

HOW YOUR VHF CAN LEAD YOU TO FISH, P. 42

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Mighty Montague



*Try This
Remote Gulf
of Alaska
Island
Where Swift
Currents and
Fast Fishing
Converge*

**Text and Photos
By Doug Olander**

The halibut that attacked me at Montague Island wasn't big, as halibut go.

It fell far short of being one of those aptly named barn doors. And thank God for that, or I might not be here.

It was, rather, the speed and ferocity of its assault on my vessel that left me shaken and very likely to require years of therapy.

Knowing Pacific halibut are a bottom-loving species that go about their business feeding on crustaceans and small fishes, I would have rated an attack by the killer rabbit in Monty Python's *Holy Grail* as likely as one by a killer halibut.

In fact, silver salmon were on my mind as I drifted alone in a Zodiac inflatable with about as much square footage as your basic laundry tub in the absolute, total and utter stillness off the island on that fateful August morning. No wind roiled the mirrored surface in the completely gray world; no sounds disturbed the solitude. Off in the distance, perhaps a quarter-mile away, the Seward charter boat *Crackerjack Express* lay at anchor as my colleagues waited for the tide to start moving.

As long as I kept my butt inside the little Zodiac, I had nothing to worry about. Or so I thought.





Big silver salmon seem to queue up for the net — and in fact five ultimately came over the gunwales in the same net!

One-Stop Shopping

It's a long run to Montague Island. Even from the closest major port, Seward, the speedy 46-foot custom fiberglass *Crackerjack Voyager* needs a couple of hours plus change to cover the 55 miles, making for a long day trip. But it's worth the run, says veteran skipper Andy Mezirow.

"Montague is one-stop shopping," he says emphatically. "Seriously — you can catch everything there in a day."

And on many days his anglers do indeed catch everything — sometimes even maxing out with full limits of the sacred Alaska triumvirate: salmon, halibut and lingcod. That's why "Our goal every day is to fish Montague."

Of course, a good part of that 55 miles is open water, and the weather may do it's Ricky Ricardo "Oh no, you dun't!" thing. But on well over half the trips in his 100-day season, Mezirow makes Montague.

Weather certainly wasn't an issue on the day we fished the island last summer. And it's a good thing: We'd spent two of our three full days in the Gulf of Alaska chasing elusive salmon sharks. But pink salmon were scarce, therefore so were the sharks, and therefore we were jonesing in a big way to bend some rods.

We had one last day to do it. Would Montague come through?

Initially, we reached the island just about the time the tide was slowing. When the water doesn't move, neither do the fish. Mate Jeff Seward (yes, that really is his birth name)

dropped anchor and we waited. But not for long.

Several things struck me (not counting that halibut) straight off. For one thing we were in about only 75 feet of water. That's shallow compared to some of the North Pacific's most productive halibut grounds. For another thing, I noted how fast the tide turned. Blink and you might miss the slack. In no time the boat had come about, riding a very taut anchor line as the current began to boil at several knots. Open water over the long shallow reef that extends out from Montague is very much like a river most of the time.

Montague Island is definitely no place for girly-man fish: Everything about this world is rugged. The bottom offers little comfort, with jagged boulders interspersed amid areas of rock and rubble. "It seems to me that every big boulder or little pinnacle acts like large rocks in a river, forming whirlpools and back eddies, pushing baitfish around where predators can ambush 'em," says Mezirow. "And there are thousands of rock piles. No wonder it's such a fishy place!"

Into that world, anglers on the *Voyager* lowered heavy lead-head jigs with big Berkley PowerBait tails.

Halibut Showers

Sure enough, once the tide changed, rods started to bounce, and as I buzzed around the big boat in the *Zodiac*, camera in hand, I could hear hollers from multiple halibut hookups. That kind of action usually means chickens — as anglers term the fast-growing species in the 15- to 40-pound range.

In fact, at Montague, when the halibut run small, they still average closer to 40 pounds than 15, an average larger than for many Alaska fisheries. But in June, and sometimes later — as we saw this August day, Mezirow's anglers often get into what he calls "the 80-pound chicken bite."

In short order, John Bretza, director of product development for Okuma Reels, and Scott Lipsett, brand manager for Reactor Watches, hooked into more than they'd figured on, with fish going 80 pounds and then some. In fact, Lipsett's fish would prove the second halibut to give me fits in

the Zodiac that morning, though in this case I did sort of ask for it.

