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Seward: Alaska's

BY DOUG OLANDER

Even for one lucky enough to fish some great places near and far, this had been a pinch-me-I-must-be-dreaming morning — and it wasn't over. As I tossed out a big Krocodile spoon, the first few hours of the day flashed through my mind.

While cruising south at 30 knots down Resurrection Bay in Alaska's Kenai Fjords National Park, I had gazed awestruck at glacier after glacier, their spectacular tidewater ice floes cutting blue-white swaths through green, impossibly steep mountains. Here and there we spotted sea otters bobbing happily on their backs outside thick kelp beds.

Then, while cruising up a cove enshrouded in mists that hung like wet blankets over the eerily still water, the skipper cut the engines. As we drifted, we watched telltale swirls at the surface soon reveal a hulking salmon shark, easily 700 pounds, its fin slicing the water. Quickly, we got a bait in the water. No one aboard breathed a word as the big shark passed within 20 feet of the boat — and kept going.

Another 20 or so miles to the south, a gargantuan fluke rose and fell ahead of us. Suddenly, two humpbacks spouted next to the boat. We continued to watch, and when we figured they'd sounded, one of the whales launched its incredible bulk straight into the sky, seeming to remain vertical for a long moment before crashing back into the Gulf of Alaska. We stopped briefly to gawk as it did so again and again.

I would have rated that a pretty incredible morning without even catching a fish. But the best was yet to come.

"You guys ready to drop?" asked Capt.

Tucked in atop Resurrection Bay, Seward is surrounded by some of the world's most dramatic coastal-glacier backdrops.

DOUG OLANDER



Spectacular Secret

Andy Mezirow, who co-owns Crackerjack Charters. Three other anglers and I assured him we were ready. The Furuno's screen glowed red and yellow, the balls and splotches of biomass virtually shouting, "Fish here!" Clouds of krill, baitfish and big fish hovered above a steep pinnacle rising to within 160 feet of the surface.

Mezirow had promised big lingcod at this spot. Sure enough, even before the first jig could hit bottom, wham! With his stout, short boat rod bent double over the railing, angler Chris Batin had his hands full with something that 60-pound superbraid couldn't stop. Maybe a half-minute later, another angler's jig on superbraid made it down, and wham! Now two anglers had their hands full.

My fishing buddy, Gabe, and I fished lighter gear with somewhat smaller jigs but instantly had fish on that felt anything but small. Four anglers, four big fish on. Three of those four big lingcod we caught on that first drop of the day went back over the side.

Long dagger-toothed lings are tough customers by any standards and, lacking swim bladders, seldom have a problem returning vigorously to their deepwater lairs. By the

time we'd dropped on several more pinnacles, we'd battled up and released lings until I hadn't the faintest idea how many were caught in those furious hours. Such action, virtually nonstop, would prove to be the order of the rest of this day — and not just for lings but salmon, halibut and rockfish.

Given the truly phenomenal scenery and wildlife along with such wide-open fishing, we should have been in one of Alaska's best-known fishing meccas. Instead, we'd come to one of its more undiscovered spots for tourists and anglers: Seward.

For years, a small number of Alaskans has had this fabulous spot pretty much to themselves, most of them Anchorage dwellers who drive the lovely two-and-one-half hours south through the Chugach Mountains. But the word's just begun to leak out with sport-fishing enthusiasts. In the next few years, Seward is truly poised to catch fire as Alaska's hot new fishing destination.

