

To My Salmon Fishing Friends:

This is the time of year when I go through my journals carefully and try to make sense of the last season.

Fishing Depth

Early in the 2011 season fishing depth didn't seem to matter. On the North King trip June 7 to 11 we fished shallow (typically 27 ft and 37 ft), and it worked well. Denis Dubord in our buddy boat picked up two tyees, and while Kim and I did not connect with a tye we had lots of action. Later in June at West Coast the guides were catching occasional salmon at all depths. Willy caught a lovely tye on his third rod which was running at about 20 feet, and at Eclipse I got a 37 lb salmon at 37 feet. Other guides were fishing sixty to a hundred feet and hitting fish, although they were few and far between.

One afternoon at Teflon Bay I watched on the depth sounder as a 30 lb salmon ran down from 20 feet to 47 feet to take my guest's cut plug. Half an hour later we picked up a 28 lb spring at 57 feet, I think it was sitting on the bottom in 60 feet of water.

Essentially I think the salmon in June were running at all depths. Perhaps early in the season the water is still cold from the winter, and there is no thermocline.

By August it was very different. At West Coast Resort in Milbanke Sound I had my best success at depths between 47 and 120 feet. Occasional tye were caught near the surface at first light, but during the day most of the fish were running 80 ft and deeper. At North King in August I found that the chinook at Borrowman Bay were very particular, the best depth was 42 feet and if I ran my gear five feet higher or lower it made a big difference in the murky water.

Summary: Fishing depth is probably not an issue early in the season but it is really important later in the summer. I'll probably start the season at 27/37 again.

Buddy Boats

Having a buddy boat is great, it allows you to fish further from the lodge and also to compare notes, for example how deep the fish are running. In June at North King Lodge we buddied with Denis Dubord and his partner Noel and ran over to McPhee Point, which is only possible with a buddy boat. It was a lot of fun and we found the fishing to be excellent (but it was also a bit frustrating to see the boat following along behind us catch the big fish).

Summary: Fish with a buddy boat.

Motors

West Coast Resorts uses 90 hp Mercury motors, and the idle speed is set in software (it can't be adjusted). These motors idle at about 900 rpm and run too fast for cut plug. I tried towing a bucket and found the boat speed was still fast (it was also a pain when I needed the bucket). Much of my time at West Coast was spent either trying to slow down the boat or figuring out how to run a cut plug fast. Neither worked very well. Most of the other guides ran spoons or flashers and hootchies.

Summary: Don't waste time with cut plug when the boat runs fast, use spoons or teaser head instead.

Teaser Head

Charlie White, the late fishing guru, wrote that in his experience teaser head out fished cutplug roughly four to one. Last summer I fished teaser head and cut plug side by side many times, and despite being a dyed-in-the-wool cut plug fisherman had to conclude that teaser head is more effective. By the end of the summer I was fishing only teaser head, and we had some excellent days.

I generally fish green teaser head in green water that has a lot of plankton, like the Caamano Sound area early in the season, and blue teaser head in clear water like Milbanke Sound in August. Until last summer my favourite green teaser head was dark green with fish scales, simply because it looks really fishy to me. However last summer I had my best results with the light green glow teaser head.

For my teaser head leader I normally use a leading #2 treble and a trailing 5/0 single with a three inch separation measured from the end of one hook to the end of the next. The #2 treble is inserted into the herring above the lateral line just behind the dorsal fin. Last summer while at Milbanke Sound I learned by trial and error that the herring needs to be tight against the teaser head, any gap will result in a poor roll. I found that I could minimize the gap by moving the treble hook slightly forward of the dorsal fin. I don't feel that this is the best hook location for hooking the salmon, but it is the best spot to get a good roll.

I believe that the salmon usually grab the herring between the dorsal fin and the tail, and for best results one hook should be just behind the dorsal fin and the other near the tail.

At North King Lodge Scotty, one of the guides, mentioned to me that in Campbell River most of the guides use a leading single and trailing treble, because it provides better hooking.

Also at North King Deryk Krefting showed me how he wire rigs anchovy teaser heads and uses them for full size herring. In the fall I adapted Deryk's method to the Rhys Davis Super Herring Special teaser head and when I tested it in the water was amazed – a perfect roll every time, without fiddling. With this approach it is not necessary to have a leading treble inserted in the herring, so I can use two singles when there are a lot of coho around, or a leading single and trailing treble when the fishing is slow. Dynamite method, this is the roll of my dreams. And it can be run much faster than cut plug.

