

The author, left, works the single-action reel like a seasoned pro.

Ruth Lawrence made the trip from Cool, Calif., to catch this Rivers Inlet chinook.



ADVANCED SALMON FISHING

Rivers Inlet serves up graduate course in salmon fishing. STORY AND PHOTOS BY JIM JONES

"I will kill you if you lose my fish!" Those were mighty strong words coming from someone who normally is quite gentle, rarely curses, and who had, when I asked her if she would like to go on a salmon fishing adventure with me to the wilds of British Columbia said, "You know I don't fish." I clinched the deal by bribing her with a detour to Victoria. But now, as the big chinook charged away from the boat, Ruth Lawrence was as adrenaline-pumped and excited as the most die-hard of avid lifelong anglers. She had fallen under the spell of Rivers Inlet and our temporary home in the wilderness, Legacy Lodge.

I couldn't blame her for her outburst, and she was kidding about the lethal threat. I think. Frankly, I didn't blame her, and I wouldn't have

wanted to return to the dock and face a very long trip home without that big king, anyway. Ruth had every reason to be really upset with me. That fish should have been safely in the boat by now had I been doing my one small, but crucial task properly — netting it.

It was our last morning of fishing, and clouds had rolled in overnight bringing a light drizzle. We actually welcomed the relief from the relentless sun that had beat down on us for most of the trip. Ruth had expertly fought the chinook from the instant she saw the rod tip dip with the initial strike. It wasn't a tentative "tap-tap" as chinook are sometimes known to bite. Rather it was grab-and-go takedown. She lifted the rod out of the holder while simultaneously reeling down to keep the pressure on, just as she had been taught. She alternately palmed the

spool rim of the single action reel when the fish would take off on a long run, applying just the right amount of pressure, and, just as expertly, shifted instantly to reeling madly when it made 180 degree turn-and-dash back toward the boat. She looked like she had been fighting big fish all her life, and she was acing her final exam in the most advanced graduate course of salmon fishing on the planet — traditional motor mooching for chinook salmon with cut plug herring.

Me? I was flunking and about to get kicked out of net school. I had netted the chinook on my first try, but while it was still "hot." I guess I was admiring my handiwork instead of paying attention to the task at hand, closing the bag and lifting the fish into the boat. It seized its window of opportunity, arching its body and

Legacy Lodge nestles in a calm, secluded cove deep in the Rivers Inlet wilderness.



springing up and out back into the water. In my defense — weak as it is — closing the net wasn't all that easy since the fish had nearly filled it. Now, I was dealing with the banana weight tangled on the net as the fish thrashed alongside the boat. I had only the briefest of moments to clear the line before Ruth's fish of a lifetime would be gone. And, that is when she uttered those murderous words.

They say that memorable experiences, like catching giant salmon, takes some effort. Just traveling to Rivers Inlet qualifies in that regard, but in a most enjoyable way. However, getting there is only a first step.

We had flown into Vancouver, then jumped aboard a turboprop plane that took us to Port Hardy on the northeast corner of Vancouver Island. Our final hop was a 45-minute

flight by float plane across the Inland Passage. It has a shoreline wrinkled on both sides by deep fjords that appear from above like the swath taken out of a jigsaw puzzle, leaving a sprinkling of irregularly shaped emerald-green pieces behind.

Your ride might be in a sturdy DeHavilland Beaver, which looks like it would be as at home in the Smithsonian as it still does skimming the waves after more than 60 years. Or, it might be the equally vintage twin-engine Grumman Goose in which we glided up to the dock delivering us within a few feet of the dining hall, straight ahead, and our sleeping quarters, a bit to the right. The buildings nestle against the impenetrable forest from which the rich woods used in constructing the lodge were hewn. And, although floating, Legacy Lodge

is anchored as solidly as the trees on the rocky shore.

Co-owner and operator Mick Heath, Legacy's general manager Johanna Tormata, and the staff greeted us and took our gear to our rooms. We were provided excellent equipment, from the custom-designed Scout boats, right down to the fitted rain gear and boots. We were pampered and fed gourmet meals throughout our stay.

