



Right: Because chinook stocks linger in Rivers Inlet and feed prodigiously for weeks on end, they are among the strongest, most porcine chinook salmon to be found anywhere.

Background: The islands and fjords of Rivers Inlet provide protected inside-passage and reliable forage for hordes of migrating salmon.

"We're talking about unchecked aggression, here!"

The Big Lebowski

Don Roberts

Like it or not, the monster mentality—the unapologetic lust for hooking stupendous salmon—holds certain sway over an inordinate number of rapscallions in the sportfishing community. That's not to suggest that even the most meek and mild angler among us would not thrill at the incidental hooking of a seriously large fish. But what it does mean is that for all intents and purposes, trophy angling requires a different mindset.

Targeting trophy salmon necessarily entails hours and hours of utter boredom—a nearly brain-dead, persistent vegetative state—interrupted (if at all) by rare moments of blue-blazes pandemonium. What you can't help learning about fishing for big chinook is that the main thing is staying power. Stay at it long enough and

eventually you might earn the right to endure the adrenaline-infused agony of hooking a truly brutish fish. The crux of all this madness, of course, is time. No matter where you go these days, no matter what region or watershed, be it the Sacramento in California, the Rogue in Oregon, the Olympic Peninsula rivers in Washington, or even famed drainages in Alaska, you hear the same thing: decade by decade the fish are getting smaller. Old-timers in the Pacific Northwest (who themselves are a dying breed) lament that there used to be considerably higher numbers of large steelhead and salmon returning to almost every system on the West Coast. Today there are way more anglers (competition) and far fewer big fish. Anglers must contend with an inarguable correlation between

availability and duration: the fewer big fish around, the longer it's going to take to find one. Back in "the good old days" on the Columbia River, for instance, the average number of rod-hours it took a savvy angler to hook a 30-pound or larger salmon could be measured by multiples of ten—10 hours, 20 hours, 30 hours and so forth. By current standards a more accurate reckoning would involve hundreds, if not thousands, of rod-hours.

In other words, if you live long enough and fish hard enough you might, just might, end up hooking a trophy-size salmon. But don't despair. There's light at the end of the tunnel. Indeed, there exists an enlightened pathway whereby the true believer may both drastically foreshorten the time period and dramatically lengthen



his chances for hooking a colossal king. And that pathway leads to Rivers Inlet.

Pig Headed

In late July/early August schools of chinook salmon begin staging in those remote reaches of coastal BC lying almost due north of Vancouver Island. Of course, considerable numbers of these fish are your standard-brand salmon, including more or less generic, cookie-cutter hatchery fish, which are headed back to nursery waters throughout the Northwest. While most of these transient fish are in peak condition and are worthy adversaries in their own right, they are not the caliber of salmon that fuels dreams or, in some cases, nightmares. However, divorced from the pedestrian hordes of nominal salmon, there pre-

sides a distinct, indigenous, truly dream-inducing species—a race of broad-shouldered, wide-bodied, astonishingly bovine salmon native to the Wannock and Kilbella rivers found deep in the visceral wild of Rivers Inlet.

Unfortunately, the alpha-salmon in Rivers Inlet are not exactly a closely guarded secret. Though the competition and inevitable jostling could be viewed as almost calm and copasetic by comparison with the melee that surrounds salmon runs in the Lower 48, the local lodges make no bones about targeting big fish. In

fact, dedicated hawg-hunters—anglers with an almost deranged yearning to pursue oversize salmon—make annual vigils to Rivers Inlet with the sole intent of besting previous exploits or, better yet, of landing a much heavier salmon than any of their compatriots. There are wagers. Money changes hands. Considerable quantities of Crown Royal and displays of chest thumping help lubricate the process. But,



whether they're aware of it or not, it's the transactions of ego that really count most.

