

*New techniques for chomper Pacific salmon
in the Queen Charlotte Islands*

SALMON

in the

SALT

TREY COMBS



BRITISH COLUMBIA'S STORM-SWEPT Queen Charlotte Islands possess the soul of the Haida culture: *Gwaai Haanas*, "Place of Wonder," say these daring seafaring people of their archipelago. Biologists, with no less wonderment, call the 138 islands the "Canadian Galapagos" for the wealth of endemic plants and animals that evolved during their long isolation from the mainland. Backpackers, too, embrace the Misty Isles, losing themselves in the silence of moss-carpeted trails that deer and bear have tunneled deep into the ancient forests of Sitka spruce, hemlock, and red cedar. But the Charlottes reserve their greatest riches for fishermen. Five species of Pacific salmon, high-seas fish in the prime of life, salmon from nearly

every watershed between northern Oregon and southeast Alaska, stop during the last summer of their lives at tiny Langara Island, the Charlottes' northernmost island. For those fishermen who cast a fly, Langara is paradise.

High-seas Rendezvous

THE QUEEN CHARLOTTEs perch on the very edge of the continental shelf where massive cold-water upwellings bring to the surface dissolved nutrient salts, mainly nitrates and phosphates. They are energized by the sun and absorbed by phytoplankton, the foundation for the marine food chain.

The phytoplankton bloom that occurs during long hours of spring and summer daylight feeds copepods

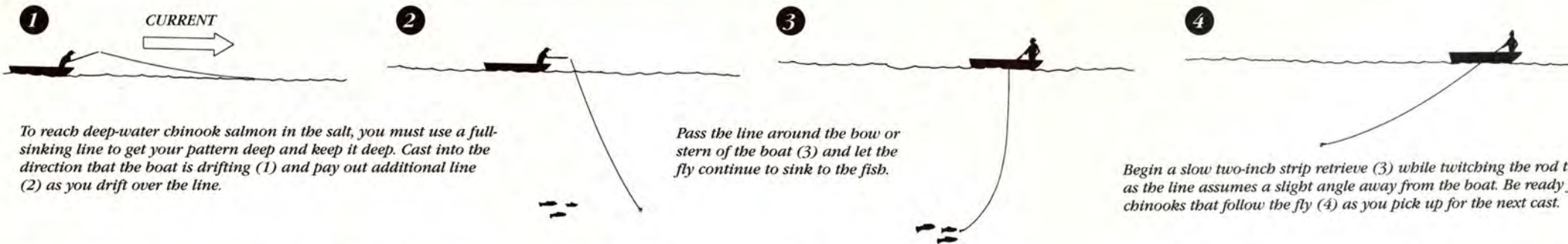
and other crustaceans, which support the immense schools of Pacific sand lance and herring that in turn feed the vast numbers of migrating salmon. Even anglers who are familiar with these baitfish on other waters are astonished when they encounter great rafts of the baitfish at Langara. Sand lances—known as needlefish along the Canadian coast—may be so tightly balled by feeding salmon and rhinoceros auklets that gulls stand on the tumult. At such times bald eagles swoop down to snatch up dozens of the fish in their talons to carry them to waiting young.

Another reason for Langara's concentration of salmon involves how the high-seas fish close with land in preparation for a final migration to their spawning rivers. Dixon Entrance, a deep-water passage between the Queen Charlotte Islands and Alaska's Dall and Prince of Wales islands to the north, lies at the right summer latitude to lead salmon from the high seas to the fjord-rich coastline and the many reaches and channels that comprise the Inside Passage between Washington and Alaska.

Directly east of the Queen Charlottes is Hecate Strait, water so shallow that if the ocean level were to drop 50

The waters surrounding Langara Island in British Columbia's Queen Charlotte Islands are a staging area for five species of Pacific salmon, in the prime of their lives, on their way to their spawning rivers between northern Oregon and southeast Alaska. Great rafts of baitfish schools and the shape of the ocean bottom make this area the best place to use a fly rod to catch large Pacific salmon in the salt water. Trey Combs photo.