But, the coddling ends when the fishing begins. There would be no sitting back while someone else rigs the bait, runs the boat, and hands us the rod after hooking a fish for us. We were going learn to fish the way the devotees of traditional salmon fishing methods believe is the only way to fish for salmon.

So, after getting settled, we were



Jim Jones with a Rivers Inlet coho that's destined for the barbecue.

Being on some of the biggest water you have ever encountered while at the helm of your own boat, doing your own thing can be a bit intimidating at first, but there's that thrill of going a bit outside your comfort zone, and so, it's quite satisfying. And, even though you might be the only boat in sight, McLaren and Heath are only a VHF radio call away. Early on, especially when help is most needed, they zip from one Legacy boat to another, sometimes hopping aboard offering reassurance that your bait is rigged and working fine; or, to patiently show you how to get the right spin, fish it at the proper depth and troll the correct speed. It's an art worth learning, and Legacy Lodge welcomes anglers of all experience levels and backgrounds and even sets aside times every year for special father-son adventures.

Case in point: While we were there, we met the Smith family. Torbjorn Smith brought his sons, Alexander, 15 and Johan, 13, all the way from Sweden; and his friend, Richard Langdon brought his 13-year old son, Matt, from England. They had never fished for salmon before, but soon the boys were out-fishing almost everyone at the lodge. The best part was listening to them give fishing tips to their dads. At the other end of the spectrum, Legacy Lodge has a high percentage of returning anglers who have learned their lessons well and come back to do post-graduate work, focusing on nothing less than Tyee-class chinooks (chinook weighing 30 pounds or more) caught using traditional methods.

Why was this disparate group drawn to Rivers Inlet from places near and far? Simple. It produces some of the largest salmon caught anywhere in the world. Alaska's

given our first indoctrination into the fine art of motor mooching with cut plug herring, by master fisherman, Ryan McLaren.

Getting the hang of traditional salmon fishing using single action, "knuckle buster," reels and whippy 10 1/2 foot long rods takes paying close attention to the lessons, making mistakes along the way—and practice, practice, practice. But the method is as effective as when it was first developed over 100 years ago, and there is no greater satisfaction than when you finally do everything right, and that limber rod tip starts bucking against the surge of a big salmon.

Kenai River may get more ink, and it does currently hold the world record sport caught chinook salmon at a bit over 97 pounds, but the chinook of Rivers Inlet fish get every bit as big, and it has a big advantage. There are fewer people, plus it has what the Kenai lacks: wildness.

An orca sneaks into the cove in front of the lodge, brown bears wander down to the shore for a drink, eagles soar overhead and perch in the trees along the shore, and humpback whales sometimes escort you to and from the fishing grounds. We experienced all this during our stay, and even when the humpbacks weren't right next to the boat, they were usually within earshot, their explosive exhalations clearly recognizable even when miles away.

But, no matter how great the setting, the wildlife, the service, and food, it's the great fishing that attracts anglers back to Rivers Inlet year after year. It sits at the convergence of three rivers which produce some of the largest chinook and coho salmon in the world. The largest chinook ever recorded, 126 pounds, was reportedly caught in a tribal net in Rivers Inlet waters, and they yield more salmon weighing more than 50 pounds every year than anywhere else in British Columbia. Salmon heading to the Kilbella and Chuckwalla rivers start arriving in early June, and catches build toward the end of the month. That's when the Wannock River strain makes its early showing. Toward the end of July, a second run of chinook surges toward the Wannock, peaking in mid-August. Coho show from July to September, growing progressively larger throughout the summer, with many reaching 20 pounds or more as their numbers peak in August. For a change of pace, you can tuck into a cove and work the bottom for tasty halibut, yellow-eye, and ling cod.

