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JANUARY 2006

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THE MAGAZINE OF SALTWATER

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SPORT FISHING JANUARY 2006

THE MAGAZINE OF SALTWATER FISHING

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THE THOUGHT OF FISHING ANY part of Alaska is enough to make a serious saltwater angler's heart beat a little faster. And with good reason: The state's blessed with a wild and pristine jagged coast that draws interest and effort with its promise of big halibut and fast action for salmon.

Now ramp that up a notch: Try to imagine a large swath of the state's coast so untouched and neglected that it's this final frontier's final frontier.

That describes the outer reaches of Prince William Sound and the Gulf of Alaska west to Kenai Fjords National Park. Fishing this area has long been impractical since day boats out of Valdez and Seward (the only real ports around with charter and private sport-fishing fleets) cannot easily make it out to these waters and back in a day. Consequently, the fishing has remained truly wide open.

Tired of wishing he could take his anglers to fish more distant reaches, Seward's Capt. Andy Mezirow decided to do something about it. A couple of years ago, he designed a long-range-capable charter boat, allowing six to eight anglers to live aboard comfortably for several days and nights.

In June of last year, Andy delivered his new custom, 46-foot, fiberglass-hulled boat, *Crackerjack Voyager*, from Modutech Marine, the builder in Tacoma, Washington, to Seward and began running the first long-range trips out of that port. I was fortunate enough to be on one of these, a four-day outing in late June.

The scenery, wildlife and of course fishing all proved simply spectacular.

DROP DOWN AND HANG ON!

That assessment is not made lightly; I've dropped lines in southeast and central Alaska waters many times over the past couple of decades. I've seen some great fishing but nothing quite like this.

After the five-hour, 110-mile run out Resurrection Bay, Andy took advantage of calm seas to head southeast to isolated, wind-swept Middleton Island, beyond which lies only open Gulf of Alaska. After the skipper had figured out our drift, I watched five anglers (all sharing my last name, and not coincidentally) put down lines. Most lines never even made it to bottom, 105 feet below, before being hit. Two came up without fish — perhaps not surprising since we fished our lead jigs and big plastic tails, such as Scampis and Berkley Powerbaits, barbless. But three came up with serious fish — two lingcod in the 30- to 45-pound range and a halibut fully twice that size. We released all our fish this day, except a small "chicken" halibut for dinner.



MULTIDAY MAYHEM IN THE **GULF OF ALASKA**

Fabulous Fishing Abounds in This
Final Frontier's Final Frontier

TEXT & PHOTOS BY DOUG OLANDER



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The outer reaches of Prince William Sound offer countless bays and channels where long-range anglers can find plenty of protection — and fish — if winds come up. Right: Releasing nearly 200 pounds of raging halibut is no easy task. Capt. Andy Mezirow tries to hang on for the head thrashing to abate.





Lingcod this size lurk over every reef and rock pile in the waters around distant Middleton Island, where multiple hookups will keep a crew boating and mostly releasing the voracious predators.

That initial drop pretty well foretold the sort of fishing we'd enjoy for the next few hours. Most of the time, these ferocious predators engulfed jigs on the drop or, if the lures did make it to bottom, within a few jigs. On braided lines testing anywhere from 14- to 80-pound, battles

varied in length and intensity. One of the toughest came when Jitka Olander of St. Louis found her hands full and then some.

Even with 80-pound line and the drag screwed down on her Stella 20000A, she had clearly hooked something too big to coax in the direction of the boat, finally



handing off the rig to her nephew Gabe. The brawny young fellow had his hands full, as well. Perhaps a half-hour later we saw why. "There it is!" someone screamed as color began to show in the dark-green depths. "That's *huge*!" And it was — a halibut the size of a Mini-Cooper appeared briefly before muscling toward bottom in another unstoppable run.

Finally, Gabe prevailed, and Andy managed to slip the jig out of the beast's mouth for a release. The skipper estimated the flatfish at 150 to 200 pounds, based on 12 years of experience as a Seward charter captain.

Seeing a fish that size released offers a memorable image, but no less so was the amazing sight of lingcod acting like dolphin (dorado). A ling will sometimes follow up from bottom a hooked rockfish or a smaller ling, often latching on. But I'd never seen a display like that when Dave, Jitka's husband, cranked up a ling in the 30-pound range. "Look at this!" said deckhand Floyd Townsend, staring down. We all convened in that corner of the boat to see three lings at least as large as the hooked fish swimming around it, clearly agitated. But before anyone could crank up and present a jig, they vanished. Late in the afternoon, an unwelcome big dogfish came up on a herring bait, and behind that was a lingcod that dwarfed the others — it looked like it would go at least 60 pounds.

