

GAMEFISHING AUSTRALIA, NEW ZEALAND, PNG, CALIFORNIA, MEXICO, SOUTH-EAST ASIA & THE PACIFIC

TRADE-A-BOAT'S

BlueWater

BOATS & SPORTS FISHING

AUST \$10.95 INCL GST
NZ \$12.95 INCL GST
PRINT POST APPROVED
PP319838/00063

Virgin FISHING

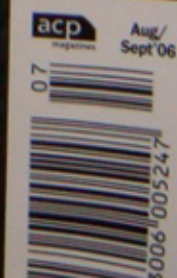
- NEW TECHNOLOGY OPENS NEW GROUNDS

VIC TUNA Bass Strait Bluefin Fire

INSIDE: Yellowtail Kingfish;
New Guinea's spectacular potential;
The Banks, NSW hotspot;
WA's Abrolhos Islands; Lure test;
Jurassic flounder; and lots more...
NEW BOATS: Trophy 2052;
Razerline Olympian 6.6;
and more...

ASSEGAU MARINE

- DREAM BOATS
BLUEWATER TESTED

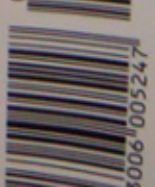


acp

magazines

Aug/
Sept '06

07



From the “And now for something completely different...” files:

JURASSIC Flounder!

It's a little off the track for a blue water gamefisherman, but the lure of an exciting, new big fish challenge coupled with spectacular scenery is enough to get us to deviate from the regular path. They may look like a giant flounder but halibut are recognised as a gamefish by the IGFA, and many rate them as one of the toughest fish in the ocean. Ross Millichamp reports on a great excuse to get on a plane and visit Alaska.



Left: The IGFA All-Tackle World Record Pacific halibut, a 459lb fish caught by Jack Tragis on 60kg tackle in Dutch Harbour, Alaska in 1996.

For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to fish for salmon in Alaska. The average Kenai River Chinook is comfortably bigger than the “fish of a lifetime” for an angler fishing for salmon in New Zealand waters. The opportunity to satisfy this itch finally came about when the American Fisheries Society had the good grace to schedule its annual conference in Anchorage. As my planning for a pre-conference look around progressed I learned that the runs of really big salmon would be over by September, but that the halibut fishery would be in

full swing. I did not know much about halibut fishing at first but the more people I talked to, the further up the “to do” list it rose. Halibut were described as the hardest fighting and best eating fish in the sea. To top it off, I was told that they were caught in one of the most scenic saltwater settings in the world.

HIPPO-SIZED FISH

The proper name for Pacific halibut is *Hippoglossus stenolepis*, and as the genus name suggests they grow to a colossal size. The IGFA record is 208.2kg



"HALIBUT WERE DESCRIBED AS THE HARDEST FIGHTING AND BEST EATING FISH IN THE SEA."

but commercial fishermen have boated fish in excess of 270kg! Most of the fish caught by sport anglers are known as "chicken halibut" and weigh around 12kg. They are widely distributed along the Pacific coast of North America, but the best fishing is in Alaska.

BEAT THE CROWDS

Fishing on your own is not a lot of fun, so I convinced a friend from Colorado to tag along. Randy Duckett is a veteran of a number of trips to the big state and was more than happy to go in September as the summer crowds should have dissipated. I was surprised to hear that Alaska could ever be crowded as it is one sixth the size of the lower 48 states combined and has a population of only 650,000. The problem is that there are very few roads and most of the locals and visitors end up going to the same places. A colleague from Alaska describes high-season salmon fishing in rivers with good road access as "combat fishing"! The only downside to fishing Alaska in September is that no one is able to predict exactly when autumn will end and winter will arrive. On his previous trip, Randy had attempted to drive into the Denali National Park in early September and had been turned back by a state official telling him that the road was closed by snow. He later learned that the road did not reopen until the following spring, seven months later! In almost every case we

Anti-clockwise from top: Launching the Hooksetters' charter boat off the beach; Big halibut caught aboard Crackerjack Charters; Mountains, glaciers and lush forests – what more could you ask for in a gamefishing backdrop?



were the last customers of the season for the guides, outfitters and lodges we used. This meant that we got great deals and the chance to fish on boats that were often carrying only a fraction of their normal passenger loads.