I wanted badly to photograph the drama of a big halibut's final, angry thrashing defense boat-side, so as Mezirow reached out to sink the long-handled gaff into the momentarily quiescent fish lying flat at the surface, there I was, hunkered down, camera in hand and elbows braced on the gunwale of the inflatable. And true to halibut form, the instant the gaff point struck home, the water exploded.

I'd gotten off a couple of quick shots and then yanked the camera protectively under my chest just before a shower of frigid salt spray covered me. I could hear Lipsett, the skipper and anglers hooting it up at the rail above. The power of these giant, broad-tailed flounder never ceases to amaze.

In fact, a 100-pounder is pretty run of the mill at Montague. Last year, Mezirow's partner, Capt. Steve Zernia, taped and released an estimated 350 on a Profish-n-Sea charter boat. While June is peak for big 'buts, during one weekend last August, Mezirow and Zernia together caught six halibut between 200 and just over 300 pounds.

As our halibut bite continued to pick up, no one aboard went long without an arm-wrenching strike. Jeff Pierce, Mustad's sales manager for North America, reacted to the sight of silver (coho) salmon following up a halibut swimbait. He snatched up his 8-weight fly rod and let his Seasick Bunny tube fly drop into the gray water. The result he'd hoped for came almost at once.

Soon other anglers followed suit, taking a break from the down-and-dirty 'but battles to engage in the frantic chaos of multiple silver hookups on light spinners and baitcasters. When every rod around the boat hooks up, mayhem ensues — a great thing to watch from outside the boat, where I saw Mezirow adroitly net one, two, three, four and then a fifth silver salmon, swinging aboard (with help) the catch of five anglers in one netful. That, we surmised, may be some sort of record in itself.

Kings and Lings

No species of salmon offers the wild acrobatics and split-second maneuvers

Planning to Fish Montague

A number of good Seward-based charters will take you to the Montague Island fishing grounds. Most are equipped to do so on a day-trip basis. The run is long but manageable on faster boats. Mezirow offers overnight and multiday Gulf of Alaska trips that include (and often emphasize) Montague Island. One advantage is that early and late in the day, the *Crackerjack Express* often has the whole area entirely to itself.

The season: May through mid-September, approximately. June's generally hot for chinook and larger halibut, but halibut fishing can be outstanding any month. From late July and through August, silver salmon replace the chinook, often in nuisance numbers.

The catch: While limits overall have tightened in recent years, the odds are good you'll have as much fish as you can manage to take home and store. Mezirow has used Captain Jacks for years, with great success in processing his anglers' fish. The cost of processing does ensure that anglers take home fish that's been frozen in zero-blast freezers and commercially vacuum-packed. And that ensures even the oil-rich flesh of salmon remains in good shape a year later (I can personally attest to that. And, hey, if you can't make the trip this year, you can have your Alaska fish and eat 'em too by ordering salmon, halibut and king crab from processors like Captain Jacks to be delivered to your door.)

The trip: Plan on a long day of travel from most of the lower 48. You'll fly into Anchorage and from there rent a car to make the three-hour drive to Seward.

The contacts: Book as early as possible; not surprisingly, dates fill up many months out since the season is so short. Charters: Crackerjack Sportfishing — www.crackerjackcharters.com, 800-566-3912; Profish-n-Sea — www.profish-n-sea.com, 888-385-1312.

Accommodations: Seward has a number of entirely acceptable hotels/resorts. We've had good luck at the Breeze Inn, which conveniently overlooks the harbor where Crackerjack boats are docked — www.breezeinn.com, 888-224-5237.

Fish processing: Captain Jacks — www.captainjacksalaska.com, 877-323-6638.

Area information: For Seward, visit www.sewardak.org; for Alaska, visit www.travelalaska.com.



Alaska's Mercurial "Makos"

Few fish more certainly earn their names than do salmon sharks. One study says the species is *the* major ocean predator of salmonids, with estimates of their collective salmon consumption between 113,000 and 226,000 tons per summer. That could well mean more than 100 million salmon in the Pacific each year fall prey to salmon sharks.

The annual appearance of the species in Prince William Sound in July and early August is inevitably associated with large runs of pink salmon, a favorite food. But predicting the movements of salmon sharks is always an iffy proposition. They may show even when pink runs are modest, or they may not be around when the pinks are thick. Our visit in prime time gave us high — and ultimately unrealized — hopes of hooking some of these sharks that not only look like makos but, like the North Atlantic porbeagle, are very closely related.