DEEP-WATER DRIFTING TECHNIQUE



1 To reach deep-water chinook salmon in the salt, you must use a full-sinking line to get your pattern deep and keep it deep. Cast into the direction that the boat is drifting (1) and pay out additional line (2) as you drift over the line.

3 Pass the line around the bow or stern of the boat (3) and let the fly continue to sink to the fish.

4 Begin a slow two-inch strip retrieve (3) while twitching the rod tip as the line assumes a slight angle away from the boat. Be ready for chinooks that follow the fly (4) as you pick up for the next cast.

feet, during low tide you could walk the 40 miles from the mainland to the islands. Storms here cause seas so steep that boats have collided with the ocean floor. "Horrible Hecate," say commercial fishermen who cross it at their peril for the richer fishing grounds beyond. But the shallow strait enforces the concentration of salmon at Dixon Entrance and the northwest Charlottes in general, and at Langara in particular.

Once salmon have reached Langara, the abundant food supply holds them for weeks until sexual maturation moves them toward their spawning rivers. The shorter days of autumn cause a decline in the herring and sand-lance concentration, and by winter only small, immature silver and chinook salmon remain to pursue remnant schools of baitfish.

Building a Fly-fishing Clientele

STEVE SHELLY, A STEELHEAD FLY-FISHING COMPANION from our days together at Chick and Marilyn Stewart's Babine Steelhead Lodge, manages the guide program at Langara Island's North Island Lodge. This has traditionally been a gear-fishing proposition for chinook salmon, "springs," or "tyee," the name Canadians reserve for chinook salmon weighing 30 pounds or more. Shelly and lodge

owner Fred Edworthy have long been interested in building a fly-fishing clientele at North Island. They asked me to sample the late-summer fishing at Langara—with a fly rod, of course.

I asked Les Johnson, a longtime friend from Seattle, Washington, to join me. He had coauthored *Fly Fishing for Pacific Salmon* (Frank Amato Publications, 1985) with Bruce Ferguson and Pat Trotter. Hopefully, he would provide some expert advice. We were confident of finding "northern coho," silver salmon weighing in the teens, which crowd Langara late each summer for a final feeding binge. Shelly had told me to expect ocean-bright pink and chum salmon, too. The lodge's interest naturally centered on the huge chinooks.

"You'll be canonized if you figure out how to take deep-water chinook on a fly," Johnson warned soberly.

Rick Steen, an extremely knowledgeable Canadian saltwater fly fisher who guides on the *Charlotte Explorer* mothership, shared that view. The deep-water chinook are "the hardest fish to take in salt water, worse than permit," he said.

Johnson and I flew on the lodge's charter flight from Vancouver, British Columbia, to Masset on Graham Island. While waiting for our shuttle flight to the lodge by

amphibian, a Museum-of-Flight-perfect Grumman Goose, we asked a departing angler for an update on the fishing.

"Well, in four days my partner and I boated 72 springs that averaged 25 pounds," he said. "The largest weighed 56." The man's laconic answer contrasted to my wide-eyed, open-mouthed look of disbelief. Where I come from, in Washington's salmon-rich Puget Sound, a single 25-pound chinook during the season becomes reason to buy the house a round.

Shortly after our arrival, owner Fred Edworthy and I reviewed the lodge's recent catch records and confirmed these remarkable figures. The possession limit on springs is four. Guides at North Island and neighboring Langara Fishing Lodge encourage anglers to kill salmon injured by the hook, the "bleeders," regardless of their weight. Nevertheless, for the previous eight weeks the average chinook killed and packed for shipment home weighed 30 pounds.

I saw iced-down chinook, many over 40 pounds, in tubs on the dock. They were remarkably handsome fish so sexually immature that no kyping (hooking) of their jaws disfigured their sleek, hog-fat lines. Their colors remained high-seas silver and gun-metal gray.

Could such salmon be taken on a fly? Edworthy told us that the previous year a Canadian fly fisher had watched a spring of 40 pounds crashing bait. He cast to it, hooked it, and successfully landed the fish. One salmon does not a strategy make, but that was our only lead, a fish for which we searched in vain. In the meantime, other salmon found our flies, causing an embarrassment of incredible riches.

