

Salmon's MOOCHING LEGACY

Catch huge Chinooks the old-fashioned way

The venerable and sturdy Grumman Goose floatplane trundles leisurely over a channel studded with emerald islands as we journey toward our destination, Legacy Lodge.

Legacy Lodge is anchored deep within British Columbia's Rivers Inlet in a hidden hobbit cove hard against an impenetrable forest. Frodo would be very much at home here.

The eye candy provided by a flight across the Inland Passage from Vancouver Island's northeastern tip to an untamed spot on the mainland coast about 300 miles north of Vancouver is enough for some. A nature lover could exist on the stunning panoramas alone. But I think they're missing the main point of a visit to this magnificent, remote part of the world.

Salmon

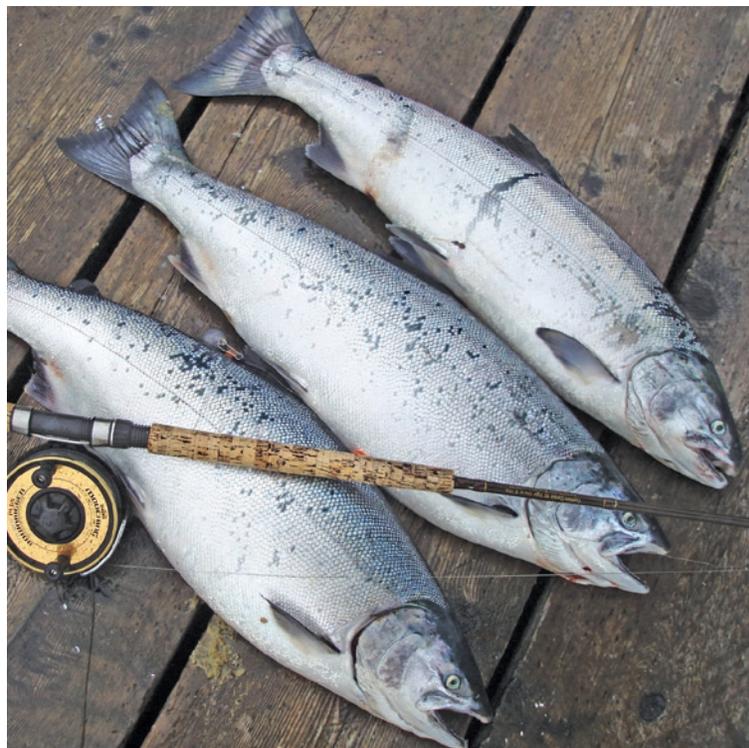
Scenery and prolific wildlife are integral to the total experience of a visit to Rivers Inlet and Legacy Lodge, but they are side dishes to the main dish – fishing for some of the biggest coho and Chinook (or spring salmon, as they are called in British Columbia) on the planet.

Rivers Inlet sits at the convergence of three rivers. Salmon headed to the Kilbella and Chuckwalla

rivers start to arrive in early June, and catches build toward the end of the month. That's when the Wannock River strain makes its first showing. Toward the end of July, a second run of Chinook surges toward the Wannock and peaks in mid-August. Coho show from July to September, growing progressively larger throughout the summer. The largest Chinook ever recorded, 126 pounds, was reportedly caught in a tribal net in Rivers Inlet waters, and every year these waters yield more salmon weighing in excess of 50 pounds than anywhere else in British Columbia. The coho grow bigger here, too. Many reach 20 pounds or more as numbers peak in August. For a change of pace, anglers can tuck into a cove and work the bottom for tasty halibut, yelloweye rockfish and lingcod.

The roar of the engines subsides and is replaced by silence as the Grumman Goose slides the last few feet to the Legacy Lodge dock, where co-owner and operator, Mick Heath and general manager Johanna Tormata wait to greet the customers. Some of the anglers are new acquaintances.

Other arrivals have been to Legacy Lodge multiple times, but no distinctions are made as we are greeted, all of us, like the old friends we are, or soon will be, with hugs and handshakes all around.



A brace of silver salmon caught motor mooching graces the dock at Legacy Lodge. The key to the bite is the proper rigging of the cut plug herring and Legacy Lodge guide Paul Cain, left, was on the water every day to make sure clients, who are otherwise on their own when it comes to the actual fishing, are geared up right and in the best areas to fish.

The place, the people, the experience, do that to you. Ultimately it is about the fishing, but it is also about much more. It's the realization of Heath's long held vision, the culmination of a 20-year quest that has indeed become his Legacy. The setting, the staff, the food, the ambiance create – dare I say – a romantic feel to the place, a term not normally used when talking about a fishing lodge.

While the hardest of hardcore fishermen are drawn to Legacy Lodge year after year – for the fishing of course – so are couples, fathers and sons, and fathers and daughters. They also come for the fishing, but more for "quality time." While the term is a cliché, the need is real.

