

SITKA: HOTTEST SALTWATER KING FISHERY IN ALASKA **By Terry W. Sheely**

The fish buzz in Sitka is all about the Californian and his 74-pound, 6-ounce white king.

A monster, even in Southeast, where a king that size still gets a four-column photo in The Daily Sentinel, a foot of fish story, and a lot of conversation aboard the charter boats in the harbor.

Paul Burtness is the lucky angler, Angela says, caught the king June 2 up at Salisbury Sound. We'll be fishing there tomorrow or the next day on the Buffalo Boat with her para-gliding, volcano-climbing husband Cheston and "Bait" the boat dog, a Jack Russell terrier that gets its jollies biting flopping halibut on the nose.

Should be interesting.

Angela Filler has put this Alaskan trip together and is waiting with a smile, an agenda, good news and a dinner invitation when TRN publisher Jim Goerg and I step off Alaskan Airline Flight 63 and into the terminal on Japonski Island.

The smile is the same infectious "trust me" grin I'd seen when we first met at the February sportsman show in Monroe, the agenda is little changed from the detailed one in my pocket and the good news is that we have landed at the peak of the hottest king bite in the hottest king fishing spot in Alaska.

She pushes the proof, a news clipping, into my hand.

"Preliminary creel data indicates this may be the biggest year for king sport fishing in Sitka," said Mike Jaenicke, ADFG Southeast project manager. "If it follows the harvest trend in the last five years, it's going to be the biggest harvest in Sitka we've ever seen, he said. "Up to 30,000 kings (could be) taken by sports anglers by the end of this season. The highest figures in past have been 24,000 kings.

"The week of June 14-20 is the historic peak week for king salmon fishing in Sitka, the best place in the state for sport fishing for kings, at an average of three hours to catch a chinook, according to the biologist."

According to every source I found, the average fishing time in Sitka to catch a salmon (chinook or coho) is three times faster than any other place in Southeast. Simply put - there's a whomping mother lode of nasty silver fish in front of this town most of the summer.

Today is June 14, Day One of ADFG's "historic peak week." It's 1:37 p.m.

By this time tomorrow Jim and I will have a 24 and a 30 pounder on ice, our companions Dr. William (Jake) Doyle of Kettle Falls and Laura Palmer, from St. Regis, MT have a 20 and an 18 (Laura's first-ever) all before lunch, Bait will have munched a bunch of halibut noses, we've had a close-up look at Mount Edgecumbe Sitka's 3,271-foot high volcanic icon that our skipper sweats up just to para-glide down and we still have half of the first day left to fish.

This, I think, is going to be an interesting trip.

Sitka, with less than 9,000 residents, is Alaska's 5th largest city. Two blocks from our room in the Westmark Shee Atika (native word for Sitka) is where Alaska became U.S. territory - Oct. 18, 1867.

The little city is steeped in Russian, Tlingit, and U.S. political history, boast 17 miles of road, a fleet of professional fishing charters, and the infamous 'P' Bar. It's a port rapidly gaining popularity with Puget Sound anglers as a destination for long-weekend Alaskan fishing junkets.

Located on the west side of Baranof Island, Sitka is accessible only by boat or plane. It's 2-1/2 airline hours from Sea-Tac International, one of the few (some say only) Alaskan destination ports with two-a-day non-stop jet service to the Outside that can deliver a sometimes blistering hot salmon and halibut fishery within sight of town.

Angela's operation is a one-woman whirlwind called Sitka Charter Brokers - her idea of one-stop shopping for fishermen.

"You call, pack, get on the plane. I take care of everything else." Each fish trip is customized, personalized. You want it, she gets it, brokering absolutely everything from fishing licenses (\$20 for 3 days, plus \$10 a day king tag) to airline reservations, hotels, B&B's, lodges, meals, charter boats, night life, sack lunches, tours of the critically historic town and throws in a bunch of pleasant side ventures, including shopping sprees for non-angling companions.

Cell phone in her ear, notebook in hand, and a toddler on her lap, she confirms, books, shuffles, brokers, solves, shifts, buys, recommends and takes us to dinner.

We're scheduled to fish two days with Cheston and Bait the terrier on the 32-foot Lorna Dee. With an 11-foot beam it's easy in open ocean waves and offers a lot of open fishing room. Buffalo Boat Angela calls it, a Sport Craft on steroids.

On the third day we will be on a 27-foot Seasport with Tim and Octobre Twaddle's Alaskan Reel Affair Charters. Their down-home skipper is Mike Boetteher of Oregon City, OR.



**With rods-at-ready,
the crew prepares
for the morning catch.**

Cheston's "Buffalo Boat" sticks its nose into Sitka Sound and looks around. At 6 in the morning the sound is a mill pond. "We'll try Vitskari Rocks," he says. Bait growls. Nobody argues.

