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**CAPT. TRED BARTA ON FISHING, SAFETY & CHILDREN**



# Sharking's

Trolling & Chumming for  
Alaska's Salmon Sharks

# Last Fro





**A**laska is a fishing destination where dreams come true. Fishermen wait a lifetime to fish these emerald waters. Stories of catching barn door-size halibut until your arms are sore and capturing salmon approaching the 100-pound mark are not uncommon. However, the big news these days is a third species to add to the list of trophies to be caught when traveling to the Last Frontier.

Imagine a species of shark that averages over 300 pounds and grows to over 1,000. These sharks will strike trolled bait or artificials; they jump like a mako and scream off line like a bigeye tuna. This mystery shark is at its peak of abundance, so it is not uncommon to see aggregations of 100 or more finning at the surface, reminiscent of the old days of swordfishing in New England. There is no commercial fishing allowed for these sharks and there is a stringent bag limit for sport fishermen.

This mystery shark is the salmon shark, *Lamna ditropis*. In the family of mackerel sharks, the salmon shark is a close relative to the great white and mako shark and big brother to the porbeagle. The fact that its behavior is quite different from its relatives is probably due to the different habitat and the abundance of food in Alaskan waters. They are very hard fighting and unpredictable. Little is known about the biology of these fish, and the fishery is quite new. The pioneers of this new fishery have catch rates for these sharks that match or exceed the best big game fishing anywhere. It goes without saying, the salmon shark is the apex predator in Alaska's waters.

Again, since the Alaskan salmon shark is a close relative of the mako and porbeagle, the techniques used to take this species in the Last Frontier can be applied wherever game sharks are found. So even if you don't plan a fishing trip to Alaska in the near future, there's much to be learned from the shark captains who ply these icy northern waters.

### THE SCIENCE

The salmon shark is reported to be quite widely distributed, from Baja California to as far North as the Aleutian Islands in Alaska. However, they're at greatest concentration between 50 and 60 degrees north latitude. That is roughly between southeastern Alaska and south-central Alaska. Like other sharks, they grow slowly, reach maturity after five to 10 years, and may live as long as 25 years. While they favor



Photos & Story By Andy Mezirow

# rior





**DOUBLE DUTY:** The standard outfit used to tame salmon sharks is a 6-foot, 80- to 130-pound class rod coupled with a 50- to 80-pound class reel. Alaska guide, Dave Wiley, spools his reels with 200-pound test Spectra braid, which is also commonly used when halibut fishing.

water temperatures of 41 to 59 degrees Fahrenheit (5 to 15 degrees Celsius), there are no temperature breaks here that cause concentrations of these sharks.

They are opportunistic feeders and tend to feed on salmon whenever possible. Charter operators, as well as longliners, have noticed these sharks also eat halibut, cod and rockfish. We lose at least one halibut rig per day to a shark bite-off. I have witnessed the salmon shark feeding as deep as 570 feet (on my client's halibut). It stands to reason they come to the surface to

facilitate digestion in the warmer waters. The most amazing scientific fact about the salmon shark is that they have the ability to elevate their body temperature by the utilizing a sort of internal heat exchanger called "rete mirabile." This mechanism enables the shark to have a body temperature that is between 30 and 50 degrees warmer than the surrounding water. This warming temperature allows more blood to flow to their muscles, making them a faster swimmer than their prey. In addition, this increases the flow of blood to the brain, making the eyes function better. This enables the salmon shark to be a very visual hunter.

There is some evidence to support the idea that salmon sharks migrate to the south in the winter and pup in the spring off the California and Oregon coasts. Through personal conversations with Southeastern Alaska ("Sitka") charter boat operators, it appears they see and catch more small salmon sharks than we do in south central (Seward & Prince William Sound). Keep in mind, Alaska is a giant state. The distance from Sitka to Seward is equivalent to the distance between Montauk, N.Y., and the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

In 1996, there was a small commercial fishery and the beginning of the modern sport fishery. In 1997, the State of Alaska Board of Fisheries closed all commercial fishing for sharks and made stringent bag limits for sport-fishing. A bag limit of one per day and two per season was put in place. There seems to be some

correlation between the abundance of pink and dog salmon and the salmon shark population. I say this because there were large numbers of sharks in the 1970s and now again in the late 1990s and into last year, which also correlates with high local concentrations of these salmon species. Most charter operators in South Central would rather catch-and-release these game fish.