Unlike many waters where great fishing is a fading memory, the Canadian government and Rivers Inlet lodges have aggressively undertaken programs to ensure that the great salmon fishing of today will still be available for future generations of anglers. The extensive commercial fishing operations that once operated around Rivers Inlet are long gone. Chinook and coho enhancement programs on the Wannock River combine with efforts by the Rivers Inlet Hakai Pass Sport Fishing Association are significantly aug-

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WHEN YOU GO ...

LOCATION Rivers Inlet is located approximately 300 miles north of Vancouver on the wild western coastline of mainland British Columbia where the Kilbella, Chuckwalla, and Wannock rivers enter saltwater. The area can be reached only by seaworthy watercraft or floatplane.

HOW TO GET THERE Depending on where you start your trip you may have to spend a night in Vancouver in order to dovetail with the charter round-trip flights to and from any number of the lodges that are located on the inlet. Flying to Legacy Lodge, the first leg is by turbo-prop to Port Hardy on the northern tip of Vancouver Island. From there, you hop a float plane which will take you on a scenic 40-minute float plane ride and deliver you right to the dock in front of Legacy Lodge.

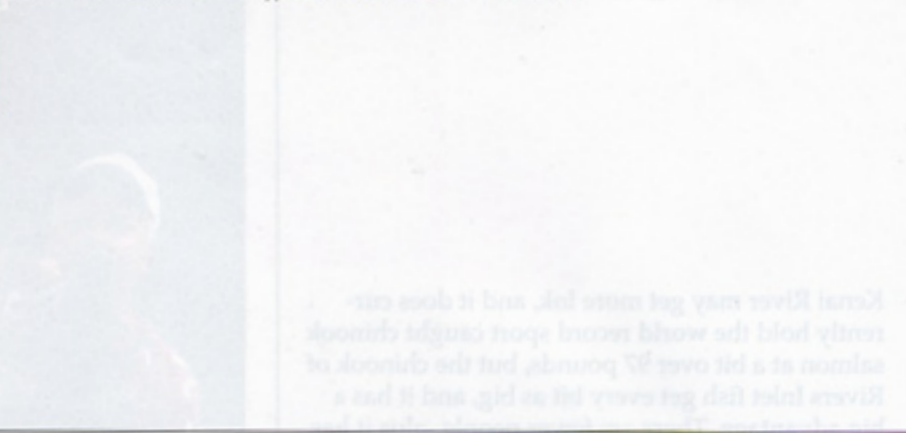
SPECIES AND TIMING Chinook (or "springs" as they are locally called) heading for the Kilbella and Chuckwalla rivers start arriving in early June, and their numbers build as the Wannock River springs appear. A second run shows up in mid-July building to a peak by mid-August. Coho, or silver salmon, start in July, with their numbers and size increasing through September. Halibut, yelloweye, and lingcod are available throughout the season for anglers looking for a time out from fighting salmon.

WHAT TO BRING Top-notch rain gear is recommended, including boots, pants, and a hooded jacket. It's a good idea to bring light-weight rain gear, too. Temperatures can range from the 30s well into the 70s so wear layered clothing that can be easily peeled off or added. Although rain is a strong possibility at any time, so is sun. A wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen is recommended. Bugs aren't bad from August on, but it's still a good idea to bring along insect repellent.

FISHING GEAR You can bring your favorite salmon fishing gear from home, however it's recommended to use Rivers Inlet salmon fishing outfits consisting of single action "knuckle-busting" reels attached to 10 1/2-foot long rods. Most lodges provide all the terminal gear, including banana weights of various size, and barbless, double-hook mooching rigs.

CONTACT INFORMATION To find out more about Rivers Inlet and Legacy Lodge, call 877.347.4534, or check Legacy Lodge's website at legacylodge.com.

Johanna Tormata with a typical Rivers Inlet coho salmon.



menting natural production.

The other three species of Pacific salmon — chum, pink, and sockeye — are present in Rivers Inlet waters, too; but it's the chinook and coho that are the big Rivers Inlet draw.