It was fun watching one particular "seasoned" father/young adult daughter duo banter over dinner about the day's events on the water. She had never fished for salmon before and never fished much at all except for panfish as a young girl. Yet, by the big smile on her face each evening as their boat eased into the dock, it was clear who had caught the biggest and most salmon. Dad? He would mildly feign chagrin over the student defeating the "mentor," but clearly was a proud papa.

Could the pride of accomplishment, the satisfaction, possibly have been as great had the success been accomplished the way fishing is conducted at most lodges – with a guide running the boat, finding the spots and setting up the fishing rigs, typically heavy duty bait casting outfits? And, often, even hooking the fish and handing

No. At Legacy Lodge, a major part of the satisfaction comes from the clients doing all those things themselves. You are in control of your destiny, though not left totally to your own devices. The freedom you are given comes with first class equipment, tutoring on safety and techniques, and ongoing support on the water.

Paul Cain and Gordon Parks' sole duties during our days on the water are to mother Legacy's little brood of "ducklings." They go from boat to boat and answer questions such as, is my herring spinning right? Am I going too fast? Too slow? Too shallow? Too deep?

And, rarely, "Help, I'm lost!"

You might be the only boat in sight – this is, after all, BIG water, but you are only a VHF radio call away. Heath and right hand man Ryan McLaren are also on the water every day.

After we get settled in our rooms, comfy and sheathed in the rustic woods hewn from the forest that envelops us, we return to the dock for an orientation session and tutoring in the fine art of traditional motor mooching with cut plug herring.

It's an art worth learning, and one that will be practiced on 17 1/2 -foot Sea Scouts assigned to each pair of anglers. These are custom-built center consoles equipped with marine radios, fish finders, maps, and emergency equipment.

The fishing technique practiced at Legacy Lodge melds the traditional with the contemporary, and the technique of motor mooching with cut plug herring harkens back to the earliest days of sportfishing for salmon in the salt. It is as deadly productive, and far more fun, as any outing with downriggers.

While motor mooching with cut plug herring is conceptually simple, this aphorism by famed architect Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe was never more apropos: "The devil is in the details."

I've trolled hoochies on downriggers and on three-pound quick-release drop



Bill Heath holds a real hog of a silver. The fish is pushing 20 pounds and several in that size class were caught during the week the author visited Legacy Lodge. He might have even had one on the line for a while.

weights, drifted anchovy chunks on banana weights, back-trolled sardine-wrapped Kwikfish, backbounced and boondoggled roe, and even caught kings in brackish tide water on a 10-weight fly rod with lies I've tied myself. But none of my salmon fishing experiences match the nuances of motor mooching for salmon with cut plug herring.

The rods we are using are 10 1/2-foot fly type rods, whippy in the tip, but strongly backboned. The reels are essentially oversized single action, double-handled fly reels. The rods are equivalent roughly to a nine-weight rod. Want to go even sportier? Just ask, and Heath is happy to fix you up with a seven-weight rod. The prospect of tangling with, and landing, a 50-pound spring on the lighter gear (it's been done), reminds me of the famous Clint Eastwood line, "Do you feel lucky – well, do ya?"

The reels have adjustable drags, but we are taught that it is best if we rely on applying the pressure on the edge of the revolving spool (palming it) rather than depending totally on the drag. It's a lesson easy to forget, however, and he inexperienced among us, and even the supposedly experienced – me – soon find out why they are dubbed "knucklebusters."

Learning the basics of rigging the hooks on a cut plug herring is only part of the process, and not even the first part. You first have to determine on what angle to make the cut. Cut it on a somewhat blunt angle down and across, and the

herring will make the big, lazy twirls that are preferred by Chinook. Targeting coho? Make a more acutely angled cut, up to 45 degrees across and down, and center the insertion of the front hook in the center of meat at the top of the cut to get the tighter spin they prefer. The more streamlined shape also stands up better to the higher trolling speeds used for coho.

That's only the first lesson. There's more, lots more, to learn. How far should the baits be dropped back behind the boat? The fish might be shallow, or they might be deep. We caught several coho as the herring skittered at the surface in our wake, while 16 to 20 pulls might be necessary later on, especially when the sun is shining as brightly as it did much of the time we were there. Speeding up and slowing down, occasionally taking the engine out of gear, and making big zigzags, are also effective tactics.

Deciding where to go each day also presents challenges, and every morning would begin with a strategy session to decide what to target and where to fish. The choices are many and scattered over miles of watery real estate. Some of the spots, like the Wall, are renowned among salmon fishermen and you are likely to see other boats since they are frequented by boats from the few other lodges.

But there is no need to be in the sight of boats other than those from the Legacy Lodge fleet, because Heath and his team have found plenty of their own salmon mother lodes. The folks at Legacy have even come up with their own code names to use to call us into hot bites over the radio.

Once the cut plug herring is rigged with twin barbless hooks properly inserted, it's dropped back the chosen distance and the rod is placed in the rod holder. Strikes are handled differently depending on the fish. A

light tap-tap indicates a spring – funny how a fish so big can often be so tentative. Grab the rod too soon and the fish is gone. You have to wait for a full takedown. The strike of a silver is anything but tentative, though. The rod instantly goes from a steady bend to lurching like a demented wizard's wand.