Langara Island is frying-pan shaped, the handle fitting deep into Parry Passage, the narrows that separates huge Graham Island from tiny Langara. North Island Lodge, a beautiful condominium built on an ocean barge, floats in a tiny bay at the end of the handle. Headlands, rocky islets, bays, and reefs characterize Langara's convoluted coast.

The boat captains remain in radio contact with each other, and guides readily communicate news of a chinook bite. Within a few minutes of such news anglers from North Island, neighboring Langara Fishing Lodge, and the *Charlotte Princess* mothership race toward the action. Boats pile up, the congestion forgivable: Chinook are on the cutplug herring before anglers can get a dozen pulls off their reels. Everyone hooks up, the boats drift apart, and 50-pound tyee often take anglers a mile away.

Amidst this action are the other salmon, the pinks, chums, and coho, magnificent 4- to 16-pound fish slash-

FOR THOSE FISHERMEN WHO CAST A FLY, LANGARA IS PARADISE.

North Island Lodge, a condominium built on an ocean barge, floats in a tiny Langara Island bay. Patterns that imitate sand lances are some of the best flies to use. Some of the salmon species take the flies fished with a simple stripping retrieve; other species require special deep fishing techniques.



THEY COME PHOTOS

IF YOU GO

LANGARA ISLAND'S SALMON LODGES typically book 3-, 4-, 5-, and 8-day packages. Prices quoted by the lodges are all-inclusive: round-trip chartered flights to camp from Vancouver, British Columbia; food, heavy-weather cruiser suits, rubber boots, license, and tackle and bait for gear fishermen. The lodges will clean, ice, and box salmon for shipment home.

Helicopter charters and ground tours can show you the area's spectacular wildlife and deserted Haida villages. Take binoculars or a spotting scope with you. The Charlottes boast the highest concentration of peregrine falcons in the world, more bald eagles than crows, and sea birds—murrelets and auklets—by the tens of thousands. I have also observed martins, humpback whales, and the largest black bears in North America munching down gallons of mussels—shells and all. One way or the other, nearly all living things in the Charlottes look to the sea. After one visit you will, too.

Prices vary based on whether you want to be fully guided (guide on board the boat) or guided by radio after an initial orientation on where to go and how to fish.

Expect to pay about \$600 to \$900 per day of fishing at Langara Island. Flies can be purchased through Umpqua Feather Merchants dealers or fly shops.

For more information contact one of the following:

NORTH ISLAND LODGE

P.O. Box 418, Nanaimo, B.C., Canada V9R 5L3
(604) 954-1060, fax: (604) 954-1066

LANGARA FISHING LODGE

436 West 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V5Y 1E2
(604) 873-4228, fax: (604) 873-5500

OAK BAY MARINE GROUP — *Charlotte Princess*

1327 Beach Drive, Victoria, B.C., Canada V8S 2N4
(800) 663-7090, Fax: (604) 598-1361

SEWELL'S MARINE GROUP — *Charlotte Explorer*

6695 Nelson Avenue, West Vancouver, B.C., Canada V7W 2B2
(800) 661-8933, Fax: (604) 921-7027

OAK BAY MARINE GROUP — *Salmon Seeker*

1327 Beach Drive, Victoria, B.C., Canada V8S 2N4
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ing through the ever-present schools of baitfish. This goes on before the chinook bite begins and continues long after the deep-running chinook have slipped away for other headlands.

Tackle and Flies

I FISHED A 9-FOOT 8-WEIGHT ROD lined with a Type IV 30-foot shooting-taper and a .029-inch floating running line for pink, coho, and chum salmon. My 9-foot leader tapered to 15-pound-test. If there had been more large coho about, or if I'd located chinook crashing baitfish

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SALMON IN THE SALT . . .

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near the surface, I would have changed to a 9-weight. My saltwater reel held 250 yards of 20-pound backing.

For chinook salmon I fished a forward taper 10-weight, with a full-sinking Type IV or V line. The 9-foot leader tapered to 20-pound-test. My reel held 275 yards of 30-pound backing.

