

# Coho Lite

*Going Weightless for Ocean Coho at Rivers Inlet*

One of the main drawbacks of salmon fishing in the ocean is that the heavy tackle so often required comes with a pronounced side-effect: it dulls the senses. Fishing with galoot equipment is not unlike eating prime rib with a jaw shot full of Novocain. No matter how succulent the cut of beef (or how big the salmon), without keen sensory feedback the experience turns out vapid. A muffled pleasure, at best.

Guess what? Heavy tackle isn't always required. In fact, during high season at Rivers Inlet—mid-July through mid-September—heavy tackle isn't required at all. Indeed, at Legacy Lodge, one of the premier sportfishing operations in Rivers Inlet, the word "required," as it applies to a good many things besides angling, just doesn't get much air play. It was that, plus our awareness that salmon surging into Rivers Inlet have a marked tendency to feed quite shallow, which firmly convinced Jerry Kustich and me to make the foray to Rivers Inlet last August. Our aim wasn't merely to hook coho on light tackle, but on the lightest of light tackle. Fly rods.

Don Roberts

The primary salmon beats in Rivers Inlet are protected by a maze of islands, coves, headlands and channels.



## OTF

During the early dog days of summer Kustich and I showed up on the docks at Legacy Lodge so laden with dangling bags and bundles it looked as if we usually slept in cardboard. One of the great ironies of fly-fishing is how much stuff one must lug around—a byproduct of the vainglorious attempt to waylay insecurities about having the right rods, lines, fly patterns, etc. etc. ad infinitum.

Rather than bore you with the eye-glazing details of our efforts, suffice it to say that the first day out we got our heads handed to us, duckbill hats still attached. Basically, we were just plain OTF, out there flapping. One could easily conclude that there's less truth than pathetic optimism to the notion that saltwater coho take flies. Nevertheless, it can be done. I know; I've done it. Right there in Rivers Inlet. But here's the deal: conditions have to be conducive, if not damned near p-e-r-f-e-c-t.

First and foremost, salmon fishing is a numbers game. Beaucoup coho must be churning in the brine before nursing any expectation one will actually grab a fly. For whatever reason—changing ocean conditions? shifting marine currents? global warming? an angry god?—in 2007 the bulk of the coho run in Rivers Inlet arrived way

## Cohoperation

Even when the locals characterize the salmon fishing as “off” in Rivers Inlet, it's still ten times faster than the average day in the Lower 48. But what I find most appealing about Legacy Lodge (877) 347-4534, [www.legacylodge.com](http://www.legacylodge.com), besides the obvious—crackerjack service and amenities, genuine 100-watt cheerfulness and old-fashioned zeal—is its commitment, nay, devotion, to free-spirited, self-guided angling. Sure, the staff provides the requisite coaching and hand-holding; after all, some guests arrive not knowing a herring from a hambone. But once all the green pilots have been briefed, you're at liberty to wing one of the custom-built Scout 175 sportboats, pushed by a Yamaha 60 h.p., into the wild blue ocean yonder.

The fact is, despite the temptation to roam like a drunken alley cat, you don't have to go far to find salmon in Rivers Inlet. That's one of its main selling points. Once out there, you call your own shots, not excluding such delusional madness as fly-fishing (though the lodge does everything in its power to see that every client stacks up salmon). Mooching, of course, is de rigueur—the slam-dunk method for waylaying coho and chinook. And now that Legacy has adopted the lightest, most sensitive (some would say extreme) mooching rods on the market as an option, every salmon hooked makes a truly lasting impression.

behind schedule. Kustich and I showed up at the appointed time; the salmon didn't. In fact, during the last few years there's been a trend toward later and later coho returns throughout Alaska and British Columbia.

Consistent barometric pressure is another crucial factor. It can be steady high pressure or steady low pressure—feeding

coho don't seem to care which—but if the barometer yo-yos erratically they may become moody, too dour to lunge at flies. Of course, wind always plays a key role: anything above a stiff breeze can make a mockery of fly-casting. And last, but definitely not least, in the whole fly-fishing equation is the presence, hopefully



*Given the right conditions at the peak of the coho run in Rivers Inlet, fly-fishing is not an unrealistic proposition.*



profusion, of forage fish. It takes roiling masses of baitfish to entice normally furtive salmon to come flashing and slashing into the upper water column. If you don't see flocks of diving birds merrily whirly-gigging into baitfish balls, you probably shouldn't bother dusting off your fly rod.