Sitka is surrounded by prominent and popular salmon and halibut spots: on the south Necker Islands and Biorka Reef, out front at Vitskari Rocks in Sitka Sound, around Cape Edgecumbe and north up the outside of Kruzof Island to Shelikof Bay, Point Mary, Pt. Amelia, Salisbury Sound, Sealion Island, Eagle Rock, Kakul Narrows and probably a dozen more. (Note: Halibut and rockfish are closed in an area at the southend of Kruzof Island called the Pinnacles off Cape Edgecumbe.)

Sitka Sound works as a huge collection bowl that pulls in fish from literally hundreds of separate salmon runs migrating along the edge of the ocean toward southern natal streams.

Vitskari Rocks is the heart of Sitka Sound, ground zero for fresh-arrivals, straight out in front of the harbor beneath the streaks of snow on the crater of Mount Edgecumbe. It's a swirl of eddies, rips and bait that sucks in migrating runs of kings and coho, holds them, feeds them and sends them on their way to places like British Columbia and Washington. In the fall it's a staging area for swarms of coho returning to a hatchery in nearby Silver Bay. The rocks of Vitskari may well be the most popular salmon spot in Sitka.

FIRST MORNING

An armada of professional boats are straining the mill pond with herring and hoochies. Birds are working everywhere. Bite is on.

Cheston puts out four rods, stacked two to a downrigger, trolling 160 and 120 feet off bottom. Laura has first rod and 7 minutes into the troll it bucks down. The 18 pounder inhaled a whole herring, turns out to be the smallest fish of the trip, and will be remember forever as her first-ever salmon.

Two of the rods are trolling flashers and herring, two straight whole herring with half-hitches of leader snugged around the nose so they pull straight.

Dr. Jake puts a brilliantly bright 20 pounder in the boat.

I have two fish that hit and rip off before I realize the drag on my assigned reel is cinched down. Back it off, line slips. I'd rather play these fish with a line-burned thumbprint than break off on a tight drag. Shortly, I release two in the 15- pound range. Nothing under 20 is going in the boat.

Cheston is getting antsy. The tide's turning. He wants to run offshore for halibut. Dr. Jake and Laura are cradling coffee, basking in morning sun and smiling. Their rods are still out, rigged for coho (early, but there might be a couple around). The tide is bearing down on halibut slack, herring balls have scattered, birds are leaving and Jim and I have yet to keep a fish. Bait is prancing.

On queue, Jim's rod folds over, a 24 pounder sweeps around the boat. Before we can clear the other rods, mine bucks, shimmies and dives. It's a double. My king likes to fight on the surface, lots of wallowing splashes and surface scorching runs. I'm guessing the low 20s, but it's a strong low 20. Jim's fish is in the net. "Seen it," he says, "low 20s" I answer. "It's bigger fish than you think," he says. He's right, the slab pushes 30. It's held by a single hook.

It's 10:15. "Now can we run for halibut," Cheston says. It's not a question.

The morning's sequence seems to be the Sitka fleet's daily fishing pattern. Fish early and through the tide change for the kings, and spend the slack on halibut honey holes. Come back for another crack at salmon - if necessary. We run 45 minutes offshore, set anchor in about 300 feet, drop gobs of chum, and circle hooks choked with salmon bellies, heads, guts, gills and assorted bottom fodder.

We wait for the scent to call in the halibut. Bait prances.

Lunch comes and goes.

A humpback whale passes wide, and inexplicably fluke slaps the water for more than a mile.

A few quillbacks, some beautiful 20-plus yelloweyes.



Dr. Jake's the first to bring up a nice yelloweye.

We manage to scratch up 3 small halibut the biggest probably 30 pounds. Bait is pleased. He's growled, sunk his rapier teeth into a trio of slimy halibut snouts, and strutted like a studdly conqueror.

Cheston is disappointed: "yesterday we did well here. Biggest fish."

Today we went for a ride and lunch on Buffalo Boat.

SECOND MORNING

High overcast, a hot sun coming up from behind the glaciers and mountain teeth on the spine of Baranof Island.

By 6:05 we're on the boat and headed out.

By 6:55 we have three kings in the 20 to 25 pound range in the box. The last of our four-fish king limit comes in at 7:10.

It's a scrambling, whoop and dodge 65 minutes of fishing. Dr. Jake and I lead off with a double from 150 feet - mine is a surface burner bent on lapping the boat. Dr. Jake's dives, takes a tight turn around another fishing line, then for good measure does two laps around the downrigger cable. My king rips around the transom and heads straight for Dr. Jake's amazing mess. I pull hard and the fish instinctively turns away from the pressure and runs - on the surface in the right direction.

Cheston is head and shoulders over the rail, fingers flying toward the impossible - to free the two-line, one-cable tangle that's somewhere below the droop of limp line dangling from Dr. Jake's rod tip. Cheston lunges onto his feet, Bait barks, and Dr. Jake's rod tip slams down. Still on! Kettle Falls must be a lucky place.

Nets fly.

Jim adds his beautiful king, Laura puts her 20 in the boat, we hold 'em up for a classic Sitka meat photo: bright kings, big smiles, and a background full of volcano.