I've done a lot of back-trolling sardine-wrapped plugs and back-bouncing roe out of my drift boat at home in California. I've boondoggled from Northern California to Alaska. I've even caught big tidewater Alaskan kings on a 10-weight rod I built myself using flies I tied at my vice. But, none of my experiences quite prepared me for the complexities and nuances of learning to motor mooch for salmon with cut plug herring.

Learning the basics of rigging the hooks on a cut plug herring was only part of the process, and not even the first part. You first have to determine what angle to make the cut. Cut it on a somewhat blunt angle down and

across, and the herring will make the big, lazy twirls that are preferred by chinook. Targeting coho? Make a more acutely angled cut, up to 45 degrees across and down, to get the tighter spin they prefer. The more streamlined shape stands up better to the higher trolling speeds used for coho.

That's only the first lesson. There's more, lots more to learn. How far should the baits be dropped back behind the boat? The fish might be shallow, or they might be deep. As few as six to nine pulls might work well early in the morning when the light is low and fish are shallower. Sixteen to 20 pulls might be necessary later on, especially when the sun is shining brightly as it did much of our time while we were there. But there are no set rules, so a good approach was to start out with one outfit shallow, the other deep, and find out what the fish prefer. Boat speed is another factor — slower for

Single action reels are called 'knuckle busters' for a reason.



chinook, faster for silvers. Speeding up and slowing down, occasionally taking the engine out of gear, and making big zig-zags, are also effective tactics.

Deciding where to go each day also presents challenges, and every morning would begin with a strategy session to decide what to target and

where to fish. The choices are many and scattered over many miles of watery real estate. Was the primary target for the day to be high flying and usually cooperative cohos? Or are we going to try for the more discerning chinooks? Some of the spots, like the Wall, are renowned among salmon fishermen and are frequented by boats

from the few other lodges. Their fame is justified by big salmon they produce every season. But, there is no need to be in the sight of boats other than those from the Legacy Lodge fleet, because Heath and his team have found plenty of their own salmon mother lodes, so to speak, by prospecting for, and finding, locations



Legacy Lodge is a great place for kids to catch big coho like these. Johan, Richard, and Alexander came all the way from Sweden and England with their dads.



that produce chinook and cohos as big and plentiful as any at better known spots.

Each day the routine was to get out on the water early and head off to the waters chosen for the morning's fishing. It was possible to stay out on the water all day, and lunch would be brought to us. Or, you could take a break and go in for lunch. We tended to tailor our efforts toward the coho salmon, which were less finicky than the chinooks. We caught plenty of coho by looking for tide rips and current seams in some of their favorite haunts, but the last morning, we decided to go back to where we had started our first day, across Darby Channel.

As we almost completed the crossing we could see a fog bank clos-

ing in from the south. It was no time to be out in the open channel where cruise and cargo ships pass regularly. The unease we had felt when we first arrived was replaced by confidence and tranquility. We knew we could wait out the fog that blanketed our view of the shore barely 100 feet away. There were no other boats, no wind, and a slight swell made a gentle and rhythmic thump against the steep rocky shore.

Best yet, bait was skittering across the surface everywhere, and the salmon were biting! It wasn't a perfect storm. It was just perfect! We had landed, and lost, several big coho when Ruth's chinook had hit and I had done my best to lose it for her.

But now, I was given a reprieve.

Somehow, I managed to get my act together long enough to clear the weight from the net. The leader didn't break, the hook held firm, and the chinook was free to dash off on another long run. Ruth kept her composure throughout — toward fighting the salmon anyway. Most importantly, I didn't screw up my second chance to net the biggest fish of Ruth's life, this time getting it safely into the net — and into the boat. It just missed the Tye class (30 pounds) which would have won her a custom belt buckle awarded by Legacy Lodge to all who catch a Tye, but she was a pretty proud girl just the same. Me? I was granted a pardon. To live, and fish, another day. As for Ruth, the girl who said, "I don't fish"? She really wants that belt buckle.