I fished several different saltwater patterns of my own design, the Sea Habit Bucktail, and the Sea Habit Deceiver. The Sea Habit Deceiver, tied to imitate a sand lance, took four species of salmon. Johnson fished tube flies that suggested both sand lances and herring. We both felt the best fly was primarily white and thinly tied.

Pink Salmon

PINK SALMON, NAMED for the color of their flesh, and called humpback salmon—or "humpies"—for the disfigurement that characterizes their sexual maturity, are fine-scaled, remarkably handsome fish of four to six pounds in salt water. They number among the most abundant salmon.

Pinks have a characteristic way of leaping out of the water on their flanks when they pursue crustaceans and baitfish in open water. Rarely did we find them around the dense forests of kelp that filled the shore and small bays. I thought them the most surface oriented of the salmon, often taking our flies as we stripped them back only a foot below the surface.

Fly selection for me was simple and straightforward: Sea Habit Bucktails, #4 to #1/0, in the Sand Lance and Herring patterns.

I generally cast the fly blind to where pinks were feeding, gave the fly a few seconds to sink, and began stripping it back. The shooting-taper allowed me to cover a lot of water with ease.

The pinks took the fly solidly and took us into our backing. We released pinks of about six pounds.

Chum and Coho (Silver) Salmon

ANGLERS SEARCHING FOR CHUM SALMON in fresh water or on saltwater flats near the mouths of spawning rivers, find green-backed fish with deep-red vertical markings. Their hooked jaws are grotesquely bared with long, caninelike teeth, a physical characteristic that inspired the name "dog salmon." These fish have incredible fighting strength.

The same species as a high-seas, fly-caught salmon becomes a revelation. No salmon is more dramatically handsome, with an indescribable shade of blue and grass-green over the eyes that gives way to a dorsal run of traditional salmon colors, gray and silver, but overlaid with

traces of green. When it is hooked, a chum in the salt shakes and twists before exploding into a series of long runs interspersed with leaps that can make coho look lame. As the fish tires, it remains bulldog-tough, turning on its side and resisting the rod every inch of the way.

Though chum salmon are widely distributed throughout the Pacific, the Queen Charlottes offer the best opportunity to take them as sexually immature ocean fish. I found myself casting for chums in water 80 feet deep, while behind me, only 300 feet away, Pacific white-sided dolphin had schooled up in water that was hundreds of fathoms deep.

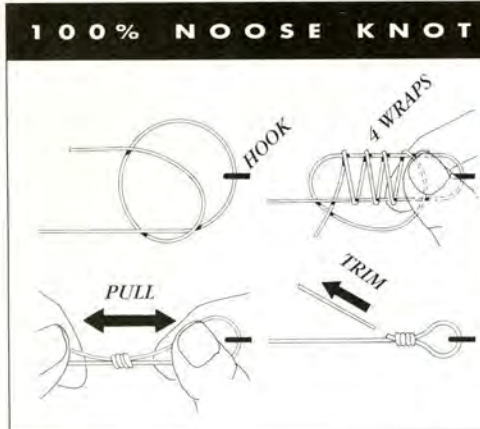
We regularly saw chum and coho salmon ball up sand lance and herring into pulsating masses 30 feet or more across and 10 feet deep. We could not separate the species as they streaked through, under, and around the bait. If we cast on the bait and immediately began our retrieve, we invariably hooked baitfish. Letting the fly sink until it had fallen below the bait avoided fouling the fly, and gave it the appearance of a cripple.

Under these conditions I fished either a Sea Habit Bucktail or Sea Habit Deceiver, tying the fly onto the tippet with a 100 Percent Noose Knot and leaving a short loop at the eye of the hook. The epoxy-soaked head tipped the fly head-down on the sink, leaving the narrow fly to flutter helplessly downward. The chums and coho often took the fly when it was in this attitude. If they didn't, a few casual strips on the line did the trick.

We often located chum and coho lurking at the edges of thick kelp forests that filled the shoreline. These fishing areas were especially effective when the kelp clung precariously to severe, wave-pounded drop-offs. I simply cast at the shore, gave the fly ten seconds or so to sink, and began a strip retrieve. The retrieve could be a mixed bag—long, short, quick, and slow—or regular foot-long strips. Regardless, angling success remained constant.