Resurrection Silver Invasion

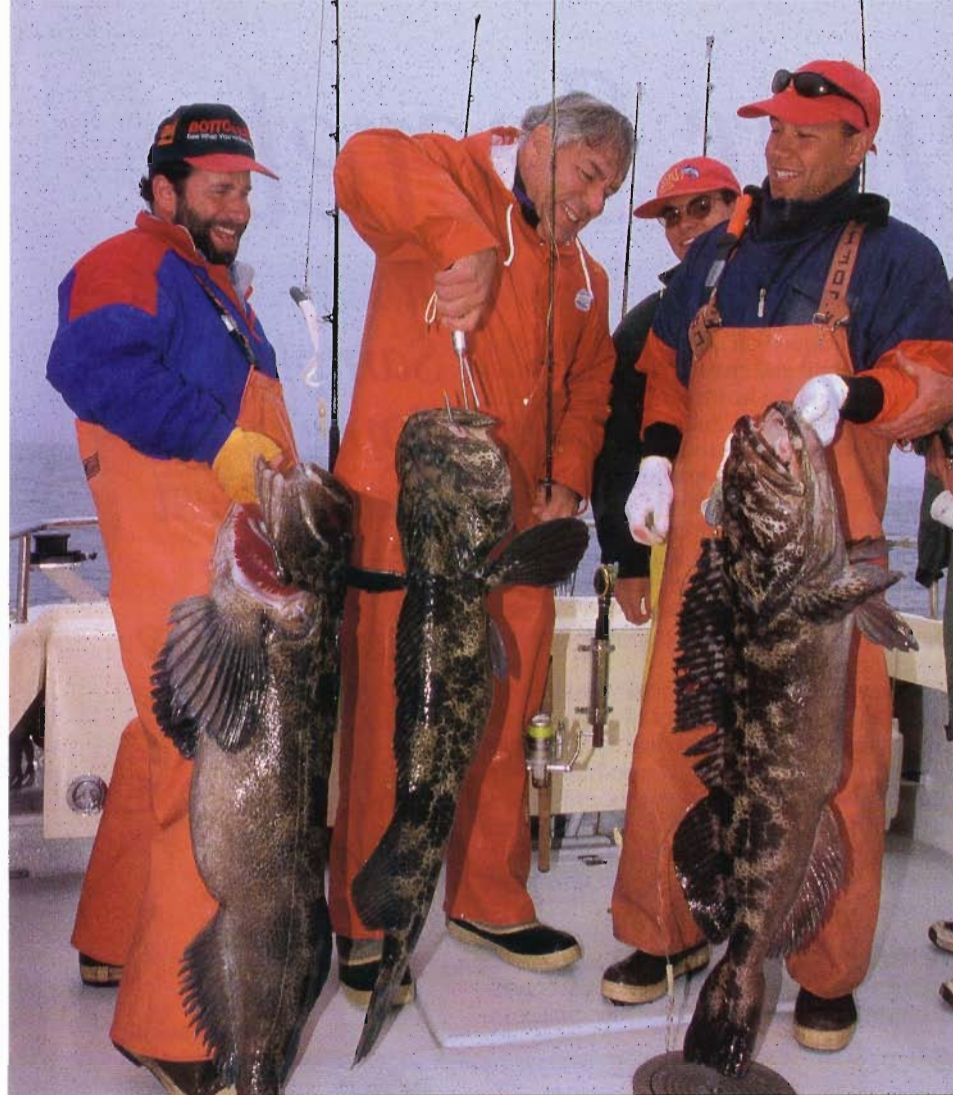
One of the area's more ambitious, conservation-minded skippers, Mezirow first con-

*Sample
Some of the
State's Best
Action in
the Shadow
of Kenai
Fjord's
Coastal
Glaciers*

KEN GRAHAM



MARCH 63



PHOTOS BY DOUG OLANDER

Top: With one lingcod already in the fish box, Capt. Andy Mezirow (left) helps put this trio of 30- to 45-pound lings in the camera lens for a quick photo. Tough as the fish look, these big females all surged straight down to bottom. **Above:** Heads up when Resurrection Bay silvers run! It's commonplace to have every rod connected to an acrobatic coho.

tacted me in 1997, describing some of what makes Seward a special place. From one of his July e-mails: "Today was a classic Seward day of fishing. Took my clients 18 miles to the mouth of the [Resurrection] Bay, fished silver salmon for an hour and a half and caught 18, then ran another six miles to a high spot and limited on 20- to 50-pound halibut (losing one much bigger) and hit another nearby rock pile for four lingcod from 30 to 42 pounds. On the way back we picked up the other six silvers that made limits."

Judging by my visit to Seward, Mezirow's description of such action is typical, given good weather. We got our first taste of the

Resurrection Bay silver salmon invasion with Crackerjack Charters' other owner/skipper, Steve Zernia, on his 28-foot Bayliner, *First Try*. Knowing that our target that morning would be strictly silvers, Zernia cautioned, "They're late this year." Usually the run starts showing up hot and heavy by mid-July; last year, it had just begun to show in early August.

But no excuse for slow fishing proved necessary, with action just about as fast as salmon fishing can offer. We ran south past the Pony Cove area, where a zoo of private boaters gathers every nice summer day, and pulled around Cape Aialik into Aialik Bay. Competition here was minimal among boats but fierce among salmon, which grabbed our metal jigs right and left. Bait proved superfluous.

