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Let 'er Buck

Bucktailing for salmon is alive and well at Rivers Inlet. By PAT HOGLUND

THE MORNING SUNRISE WAS HIDDEN BEHIND A BANK OF GRAY CLOUDS THAT LEFT THE SETTING ON RIVERS INLET SOMEWHAT DRAB. THE WATER WAS SMOOTH AS A TABLETOP AND THE DEEP GREEN WATER FADED INTO BLACKNESS MADE FOR AN OMINOUS SETTING.

After surveying the situation Phil Dawson kicked the 60-horse Yamaha into gear and stirred the calmness into a white froth. The prop wash trailed 50 feet behind the boat. Behind the 18-foot fiberglass boat were three fly lines. Attached to each line was a leader followed by a poor excuse for a fly. These were big, gaudy conglomerations of feathers, fur, thread, beadhead eyes, dubbing and Krystal

flash. A liberal amount of head cement kept it all together to resemble a baitfish. We were fishing for silvers, which have a reputation for not being too discerning about what they chase and attempt to squash.

It was our first pass along Double Cut and Dawson, one of the owners of Legacy Lodge, was hoping to find a fly color that would entice one of the countless salmon that were swimming along the high wall of granite. There was a red fly, a pink fly and

a chartreuse fly. After 10 minutes he was somewhat perplexed. "I can't believe we haven't been bit yet," Dawson said. "Normally by now we have our first fish in the boat."

Dawson bumped the speed up to 1200 RPMs, which was what we needed to get the salmon to notice our flies. My rod bucked and a coho was dancing on the end of the line. The salmon, which I'm guessing weighed about 10 pounds, swam at breakneck speed toward the boat and I did my best to get a tight line on it so I could set the hooks. It jumped and spit the hook before I had a chance. Notice I said guessing.

Five minutes later my

compadre Jack Hanselman was into a fish. This time he was able to give it a good hook set and the fish was on. For good. It jumped and ran and gave the 8-weight fly rod a run for its money. It weighed 8 pounds. This I know because when he landed it, he weighed it on the lodge scale that evening.

No more than five minutes later Jack was into his second fish. But this time it was different. Considerably different. There were no jumps and twists and rolls at the surface, which is characteristic of silvers. The short quick runs were replaced with long, deep bursts of energy that drove his line straight down to the bottom and put a bend in his Sage fly rod that almost completed a full circle. After about five minutes the fish came close to the surface, and before I could get the words "chinook" out of my mouth, it raced to the bottom

Left, a poor excuse for a fly, but a hell of a good bucktail pattern includes flash, color and size like the Wild Dingo.

Jack Hanselman with a coho that he caught while bucktailing at Rivers Inlet.

again. Chinook taking flies near the surface is an anomaly, but it does happen. Obviously. It took Jack 10 minutes to corral the salmon and when we finally netted it he was exhausted. A 20-pound ocean-fresh king has that affect on a person. Even Jack, who's 6-foot, 2-inches and weighs 260 pounds.

Less than 30 minutes the scene went from drab to exciting. How could it not?

How appropriate that we found ourselves on the calm waters of Rivers Inlet bucktailing flies for salmon. Both the location and the method have roots deeply imbedded in the salmon fishing history. Hundreds of years before Native Americans in Alaska rowed long boats and pulled behind them whale bones carved into hooks that were dressed in feathers. It is some of the earliest known forms of bucktailing. Factor in Rivers Inlet's long history – in the early 1900s salmon canneries dotted the inlets here – and you have a recipe for a spectacular fishing trip. Today, it's a different scene. Fishing lodges dot the shorelines, and thousands of sport fishermen flock to this iconic salmon fishery with the hopes of putting their metal hooks into a trophy salmon. Which is exactly what Phil, Jack and I did for the better part of three days.

Ask anyone who has done enough of it and you'll find that they all agree on one thing: that bucktailing is one of the more enjoyable ways to fish for salmon. By holding the rod in your hand you can either strip in line triggering a chase, or let it troll in the prop wash and wait for a salmon to abuse your fly. It's also perfectly acceptable to place it in the rod holder. I personally love to strip the fly while trolling. On many occasions we could see the salmon chase the fly down and grab it. I have to say it's one of

the most exciting ways to fish for salmon. Bucktailing is also one of the easiest. And that is part of the attraction. You can literally troll a fly behind a boat and assuming there are salmon around, expect to catch a coho. Chinook salmon are an entirely different matter, but Jack's 20-pound king is proof that the odd king will take a trolled fly.

