

# Counting Your Chickens

When the US Army posted their cousin to Alaska, Ros and John planned a fishing holiday, including a halibut trip, as part of an Alaskan adventure and to see how the Alaskans manage their \$1.4 billion Sport Fishing Industry.

## Catching Chickens

"Let's go and catch some Chickens!" said Carrie, skipper of the *Snow Bird*, as she finished her safety briefing in Seward. The chickens she referred to were not the feathered kind but halibut. We had signed in at the reception of the Military resort with our fishing licences at 06.00 before being called by our guide, Abi, to board the shuttle bus for the five minute trip to the quay.



I was puzzled by the term "Chickens", and when I enquired later Carrie replied, "I don't know the history behind the "chickens" but small halibut are called this and larger ones, like 40-70 pounds, are called "turkeys" and the largest ones are called "hogs." Go figure." My own research shows that gourmets reckon the smaller "chickens" to be the best eating and these are also more expensive per pound, but no explanation as to how the term came into common usage. Two days earlier we had watched the private charter boats return to port and unload their catches. The largest halibut that day was in the high 200s.

Skipper Carrie eased *Snow Bird* out of the harbour and then opened up the throttles of her powerful engines as we cruised south down Resurrection Bay. This inlet is so large and deep that it is often visited by hump back whales and has at least resident pods of orcas as well as steller sea lions and sea otters. We had a three hour steam ahead of us to reach the entrance waters of Prince William Sound. *Snow Bird* is one of four boats owned by the Military Resort at Seward. She is a 43' Delta, built in Bellingham, WA powered by two C-7 Caterpillar diesel engines each delivering 400HP.



We sat under the awning behind the spacious cabin and swapped stories of fish and lives with Tyler, a law student from Texas, working his vacation at Seward Resort and Rob from the US Coastguard. Rob had his wife and three children with him, the youngest, Wyatt, only just tall enough to be on the trip, and like his sister Paige had to wear a life jacket as they were under 12 years when on deck and not in the cabin. Rob regaled us with stories of flying on ice patrol over Greenland in response to our experience of seeing the glaciers as we flew over southern Greenland.

We watched the coast on our port side, photographed the glaciers and felt the cold katabatic winds that come off these ice fields. Fortified by a plentiful supply of coffee, we looked south and east for signs of the weather clearing. The mountains snuggled into the clouds around them, whilst the appearance of the sun ahead brought a cheer from the anglers on the deck. Dan Lee, a retired soldier from the "Lower 48" joined us outside, saying he was up for the halibut and salmon fishing.

After nearly three hours steaming, Abi and AJ, our crew, appeared in their waterproofs and attached the 2lb weights to the rigs before separating the thawing herrings and attaching decapitated bodies to the circle hooks. Next job for the crew was to chop up yesterday's left over and rather ripe bait as chum which was inserted into a net to be attached to the anchor chain. I asked Skipper Carrie if the chum made a difference to the catch. Her honest reply was, "I don't know, but it can't do any harm." Carrie then handed each angler their two halibut tags as each angler has a limit of two halibut per day and the skippers rigorously enforce this to avoid severe penalties from the authorities.



The boat slowed and the anchor was dropped by AJ. As we waited for *Snow Bird* to settle, Abi went through a briefing on how to use the rods and reels loaded with heavy braid. The rods were Shakespeare Stand Up rods rated at 50-130lbs. The reels were large Penns without a level wind. The basic principle was to drop to the bottom, a tad under 200', and then make 5 turns of the reel handle to lift the bait up so that it was off the bottom and could be easily seen by the upward looking halibut on the sea bed. Her instructions were not to strike at the first bite as we were

using circle hooks and a strike would pull the bait and hook out of the fish's mouth. At the second rattle of the rod tip we were to wind in and if the fish was hooked to shout "Fish On!" Then pump it towards the surface, as soon as we saw the fish coming up from the depths we were to shout "Colours!" One of the crew would then come to our assistance, but we were asked to be patient as with a dozen anglers they were expecting to be kept busy.