Though the norm here for silvers (coho) is 15- to 20-pound lines, we'd brought along lighter spinning and baitcasting rigs, from 4- to 12-pound. These made landing the 8- to 14-pound salmon an exciting challenge, with some coho clearing the water in as many as eight wild jumps. As you might suspect, we lost plenty but still had no trouble releasing well over our limits.

Batin's a real fan of Seward silver fishing and one with a significant perspective. The Fairbanks native has been coming to fish here for 26 years and, as Alaska's pre-eminent author/publisher of fishing and hunting books and articles, has experience all over the state. "It was great 26 years ago, and it's still great," he says. "I remember many days catching dolly varden, silver and pink salmon right from the shore until I was tired of catching them. If anything, I think silver fishing's even a little better now than it was then."

These coho begin massing along the outer edges of lower Resurrection Bay (20 to 45 minutes south of Seward, depending upon the boat) in mid-July and work toward Seward in ensuing weeks. Usually by mid- to late August, they're heavier and so abundant in the top end of the bay that anglers may start fishing immediately outside the harbor. The combination of hatchery and wild runs and astonishing amounts of baitfish makes for great abundance of salmon every year.

While coho make up nearly all the catch, there's little doubt that some huge Kenai kings also pass by Resurrection Bay. Earlier last summer, Zernia caught one over 50 pounds on a little coho rig, and Mezirow landed a 40-pounder that attacked a big lead halibut jig.

With salmon feeding largely on sand lance or small herring, most anglers fish 4-inch herring for bait, often using only the tails. We found the small heads just as effective while fishing bait our second morning out when the silvers proved slightly less aggressive than the day before. (While sporadic action kept us busy — as did sights such as a small pod of orcas working through the bay — it took until early afternoon before we reached the limit mark.)

Shortly after Zernia had pulled into tiny Three-Hole Bay, one of many quiet spots in Aialik Bay, I witnessed a spectacle that salmon anglers in many areas never get to see: coho crashing bait tight against the sheer rock



shoreline. As showery sprays of silver needle-fish darted frantically, we headed over and soon found ourselves actually sight fishing, casting to roving packs of salmon that would dart through and compete to attack our baits and lures — and flies. Up on the bow, Batin kept busy with a 10-weight long wand and herring-pattern fly.

Drop 'Em and Hang On!

Many Seward skippers customarily plan on fishing salmon until limits fill the fish box by mid-morning or so, then with good bottom habitat so close by, switching to bottom fish. We did just that on our first day out, when