Toward evening (with the sun still very high in the sky), we anchored on the north side of Middleton Island, not far off the beach, in just 40 feet of water. The

SF TIP

FOR HALIBUT, ONE WORD: **PLASTICS**

I used a good portion of the checked-baggage weight limit allotted by the airline with metal jigs — spiffy, shiny, long and short models, the latest fish killers out of Japan. Halibut and lings would clobber 'em for sure! Wrong. After being thoroughly outfished each drift by those using the **Crackerjack Voyager's** standard-issue, plain lead-head jigs of 12 to 24 ounces with an oversize curlicue Powerbait tail or a big twin-tail Scampi, I gave it up. As soon as I started dropping the big tails, I enjoyed the same level of action as my peers. Advice: Leave most of your fancy jigs at home. And don't feel too bad, Captain Mezirow assured me. Not long ago, he had taken out a group of hard-core jiggers from Korea who'd brought hundreds of dollars' worth of great-looking iron. They, too, soon gave them up for the wiggly tails.



The basic 8- to 16-ounce plain lead-head with a big, flashy plastic tail remains the standard-setter among lures for Alaska's hungry halibut.

DOING IT LONG RANGE

HOW TO GET THERE: Fly to Anchorage and arrange a pickup time with Crackerjack Charters; long-range participants are provided free transportation for the 125 miles to and from Seward. (If you prefer to do your own driving or want to have a vehicle on hand, rent a car in Anchorage.)

WHAT TO BRING: The necessities — clothing, personal effects (including camera, books, bug repellent — though we never needed the latter — and so on). Include warm clothing and good raingear/deck boots. As far as tackle, Mezirow has plenty of top-notch gear. However, if you have favorite outfits, very light rigs and/or fly tackle, bring it along. Ditto lures, though he has plenty of jigs and tails and hooks for salmon and large bottomfish. If you'll want to fish smaller jigs for very light lines (e.g., for silver salmon), bring them. (I like to have a 6- or 8-pound spin outfit set up with a little jig or spoon for quick access since salmon can show up passing by the boat at any time.)

WHEN TO GO: Mezirow starts long-range trips May 15 and books them until September 15. July and August are the most popular months, when silver salmon can be a delightful scourge. June offers a shot at big chinook — and lower rates.

HOW MANY CAN GO: The *Crackerjack Voyager* can take 12 anglers, but six to eight are the maximum for long-ranging.

KEEPING YOUR CATCH: Most anglers love to bring back great Alaska fish, and possession limits of four salmon per person and



two halibut are pretty run-of-the-mill. Mezirow packs a thousand pounds or more of ice on these trips to keep fish in top shape. On an outing of four or more days, consider keeping fish just the last couple of days. Everyone should still have plenty of fish to take home, and they'll be fresh for processing back in port.

COSTS: All trips (which can be two days

to a week out or more) are customized per anglers, and cost varies with itinerary. A five-day trip offering four full days of fishing and one day to tour glaciers, take a scenic charter flight, etc. would include three nights at the Hotel Edgewater in Seward, two nights on board, and one night at the Jumping Salmon Lodge. Cost for this would run \$2,995 per person (for a minimum of three). Packages also include shuttle from the airport in Anchorage to Seward and all meals on fishing days, plus fish processing for two 50-pound boxes of fillets per angler and fishing licenses. Single overnight trips, full- and half-day fishing trips, and river fishing trips are also available.

CONTACT INFORMATION: To book trips — Crackerjack Charters, 877-224-2606, www.crackerjackcharters.com. (To see the overnight lodging option at Jumping Salmon Lodge, 907-573-5162, www.jumpingsalmonlodge.com.)

For fish processing — Captain Jack's, 907-224-2082, www.captainjackalaska.com. (Very customer-service-oriented, these guys do a first-rate job of vacuum-packing and flash-freezing to take back on the airplane or have shipped.)

For accommodations in Seward — Hotel Edgewater, 888-793-6800, www.hoteledge.com. (We've always had great luck at the Edgewater, though Seward has several nice hotel options.)

For general information on visiting Alaska — Travel Alaska, www.travelalaska.com.



This idyllic scene greets long-rangers when they turn the corner into the cove on Chenega Island to see Jumping Salmon Lodge.



