

SALMON ON THE FLY

Ocean Salmon On A Fly

By Jim Earley

O.K., I admit it. I've watched those fishing shows on Saturday mornings, but I didn't get up at 4:00 a.m. to do it and I didn't take fishing time to watch them either. My wife gives me a bad time about it when I tape them and watch them later. I have to admit that listening to some fellow with a southern accent holler "boy howdy Bubah, ah gottanutherbiggun" is difficult to take for more than about two minutes. These shows were the reason manufacturers put a button for VERY fast forward on the VCR remote. Fortunately, not all the shows are of this caliber and some even provide useful information. The "Walker's Cay Chronicles" helped me put together an approach to Salmon fishing you might find interesting.

One morning, they had a show on about fly fishing for sailfish off Central America. Flip Pallot, the show host, and his buddy would take turns attracting, casting to, and (if they were lucky) hooking sailfish on a fly. I thought about the technique they were using and it looked like the same approach could work on Coho or Chinook. In fact this technique works for most schooling predatory fish. The sport Tuna fleet troll using large feathered jigs. When the person standing watch on the trolling rod sees a hook-up, the drill is to quickly drag the Tuna in and then keep the fish around the boat while churning with live bait. The rest of the school follows the hooked fish to the boat. My technique isn't exactly the same as either, but it's similar enough for comparison.

Every year, my family and I spend at least part of our summer vacation in Oregon. During that time (at least up to 1993), we fished for Salmon in the ocean. My brother-in-law, Jeff, and my Dad, have a 19 foot Sea Ray they use during the summer and it's great for getting to and fishing for Salmon out of Florence, OR. Jeff is an expert troller and can usually find fish when others can't. He has plenty of contacts and keeps an eye on the fishing so he knows when the Coho show up off Florence.

The first time we tried fishing Salmon with a fly rod from Jeff's boat, he thought I was a little strange. I told him what I wanted to try and he just shrugged. After all, I am his brother-in-law, and in his mind entitled to a few idiosyncrasies. Until I started fishing with him, Jeff used 5 foot long trolling rods and 40 pound test line. The harvest was the most important thing to him. But now that has all changed. He still trolls for Salmon when the regulations permit, but we've upgraded his tackle and I may eventually get him into using fly rods. He's practicing more catch and release, always uses barbless hooks in the ocean and only takes fish when we're ready for a barbecued Salmon dinner.

Our technique is simple. We troll bait or lures (sometimes even tube flies) until we have a hook-up. My Dad or Jeff will play the troll hooked fish to the boat while I cast to where the fish is coming up. Most of the time, Coho head straight to the surface and put on an acrobatic show. Casting near a surface fighting fish almost always results in a hook-up on the fly. The reason this works is that Coho and Chinook travel and feed in schools. They stay together most of the time, and especially when one of their comrades is acting strange.



When you hook a Salmon, it will disgorge anything in its stomach and the other salmon will hit the undigested meal. Kind of disgusting, but to our benefit. It's a lot easier for another Salmon to pick up the piece of bait than chase down a live one that hasn't been stunned or killed. Most schooling predators have this type of behavior. Stripers in the surf and delta and Tuna in the ocean will demonstrate the same tactics.

In preparation, we use the same method Flip Pallot used on the sailfish. I stand in the stern of the boat ready for action. I use a 10 weight rod, a reel with a good drag and a high speed, high density shooting head to cast a tube fly intended to imitate a bait fish or squid. I strip off about 50 feet of running line into a bucket and keep the shooting head in the water. When we hook up and stop the boat, I make the cast. I let the fly sink a few feet and then start to strip the fly in quickly. Most of the time, the fly doesn't make it 5 feet before being slammed. In fact, I've hooked fish, fought them for a few seconds, lost them and then had another Salmon take as I was stripping in. This has happened more than once and is part of the intrigue that keeps me wanting to try for them again and again.

The first time we hooked up using this method, Jeff couldn't believe it! He got so excited, he was yelling at all the other boats about what we were doing. And we proved it was no freak occurrence. That day, we hooked and released 10 Coho and lost several others. Each year, until the closures were implemented in 1994, we would have days like this. Jeff was so excited, he told all his friends at work and in town. Most of them thought we were a bit strange to try it, but Jeff convinced them that it was a great way to catch fish. It doesn't hurt Jeff's persuasive powers that he's 6 feet 3 inches tall and over 200 pounds. Now he can't wait to get back out and use this technique some more.