For example, the Herzog clan (including relatives, loyal employees and professional associates) who run a successful contracting business in Seattle, have been coming to Rivers Inlet for decades. Their sole purpose—besides engaging in the nightly boisterous, boys-will-be-boys drinking/gambling/howling routine—was to race straight out to a place called “The Head” (or that vicinity) and try to bag a hellacious salmon. The Head is a clearly defined piece of water, roughly a nautical mile in length, which lies at the very fringe of Kilbella Bay, a broad fertile estuary where both the Kilbella River and Wannock River fish stage prior to ascending their natal streams. With the possible exception of pools on the Kenai, there's probably no place on earth that can boast a denser concentration of 30-pound-plus chinook salmon than those precious few acres of water contained at The Head. Despite said glorious reputation, a small cadre of serious anglers, especially some of the more scrupulous locals, disparagingly refer to The Head as the “toilet bowl”. Why? For one thing the water here is dirty, loaded with glacial till and tannic runoff. Plus annoying quantities of flotsam and woody debris circulates with the tide and

collects in this part of the bay. And finally there's the grim concentration of boats, thus lending the scene a siege-like aura. On the other hand, when put in perspective—that is, when compared to typical scenes of combat fishing in the states—the gaggle of boats clustered at The Head may seem almost quaint, if not pastoral.

Besides, as Mick Heath, co-owner/out-fitter of Legacy Lodge, pointed out, “There's plenty of viable alternatives.”

Open Water

We had been there about 15 minutes, barely enough time to join the throng and complete a partial circuit at The Head, when Mick Heath looked over at me and started reeling in line. “There's something about the tone of fishing here that doesn't appeal to me...Some days I can take it...for awhile anyway. But this isn't one of those days.”

The beauty of Rivers Inlet is, well, the beauty of Rivers Inlet. Where else can one pursue such remarkable fish in such eye-watering splendor? We motored across Kilbella Bay to a half-moon-shaped cove where monumental walls of granite plunged precipitously into the blue-green brine. Heath commented that even though he had seen few boats in this location everything about the place suggested the possible presence of salmon. The depth

Above: Members of the Herzog group proudly (and competitively) hoist the day's plunder. Hardcore anglers all, these guys could really chew up the scenery. Right: The island and channel labyrinth of Rivers Inlet could be accurately described as rocks, trees and water surrounded by rocks, trees and water.

was right, between 30 and 150 feet, and the jutting rock that formed the shoreline provided the kind of defined structure salmon are often prone to follow. Then there was instinct, that unconscious predatory faculty which crouches like Gollum Smeagol at the back of one's skull and hisses wheedling counsel: *Yesss...yesss. We smells fishesss...Must kill big fishesss.*”

Mooching, of course, is the most practical and efficient method for covering expanses of water in the search for salmon. Not to push the Hollywood references too hard, but when I think of the angling program at Legacy Lodge a classic line from the film *The Big Lebowski* leaps to mind: “Three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax...” Don't ask me to explain exactly what that means. All I know is that mooching goes way back, largely arising in coastal BC back in the late 1800s, persisting during the newfangled fads of the 20th century, and enduring to this day as the

gold-standard technique for saltwater salmon.

While mooching basically involves putting the motor in gear and pulling plug-cut herring behind the boat, that's not to imply that there aren't a host of perplexing factors to consider, including speed (usually a snail's pace for chinook), current, tide flux and depth. Since we didn't pick up clear indications of fish on the depth finder, we had to go with by-gosh and by-golly. No problem. Heath not only sensed the presence of salmon, he surmised that as the fish neared the estuary they would probably adhere to the upper water column. We elected to go with seven pulls of line on one rod and ten pulls on the other, surprisingly shallow for water over a 100 feet deep.

I won't burden you with an insufferable description of our heroics. Suffice it to say that in the next two hours we each hooked a salmon, managed to halfway gracefully coordinate the ensuing chaos and, after the obligatory struggle and cursing, brought to net said beasts. As it turned

out, these salmon proved to be the largest either Heath or I had ever landed. And this all happened in solitude—not another boat in sight—in the midst of an alpine fjord of dizzying grandeur. And then we called it a morning.

Party Animals

The character of a creature is revealed in its visage. Look at a freshly-landed chinook and staring back at you will be its cold, hard eye and a jaw set in iron. These are beasts designed for two things and two things alone: predation and migration. In the most elemental sense, big chinook are fundamentally gleaming slabs of muscle. Sumo salmon. Beautiful. Terrible.

Compared to the bellicose demeanor of chinook salmon, coho seem almost cuddly. Nevertheless, in Rivers Inlet coho are numerous, aggressive and altogether sassy. And their willingness to bite—they often feed with abandon in the Inlet—makes them a rather pleasing and rewarding quarry.