Above: Big chinook haunt the waters near Montague Island, where this trophy fish nailed a bait trolled deep on a downrigger. Right: A paper bag allows chum to disperse near the bottom, calling in nearby halibut.

sonar showed no fish or structure beneath us. Yet while Andy cooked very fresh halibut on the grill, the herring he had put down on the bottom when we stopped ended up in the maw of yet another halibut, this one a decent 100-pounder (which in such shallow water made some serious runs on Andy's salmon-mooching rod with 20-pound mono).

In fact, the skipper often finds great action in surprisingly shallow water in the Gulf of Alaska. On some trips he actually is able to chum (chunk) up both halibut and lingcod topside around the anchored boat! For example, during one recent trip, at a Middleton high spot, a group limited on halibut averaging 70 pounds and released a total of 74 lingcod — all on one stop.

After dinner, anglers, weary from hours of nonstop action, filtered down to the cabin where six berths awaited, though only our watches suggested bedtime. In this far-north realm, there is no darkness in late June — just a couple of hours of somewhat muted light shortly after midnight.

A GREAT DAY'S FISHING — BY 10 A.M.

The second day dawned just as benevolent as the first, but that's often not the case. Middleton is not only distant but also very exposed to wind from any direction. Currents rushing into and out of Prince William Sound sweep over the surrounding reefs. Although these currents contribute to the great productivity of the



area, they create conditions that can be hard to predict and, with any wind, to navigate without considerable skill and experience. Since no sport-fishing boats come out here, we had zero competition — not a boat in sight either day.

While we might have remained to fish Middleton another day, we spent only part of the morning drifting reefs in a different area — one that Andy hadn't fished before. No matter: In less than three hours or so, we lost several halibut, released others and boated four "eating-size" fish of 40 to 80 pounds.

Using a 10-inch Williamson menhaden from its Saltwater Live Series that I had brought along to try out, I managed to boat one of those 80-pounders and lost another at least as large. Add a couple of big, toothy lingcod and it was getting pretty beat-up. But I dropped the soft-plastic bait once more and hooked the biggest halibut of the trip, also on the big Stella spinner. Once at the boat I handed off the rod and grabbed my camera, hoping to do the impossible and show in a photo the immensity of 200 pounds or so

SF TIP

PUT ON A POSITIVE SPIN

It's hard to remember just when serendipity struck, but I recall suddenly wondering why not slide a spinning blade on a mono or wire leader ahead of a jig? So I did. I ordered from Cabela's (www.cabelas.com) several packages of blades (especially 1- to 2-inch bright willow-leaf blades) and various beads.



This silver salmon seemed to make a beeline for the small herring the author fished behind beads and a bright, spinning blade.

Before tying on jigs or spoons for bottom-fish or salmon, I ran the blade onto the leader, followed by one or two (or sometimes three) beads. Try it and you'll see that on the upswing or when cranking, the blade revolves busily — and flashes like crazy. (In fact, I could feel it spinning, at least with braided line, even when 200 feet down.) I also used a blade ahead of herring baits for salmon. So what's not to like? Minimal cost, maximum exposure. It stands to reason that anything that so easily gives a lure or bait more visibility and life can only draw more attention to itself.

of angry halibut thrashing off the stern.

By 10 a.m. we had what most anglers would consider a great day's worth of fishing. But of course there was lots more to come after the *Crackerjack Voyager* ran 45 miles north to Montague Island to fish for salmon. Capping off the action was a 35-pound chinook that my spouse, Jackie, wrestled to the net.

The second day we took advantage of the option to overnight at Jumping Salmon Lodge, tucked into a bay on Chenega Island, in the southwest corner of Prince William Sound. Staying at the small, hospitable resort offered yet another angle to the trip.

LONG-RANGE TRIPPING: FULL OF SURPRISES

Anglers can stay aboard the *Crackerjack Voyager* each night out or spend one or more nights at the lodge. In fact, flexibility is the name of this long-range game. Depending on the two critical and completely uncontrollable factors of weather and fish, "We can quickly modify a trip to fish the open ocean if it's calm or head up into the countless bays and sounds when it's rough," Mezirow says. "The nice thing is that we have the flexibility and time to find good fishing."

That flexibility also extends to what species a group wants to target since summer fishing offers consistent action for halibut, lingcod and silver salmon (the mouth of Resurrection Bay is famed for its summer silver run). Although chinook fishing is less-renowned, Mezirow has found solid action for 30- to 50-pound chinook in a few areas off Montague Island. In July and August, huge salmon sharks (close and similar cousin to the mako and porbeagle) move in to Prince William Sound and at times hunt in large packs.