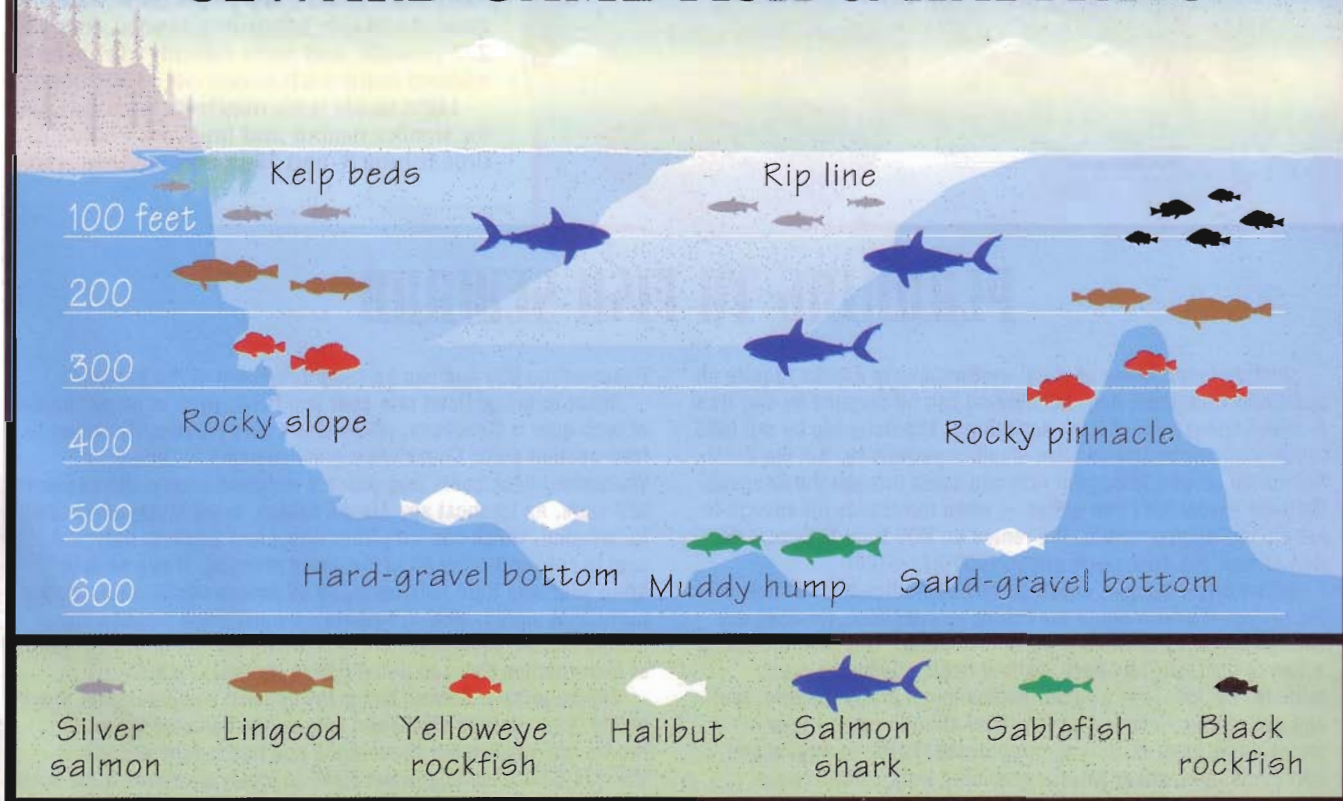
Zernia ran out about noon to a hump in the depths that rises to just over 400 feet and anchored up. (Many Seward skippers will anchor in waters this deep without a second thought.) In the moderate currents, we dropped down 8- to 16-ounce jigs. After just a couple of hours we'd caught limits (two each) of 30- to 50-pound halibut, though we released all but two. Later that afternoon, Mezirow's party nailed a barndoor halibut over 130 pounds at the same spot.

Some skippers run all-day bottom-fish trips, and given good weather, such fishing's a pretty sure bet for nonstop action, sore arms and plenty of surprises. Not many skippers venture

Left: A chaotic battle with a fat 12-pound silver on 6-pound line is bound to put a smile on any light-tackle enthusiast's face.

Above: The waters off Kenai Fjords are full of surprises; the sudden "woosh!" of an orca — or even a whole pod — next to a boat has scared the bejezus out of more than one fisherman.

SEWARD GAME FISH & HABITATS



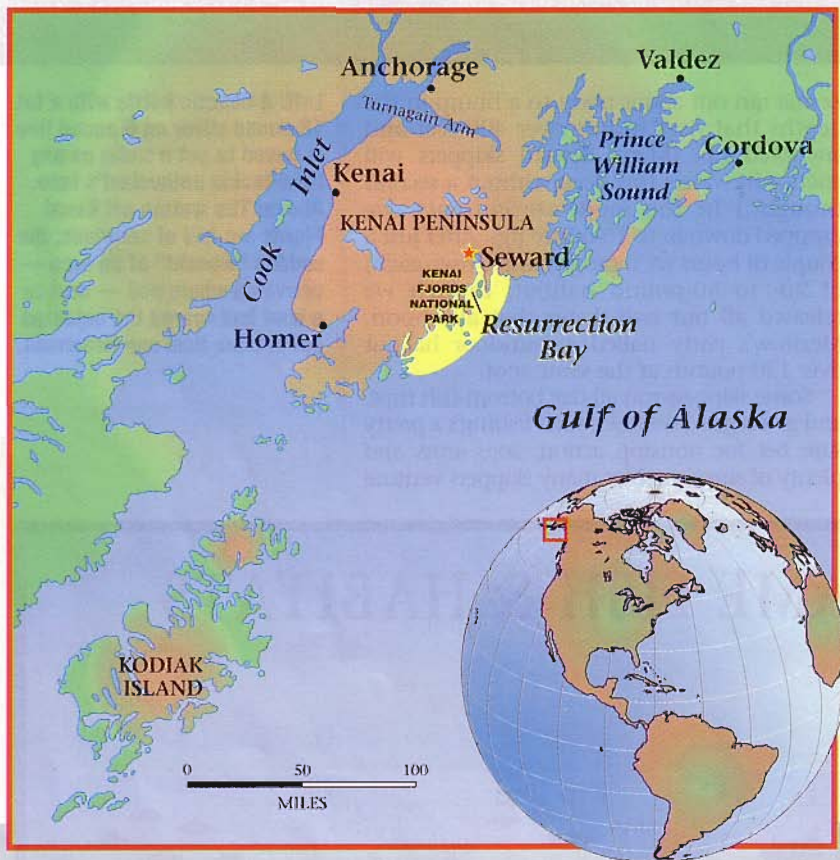
Some days, an angler can catch and release halibut until his/her arms wear out. But saying goodbye isn't always easy: A thrashing halibut of even modest size can be a handful for a skipper to unhook.