## TACKLE & TECHNIQUES

This is an exciting new fishery and the pioneers of it have provided some great insight, however, since most readers will not venture to Alaska to pursue these sharks on their own, I have omitted details on the exact locations these great fish occupy.

The vast majority of Alaskan shark fishing is done with heavy stand-up tackle. The standard outfit used is a 6-foot, 80- to 130-pound class rod like the G.Loomis Hybrid IGFA 80. Most guides use either the Penn International or Shimano Tiagra 50 or 80. I have found the Shimano TLD 50 two-speed to be more than adequate to handle these sharks. Most guides spool their reels with a good-quality 80- to 130-pound test monofilament. Others prefer a Spectra braid such as Tuff Line Plus.

Dave Wiley of Orion Charters in Valdez said he prefers the 200-pound test Spectra braid. The up side to using Tuff Line is that it is commonly used for halibut fishing. This makes the transition from halibut to shark fishing easy and relatively inexpensive for guides. The down side is it tends to weaken substantially if it gets abraded. Whether it is roughed up by rubbing along the side of the boat or across the shark's skin, it is only a matter of time before it breaks. One way to prolong the life of the Spectra when sharking is to use a 30-foot wind-on monofilament leader that goes from the Spectra backing to the wire leader. This gives some stretch and abrasion protection.

Stainless steel 3/32 aircraft cable wire leaders are commonly used here; I have never seen a fisherman use single-strand wire when sharking in Alaska.

Salmon shark fishing pioneer, Capt. Bob Candopoulos of Saltwater Safari Company, has spent years perfecting modern salmon shark fishing techniques. He favors the cable because it is durable and can be reused. He will use a 6-foot cable leader crimped to a premium Spro Power Swivel, then add another 6-foot, 400-pound test monofilament leader which he attaches a 10/0 Gamakatsu circle hook. He uses this rig so that when the shark is brought along side to be released, the monofilament can be easily clipped as close to the fish as pos-

## ALASKAN FISHING CONTACTS

Saltwater Safari Company of Alaska  
(Capt. Bob Candopoulos)  
907-224-5232  
www.saltwatersafari.com

Orion Charter of Valdez  
(Capt. Dave Wiley)  
907-835-8610

Native Son Charters of Cordova  
907-424-7393

Captain Jack's Seafood Locker  
907-224-8082



sible. When catching a shark for keeps, he favors the straight 10-foot wire leader.

### ICY WATER TROLLING

Salmon shark fishing is not a rough-weather sport. The strain these fish put on angler and tackle alike, and their exceptionally large size make pursuing them in adverse sea conditions unsafe. While it is an acceptable risk to travel through rough water to fish in comfortable conditions, charter skippers in Alaska seem to have a healthy respect for the potential fury of the Gulf of Alaska.

In Alaska, we experience huge tidal ranges, these fluctuations of water cause the surface layer of water to mix up and make finding and meaningful temperature breaks difficult. The salmon shark seems to favor any structure that holds fish. Their immense size means they need a reliable food source to stay alive. Ledges, rock piles and pinnacles all hold a variety of marine life for the sharks to feed on. However, there are literally thousands of rock piles and pinnacles within the range of a charter boat. Some hold more fish and sharks than others. This is where Capt. Candopoulos's experience pays off. He knows where the sharks are likely to be and at what time of year. His crew has caught and released more salmon sharks than any other crew in Alaska. They fish 8 fishermen per trip and it is common for each fisherman to get a shot at a shark. While the idea is to catch these fish one at a time, multiple hook-ups do occur and tend to create chaos in the cockpit.