The most amazing thing about Coho is the acrobatic display they put on when hooked on a fly. I've had fish tail walk across the surface, slice through waves and cart-wheel all over the place. Usually the water is relatively clear and you can see the fish fight, especially in heavier seas with large swells. Chinook can be hooked using this same technique, but they don't usually jump like the Coho. The take is never gentle. If you can see the fly as it sinks, you'll see a slash of silver, just as the Salmon turns with the fly. Most of the time, you don't have to set the hook because the fish does it for you! Many times, you'll see the take and a flashing streak of silver as the fish realizes it's hooked. Then usually pandemonium sets in. Your cohorts are landing one fish while a fish is jumping, all the while your line is in a completely different direction. Eventually, your line slices through the water to catch up to the fish and you realize the jumping fish was the one you have hooked.

Catching salmon on a fly in the ocean is nothing like catching them in a river. They are not confined to a small area and they haven't begun the deterioration that marks their entry to fresh water. While the hazards of sunken logs and rocks isn't a problem, their sheer energy is. Anything less than a 10 weight will work against you and if you don't have a good reel with a smooth drag, you'll be in for an unpleasant time.

The Coho range in size from 5 to 10 pounds while Chinook range from 10 to 20 pounds. We generally hook several Coho to each Chinook, but from time to time, the ratio will reverse. They are not leader shy so we use 4 feet of 15 or 20 pound Maxima for a tippet. This makes releasing quick and minimally taxing on the fish. You don't even need to bring them into the boat. Just a quick twist of the barbless hook and they're off, that is, if you're using a 10 weight. In fact, if you plan to release the fish, don't use a net or boat the fish. They have very loose scales in the ocean and will lose them by flopping in the boat.

The tube flies we use are relatively generic. They should be 5 to 6 inches long and have lots of white in them with a little flash. The hooks we use are barbless and at least 2/0. I've used brown and red as the top dressing, but blue is generally preferred. Salmon feed on all kinds of bait fish and will take

Squid when they are available. Coho generally feed on “Krill”, a small shrimp like crustacean, but they generally can’t resist a wounded or stunned herring or anchovy. Baits that represent these fish will work the best, unless the Salmon are feeding on Squid, then a red or brown topped fly will work best.

I like fishing out of Florence, Oregon, because I know the area and it’s a good jumping off point for other Oregon coastal destinations. The ocean Coho and Chinook fishing is just as good or better off some of California’s ports, but the timing is different. The season starts earlier and moves north as it progresses.

The Salmon generally move north from around Santa Barbara in the spring and end up off Florence around July or August. They will be off the Bay area in March or April and off Fort Bragg in May or June. Most of the returning fish are from the Columbia river hatcheries and spend the colder months off California.

Fort Bragg is the best California location for Coho using this technique and Eureka would be next. The method will work for Salmon out of Monterey Bay, but the success rate is usually not as high. Here, the squid imitation will be especially effective. You’ll need a sea-worthy boat to tackle Salmon in the salt from San Francisco Bay north, but rentals are available in Santa Cruz and other ports in Monterey Bay. Some of the local guides in Fort Bragg and other coastal ports are getting acquainted with this technique so if you’re interested, give them a call, especially if you don’t have access to a boat.

If you want to know more about salmon fishing in the ocean, Ken Hanley’s book on coastal access has some helpful hints for the Monterey Bay area. Les Johnson, Bruce Ferguson and Pat Troller also have a book out detailing fishing for Salmon in salt water, but it is primarily oriented to the Puget Sound area. John Crawford has written on Pacific Salmon to a fly, but his one too, concentrates on fishing from Puget Sound north.

There are also a few books out on tying salt water patterns and tube flies. These can be found in most fly shops and catalogs.

For the past three years (since 1997), the ocean off Oregon and to a lesser extent off California, has been closed to Coho harvest with minimal action allowed for Chinook. For what ever reason, it’s a sacrifice we live with to effect the return of the coastal populations of Coho. But the wet weather predicted for the next 20 years could mean a return to fishing for Coho out of Florence and the other Oregon Ports. It should also mean better access to the Coho off California and potentially removal from its listing under the Endangered Species Act.

The author, Jim Earley, is a Past President of CFFU. This article appeared in the June 1997 issue of California Fly Fisher Magazine.