The tide was still ripping out from the Sound and soon we had three sets of lines tangled. While Carrie and Abi sorted out the tangles, AJ weighed anchor and we went inshore in the lee of an island. Baits were refreshed, the anchor deployed and once *Snow Bird* had settled, lines dropped. Rozy and I fished on the bows as *Snow Bird* has deck all around the wheelhouse and cabin. After 10 minutes I felt a familiar rattle on the rod, waited and then wound into the fish. Not monstrous but a good size. "Fish On!" I shouted and then I thought I had lost it.



There was no weight on the line. "Keep winding!" Abi instructed. Suddenly the fish kicked and the rod tip hooped over and soon I could shout "Colours!" A nice fish, just under 20lbs, was swung on board by Abi, the first of my two tags inserted through the gills as the fish was despatched with the "Seward Slugger" and bled before being put in the fish box. At the stern of the boat a couple of rock fish were caught.

Carrie and Abi had a short radio contact with a fellow boat, and as the action was too slow for the crew, we headed back out to more open water as the tide eased. The anchor was dropped, *Snow Bird* settled on her anchor and we dropped lines with fresh baits. Soon shouts of "Fish On!" were ringing out around the boat, followed by "Colours!" The crew were now kept busy as everybody started reeling in the "Chickens." Interspersed between the halibut were quillback and a yelloweye rock fish (aka red snapper). Paige and Briton took turns helping their father, Rob wind up halibut to reach their quota.

The skies darkened and we were glad of the waterproofs we had paid extra baggage on. Carrie started to move anglers around the boat as they reached their quota of just two halibut. We released several hoping for a larger turkey, and were assured that they returned to the depths with no problem. The anglers who had not reached their quota were moved to the bows, and those in the stern were switched to light rods and fixed spool reels with "Pink Willies" fishing for salmon.

### **A Bonus Fish**

Dan was on the port bow and hooked into a decent fish that fought harder than previous fish.



Carrie was on his shoulder and as colours showed she shouted for the gaff. This was no halibut but a prized ling cod that was well above 36" which is minimum size. AJ was busy at the stern, so Abi leapt forward and deftly brought the fish on board with the gaff as Dan wished to keep it. Only fish that are to be kept can be legally gaffed.

I fished hard on the bottom hoping for a rockfish or ling cod of my own, but to no avail, the halibut always got to my bait first. I was transferred to the lighter salmon tackle and although fish were showing 70' down on the sounder I could not make contact. Rob and his children managed a couple of salmon before Carrie said it was time for "Lines Up!" She had hoped to move us to another mark for the salmon, but due to the abortive first mark we had run out of time, so it was stow our gear, weigh anchor and start the three hour trip back to port.

### **Counting the Chickens**

While Abi and AJ cleaned and stowed the tackle and washed down the other equipment and the deck, I took the opportunity to sit in the wheel house with Carrie to discuss the state of Alaskan fish stocks. Carrie has been a skipper for 22 years, and is now employed by the US Military at Seward Resort from May to September. Although she really enjoys skippering, the mass of paperwork that is now required to be completed, and the updating of qualifications is becoming tiresome. There is a possibility that next year the halibut limit may be reduced to just one per day per angler, which Carrie thinks will kill the charter business. I asked if she thought this was necessary to maintain stocks. Reluctantly she admitted "Maybe."

I was amazed that during our nine hours at sea, we had seen only one commercial inshore fishing boat. Carrie informed me that the commercial fleet do not fish inshore, but in the much deeper waters out at sea.

Each day the crew have to complete a record for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, listing each angler, their licence number if over 16, and whether an Alaskan resident or not. The catch of each angler must then be recorded and whether the fish were "Kept" or "Released" for each species. The records are signed by the skipper and mailed off to be scanned and then the data is analysed by the ADFG.

We had seen a researcher from the Department weighing the fish brought back by the other charter boats a couple of days earlier. The biggest fish that day was a halibut just less than 300lbs. Once the fish had been filleted at the public filleting stations, he then collected the tagged frames to measure the length of each fish and to study the otoliths (small bones from the 'ear' of the fish) to determine their ages.