The following statement appears on Legacy Lodge's letterhead: "The coho or silver salmon, are notorious for their wild, fast and erratic fight. Coho will double their weight in the six months prior to spawning. The coho in Rivers Inlet are among the largest in the world." These plain, simple declarative remarks are not only accurate, but come close to saying it all. What they don't say is just how much sheer frothy fun you can have fishing for coho. True, to serious big-game hunters, like the Herzogs, coho are a distraction, an interference, indeed, almost a damned nuisance. But to the rest of us frivolous souls, bustling pods of coho are no less than a party waiting to happen.

During one particularly memorable session of coho-ho-hoing near the south shelf of Calvert Island, shoals of baitfish appeared in such profusion they were bursting at the ocean's seams, spraying out of the chop and pelting the surface like an upside-down rain. The squirming masses of baitfish were so thick you could actually



No Lawn Bowling

Legacy Lodge (877-347-4534, www.legacylodge.com) resides in a protected cove on the interior side of Pendleton Island in Darby Channel, within easy reach of wide savannas of saltwater interrupted here and there by impossibly rugged protrusions of rock, tree-studded islands and nothing much but weather and distance between. It's a truly wild place. The lodge complex—consisting of an intimate arrangement of buildings—is entirely suspended on floats. Both figuratively and physically, there's little room for a rousing game of horseshoes, croquet or badminton. Legacy Is All About The Fishing.

Of the handful of lodges scattered about the fringes of Rivers Inlet, you wouldn't necessarily choose Legacy Lodge because it caters to all ages, taking special delight in couples (whether man and wife, parent and child, or simpatico angling buddies) and in kids with a yen for the outdoors; nor would you necessarily choose Legacy based upon the unflagging cheeriness and efficiency of the staff; nor for the food which is prepared with an artistry dangerous to one's waistline; nor would you necessarily choose this lodge because of the quality and meticulous condition of the equipment. No. If for no other reason, you would choose Legacy Lodge because of the superiority of its boats—custom-built Scout 175s (17.5-foot), propelled with gutsy 60 HP four-stroke Yamaha outboards. These are the most stable, responsive, intuitive-to-operate and angling-ergonomic marine craft I've ever encountered. The perfect conveyance for self-guided salmon forays. How perfect? As primarily a river-wading type angler, I'd be the first to admit that I don't know a motorboat from a bratwurst. Yet within minutes of receiving the standard orientation/instruction, I was zipping along full-tilt-boogey, tongue hanging in the breeze like a dog in a '65 red Cadillac convertible.

The lodge is small. The fish are big. The arithmetic stands comfortable.



"Mine is bigger than yours." For better or worse, big chinook salmon bring out the competitive compulsions among sportsmen.

Below: Schools of chinook salmon begin staging in remote reaches of coastal B.C. almost due north of Vancouver Island.

smell them, a scent not unlike a freshly opened bottle of cold-pressed olive oil. Needless to say, the coho were right behind. It didn't take long to surmise that the fishing was going to be fast-and-furious when I threaded a herring onto the hook, casually dropped it over the transom and, before I could let go of the line, found myself instantly tethered to a thrashing silver. I can see it now—bumbling outdoor writer discovers revolutionary new coho angling technique: hand-lining herring.

During the typical changeover day at Legacy Lodge there's just enough leeway to get packed and ready for the afternoon flight out, and still manage to wedge in a quick morning's bout of fishing. Nothing too ambitious or too distant from the lodge, mind you. But maybe time for one or two fish—just enough to take the edge off. Fortunately for those of us who happened to be at the lodge that week—and

unfortunately for the lodge staff—the waters of Rivers Inlet proved benevolent, if not downright magnanimous. Everybody and his cousin Pewee boated ridiculous quantities of salmon. So many salmon, both kings and coho, came into the dock that morning that Sean, the fish cutter, had little choice but to bend to the task with demonic resolve. Like it or not, Sean became the star—the psycho-antagonist in his own unrehearsed horror classic. Knives. Blood. The insistent whispering *ssllith* of steel passing through flesh. The fish-preparation station ended up resembling a spine-curdling scene from *Nightmare on Elm Street*.

There, I did it again. I cranked out another allusion to Hollywood. But, hey, no apologies. After all, as has often been said of the movie business, Rivers Inlet and the fishing to be found there is bigger than life. *The Dude abides.* ■