Steep pinnacles that rise from the bottom, dotting the subterranean topography throughout the area, hold promise of huge lingcod and scarlet-hued yelloweye rockfish. (We found great action in a 15-square-mile area known appropriately as The Needles.) Yelloweye, which can exceed 20 pounds, often have the conservation-minded skipper leaving a pinnacle where fishing has been *too* good: These largest among rockfishes grow incredibly slowly and, once boated, must be kept. Usually brought up from deep water,

SF TIP

ULTRABITE: SKIPPER'S SECRET WEAPON

"I've never really believed that putting smelly goop on a jig would make any difference, but I'm convinced this stuff works!" While we never conducted anything resembling scientific testing during many hours of dropping jigs for halibut and lingcod, casual observation suggested that spraying this new concoction from Mustad scientists onto anything before dropping it over does indeed enhance the bite. Simply, those who did seemed to hook up faster/more often than those who didn't. Coincidence? Maybe. But after some wait-and-see, I sure did find myself spraying the heck out of my jigs! Mustad now offers an unscented version of this stuff, which relies on pheromones and not on any odor for its appeal. Good thing, too: Imagine a concentrate of really gnarly halitosis in a bottle, and you can figure out why we held our lures at arm's length over the gunwale when spraying 'em! But unscented versions are in the works. For more information, visit http://mustad.no/products/other/fish_attractant.php.



Spray and drop — why not? It took only a moment to douse one's lure in pheromones that seemed to turn on predators.

yelloweye bloat easily from even slight internal gas expansion and if "released" simply float away at the surface.

Salmon offer an ever-present target and often an incidental catch. In May and June most salmon action is limited to trolling some spots for big chinook that Andy has located in the more distant reaches of his long-range fishing area. In July and August, however, the waters can

be lousy with silvers — so much so that these aggressive 8- to 18-pounders will grab big lead-head jigs headed down to (or up from) the bottom.

But every day involves fishing different areas and any number of surprises. Case in point: On our last morning, we opted for light-tackle silver salmon fishing. The *Voyager* was anchored just 20 minutes from the grounds at Aialik Cape, versus the 20 miles that Seward day boats had to run. So during the prime time, from 6 to 8 a.m., we had the whole area to ourselves. During that time, Jitka was coaxing in another silver just behind the boat. Suddenly, in a Hummer-size boil that scared the bejeezus out of us as we stood at the transom, 1,500 pounds of sea lion erupted on her hapless fish. Such occurrences may be common in California but rare (so far) up here. Shortly thereafter we found ourselves more or less surrounded by oblivious humpback whales.

Expecting the unexpected has to be ... well, expected, in any Gulf of Alaska long-range trip. That's the real beauty of it, since having two to four or even more days out puts a vast area otherwise off-limits suddenly within easy reach. And almost whatever the conditions, a skipper like Andy Mezirow will be able to put anglers on fish. Fishing Alaska long-range isn't cheap, but what for most of us should be a bona fide trip of a lifetime, it's a pretty good investment.

SF INSIGHT

CPR FOR ALASKA'S MONSTA FISH!

There's nothing like the sight of a 250-pound halibut hanging from a dock scale, dwarfing its vanquishing angler, to get the heart pumping — or to persuade many prospective anglers to book a trip. Despite that reality, more and more skippers are joining Andy Mezirow in his longtime quest to encourage (though not demand) his anglers to release halibut much over the century mark. I suggest anyone planning to fish Alaska who wants to keep halibut to take home fill up his/her fish boxes with 30- to 100-pounders. Not only do these smaller fish produce far fewer eggs each year than the old brood-stock females, they are simply better eating. And, certainly on a long-range trip, odds are good that you'll get many more this size than you would want or need to keep, anyway. Ditto with lingcod (when the season is open): The big females of 30 to 50-plus pounds are never as tender and tasty as the much more abundant 15- to 25-pound fish. Mezirow gives his anglers extra incentive to release triple-digit halibut by offering either 20 percent off his/her next trip or a free G.Loomis rod for doing so. Suggestion: Bring a good camera and have it handy, set for action (with high shutter speed). If the skipper can (carefully) hold a big halibut's head out of the water alongside the boat, be ready to catch the action on film. It's not easy but can be richly rewarding to get a shot that shows the huge fish thrashing boat-side before release.