We'd hoped to tangle with salmon sharks not only for the novelty of it, but also the sport. They're reputedly an extremely quick fish and one that "loves to chase down fish," says Capt. Terry Mangold. Mangold ought to know: He runs the *Strider*, a 74 Viking that puts videographers in the middle of all sorts of underwater dramas for natural-history documentaries — including an entire National Geographic show called *Icy Killers* about the salmon shark.

And Mangold confirms that salmon sharks are jumpers. "Sometimes they'll jump like crazy. I've seen hundreds around and counted as many as 15 in the air at one time, often with a salmon crosswise in their jaws," he says.

This North Pacific apex predator shares an adaptation with some other sharks in the Lamnidae family, famed for their endothermic abilities. That is, they're warm-blooded, able to keep body temperatures up to 70 degrees Fahrenheit, well above the frigid (but productive) waters of the sub-Arctic ocean. Ranging from Southern California to northern Alaska, salmon sharks can exceed 500 pounds.

Salmon sharks, like makos, are undeniably tasty. When they move into grounds anglers can access, they do target salmon sharks. Some skippers have no qualms about killing a couple of 300-plus-pound fish, while others like Mezirow primarily release, occasionally taking a small one for the boat. State regs permit keeping two per person per year; while many are killed as commercial bycatch, targeting sharks commercially in Alaska waters is illegal.



Slashing attack of salmon shark snatches a pink salmon in the Gulf of Alaska.

of coho, and few places offer more coho than the reef and rip lines around Montague Island in August. If fast fishing on light gear is your thing, catching silver salmon (and releasing them, once you've boated a six-fish daily limit of the succulent, red-meated fish) will fire your pistons. Any small metal jig gets results, but a small chunk of herring with a bit of lead is simple and always hard to beat.

While this whole area has traditionally provided happy hunting grounds for silvers, for the past seven or eight years, Mezirow has been targeting big chinook (kings) at Montague with increasing success. Mezirow picked up a technique from Capt. Josh Temple

(for years a British Columbia salmon skipper but now based in Riviera Nayarit, Mexico) for rigging herring. This "full-metal jacket," as Mezirow calls the rig, has wire running along the spine of the fish "to get just the right roll," Mezirow says. "I've come to the conclusion that the right roll greatly increases our overall success rate." And that success rate has been high — one nice king/angler for a couple of hours trolling, on better days (and limits on the best days). Chinook of 18 to 25 pounds are the norm, but fishermen are taking 50-plus-pounders every year, mostly during targeted trolling. We had to skip this fishery, though, since kings start in late May and have pretty well left the area by early July.

We sure didn't skip lingcod fishing, however. Seems to me not catching lings would mean missing a major part of the quintessential Alaska experience. The long, brown predators are as rapacious as any fish that swims and readily attack just about any sort of jig or bait — or hooked fish (lacking swim bladders, they can prowl the entire water column). Wherever you anchor and catch halibut, lings are likely. But for serious ling action and bigger fish (the 40- and 50-pounders, with lings in the 70s never out of the question), Mezirow drifts. As with silver salmon, multiple hookups are the norm. While it's safe to say most anglers catch lings with fairly stout gear and braided line, the truth is many miss out because lings are not inherently great fighters. But hook a feisty 20-pound male or 40-pound cow on the same gear used for silver salmon, and you've got a light-line smackdown on your hands! This enthusiast recommends it highly.

I also recommend being ready to duck if you happen to be in a little inflatable off Montague Island. While retying a Crippled Herring jig on my ultralight spinning outfit, suddenly, completely out of nowhere, I found myself damn near eyeball to eyeball with a halibut that burst from the water right next to the Zodiac and, trying to make like a greyhounding sailfish, came leaping almost into the boat! As its upper body whacked the side of the inflatable, its head hung momentarily in the cockpit with me, its churning tail continuing to give it momentum, pushing the little boat. Then just as suddenly, it was gone.

I screamed one word that describes a proactive act so loudly that I actually heard, far across the dead-still water, my mates on the *Crackerjack Express* exchanging bemused comments ("Did you hear Olander just now?"), then laughter. Little did they know: This was no laughing matter. I braced for another attack that never came.

Anyway, if you go, consider yourself warned: Beware the killer halibut of Montague Island. 

FOR MORE GREAT IMAGES AND WALLPAPERS Don't miss the online Montague Island photo gallery at www.sportfishingmag.com/montague.

Below: Heads up! A big halibut gets ready to drench anglers in a cold, salty shower. Opposite, top: Fifty pounds of rapacious Montague Island lingcod about to be released by captains Andy Mezirow (left) and Terry Mangold. Opposite, below: Fly prize — yelloweye rockfish gives Jeff Pierce reason to smile.