ENORMOUS TIDES

Our first halibut charter departed from the settlement of Anchor Point on the west side of the Kenai Peninsula. We fished with Nick Fortney of Hooksetters Guide Service in the Cook Inlet, a long stretch of water that runs between the Kenai Peninsula and the Alaskan mainland. Cook Inlet is best known for its huge tides, which are second only to the Bay of Fundy in Nova Scotia. The day we fished, the tide was only three metres high but a week earlier it had been in excess of seven metres! The boat launch was unlike anything I had seen before. The trailer was hooked onto the back of a contractor's loader and driven out through the shallow surf until the 28ft Alumaweld runabout started to float. Nick gunned the twin outboards into reverse as soon as the cooling intakes were submerged and pulled the boat off the trailer and turned it into the waves. After warming the engines, Nick pointed Hooksetters west and ran out 30 kilometres before arriving at the chosen spot. This was the only gamefishing charter I had ever been on where the captain did not stare constantly at his sounder. Halibut and the prey they eat live right on the bottom and were invisible to his technology. A GPS full of jealously guarded spots where fish had been caught in the past was his only piece of electronics worth its salt out here.

SOLID TACKLE REQUIRED

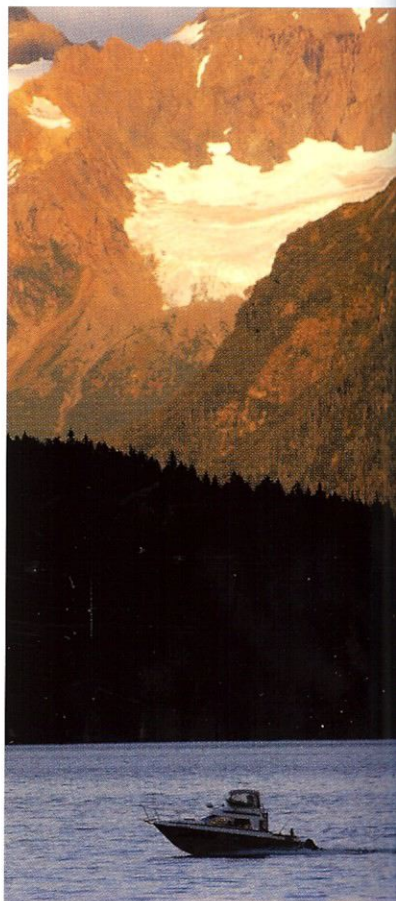
"Pragmatic" is the best way to describe the tackle we used. Halibut are tough in still water but in the inlet where the current flows at up to 6kts, they are almost impossible to land on anything but heavy tackle. The problem is that when they start to tire all they have to do is to expose their flanks to the current and sail away. By the time the Captain had lifted the anchor and the 100m warp, the fish and all of the line would be gone. The only way to land halibut in these conditions is to

work them hard so that they arrive back at the boat full of life where they can be fought out on a short line. Nick's outfits were 24kg game rods and 6/0 Penn Senators rigged with heavy dacron. Completing the rigs were herrings rigged on circle hooks and injected with "Professional Grade Butt Juice", which was described on the bottle as a "powerful scent emulsion". To take this lot to the bottom we tied on lead weights that looked more like something you would hang on a dive belt than tie onto a sportfishing outfit.

BRUTAL DRAGS

The "small" tide we were fishing allowed us the luxury of using sinkers which weighed a mere 1.8kg. When the current really cranks up, weights of 2.6kg are required.

"Don't worry, the drags do work!" Nick said when explaining the tackle and the fishing technique. What he meant was that the drags were set so



tight that anglers could be forgiven for thinking that the reel was locked up. I tried the drag on my reel and it felt similar to the setting I had used when fishing for swordfish with 130lb tackle in New Zealand. The fishing technique was simple. Drop the rig until you feel the sinker hit the bottom and then wind it back up two metres to prevent dogfish and skates from taking the bait. Nick explained that it would take a while for the fish to move up the current toward the smell of our baits, but when they arrived the fishing should be hot. Our first few baits were chewed off by dogfish and sharks as we waited for the real fish to arrive. Fishing with that much weight took a bit of getting used to and it was hard to tell whether you were hooked into something small or were just retrieving the empty rig.

JUST HOW TOUGH ARE THEY?