In the side of the teaser head drill two 3/64 inch (or smaller) diameter holes about 3/16 inch apart as shown in the photo below. The exact placement is not critical, but it is best to have the wire spaced below the leader so they don't touch. Thread a 7 inch piece of soft #16 gauge galvanized steel wire through the holes and use a pair of pliers to crimp it tight. The wire should be long enough to thread through the herring almost to the tail, and soft enough to bend easily and hold the bend (don't use piano wire, which would spring back).



Hole Placement

Deryk rigs the teaser head with a long piece of wire and for storage folds it back to fit in a plastic snack bag. In the boat straighten the wire and cut it to length, to fit the herring supplied by the lodge (the Rhys Davis Super Herring Special teaser head is intended for blue herring, but it can also be used with the larger purple and black size herring).



Wire Rigged Teaser Head

Place the teaser head beside the herring to estimate the entry point for the wire (usually just behind the gills), then thread the wire into the herring until it is buried to the tail. Use the normal round toothpick to secure the herring to the teaser head.

With a wire rigged teaser head it is not necessary to bury the hooks in the herring. I plan to use a leader with two 5/0 hooks and a two inch separation. Use the tensioning toothpick to position the last hook level with the tail of the herring. This way both hooks are hanging free and between the dorsal fin and the tail, in the region the salmon is most likely to grip the bait.

Bend the herring into a very gentle curve and try it in the water. It should roll smoothly with the tail directly in line with the head.

The resulting roll is both beautiful and bombproof, and can be run at pretty much any speed. I love this roll (thanks again, Deryk).

Summary: I had my best luck last summer with the light green glow teaser head. I haven't fished the wire rigged teaser head yet, but I'm really enthusiastic about the prospects.

Dummy Flashers

I know flashers are really effective but in the past have been hesitant to use them. First, I don't like using in-line flashers because it's not as much fun to fight the fish. Second, I like to use a light rod which is not strong enough to support a flasher. I've occasionally used a "dummy" flasher attached to the cannonball, but I've always been nervous that it would scare away the really big salmon, because I've heard that they tend to be hardware shy. And there's the problem that a normal flasher like the Hot Spot may not rotate properly when trolling at cut plug speeds.

Last summer I tried the Kona dummy flasher (from Nikka), which can be run slow with cutplug. The first time I used it was at Whale Channel in June when my guest wanted to catch a coho, which were few and far between at the time. I rigged the Kona dummy flasher on one side and set a five inch Wonder Bread spoon about four feet above and six feet behind, for coho. On the other side I put a six inch half and half (chrome and brass) spoon for springs, no flasher. We didn't have any success on the half/half spoon, but with the Wonder Bread spoon hooked a chinook of about 30 lbs and lost him at the boat. That was a big surprise for me.

Another day I was fishing Eclipse, things were dead slow, and my guest suggested we try a dummy flasher. Out of curiosity I put the dummy flasher on one side, and set both lines with the same lure and depth – dark green teaser head at 37 feet. In a couple of hours of fishing we had three springs and a coho on the side with the dummy flasher, all hard aggressive strikes, and one half hearted strike on the other side. As I watched the depth sounder I also saw something enormous come up off the bottom to look at the dummy flasher, but unfortunately didn't take. This on what was otherwise a very slow day, the other boats had practically no activity.

Summary: Dummy flashers work, springs like them, and the strikes are much more aggressive.

Murky Water

In August at North King Lodge we had a lot of rain, and the runoff from the island was brown with tannin from the peat soil. As a result the water at Borrowman Bay was murky brown and it was difficult to find the salmon. And it was really important to get the depth right.

Later in the fall after the season ended I talked to my next door neighbour, who was having great success in September fishing for springs and sockeye at the mouth of the Fraser River. He was nailing them with a brass coloured flasher in the muddy brown water.

Summary: Try a red or brass coloured dummy flasher when the water is murky brown from tannin runoff.

Rhinoceros Auklets

In Borrowman Bay I noticed several hundred seagulls milling around a small area. Some were flying around in circles and others were sitting on the water, dipping their bills for sandlance which had been forced to the surface by Rhinoceros Auklets. Tom Miller and I picked up two 20 lb springs by fishing at the edge of the activity and four more in the general area.

Summary: Watch for gulls and Rhinoceros Auklets and fish at the edge of the activity, but try not to disturb the birds.

Spoons

During the middle and later part of the fishing season most of the guides at both lodges were running spoons. At West Coast in Milbanke Sound the most popular spoons were six and seven inch chrome or half/half hammered spoons. Gord took the largest West Coast salmon for 2011 (58 lbs) on a hammered half/half spoon. At North King spoons were also very popular, while I was at the lodge Gary brought in a 51 lb spring caught on a green and chrome spoon. Spoons are particularly effective when the currents are running strong and the salmon are hunkered down on the bottom, they will often rise up to investigate the flash and sparkle of a spoon.

