

the ALLURE of NOOTKA

by Kevin Wilson

SEEKING A MEMORABLE WEST COAST FISHING ADVENTURE? LOOK NO FURTHER THAN NOOTKA SOUND, ONE OF VANCOUVER ISLAND'S HOTTEST SPORTFISHING DESTINATIONS.



Downriggers set at 21 in a mere 30 feet of water, we slowly trolled our way through a string of small islands at the mouth of renowned Nootka Sound. Salmon were gorging themselves on baitfish and our trolling efforts were paying dividends. When big fish are hooked in tight quarters, their instinct is to dash for deeper water. In a matter of minutes, a rod tip bounced feverishly! It was my turn up to bat and I eagerly embraced the rod. Instantly greeted with a 'knuckle-buster', at the first hint of resistance the giant chinook made a run for it and I yanked my hand away to avoid further insult. Words can't even begin to describe the raw power. Racing for open ocean, line peeled from the spool at lightning speed. In all my years I've never heard a reel sing quite like that!

"Hang on and let him run!" exclaimed our guide, James Fisher. "You've got a good one on there ... settle in, he's gonna be a while. No room for mistakes on this one Kev!"

Indeed, I thought the Amundson reel might start smoking. Loaded with 350 yards of 40 lb. high visibility Maxima, in a single run the mighty spring nearly spooled me out! If you've fished the giant salmon off of B.C.'s west coast, you know they're feisty and powerful. Every angler dreams of catching a Tyee - a chinook that breaks the 30-pound mark - and by all indications, that could very well be what was on the other end of my line!

Duped by a glow green teaser head armed with an anchovy, and using a green and white flasher, the mighty salmon had smashed the offering and was now doing his best to shake the hook. At the first hint of slack, I reeled feverishly to keep tension on the line. Rod tip high, he stole more line with another run and at each pause I continued to reel. Then, at the 15-minute mark, when he saw the boat, he darted away yet again. Several times throughout the ordeal, I had to pause and stretch my fingers to flex my reeling hand. Then, finally worn down, as the huge salmon cruised in toward the boat, with the skill possessed only by a seasoned guide, James cued me to reel in and back up to the opposite side of the boat and lift the rod tip as high as I could. The riskiest time of the catch, one wrong move – even the slightest bit of slack line – and with a single head shake, the salmon could disappear forever.

With one smooth motion, James gently cradled the giant chinook in the net, lifted the handle vertical, and he along with my buddies, Barry Cymbaluk and Norman Sinclair, celebrated with cheers, knowing we had just landed the best fish of the trip! Straining to bring him on board, there was no denying this was one serious fish. At 41 inches in length, with broad shoulders and a massive tail fin, this spectacular salmon topped the scales at an impressive 34 pounds!

WEST COAST OPTIONS

Every angler dreams of fishing the west coast. Limited only by time, resources and expertise, there are a variety of ways to make that dream a reality. From the inside passage to the west coast of Vancouver Island, and all along the northern coastline to Prince Rupert and the Queen Charlotte Islands, destination choices are many and varied. No doubt, the allure of the Charlottes is great, but the price tag also reflects its echelon, not to mention the associated time and logistics required to get there. For my own return on investment, the central west coast of Vancouver Island is easy to access from Comox and offers some of the finest saltwater sportfishing B.C. has to offer. I've fished from Campbell River to Port Hardy

and several places on the outside as well. It took a few years, and a bunch of trips to sort it out, but I'm unabashed in saying I'm head over heels in love with Nootka Sound. Where every view is from a postcard, the salt air is clean, the people are friendly, and the fishing world-class. If you're yearning for a memorable ocean fishing adventure, you owe it to yourself to give it some serious consideration.

Yes, you can take your own boat and gear – and many do. Alternatively, you can rent the necessary equipment from a local fishing resort and capitalize on a partial do-it-yourself trip. On the other hand, I've learned that to get the biggest bang for my buck the key is booking with a reputable full-service lodge or day rate charter operator. Most recently I've been fishing with Nootka Marine Adventures and I've got nothing but good things to say about their guides, equipment, accommodations, and staff.