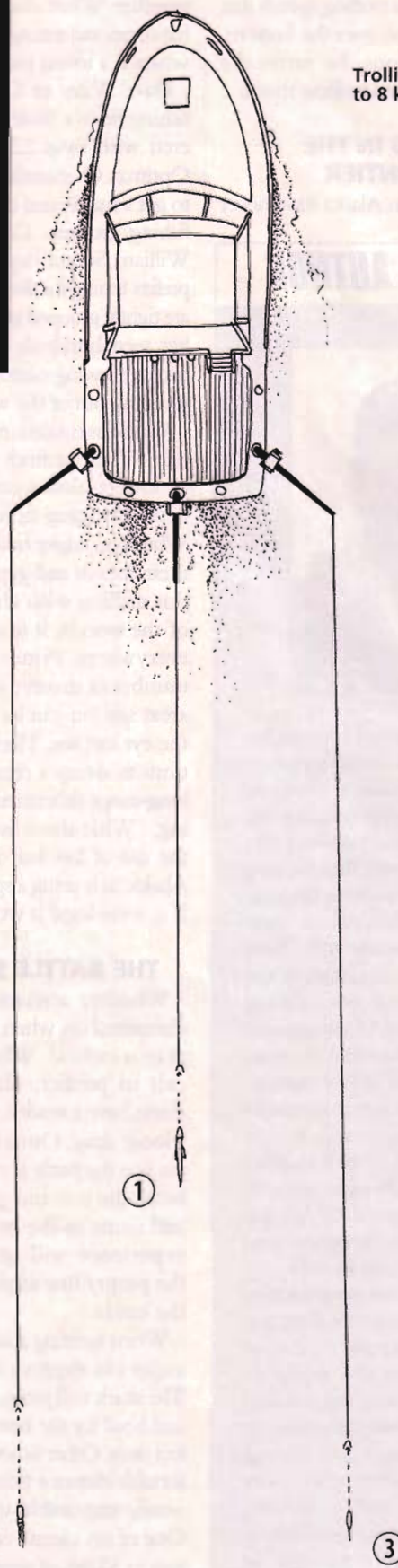
The Saltwater Safari Company's 50-foot boat, **LEGEND**, is perfectly suited for tangling with these monstrous fish. The deck is far enough off the water, and large enough, to give a degree of protection to the angler and crew from this high-jumping cousin to the mako. His crews of three deck hands each have years of big game fishing experience, and the crew on the **LEGEND** approaches the shark trips like a big game hunt. They stalk the sharks by trolling a spread of diving lures (The largest size Yo-Zuri Bonito plugs, Braid Wahoo Bombs and other jet head trolling lures). As in other fisheries, the idea is to have the lures resemble some type of prey in the area. Salmon, herring and squid are the primary prey fish; and silver, blue and red are the most likely colors to draw a strike. When Capt. Candopoulos realized these sharks would aggressively strike a lure, it became possible to prospect large areas every day, while still having a realistic possibility of hooking up. Downriggers and Z-wings might be part of the future evolution of this fishery, but lures are simply run directly off the rod tip for now.

When the **LEGEND** finds the fish that

### CAPT. BOB CANDOPOULOS' SALMON SHARK TROLLING SPREAD

1. Ballyhood with mackerel inside fished 50 feet back.
2. 16-ounce Braid Wahoo Bomb, fished 75 feet back.
3. 16-ounce Yo-Zuri Bonito Plug, fished 100 feet back.

Trolling speed is 6 to 8 knots.





won't respond to the artificials, they switch to trolling natural baits. As you can imagine, some lures work much better than others; the same is true for baits. The trolling speeds that work best are 6 to 8 knots over the bottom. Depending on conditions, he varies the lures/baits in his spread and trolling speed.

## CHUMMING IN THE LAST FRONTIER

Since most guides from Alaska have never

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Capt. Andy Mezirow has been on the water all of his life. After completing high school in 1982, Andy moved to Montauk, N.Y. to begin a long career at sea. He worked as a deck hand for the Viking fishing fleet for several years, then worked fishing the Grand Banks of New England. Moving to Alaska, Andy continued working aboard fishing vessels while completing his college education in the Pacific Northwest. After college, Andy earned a 1600-ton Ocean Master's license. He sailed aboard Oceanographic Research ships as a Navigational Officer and captain for years. These sea-going laboratories have taken Andy (and his tackle box) to all corners of the earth, from Antarctica to the North Pole. After completing 10 years at sea, Andy started Crackerjack Sportfishing Charters in the coastal community of Seward, Alaska in 1993.