Summary: Have a couple of spoons in the tackle kit and fish them when the currents are running strong.



Dimpled or “Hammered” Spoons

Siwash Hooks

At West Coast Gord showed me how he bends his Mustad Siwash (open eye) hooks into an offset claw shape, which he feels provides a much better hooking action than the straight “J” hooks. It never occurred to me that you could bend a Siwash hook like this without breaking it, but with the Mustad hooks it worked beautifully. The next day he landed his 58 lb chinook.

Summary: Next summer I’ll bend my Mustad Siwash hooks (on spoons and plugs) into an offset claw shape.



Mustad Siwash Hooks Normal (left) and Offset (right, exaggerated)

Hook Shape

Last summer I learned that Gamakatsu and Mustad hooks have a slight difference in shape at the bend, and the shape of the lead hook affects the cut plug roll. The Gamakatsu hooks work well for most cut plug hook positions but not 0900, while the Mustad hooks work well for the 0900 hook position but not the others.

Summary: I will continue to use Gamakatsu hooks for cutplug.



5/0 Mustad (top), Gamakatsu, and DNE (bottom)

Big Bait

I believe that when a salmon takes a big herring (cut plug or teaser head) he usually grabs it between the dorsal fin and the tail, chomps down hard to break the spine and cripple the baitfish, then holds it lightly while he waits for it to die. Then after ten to thirty seconds he swallows the baitfish, usually head first (I've watched coho smolts taking sand lance this way).

Often the strikes are aggressive with the rod bouncing three or four inches, these I strike immediately. The ones that give me problems are the light taps, with the rod tip deflecting half an inch or less. I usually hit them immediately and often miss the salmon – perhaps he has already dropped the bait (or it's been pulled from his mouth by the motion of the boat) and is following along behind.

One morning last summer I was fishing on my own in Borrowman Bay with teaser head, and saw a light tap on the rod tip. This time I very quietly reeled the line off the release clip and waited. A few seconds later I felt weight and struck a 23 lb spring that had swallowed the herring, a very secure hookup with the hooks deep in his gullet. I suspect that when I reeled the line off the release clip it gave the salmon slack, which he interpreted as the baitfish being dead and he swallowed the herring.

Summary: This might be a better way to strike those light taps, I'll try it again next summer.

Cork Drag Washer on Islander Reels

I love my Islander reels, but in June Kim lost a lovely chinook when it took off on a run and the drag suddenly increased to the breaking point. It had been raining very heavily and the reel was soaked. Later I realized that the cork drag washer had probably absorbed water unevenly, so was lumpy and did not run smooth. I checked the maintenance booklet and noticed that the cork washer should be periodically oiled, I think to ensure that it does not absorb water. Nikka sells a maintenance kit with the recommended SuperLube oil and grease.

Summary: In future I'll be oiling the drag washers after every five or six days of fishing, and especially before wet weather. And keep the reels covered overnight!

Sand Lance Home Sand

Shallow bays such as Arnie's hole, Eclipse Bay, and the Dark Side are home sand for sand lance (needlefish). Sand lance do not have a swim bladder, so burrow into sand with just their heads sticking out when they are dormant or want to nap. They also do this to escape predators. Chinook often feed on the bottom of these bays, picking sand lance out of the sand. So far I've had two tyees from far inside Eclipse Bay, the one last June was 37 lb and was absolutely gorged with sand lance.

Since these shallow bays are easily disturbed, they are usually best when they've been unfished for a couple of hours. The stage of tide doesn't seem to matter. I usually bring my lines up to 27 ft and 37 ft, and make my turn when the bay narrows and the bottom comes up to 47 ft. Last summer there was often a race to make the first morning pass in Arnie's hole, and it usually produced a chinook. The west entrance between the rock and the kelp was also good.

Summary: If you notice that Arnie's hole or Eclipse Bay hasn't been fished for a couple of hours, give it a try.

Halibut

I had more and bigger halibut last summer than previous years. I tried 16 oz pipe jigs, circle hooks, and the Jim Decker spreader bar with tandem 8/0 leader. The most productive, and my favourite, was the tandem 8/0 leader – it was on that rig with a large herring and small strip of salmon belly that Myles Sidorak landed his 100 lb halibut.

Halibut love the 16 oz pipe jig, but because of the weight they can also throw it quite easily. At West Coast my guest lost a halibut in the 60 to 70 lb range when he tossed the jig at the boat, just as I was about to harpoon him.