Norb, a retired pharmaceutical rep from Philadelphia who had joined us on the charter was the first to hook up. Norb let the fish chew on the bait and waited until it had started to swim away before lifting the rod quietly to allow the hook to catch in the corner of its mouth. As soon as the fish felt the hook it pulled the rod down to the gunwale and kept it there for some time as Norb battled to move the fish off the bottom. It took 15 minutes of real struggle to get the 15kg fish to the surface and into the boat. The only thought that came to mind was, "Bloody hell, how could I manage to land a fish 10 times that weight?" Mike, a GP from Philadelphia, was next. As soon as his 20kg fish came aboard he disappeared into the cabin exhausted, and he did not reappear until the boat was back at the trailer at the end of the day.

THE REAL THING

After catching a number of small sharks I finally hooked into the real thing. The bite was surprisingly gentle and I had to wait for the fish to swallow the circle before tightening the line. After a struggle, I was able to lift the fish off the bottom and for a while the going was easy – until for no apparent reason it came to life and ran back to the bottom. This happened a number of times before the fish came to the surface. After the fight it had put up I was stunned to see that it weighed only 12kg. It would have been a lot easier had I been using a harness, but with five guys fishing from a small cockpit this would have made it difficult to pass the rods over each other to undo the regular tangles.

CATCH LIMITS

Maximum sustainable yield is the



foundation principle behind fisheries management in Alaska. Charters are run on the basis that clients expect to catch and kill their bag limits every day, especially when chasing fish such as salmon and halibut which are so good to eat. It took only 90 minutes to catch our bag limit of two halibut, and most of us had released a number of smaller fish along the way. The best was a fat fish of 22kg. We learned that the really big halibut are quite rare and are seldom found in the same place as the school fish.

WE CAN'T RESIST

Randy and I spent the next few days fishing for Coho salmon, Dolly Varden char and rainbow trout in the Kenai River. The four halibut we had taken on Hooksetters already had us worried about our luggage allowances for the flight home. However, before long the itch of getting back out on the ocean returned and we made inquiries about another halibut charter. This time we chose to fish out of Seward simply for the reason that we would see some new country on the way out to the fishing grounds. Seward is located on the eastern side of the Kenai Peninsula and is the gateway to one of the most scenic stretches of the entire Alaskan coastline. Everyone we talked to said that Crackerjack Charters were the people to fish with in Seward. Nik Ranta (are all halibut captains called

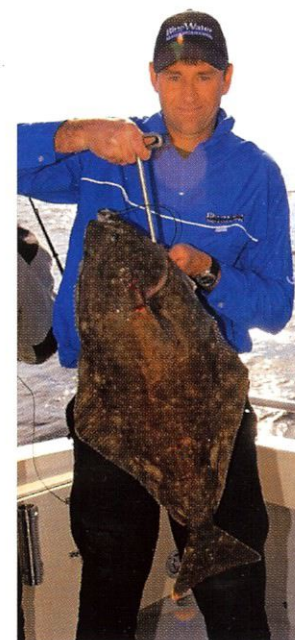
Nik?) runs a 31ft Farallon runabout which is one of the smaller boats operating out of Seward. Although we did not know it when making the booking, fishing on smaller boats is the way to go as you are sharing the charter with fewer other anglers and you can fish further afield because these boats really get up and move. We pulled out of the marina at dawn and ran 100km down the coast before wetting a line. Never before had I travelled so far in a day charter in a petrol powered boat, a testament to the cheap fuel prices the US had enjoyed for many years.

KILLER DRAGS AND REEL-DESTROYING FISH

The run down the sound was worth the price of the charter, let alone any fish we were to catch. The steep sided hills were covered in conifer forests, punctuated in places by huge glaciers that ran right down to the sea. The tops and ridgelines were reminiscent of New Zealand's Southern Alps, except that they rose directly out of the ocean. Along the way we passed seals basking on the rocks and sea otters swimming on their backs exposing their bellies to the warm sun. Our long journey ended at a spot called the "Million Dollar Baby". The trend in recent weeks had been for the halibut schools to disperse and to move further and further away from Seward. The Million Dollar Baby



Above and left: More huge fish caught aboard Crackerjack Charters at Seward. Below: Ross gets a taste of the power with his first halibut.



