

ALASKAN ADVENTURE

“While there is almost always something hungry that will give a herring-baited hook a look, anglers searching for salmon stand their best chance from June through October when most head inland with romance and species survival propagation in mind.”

Lee Allen

The salmon in Southeast Alaska didn't stand a chance as we came at them from four corners of the globe—Virginia, New Hampshire, Arizona, and South Dakota.

In a trip sponsored by Sportsmen's Alliance of Alaska, it was like the Three Musketeers Plus One when our quartet of outdoor journalists joined up in Ketchikan to chase silver salmon as part of their migratory run from the open ocean to leeward waters around Prince of Wales Island.

Much of the pre-trip hype proved to be true. “Ketchikan, the First City on the Inside Passage of Southeast Alaska, is a place where the sport angler can stay busy year-round fishing for all five species of Pacific salmon, wild trout, halibut, and a variety of other species,” according to the visitketchikan.com web page that boldly proclaims the area, “Salmon Capital of the World.”

By the time Day One's safe light arrived, our gear was stowed and we were buckled into our 6-seater DeHavilland Beaver float plane, looking forward to a half-

hour aerial overview of old-growth forest headed to a pontoon landing on Prince of Wales Island and the expert fishing guides awaiting us at Boardwalk Lodge.

Boardwalk Lodge is an Orvis-endorsed fly-fishing lodge with certified guides to lead both saltwater and freshwater anglers to some of the most prolific waters in the

Northwest. “We provide food, lodging, and fishing for the salmon species indigenous to our waters,” says owner Brad Steuart. “This area is made up of hundreds of protected passages, bays and inlets, waters that teem with aquatic life and help make our lodge records impressive. Boardwalk's fleet of 28-foot-long cruisers has brought back king salmon that hit the scales at 65 pounds and halibut in excess of 325 pounds.”

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Guides, like Chicago Jim, a veteran of 10 years on these waters and skipper of the uniquely-named vessel, *Thunder Chicken*, wasted no time in firing up twin 150 Mercs, casting off mooring lines, and heading to



Boardwalk Lodge displays the day's catch.

Like Yule holiday “visions of sug-arplums dancing in our heads,” we were met dockside by a departing group of 20 anglers headed home. All possessed smug smiles of success and boxes of frozen fillets, piled as high as need be to fly out 700 pounds of fish flesh, testimony that good times lay ahead.

continued on page 72



Author Lee Allen caught this tiger snapper.



Two coho ready to be placed on ice.

productive waters—in this case, a 12-mile ride to a place called Ship Island.

Jim keeps a close eye on fish-finder electronics and when the appropriate color combinations of reds, oranges, yellows, and greens indicate huge schools of baitfish being besieged by equally large schools of sportfish, he kills the motors and advises: “We be fishin’.”

“Everything in the world swims by this island because we’re close to the big water and they follow the tide,” he says. “We catch everything from our regular salmon species and halibut to a never-ending variety of rockfish. Everything the ocean has to offer can be found right here by this one island.” (The jury is still out on one of his stories—“I got a humpback whale on a blue fly one day... but I couldn’t turn him,” he says, laughing. “When he blew right next to the boat, that was pretty exciting.”)

One thing is for sure—there are four words a Pacific salmon doesn’t want to hear Captain Jim say: “Welcome aboard, Little Buddy,” because that greeting is followed by a quick dispatch and stowage on a bed of ice.

In 55- to 60-degree waters and at depths ranging from just-below-the-surface to hundreds of feet deep, there is no single best method of fishing. “Whatever works,” says Jim. “I’ve got more gear on board than most tackle shops have on display, so you get to try everything before going back to

the old reliable, a 6/0 hook, 4-ounce chunk of lead, and a piece of herring.”

Although our trip was somewhat in advance of the mid-to-late August salmon runs when cohos come in from the big pond and have been known to aggressively slash at the flash of a bare hook, our silvers were respectable, running in the 8- to-12-pound range. “September silvers are awesome, like 20 to 22 pounds, and we get kings that are up to 60 pounds in the net,” he says.

As our day on the water ended and we headed back to Thorne Bay for libation and lodging, our catch tally for a 9-hour day showed 13 silvers (also called hooknose); 11 of the frisbee-shaped pinks (humpies), the most abundant species of salmon in area waters; 8 rockfish of varying kinds and colors; 2 pelagic rockfish, and four halibut that ranged from 20 pounds to over 60 pounds.

Day Two saw us trade rain slickers for chest waders as we headed to Staney Creek to pursue pitbull chums or dog salmon, facing upstream in holding pools waiting for some rainy days (Southeast Alaska gets 160-200 inches of rain per year, from short showers to day-long deluges) to make the

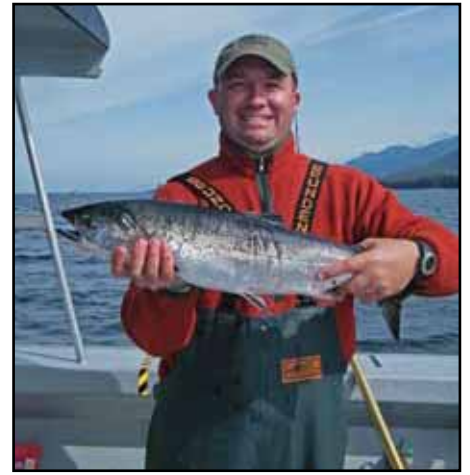


Fly-fisherman Crispin Battles caught this dog salmon on a purple Egg-Sucking Leech.

river rise and allow them to further continue their quest upstream.

It was a fun-filled day of catch-and-release with Jay Mar as our guide. “In all likelihood, you’ll catch a lot of fish, but fishing is supposed to be fun, so don’t turn it into a numbers game,” he says. An Orvis Helios 9’ 8-weight rod and a Battenkill size 4 reel with standard floating line and 18-pound leader did the job. Fly selection was dictated by river flow and in this case a barbel-eye purple Egg-Sucking Leech was the big winner ahead of purple Bunny Leeches, orange Comets, and pink cone-head articulated leeches.

“The wet-fly technique we use up here can be used anywhere. It’s about reading the flow of water and the depth the fish are



Scott Hed of Sportsman’s Alliance for Alaska shows off his first silver salmon of the trip.

holding at that will determine the depth and speed of retrieve. Those two combined are what will catch the most fish.”

Following rainfall when waters are running faster and deeper, larger flies that are more visible in the fast current may work better. In slower flows, a smaller offering often gets the reaction strike when stripped in front of a fish’s nose.

As the day waned and arms started to tire from pulling in so many salmon (literally), it was refreshing to change to a light-weight spinning outfit rigged with a small spinner (try a #3 Blue Fox Vibrax or a



Author displays a small river-caught Dolly Varden.

Mepps spinner, size 3 or 4) and bring some olive green silvery-sided Dolly Varden char gently to the net before releasing them and watching them disappear like tiny torpedoes.

“The take-home message is this,” says Scott Hed, Director of Sportsman’s Alliance for Alaska: “In contrast to the Pacific Northwest where salmon stocks are in real dire straits, here the pie is still big enough to sustain sport, commercial, and subsistence use. In most places, these diverse user groups are at odds over resource allocation, but there’s enough here to serve all interests and they’re working together to see things stay that way.”