as far as Mezirow, but he will enthusiastically make the 80-mile run far south to Nuka Bay or east to Montague Island and has the experience and boat to do it. After years skipping government research vessels all over the world and passenger boats up and down Cook Inlet (often having to break the ice to get from here to there), Mezirow's a consummate skipper for these waters. Last year, he was running a 30-foot Farallon; in 1999, he replaced the 300-hp diesel engine with twin Yamaha 225 outboards on an Armstrong bracket and saw his cruising speed jump from under 20 knots to over 30. This year he and Zernia add two custom-built walk-around sport-fishers that will be very fast and very fishable.

Mezirow acknowledges some pretty big fuel bills on "long-range" days, but he can get



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his anglers to spots that see little if any pressure. With 100 honey-holes logged into his GPS already, he's constantly passing over many more heavy-duty reefs and pinnacles than he can check out.

Even if targeting lingcod, you can't drop baits or jigs to the bottom here without being ready for halibut. They patrol these waters in great numbers; Mezirow's landed them to 277 pounds, and more recently clients have released many each season over 150 pounds.

Light tackle is no match for such fish, but for smaller halibut and lings, we had a great time fishing 8- and 12-pound line. Lings tore

PLANNING TO FISH SEWARD

Getting there: Many anglers' destinations in Alaska require an additional floatplane hop, but Seward can be reached by car, train or (fixed-wing) aircraft from Anchorage. The daily trip by rail (\$86 round trip) can be spectacular, weather permitting. But the 2-1/2-hour drive around Turnagain Arm and south through the Chugach National Forest isn't bad either — when the clouds lift enough to behold the rugged terrain. We rented an SUV from U-Save Auto Rental near the Anchorage airport (907-272-8728).

When to go: Despite unsettled and unpredictable weather in the spring, Mezirow starts his fishing season then. He does get enough business to make it worthwhile, and "You have the whole ocean to yourself." By April, halibut fishing becomes pretty reliable. By June, the weather begins to get pretty reliable, too, and everything — including the silver salmon run — gets increasingly busy as summer progresses. Later, in August and into September, silver salmon gradually work up into upper

Resurrection Bay and can be caught right out of the harbor.

What to bring: Good rain gear is a must. (One of many sources of such gear is Grundens, which offers very reasonably priced foul-weather suits: Check www.grundens.com for info.)

Waterproof deck boots may prove a welcome luxury, but sneakers will work. As for most any Alaska fishing, bring layers of clothing for weather, which can vary from sunny and warm to hazy and cool to cold and rainy all in the same morning. If you wish to bring your own light rods/reels, by all means do. Mezirow stocks fairly light outfits, also. A camera's a must since besides the fishing action, you'll want to capture some of the dramatic beauty of Resurrection Bay and Kenai Fjords National Park.

Where to stay: Seward has many options: bed/breakfasts, large hotels (from plain to plush) and lodges. We sampled three: the Breeze Inn (modest but comfortable and right on the waterfront — 907-224-5238); the Edgewater Hotel (a lovely new three-story hotel

out line on initial runs, acting nothing like "sedentary" bottom fish. And there's no denying the sense of accomplishment one gains from seeing a fish longer than a man's leg come up on wispy mono.

Of course, other fish come up, too, among them yelloweye rockfish — the big red fellows that may reach 20 or more pounds — and the hard-fighting black rockfish ("black bass" locally), which at 4 to 5 pounds offers a pretty hefty average for a species that often feeds in big schools at mid-depths and slams jigs before they can drop very far.