Capt. Andy is a regional representative and world record holder for the IGFA, and was named Alaska Angler "Guide of the Year" in 1998. He also serves on the Board of Directors for the National Association of Charterboat Operators and the National Advisory Board for the Recreational Fishing Alliance. For more information call Capt. Andy at 907-224-2606, e-mail to [andy@crackerjackcharters.com](mailto:andy@crackerjackcharters.com), or visit his website at [www.crackerjackcharters.com](http://www.crackerjackcharters.com).

rigged a big game trolling bait, they drift and chum instead. This technique is a good one as long as the sharks are grouped tightly together. When chasing solitary sharks, it is a big ocean and setting up a chum slick just anywhere is a losing proposition.

Dave Wiley of Orion Charters does his fishing from a 28-foot aluminum boat powered with twin 225 horsepower Mercury Optimax Outboards. He uses his boat's speed to get a maximum of time on the productive fishing grounds. Capt. Wiley fishes Prince William Sound departing from Valdez. He prefers fishing for the salmon sharks when they are tightly grouped and feeding on salmon. He has seen hundreds feeding in a small area; some throwing salmon across the water, some jumping out of the water.

Wiley uses salmon carcasses as chum and bait. When he finds the sharks schooled up he lowers salmon carcasses over at different depths ranging from 15 to 150 feet deep. When one angler hooks up everyone else reels their lines in and gets out of the way. While this drifting with chum works in his neck of the woods, it is not a sure-fire method everywhere. Prince William Sound has a number of massive salmon runs. There are areas salmon can be seen jumping as far as the eye can see. These areas are prime locations to set up a chum slick. I can hear the long-range fishermen from California thinking, "What about live bait?" Unfortunately, the use of live bait is illegal in the state of Alaska, as is using a sport-caught fish for bait. If it were legal it would be deadly.

### THE BATTLE STARTS & ENDS

Whether a shark has been trolled or chummed up, when the strike comes, a tight drag is critical. While their battle is difficult to predict, ultimately these salmon sharks have a tendency to spin if fought using a loose drag. Once the shark is spun up in the line the battle is over; the shark will either break the line and get away or be hog-tied and come to the boat. The boat handler's experience will be the key to ensuring the proper line angle is maintained during the battle.

When fighting a salmon shark properly, an angler can expect a long, often brutal battle. The shark will jump, greyhound, then sound and head for the bottom, which is often 600 feet deep. Other times, the fish will find a comfortable distance from the boat and it will be nearly impossible to get them any closer. One of my client's caught one in May of last year in 33 feet of water and the shark took me into the kelp and nearly the surf line off of

Montague Island. Capt. Candopoulos once had a giant shark on for several hours before getting it close enough to release.

Once the shark gets close to the boat, the technique for landing or releasing them is similar to what is done elsewhere. They are wired to the boat and either released or killed and hauled aboard. Once the fish is in the boat, the preservation of the meat is imperative. Due to the high urea content in the skin of all sharks, bleeding and gutting as soon as possible is very important. If you choose to retain your shark, don't let the hundreds of pounds of meat go to waste by improperly handling the fish.

The shark's meat is very good to eat and freezes well; they taste similar to swordfish. Since the sharks are so large, each fish yields hundreds of pounds of fillets. There are fish processors that are experienced in handling these fish in Seward. Captain Jack's Seafood Locker will cut, vacuum-pack and flash-freeze your catch. When fishing keep in mind how much fish you really want and only keep what you can use. For freezing and vacuum-sealing it will cost you around \$1.10 per pound and to ship it out of state you are looking at \$3 to \$3.50 per pound. The salmon sharks average between 250 and 500 pounds.

### THE SHARK'S FUTURE IN THE LAST FRONTIER

I am sure you will hear more about the salmon shark in the future. It is an amazing game fish. We may be far from the East Coast, but we have heard about the decline of the shark populations elsewhere. The Department of Fish and Game is closely monitoring this fishery and the landings. So be advised: If you plan a trip to Alaska, go shark fishing, take some photographs and video, then release these great fish to fight another day. Fill your freezer with halibut and salmon. This is especially important because the salmon shark is one of the few species of fish that the commercial guys are not allowed to fish for. If we show restraint in our harvest of these fish, the commercial interests will not be able to justify targeting them. While there is evidence salmon sharks live in Alaska's waters year round, they tend to become more commonly seen when the salmon move in. Typically, early June is the first substantial run and from mid July through August the ocean comes alive with salmon returning to streams throughout the North Gulf Coast and Prince William Sound. This is when an angler's chances would be best for capturing a salmon shark, the Last Frontier's newest attraction. 