If it's a first time experience, remember that maritime navigation is a specialized skill. Venturing out on the open ocean requires knowledge of tide charts and how to navigate tidal waters, a boat equipped with reliable electronics including GPS technology, a VHF radio, and a proper seaworthy vessel capable of handling big water. Storms can develop quickly creating extremely dangerous conditions in a hurry. Understanding how to read the weather and the water is what keeps experienced mariners alive. I've done the math and, factoring in the costs, you're typically dealing with anywhere from a \$60,000 to \$100,000 investment to become the proud owner of a suitably equipped ocean-ready boat.

As for renting, no doubt some savings can be had, but then there's the trial and error part of the equation. If you're familiar with the fishing grounds that's one thing, but if you have to feel your way around, you risk losing valuable time on the water learning the ropes. Nootka Marine Adventures is one of several fishing lodges based in Nootka Sound. Through their Moutcha Bay Resort, they offer boat rentals for folks who prefer the independent approach. Again, I've done the math and, by the time you factor in transportation, food, rentals, not to mention wear and tear, booking with a full-service resort operator is really an economical and convenient way to go.

MIXED BAG OPPORTUNITIES

Regardless of how or where you plan to fish, the main attraction is the west coast's abundant, eager and willing mixed bag of saltwater species. From crabs to prawns, this region of western Canada's Pacific tidal waters is perhaps most noted for its variety of salmon species including coho, chinook, sockeye, pink, and chum salmon with the most coveted and sought-after being the chinook and coho. While Atlantic salmon are farmed commercially in pens on the west coast, sportfishing enthusiasts tend to look at this with disfavor, recognizing that periodically this foreign species escape from the pens and are caught by anglers. At present, the Atlantic Salmon Watch Program (ASWP), run by Fisheries and Oceans Canada, relies on recreational and commercial fishers, fish processors, government and independent field staff and hatchery workers to report observations

of Atlantic salmon. For this and other management reasons, it is important that all anglers can accurately identify species that they catch.

Adding another unique and attractive dimension to this fishery is a long list of bottomfish. With a conservative daily and overall possession limit, in most instances it only takes a few days to fill your marine coolers with enough salmon, halibut, yelloweye and lingcod to last for some time.

My last two trips to the Nootka Sound area, we fished a key migration route between 16 and 20 miles offshore, an area affectionately named the salmon highway at the 50 fathom or 300-foot depth. Out there, the water is warmer and emerald blue in color. Considering peak seasons, with the July and August migrations in full swing, eager chinook salmon in the mid-to-high teens are common with lots in the mid-to-high 20-pound category being brought to the boat. Hit it right, and you may just get into the big runs of Tye salmon!

One of the principal advantages to booking with a guide service is their intimate knowledge of the sea, along with where, when, and how to target each species. Local guides have a list of hotspots marked on GPS and they waste no time getting to the best fishing grounds. They are constantly in communication discussing which areas are hot and which ones are not. On our first day offshore this year, our guide took us directly to a spot where we jigged for halibut and yelloweye in 250 feet of water. His knowledge was based both on personal experience but also the insight of one of the other guides who had been experiencing great success in that spot the day before. Landing our limits inside of an hour, I was in awe that he could straight run to the prime open ocean location by navigating only with his GPS.

While many anglers refer to them as snapper, in actual fact, the yelloweye rockfish is not a real snapper. It does however offer outstanding tablefare. Many other rockfish and groundfish can be incidentally caught but the province along with Fisheries and Oceans Canada cautions anglers to limit their catch as some species are considered to be vulnerable. In fact, there are numerous designated Rockfish Conservation Areas that anglers must avoid.

In the end, anglers must always be familiar with B.C.'s sportfishing regulations, pay attention to closures along with area boundaries, recognize where hatchery-raised coho only can be kept, understand and respect slot sizes and comply with the requirement to record all chinook salmon, lingcod and halibut harvests on their licenses.

While I've become a true believer in the Nootka area, there are certainly other options on the west coast. Take it from me though, head to Campbell River, take the road to Tahsis, and when you hit Nootka Sound, you're in for an adventure you won't soon forget.

To handle the open ocean, vessels must be balanced and have a deep hull.



A striking specimen, yelloweye are a fine eating fish.



Kevin Wilson, Barry Cymbaluk and Norman Sinclair with a day's limit of chinook salmon, yelloweye and halibut.