In the past I've been less than keen on circle hooks, because it is so easy to pull the bait and hook out of the halibut's mouth. It is important with circle hooks not to strike the halibut. On the other hand when you do hook a halibut with a circle hook it is very secure and he is unlikely to come unhooked.

All of the halibut that I caught last summer (even on salmon gear) were hooked at the edge of drop offs, where the halibut could run downhill into deep water.

Summary: Use a spreader bar with tandem 8/0 leader and fish the shoulders of high points, rather than valley floors.

Ulric Point

In past years I've had good luck at Ulric Point, usually from low slack until about two hours into the flood tide. In 2010 Kim took a 38 lb salmon just west of Ulric two hours after low slack, and last June Denis Dubord took a 32 lb salmon about 90 minutes after low slack (hooked at 26 ft on cutplug, with the "sexy" roll).

Summary: It doesn't always hold salmon, but Ulric is worth a try in the early stages of a flood tide and is well protected from a southeast or southwest wind.

McPhee Point

The McPhee area is usually good in early June, when the big springs are migrating north into Whale Channel. This last June Denis Dubord picked up a 32.5 lb salmon at Johnstone Point at high slack. We had a lot of action that morning – Kim and I boated 27.5 lb and 18 lb salmon, broke off on two others, and had many strikes that we couldn't hook. Denis's partner Noel landed two springs, lost a big one by the boat and had many other strikes.

The following morning we fished McPhee again on the flood tide and had a terrific strike that knocked the rod from the holder. I was barely able to grab it as it headed overboard (with my Islander reel). Kim fought the fish for about ten minutes then had it break off – I suspect that the fish swallowed the herring and the line was cut on a tooth. We never saw it but I think it was a salmon and definitely a keeper.

Paul (Chief) told me later that the ebb tide out of Surf Inlet causes an eddy to form at McPhee. The baitfish and salmon are concentrated in the center of the eddy, which is about two hundred yards offshore towards Waremouth rock. That is the situation late in the ebb tide, near low slack, but I've had good success along the shore between McPhee and Johnstone Point on other stages of the tide as well.

Caution: McPhee is off the North King map and out of radio coverage, don't go there without a buddy boat and be sure to check with Clint first. And watch the weather closely.

Kettle Inlet in the Evening

Last summer Kettle Inlet was excellent in the evening, generally on a flood tide. We took many nice chinook and a 35 lb halibut (caught with teaser head herring on a light mooching rod). One of my guests spent an hour fighting something huge that hammered a teaser head just as it was getting dark, unfortunately when the fish finally lifted off the bottom he came up on the other side of the boat and the hooks pulled out. Although I think this was a salmon, I also know that big halibut hang out in Kettle. Also lots of Rhinoceros Auklets, sand lance and pink salmon, a very rich area. I tried Kettle several times “the morning after” and came up blank. I think it’s an evening spot.

Summary: Fish Kettle Inlet in the evening on a flood tide, but take a good flashlight.

Borrowman Bay

My favourite fishing spot last summer was Borrowman Bay. I had good success at first light and also in the two hours before high slack. It appears that Borrowman Bay is a sand lance feeding location, and the salmon (and maybe the sand lance) are pushed in with the flood tide. The best area was from the Bonzai tree south to the rock where the sea gulls sit. My friend Tom Miller nailed a 40.5 lb salmon on the afternoon flood tide, and the next morning his line got hammered by something too big to handle with the light mooching rod. From the fight this was most likely a big spring, but I also suspect that big halibut hang out in Borrowman, to feed on the pink salmon which in turn are feeding on the sand lance.

Summary: Fish Borrowman Bay at first light and the last two hours of the flood tide.

Big Bait, Big Fish

One of the reasons I like teaser head is that the bait is bigger if you don’t cut off the head. I think big fish tend to go for big bait. Last year I fished teaser head more than previous years, and I also had two fish that we couldn’t handle, which was a new experience. Of course it is also possible that they were halibut, and halibut also like big bait.

Summary: North King stocks the biggest herring on the coast.

El Nino / La Nina

This winter has been another La Nina, which should be good for the salmon fishing. The cold water off the coast is very good for the plankton and baitfish, which in turn should result in fat, hard fighting salmon this summer. The downside is that the weather will likely be cold, wet and windy, similar to last summer.

Three years ago we had the best coho fishing I’ve ever seen, simply off the chart, absolutely incredible. The offspring of those runs will be returning this summer – it might be a good or excellent year for coho on the central coast.