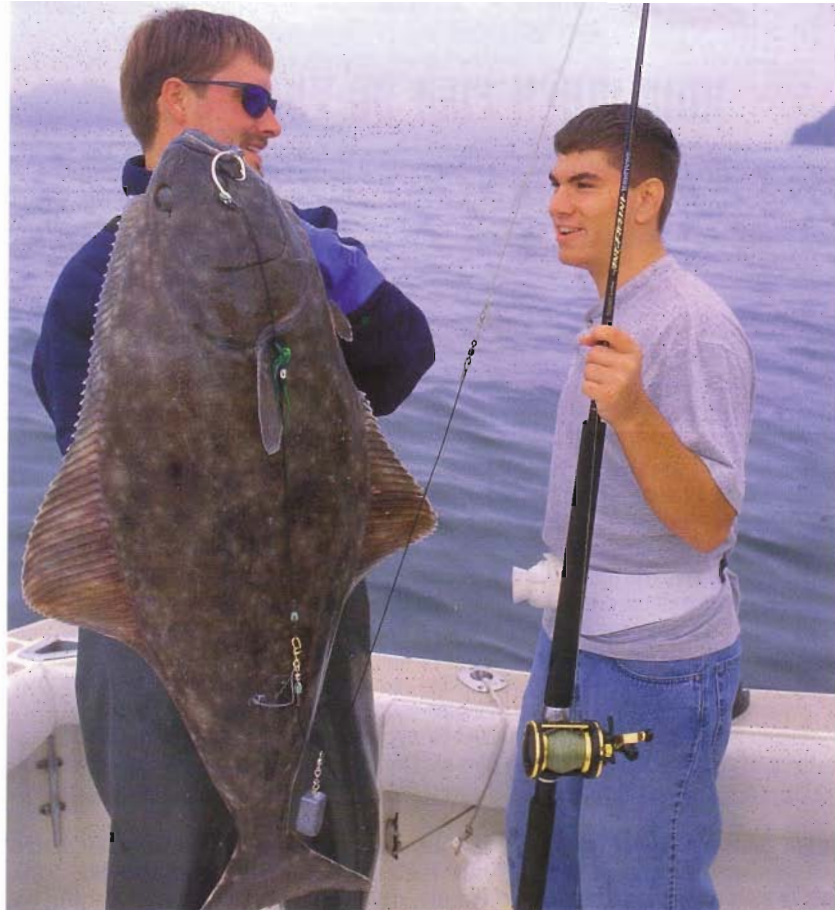
Another unlikely game fish that few target other than Mezirow (and then only rarely): sablefish or "black cod." He catches these succulent deepwater fish by anchoring over a 600-foot-high spot in the middle of Resurrection Bay.

Surprises From Salmon — and Salmon Sharks

Probably the greatest surprise — certainly in its sheer bulk — is the salmon shark. Anyone familiar with the tiny-toothed, annoying little dogfish so abundant in North Pacific waters will never confuse these two shark species. Salmon sharks, like porbeagles, are lookalike cousins of the ferocious mako. They visit seasonally, as do salmon anglers, and for the same reason: silver salmon.

When silvers are thick, according to Mezirow, you'll usually find salmon sharks if you know how to look. Few anglers target them, or want to, since they're so big. "It's hard to find small ones," he says. "They average 400 to 600 pounds." He is willing to go after salmon sharks but notes that it takes the right kind of angler to pit himself on heavy standup gear against these very tough, powerful brutes.

On calm days, Mezirow sees them cruising at the surface — "I've seen as many as 100 in three square miles" — but then they're often less interested in striking than when prowling the depths. If his goal is hooking a salmon shark, he may troll as he looks for the unique boomerang-shaped marks on his sounder screen, pulling huge Yo-Zuri Bonitas in green or blue mackerel. When he locates sharks



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(usually about the same depth as or just below salmon), he'll drop a whole horse herring or a salmon head on a circle hook.

Even if one never targets or hooks a salmon shark, their presence lends an air of unpredictable excitement to a day. Mezirow recorded one such event in an e-mail to me that read: "I had the most amazing encounter with a giant salmon shark today. After a client reeled in half of a 40-pound halibut, I dropped it down until the salmon shark picked it back up. I started reeling fast. The shark followed the head right up to the boat.