Once in port, we were taken by shuttle back to the Fish Houses at the Military Resort and our fish followed by truck. Carrie and AJ squared *Snow Bird*, while Abi helped sort our catch. Fish House 1 is set up with individual filleting stations, cutting boards, knives, water hoses and waste chutes. Fish House 2 is for packing and vacuum sealing your fillets. Soon nearly 50 anglers were sorting and preparing their fish. Abi offered to demonstrate how to fillet, or even to prepare our fish pointing out "I am now off the clock and drink IPA." One of the delicacies of the halibut is the cheek, so these were packaged separately before the fillets were put in vacuum bags and taken to Fish House 2 where we vacuum sealed them before logging them into the freezer

room. Anglers could choose to take their catch with them, as we did the next day, or use FedEx to send it home.

## Managing Sport Fishing in Alaska

Governor Sean Parnell in an open letter to anglers says, "Fishing is an integral part of the Alaskan lifestyle and experience. Purchasing a sport fishing licence is an investment that provides big rewards for you and Alaska. Every dollar spent on an Alaskan sport fishing licence or king salmon stamp supports fisheries, conservation, management, and research across the state. Not only that, sport fishing contributes \$1.4 billion to Alaska's economy each year."

Sport Fishing is defined as "the taking or attempting to take for personal use, and not for sale or barter, any freshwater, marine or anadromous fish by hook and line attached to a pole or rod which is held by the hand or closely attended."

Anglers are also constrained by law to limit the fish they catch to what they need for personal use, as: "The intentional waste or destruction of any sport caught fish is prohibited." The skippers ensure that once an angler's limit is reached, they are switched to a different style of fishing and ensure that anglers only retain what they want for their personal use so there are no fish left over at the end of the trip for the skipper to dispose of.





Anglers can keep one yelloweye and one quillback each per day and three silvers.

Lingcod season opens July 1 each summer (and assumed open for the rest of the year) and one can retain 1 fish per day which must be a minimum of 35 inches. It is closed before July 1 because the female lingcod lays her eggs and the male guards the eggs, and during this time the male will dart at anything and are too easy to catch.

Licences are required for all sport fishing, salt and fresh water. Alaskan residents pay \$24 per annum; visitors pay a lot more: 1 day is \$20, 3 days are \$35, 7 days \$55, 14 days \$80 and 12 calendar months \$145. In addition king salmon tags are necessary and there is an annual limit of 5 king salmon per angler.

### **Travel**

We flew with American Airlines, along haul from Manchester to Chicago, then to Seattle and finally by Alaskan Airlines to Anchorage. On the last flight, Anne, a salmon angler flying

on to Bristol Bay informed us that there is a direct flight of just 9 hours from Frankfurt over the North Pole to Anchorage which sounds a much better bet.

### **Alaska Facts**

Alaska describes itself as "The Last Frontier" and it is huge, 2½ times bigger than Texas, which they love to rub in to Texan visitors and 1/5 of the total land area of the USA. The population is estimated at about 700,000. There are only 11 primary highways, and most of the wilderness is only accessible by plane.



The climate varies enormously, South-eastern Alaska containing the capital Juneau (accessible only by sea or air) has warm winters and cool summers. The Interior (Fairbanks) is an arctic desert with less than 12" of precipitation, summer temperatures can reach 90°F and drop to -60°F in winter. The famous Iditarod sled race starts in Anchorage on the first Saturday in March.

## Lemon-Garlic Broiled Halibut Fillets

### Serves 4.

Prepare four halibut fillets for the broiler a few hours ahead of time for an easy fuss-free dinner.

### Ingredients:

- 4 halibut fillets, about 6 to 8 ounces each
- salt and pepper
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 3 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1/2 teaspoon dried leaf basil
- 1 tablespoon fresh chopped parsley
- lemon slices
- parsley leaves

### Preparation:

Place halibut fillets skin side down on greased baking pan or greased rack of broiler pan. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.

In a small saucepan, combine butter, garlic, and herbs. Heat over low heat until butter is melted and garlic is softened, about 1 to 2 minutes. Spoon butter mixture over each fillet. If making ahead, cover the pan and refrigerate for 2 to 4 hours, or until ready to cook.

Heat broiler. Broil halibut for about 10 minutes, or until it flakes easily when tested with a fork. Garnish with parsley leaves and lemon slices, if desired.