Last spring the early chinook runs to Caamano Sound were the poorest I've ever seen, the fish came through in small groups and seemed to pass right through. There were many days without any fish at all. I'm hoping that this was an anomaly and that this June will be better, perhaps closer to normal.

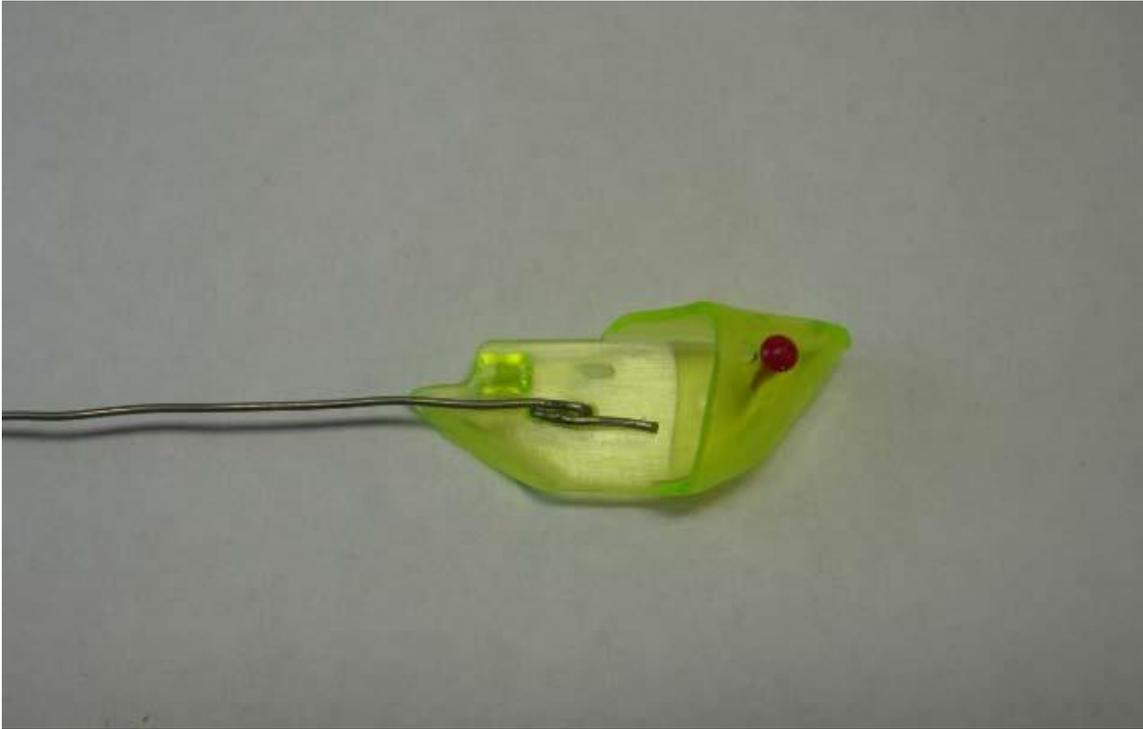
Last summer from mid July through August the chinook runs appeared normal to me. There seemed to be average numbers of 20, 40, and 50 lb salmon but not as many 30 lb salmon as I expected. That would suggest that next summer there may be average numbers of 30 lb salmon and not many larger salmon.

One of the really odd things last June was the absence of the big schools of adult herring that normally hang out in Caamano Sound. This might be related to water temperature and explain the absence of the big chinooks, perhaps they were moving through quickly instead of hanging out and spending time in the area. For much of June the best fishing was at Eclipse and Aristazabal, and primarily with sand lance imitations. During this period a popular spoon at North King was the Diamond Lance (which imitates a sand lance) and at West Coast a green or purple haze flasher with Silver Horde hootchie (also a sand lance imitation) was very popular.

Summary: Bring some sand lance imitations, and consider running flasher with wire rigged anchovy.

Wire Rigged Anchovy

Deryk Krefting showed me how he wire rigs an anchovy teaser head and uses this on the head of a large herring. I've tried this with herring but prefer the larger Rhys Davis Super Herring Special teaser head instead. However I love the wire rigging when running anchovies.



Deryk's Wire Rigged Anchovy Teaser Head

Anchovies tend to be soft and take on a sharp bend just behind the gills, which after a few minutes in the water makes for a poor roll. A piece of #18 gauge galvanized or stainless steel wire threaded through the anchovy will maintain a smooth curve. The Rhys Davis anchovy teaser heads are pre-drilled for the wire.

Good fishing, and I hope to see you on the water this summer.

Bill Haymond