"I fed the 600-pounder a whole box of herring, keeping it within 5 feet of the boat for a

Capt. Steve Zernia hoists a typical halibut for a very happy Florida fisherman who caught his first Alaska flatie by dropping a bait 400 feet to bottom using superbraid line.

with a lobby open to the rooftop skylights — 907-224-2700); and the Windsong Lodge (a couple of miles out of town, set next to the Resurrection River, offering a sense of both the rustic and luxurious — 800-208-0200). Everything in its Resurrection Roadhouse restaurant is worth sampling, and the pizza's some of the best you'll have anywhere. For an Epicurean seafood dinner in Seward, try Ray's waterfront. For overnighting in Anchorage, one of several hotels near the airport is the Best Western Barratt Inn (907-243-3131).

Weather and safety: Don't be fooled by calm waters and light winds at Seward, which is fairly protected so far up in Resurrection Bay. It can be a different world nearer the mouth of the bay. After a day when the bay and gulf beyond were as smooth as glass, the next morning we had to fish behind a small island in the bay to find any shelter from gale-force winds blowing hard enough to whip the caps off our heads. Yet, when we headed back up the main bay in nasty 4-foot whitecaps, we saw a small, flat-bottomed Kenai River guide's boat with four anglers heading down the bay. The bottom line: Pick a charter skipper who specializes in fishing Seward and has the right sort of boat for it. Don't hesitate to ask about basics such as survival gear and EPIRBs.

Besides fishing: Hike the magnificent Kenai Fjords wilderness, starting as nearby as the famous Exit Glacier (a 20-minute drive from Seward) and vast Harding Ice Fields. In Seward, you'll find the Alaska Sealife Center and plenty of shops offering Alaskan arts and crafts.

For reservations or information: Captains Andy Mezirow or Steve Zernia, Crackerjack Charters: 888-385-1312 or 907-225-2606; crjack@ptialaska.net; www.outdoorsdirectory.com/akpages/crackerjack. For a full "standard" day with Crackerjack Charters, the rate is \$170 per person or \$900 for the entire boat (two people minimum, six maximum). For a long-range trip, it's \$200/\$1,100.

For more information on the area as well as other charters, contact Seward Chamber of Commerce: 907-224-8051, chamber@seward.net, www.seward.net/chamber.

For information about Kenai Fjords National Park: 907-224-3175, www.nps.gov/kefj.

Also, a great deal of insight about Alaska fishing, including Seward, is available in the books, *Trophy Halibut* and *20 Great Alaska Fishing Adventures*, from Alaska Angler Publications, 907-455-8000, www.alaskaangler.com.

HOW MUCH FISH DO YOU KEEP?



Rather than wait until you're in the thick of things, decide before you ever start fishing: Just how much fish do you really want to keep? You will have to make that decision if you spend much time fishing here (often in even one day). The keeping's easy; Captain Jack's Fish Locker at the dock (907-224-8082) will vacuum-pack, flash-freeze, box and store for your flight home all

the fish you want and can legally keep. But that could be 200 or more pounds of fillets from salmon, halibut and other bottom fish.

Despite Alaska's last-frontier atmosphere of seemingly infinite fish, Mezirow knows better and urges catch-and-release fishing once a reasonable number of fish has been boated. He points out that processing and storage of just 100 pounds of fish can cost well over \$150 (assuming you take it with you instead of shipping it). He further advises clients in writing that "A Pacific halibut yields 50 percent of its weight when filleted, [and] large Pacific halibut are all breeding females. We encourage you to release any large halibut you catch." Toward that end, he offers to any of his anglers who release a 100-plus-pound halibut a free one-year IGFA membership and a 20-percent discount on any subsequent fishing trips with him. In the past couple of seasons, his anglers have released many halibut over 150 pounds.

Tough choice: A pile of fat-laden salmon belly strips like this is hard to beat as smoked snacks, but is also great for halibut baits.

half-hour for my clients (who were fascinated but had no desire to hook the big fish). Finally, my clients wanted to start fishing for halibut again, and I actually had to take the dull end of the harpoon and nudge the shark on the nose until he slowly swam away.

"About 30 minutes later, one of the guys was reeling up an inflated yelloweye rockfish from deep water when, about 20 feet from the surface, it started ripping line off the reel. Of course, it was the shark again. This time it made a sizzling run then threw the rockfish and 2-pound sinker about 10 feet in the air!"