I found that the chum salmon required a deeper sink than the coho. When I gave the fly a half-minute to sink before stripping it back, the chum might immediately pounce on it or track the fly nearly to the surface before grabbing it a rod's length away.

Coho stocks are depressed throughout their Pacific Coast range, and numbers were noticeably down at Langara. The largest coho of the season at North Island topped 19 pounds; we found them up to 16 pounds. Any coho over 10 pounds took our lines on a high-flying tour of the salmon fleet with side trips through the kelp forests. No



Trey Combs holds a Langara chum salmon.

tern, an especially thin, primarily white dressing. I tied the fly on with a loop so that it would swim nearly straight up on the short strip and rod twitch, and then turn head-down on the slack created when the rod tip was dropped.

The chinook usually crushed the fly at their feeding level, 30 to 50 feet down. If the wind remained light, it was possible to release retrieved line when the fly was halfway to the surface and then to repeat the retrieve.

Wind blowing more than a couple of miles per hour on the slack tide dragged the line up to above the desired level and prevented the super-slow, jiglike retrieve. At such times it was necessary to move to a headland situated in the lee of the wind. When the tide began running—the Charlottes have 20-foot tides—we drifted along and merrily turned our attention to the other salmon.

By using this approach, Shelly, Johnson, and I hooked five chinook on our last morning at Coho Point, Johnson boating one weighing in the high teens, while I got one over 20 pounds. Shelly and I both had door-size chinook follow the fly up from the depths and leave us shaking on an adrenalin overdose.

When a chinook snapped my fly off on the strike, I changed from an 8kg to a 10kg tippet. While these fish are not known to be leader shy when anglers are trolling cutplug herring, I felt that the flies sank and fished better on the thinnest leader possible, one fine in diameter for its strength that still has reasonable abrasion resistance.

Other refinements will surely follow, but I left Langara Island convinced that the full-sinking-line approach (not shooting-tapers), the method of presentation, and the flies fished—in that order—would ultimately lead me to Langara's great tye, chinook salmon 40 pounds or more.

TREY COMBS is author of *Steelhead Fly Fishing* and other books. His next book will be *Bluewater Fly Fishing*, available from Lyons & Burford, Publishers.

remarkable differences existed between coho and chums save for the few seconds chums require to get going after they are hooked. Coho exploded on the fly and were gone, often without even an initial jump to mark the strike.

Chinook Salmon

FINDING WAYS to take chinook—the springs and great tye—in deep water when the bite was on became our challenge. Rick Steen, whose mania for fly fishing centers on chinooks in salt water, likens chinooks to "sumo wrestlers waiting to be fed," fish that suck in baitfish from a foot away, and take a deep-running fly as lightly as any trout picking up a nymph.

I had jigged for chinooks in deep water and remembered how they often took the lure as it fluttered down on the drop between upstrokes of the rod. I decided to duplicate this approach while using flies. Johnson and I fished forward-taper full-sinking lines, "fast" and "extra fast," sink rates IV and V, on 9- and 10-weight rods, respectively.

The considerable weight in the running line made a long shoot difficult. But the sink rate in the running line allowed us to reach the level where chinooks were feeding, and then to keep the fly swimming at this level. To accomplish this, it was necessary to fish on—or nearly on—the slack tide, and to do so where there was very little wind.

I began the presentation by casting the fly in the direction the boat was drifting, paying out additional line as I floated over the fast-sinking line. Then I passed the line around the bow or stern of the boat and began the retrieve as the line assumed a slight angle away from the boat. At this point the fly was down 50 feet or more, and the entire 25-meter fly line was off the reel. I retrieved the fly in slow, two-inch strips while giving the rod tip a slight twitch.

The fly I found most effective was a Sea Habit Deceiver, the sand lance pat-



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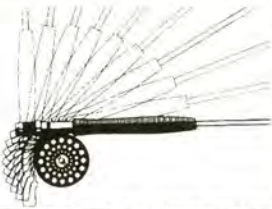
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