This time, we look for halibut at Pt. Mary, north along the outside of Kruzof Island. Cheston calls it the "ranch, the hutch, the chicken farm." By any name it means small halibut in 310 feet of water. There's an armada of anchored boats at "the ranch" and most seem to be playing halibut?small 10 to 40 pounders. We use 9 1/2 foot G.Loomis mooching rods which prove to be amazingly effective almost effortless halibut tools. They are rigged with 8/0 Gamakatsu hooks, 40-pound leader and baited with rotten horse herring. Lots of leverage from the long rods.

Set the hook, pull up, wait for the bend in the rod to recover, to leverage and lift the fish. Reel down, and repeat the lift, wait, recover. As the horse-shoed rod slowly straightens it lifts the fish toward the surface.

Both Jim and I arrived in Sitka expecting to connect with halibut in the 50 to 100 pound range. We didn't. Most of our halibut were small, even by chicken standards. Big halibut had been around, everybody said so, just not where we were-when we were there. Best halibut fishing, according to Chestin, starts in July and runs through August

Some people were lucky in mid-June. We ate dinner one evening at Sitka Point Lodge with Mike Boles, his gracious wife, and three anglers from San Diego who were more than a little proud of their 115-pounder. They'd gone south to find the slab and had. Chef Teddy Gassman served salmon with red pepper sauce on a bed of wild rice, scallops and brie on crackers, chocolate mousse swirled with purple boyson berries. It made the halibut envy a little easier to swallow.



**Sitka Point Lodge as it looks down
and across the fishing grounds.**

Sitka Point Lodge is a little north of town, on a hill overlooking a calendar scene. It's a new operation, with five double occupancy rooms, walk-in freezer, hot tub and midnight sunsets, a charter boat operation ...and Chef Teddy Gassman.

With four limits of kings and halibut on board the Buffalo Boat, and most of the day still ahead of us, we talked Chestron and Bait into bottomfishing. It didn't take a lot of convincing. Dr. Jake and Laura jumped at the chance. "Nobody ever lets us fish for bottomfish. This'll be great," Doc Jake said.

And it was. We ran north to Salisbury Sound, photographed the lions at Sealion Island, the eagle on Eagle Rock and jigged glow tail sickle shaped plastic worms on pinnacles 120 feet deep until we couldn't quit smiling. The first five rockfish are all different species. The deck fills with red and black striped tiger rockfish, yelloweye, black, China, boccacio, and widow.

These waters seem to swarm with fish. A sea otter checks us out.

On the way in we see an eagle flapping in the waters of Neva Strait, beating slowly toward shore. It hauls out on a kelp-slimed boulder. A salmon a few pounds bigger than its wing lift, is impaled in its talons.

THIRD MORNING

For our final fish day, Angela has us booked with Alaskan Reel Affair Charters, which runs four 4-man boats and operates a fish packing and shipping service for sport anglers.

We're fishing on a 27-foot Sea Sport with skipper Mike Boetteher an Oregon City guide who also runs winter boat in the Willamette and Columbia for salmon, sturgeon, steelhead and walleye. He's a big guy with an infectious laugh, and a sense of humor -" Do I look like a guy who wants a diet soda.... ."

Our fishing partners for the day are Chuck Leazer and Thomas Ruhaak, Loveland, CO. Tom is first up and his rod goes off on a 5-pound silver. Nice fish in Loveland, but a nasty break in a king factory like Sitka in June.



**A typical fish on this third
day of Sitka catching.**

His buddy Chuck nails a 20-pound white king at 90 feet. I catch a twin to Tom's small silver. Mike guesses there's a wad of feeders from the Silver Bay coho hatchery moving by. Tom hits a king, a second later my rod goes off and I've got a twin to Tom's. He's wedged into the starboard corner, and I'm on the port side. His fish stays on the surface, throwing up water welts as it torpedoes away.

Mine is a diver, a deep-down slugger. It sounds for 15 full seconds before stopping. Must have hit bottom.

Later, Jim finishes off our king salmon limits with another 25 pounder, and we head for a fog bank 16 miles out where a GPS mark says there are halibut 452 feet down.

We drop 2 pounds of weight, hooks slathered in salmon gills, guts and belly strips and catch limits of yelloweye rockfish (2 each), six small halibut, and enough quillbacks to cuss at.

The fog starts to lift, whitecaps are rocking our anchored boat pretty good.

Humpback whales pass in the distance, dolphins swarm the boat. A shearwater lands in a trough off the transom and looks us over.

For the day we have 4 kings in the 25 pound range, 2 silvers, 8 yelloweyes and 6 halibut. The tide is running hard, boat is getting bashed, the bite is dead and we head for home

Sitka is glowing in afternoon ocean light; onion domes, white clapboard houses, trollers, net boats, charters, sternwheeler, old town, new tourists, cruise ships, a barge, hacksaw mountains with glacier ice in their teeth and a westerly sun on their flanks.

And a mess of good eating in the fish box.

Bar time!



The small wooden fishing boat bearing the town's name rots at moorage in the harbor. A boat full of stories, and the End to this one.