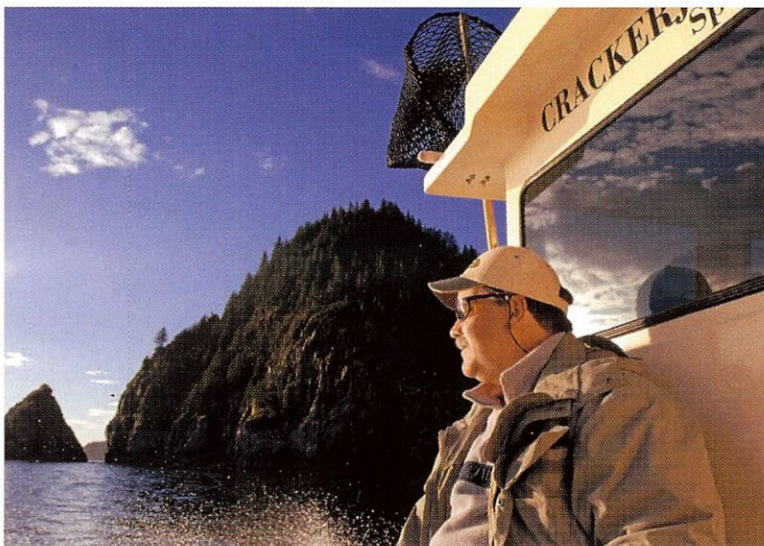
"THE RUN DOWN THE SOUND WAS WORTH THE PRICE OF THE CHARTER, LET ALONE ANY FISH WE WERE TO CATCH. THE STEEP SIDED HILLS WERE COVERED IN CONIFER FORESTS, PUNCTUATED IN PLACES BY HUGE GLACIERS WHICH RAN RIGHT DOWN TO THE SEA."



was a place Nik had discovered a couple of months back that had continued to hold fish when the other spots were starting to fail. At first, Nik's gear and techniques appeared similar to those we had used with Nick Fortney the previous week. He used 24-37kg game rods, rigged with Avet lever drag reels, heavy dacron and those same killer drags. I asked him how long his gear stood up to this treatment and was told that he had wrecked almost every brand of reel made. On average, the reels needed a complete rebuild every second season or they would fail on fish.

JIGGING WITH LURES

Within minutes Million Dollar Baby lived up to its reputation and a steady stream of halibut started to come over the side. At first they were smaller chicken halibut of 8-10kg but before long the bigger fish started to appear. After landing and releasing a couple of fish, I asked about the 10kg outfits I saw sitting in the rocket launcher, which were rigged with giant soft bodied jigs. "Have a go," Nik said. He explained that the jig rods were fun to use but that he needed most of the anglers to continue to fish with bait to keep the halibut around the boat. My jig arrived at the bottom just as the fishing was reaching its peak and it only took a couple of tentative jerks of the rod tip before I was hooked up. The switch to the lighter tackle brought out the gamefish in the halibut. The short dogged pulls experienced on the heavy tackle turned into long smooth runs on the jig rod. As is the case in many sport fisheries, the standard gear was heavier than it needed to be just in case a huge fish came along. Charter boat captains catering to anglers who are generally high on expectation and light on experience face this dilemma every day on the water. Nik explained that he spent a little time each season fishing with anglers who specialised in fly and light tackle fishing, but for the majority of the time he dealt with people who



just wanted to catch fish. An hour at Million Dollar Baby was all it took to catch our limits and to release many more. I was in the fortunate position of already having more than enough fish to take home and so could just enjoy catching and releasing fish on the jig rod. The best halibut for the day went 25kg – not a "barn door" as the big ones are known, but a nice fish. An unexpected bonus was a 12kg ling cod which had beautiful trout-like spots and coloration on its flanks.

MUCH MORE TO SEE

Although halibut are worthy of the title "gamefish", it would be a huge mistake to go to Alaska and not try out other types of fishing and have a look around this amazing state. Nik Ranta runs combined halibut/salmon charters earlier in the season when the halibut can be found close to Seward, however, most salmon anglers head to big rivers like the Kenai and Kasilof where the world's largest Chinook salmon run in June and July. A float plane trip into a wilderness lake to fish for salmon and trout is another must do. Finish your visit with a drive into the interior to the Denali National Park where you will see North America's highest peak and

an amazing array of wildlife. Halibut fishing, salmon fishing, trout fishing and wildlife viewing are all the same at the end of the day; they are merely excuses to go to Alaska.



Even if you're not catching monsters, it's hard not to have a great day with scenery like this.

"THE ONLY THOUGHT THAT CAME TO MIND WAS, "BLOODY HELL, HOW COULD I MANAGE TO LAND A FISH 10 TIMES THAT WEIGHT?"

CRACKERJACK SPORTFISHING CHARTERS

Nick Ranta and Andy Mezirow
Address: PO Box 2794, Seward, Alaska, 99664
Phone: (907) 224 2606
Email: info@crackerjackcharters.com
Website: <http://www.crackerjackcharters.com>