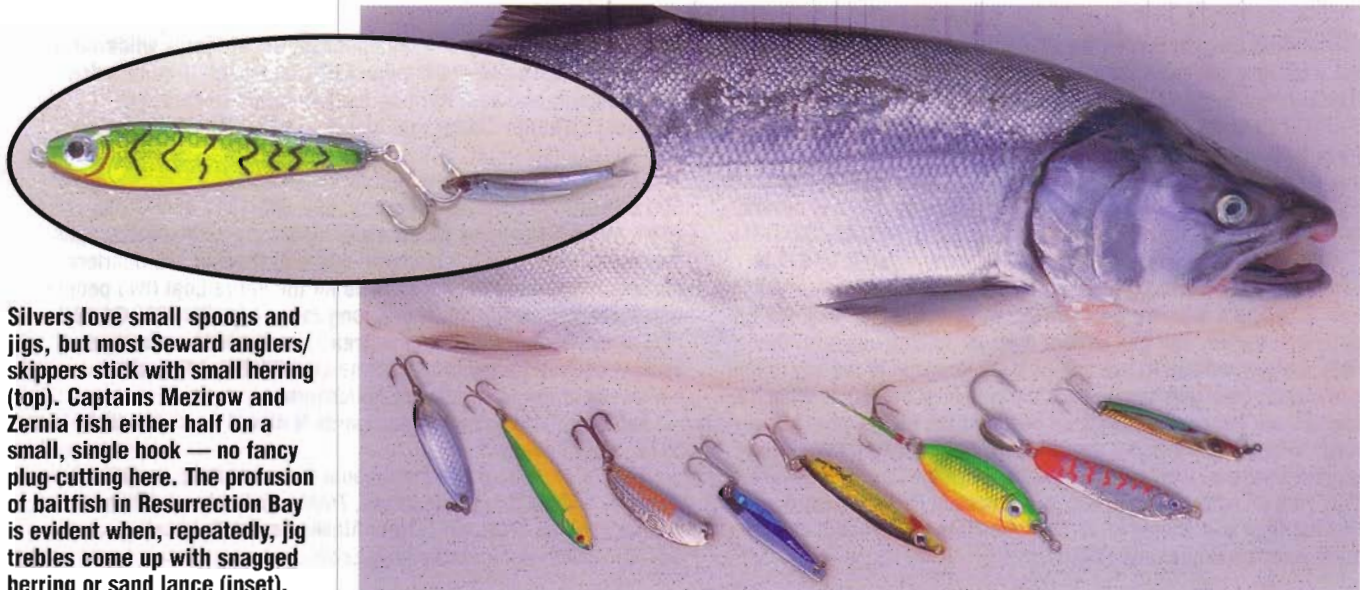
While we didn't finish our day with a similar salmon shark adventure, salmon surprised the heck out of us. During an afternoon drift over a long stretch of pinnacles and hard (halibut-covered) bottom 200 feet below, I tied a huge 7-ounce Krocodile spoon to a spinning outfit I'd rigged with 12-pound line.

But the heavy spoon didn't go far. It found "bottom" 50 feet down, and as soon as I started winding slack line, I knew what had happened. I cranked like a madman, but by the time I caught up with the silver that had taken the heavy spoon (many times heavier than I'd normally fish for silvers), it was already jumping near the boat and "returned" the spoon to me on the first jump.

At that point, I set aside the heavier rod and quickly grabbed an 8-pound outfit rigged with a small spoon. From the port corner, I jigged my first cast back to the boat as Dave, a light-tackle aficionado from St. Louis, stood in the starboard corner working on another big bottom fish of some sort. He'd been easing it up on 12-pound line for over 15 minutes.

Suddenly, in the space of perhaps 15 seconds, everything went haywire when — just as I was lifting the 1-ounce spoon from the surface — a silver darted in at full speed, grabbing the spoon on the run and heading under the bracket between outboards and transom and around Dave's line. It then made like a missile, leaping high into the air, so close that Dave could have touched it with his rod, and breaking both lines in the process. Few fish are wilder than coho salmon on light line. We caught several more on that drift, targeting them with both jigs and also on the bottom-fish gear they grabbed as it was heading up or down.

Unfortunately, my visit to Seward came to an end all too soon. But even a few days were plenty for me to figure out that the area offers world-class cold-water fishing with vast, untapped potential. I have a feeling that (with or without this feature) this fishery is one cat that won't be in the bag much longer.



Silvers love small spoons and jigs, but most Seward anglers/skippers stick with small herring (top). Captains Mezirow and Zernia fish either half on a small, single hook — no fancy plug-cutting here. The profusion of baitfish in Resurrection Bay is evident when, repeatedly, jig trebles come up with snagged herring or sand lance (inset).

PHOTOS BY DOUG OLANDER