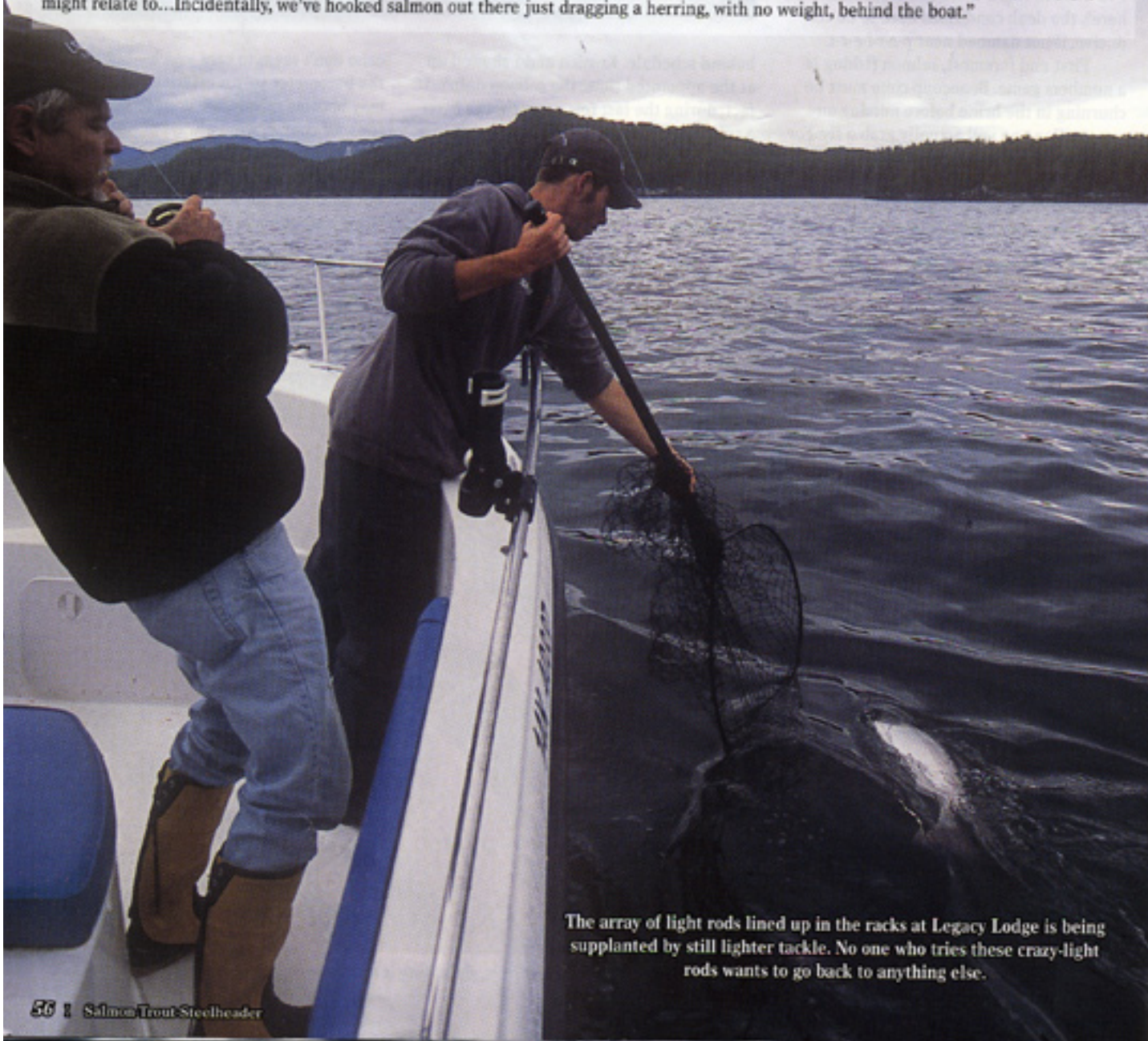
Unfortunately, you can't requisition all-of-the-above conditions as if ordering Chinese takeout. You can't *make* it happen. As John Lennon once observed, "Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans."

### My Way Or The Highway

The next day Kustich and I motored out to a place called the Open Bight, located at the junction of Rivers Inlet and Fitz Hugh Sound. The locals call this spot "The Highway," not only because it's wide, long and more or less featureless, but because it functions as an autobahn for traveling salmon. We hadn't putt-putted on the highway long before realizing that the pods of salmon were way too sporadic and widely dispersed for even a prayer of intercepting with a fly.