If you're going to use a fly rod (8, 9, and 10 weights are recommended) it's suggested you use a sinking line. On two of our rods we used a 250-grain head that was 20 feet long; the third line was a slow-sinking line that worked equally as well. We tied 12-foot leaders and used a 5-bead chain swivel in the middle to keep the fly from twisting.



PAT HOGLUND PHOTO

It's important to use a fly line that will sink the fly as best you can. You will notice that as you troll the fly will get pulled to the surface. The weighted fly line helps to keep it just under the surface. I've also bucktailed using fly rods and reels that are spooled with 20-pound mono. You can also do it with casting rods and spinning reels.

Salmon, in particular coho,

are like cats. Pull a string across the floor and a cat will give chase. Coho are similar in so many ways. For the sake of curiosity they will chase a fly in the water. But something needs to first get their attention. That's where the motor's wake comes in. By raising the pitch of the motor, and running at a slow to moderate speed, the prop wash is enough to get a



A spinner blade and a stinger hook will increase your catch rates.

PAT HOGLUND PHOTO

FLIES

ADD STINGER HOOKS AND BLADES

Phil Dawson has caught enough coho to know that they're like crows.

"They like a little flash," he says, as he placed a silver blade above his fly. Using five small beads and a plastic clevis he's able to keep the blade spinning without affecting the action of the fly.

"It's a double whammy. And it's dirty."

He smiled when he said that.

Because coho have a tendency to short strike, Dawson also likes to tie on a stinger hook. Using Power Pro braided line, he runs a 2- or 3-inch section tied to a number 6 hook.

"It makes a huge difference in the number of fish you catch," says Dawson.

He smiled again when he said that.

— PAT HOGLUND

coho to investigate. And when a fly is hanging in the wash, a coho's feeding response is triggered and it will attack the fly with reckless abandon. The takes are as much fun as anything, especially when you're holding the rod in your hand.

While you're holding the rod in your hand it's important to make sure the line is at a 45-degree angle or less. Often I would hold the rod so the tip was next to the surface. This was partially due to wanting the fly to be deeper in the water column. If you hold the rod at an angle higher than 45 degrees, the fly has a tendency to skip and bounce on top of the water. I've done it this way, but you will get a lot more solid hook sets if the rod angle is less than 45 degrees to the water.

The flies themselves are a collection of big, gaudy materials. Let's just say they make Isaac Walton roll over in his grave. I personally had my best success on a bucktail pattern called Nash's Wild Dingo. Originated by Jon Nash, it is tied on number 4/0 saltwater hook, it has large pearly white dumbbell eyes, it's tied with green Krystal flash, white and chartreuse feathers, and a gray dubbing material that hangs back 10 inches. There was so much that it undulated in the water and drove the salmon crazy. That fly – and a red and white Clouser style pattern that Phil tied – performed the best. And those colors seem to resonate with coho better than any other fly we used. If you don't tie your own flies, look for something colorful and gaudy in red and chartreuse. Remember, these are silvers we're talking about.

Silvers have a tendency not to be in any one particular place. They travel in schools and follow the baitfish. That's the best advice I can give you when it comes to locating places to fish. A telltale sign that salmon are schooling is to locate seabirds. If you see seagulls, murrelets, or murrelets, or other sea birds in flocks near the water, you can just about bet the house there are bait fish



The Wild Dingo fly: it's what's for dinner.


nearby. And if they're nearby, chances are even better that salmon will be around.


Of course it helps to fish in places like Rivers Inlet where massive numbers of silvers are returning. We spent a lot of time close to the ocean, which happens to be one of Legacy Lodge's finer traits. Among many others, I might add. Within 20 minutes you can find yourself at Double Cut bucktailing flies where ocean-fresh silvers are on the prowl for a quick, easy and interesting meal. And that is something I find hard to beat. SSJ



Coho salmon are like cats: they will chase anything big and colorful.

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