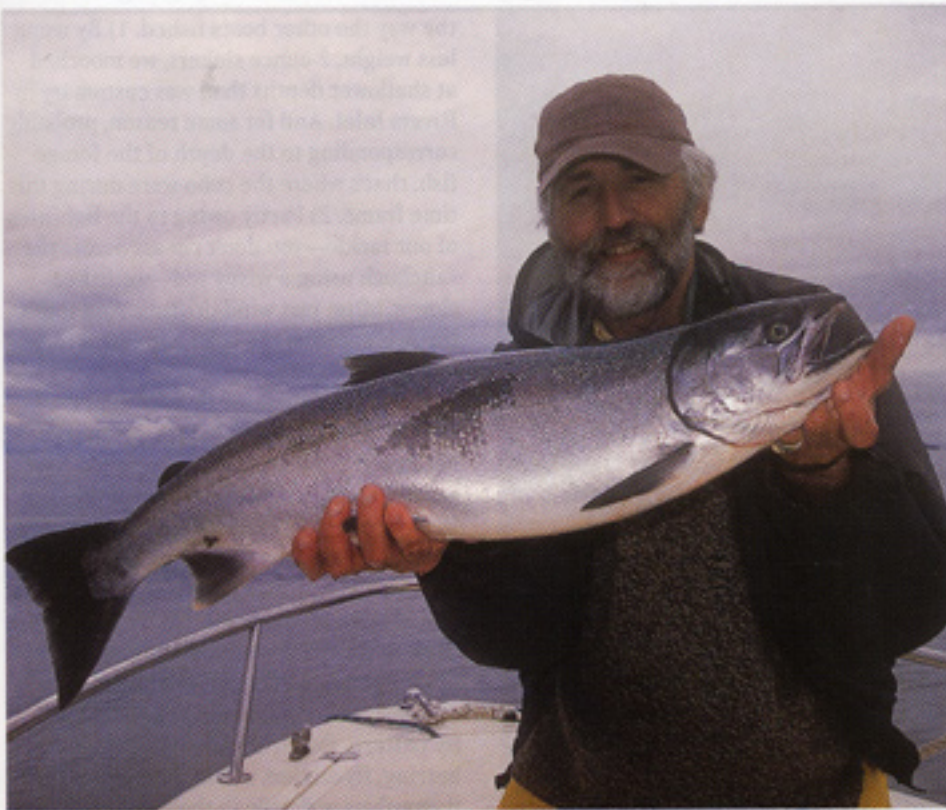
I've got to admit right at the outset that I'm not a big fan of bait-fishing. I'm not squeamish or anything. If necessary, I won't hesitate to run a hook through the innards of whatever hapless critter it takes to get the fish interested. But all in all, bait-fishing is unpretty. I like plumage; I'm a shameless devotee of hooks disguised in feathers and frippery. On the other hand, there's something appealingly Old West about bait-fishing. It's more fatalistic. You eat what you hunt, stalk and kill.

Furthermore, the decision to forsake the fly and embrace bait was aided and abetted by Legacy's resolve to lighten up. Actually, compared to the Joe Palooka gear favored by other outfitters, from its very first season Legacy had used and advocated what would be considered light tackle. Now they were on the verge of ethereal. Before leaving the dock that morning, Phil Dawson, one of the principals at Legacy Lodge, equipped our boat with two 10-foot bait rods, custom built on graphite fly-rod blanks by Redl Sports in Burnaby, B.C. Instead of standard mooching reels, the rods were armed with Islander MR2 fly reels. And in lieu of the usual 6- and 8-ounce ball sinkers, we were supplied 2- and 4-ounce sinkers. Barely containing a grin, Dawson explained: "If you've got to mooch, here's some gear you fly guys might relate to...Incidentally, we've hooked salmon out there just dragging a herring, with no weight, behind the boat."



The array of light rods lined up in the racks at Legacy Lodge is being supplanted by still lighter tackle. No one who tries these crazy-light rods wants to go back to anything else.





*Jerry Kustich, an ardent fly-angler and author from Montana, found the crisp marine air, the rambunctious coho, and even the mooching rods (the ultra-light brand) to his liking.*

### Peppermint Herring Guts Barfuccino

No sooner had we switched from flies to bait than we started catching fish. Given the circumstances, who could be blamed for sliding into the den of bait-slimed iniquity? (Confession: it wasn't that far of a slide.) And before long Kustich and I became mighty relaxed, if not blithe, about our conversion to the gospel of mooching, joking that herring guts were getting all over everything, including our fancy GoreTex pants, pristine fly rods and even the coffee thermos. Though flavored coffee drinks are all the rage, herring guts espresso probably won't generate much demand.

Curiously enough, our boat consistently hooked coho while most others did not. Perhaps it was pure dumb luck—maybe we bumbled and stumbled into the paths of voracious salmon. But I doubt it, because that's the way it went for the duration of our stay. The only theory I could come up with is simply this: going ultra light gave us an advantage. There were two differences, albeit somewhat subtle, between the way Kustich and I fished and



*Legacy Lodge lies sequestered in a backwater like a floating hamlet in a fairy tale cove.*





Reliable, stable and quick—sea-worthy 17.5-foot Scouts make getting to the salmon grounds a breeze.

the way the other boats fished. 1) By using less weight, 2-ounce sinkers, we mooched at shallower depths than was customary in Rivers Inlet. And for some reason, probably corresponding to the depth of the forage fish, that's where the coho were during this time frame. 2) Partly owing to the lightness of our tackle—you don't rip-ass across the saltchuck using a wispy rod—we fished slower, often just wind-drifting. And that's the presentation the coho happened to be looking for.

Slow and shallow? So why didn't flies work? Like I said before, primarily because the pods of salmon were too few and far apart. But also because of the flies themselves. Plug-cut herring not only present a generous silhouette, they also roll and twirl, flutter and flash as they're pulled through the brine. No fly pattern yet devised is capable of producing such a rollicking action. I'm convinced that if someone designed a righteously "boisterous" fly pattern, that truly mimicked wounded herring, fly-anglers would more often find themselves seriously in the game.

In the meantime, I know two fly guys who—uber-light mooching rods firmly in hand—willingly wait for the bite with, well, baited breath.