You'd think that with such a vicious strike, the fish would have solidly hooked itself, but it's vital to reel down to the fish as you simultaneously take the rod out of the rod holder so as not to put any slack in the line. Then it's important to do a solid hook set, or two, or three.

And, this is where I went wrong on my first couple of fish. I had plenty of bend in the rod and lots of pressure – or so I thought. Wrong! First, the rod is longer than any other rod I am used to using, so even light pressure on the fish magnifies to a substantial load at the angler's hands. (That's why tuna fishermen use short rods.)

A test with a scale at the dock proved how little force is applied at the hook end. Also, the banana weights, even as light as two ounces, put a hinge in the line, and a good part of the initial rod sweep goes to straightening out the line, with little pressure actually applied to the fish.

To shorten a long story, that's why I got schooled by my first coho of the trip. That first big coho made its trademark surface runs, interspersed an impressive display of aerobatics, and eventually let me get it close enough to the boat for a good look as it made another Olympic-quality leap. Anyway, just as I thought maybe I had the battle under control, the hook came out and I was left only with the memory (added to an ever-growing list) of the big one that got away.

I soon had another chance to get it right, and many more during my stay. We had the choice of staying out on the water all day, and having a hot lunch, including thermoses of wonderful soup, brought to us. Or, we could take a break and go in.

I always stayed out.

The week I was there in mid-August we tended to tailor our efforts toward the coho salmon, which are less finicky than the Chinooks (or springs). In fact, the springs were late. Naturally they showed up the following week. I was quite happy to be focusing on coho salmon. They would sometimes slash at the wake-riding stern bait like a crazed marlin, and then repeatedly rocket out of the water like a Polaris missile. And, they were big, many pushing 20 pounds. We'd look for birds (taking



IF YOU GO

LEGACY LODGE

How to get there: Getting to Legacy Lodge is a good part of the fun. You may have to spend a night coming and going in beautiful Vancouver in order to dovetail with the charter round-trip flights to and from Legacy Lodge. The first leg is by turbo-prop to Port Hardy on the northern tip of Vancouver Island. From there, you hop a floatplane for a scenic 40-minute ride.

What to bring: Top notch foul weather gear is provided, including rubber boots. It's a good idea to bring your own good lightweight rain gear for before and after fishing excursions. Temperatures can range from near freezing to well into the 70's so bring layered clothing, preferably modern wicking fibers other than cotton.

Although rain is a possibility at any time, so is sunburn on unprotected skin. So bring, and wear, a wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen. Although bugs aren't bad from August on, it's still a good idea to bring along insect repellent. Fishing gear: Although some anglers might be tempted to bring their favorite salmon fishing gear from home, it won't match up in fun and effectiveness with traditional Rivers Inlet salmon fishing tackle. Legacy also provides all the terminal gear.

Contact information: To find out more about Rivers Inlet and Legacy Lodge, call (877) 347-4534, and check out Legacy Lodge's website at www.legacylodge.com.



along a pair of binoculars is good idea), bait balls on the fish finders, as well as tide rips and current seams.

I didn't spend much time fishing for bottom species, but I hooked what would have been the biggest halibut of my life. First, it was a real struggle to get it to move even a little bit off the bottom. Then, it would toy with me, allowing me to gain several feet of line, before easily stripping line off the hellishly heavy set drag and plopping itself back onto the bottom. This unseen beast toyed with me this way several times with no indication whatsoever that it was tiring in the least. I know I was

After 10 minutes and several trips back to the bottom, it got bored with the game, and, suddenly, was gone.

That's how the days passed: fishing for, losing and catching the biggest coho I have ever laid eyes on, while surrounded by beautiful and always changing panoramas and by humpback whales that breached, tail-slapped, eye-hopped, and, one day, even rubbed against Heath's boat.

We returned to the dock each evening to weigh the fish, mark them down on the board, take pictures, and then turn them over for processing (fillet, vacuum-pack, flash freeze, and box for the trip home). Great appetizers and drinks waited in the beautifully appointed, rustic dining room/lounge. Dinners were a blend of the gourmet and hearty prepared by Executive Chef Gianni Picchi. Afterward we'd sit at the bar and tell tall tales until late in the night to drinks prepared by mixmaster, Karen Drgon. Night after night, the time for rest until our next bout with the salmon of Rivers Inlet ends up being far too short.

But it's not right to keep the giant salmon of Rivers Inlet waiting. Besides, there will be time enough to sleep when I get home – and dream of returning to Legacy Lodge.

The Legacy Lodge's fleet of custom Sea Scouts heads out in search of another great day of fishing in the waters of British Columbia's Rivers Inlet. Mick Heath, co-owner of the Lodge, looks on as brother Bill hoists another nice silver aboard for their dad, Rol. MaryAnn Simpson Von Stalk of Victoria and her niece Claire Liesbeth of England caught many silvers like this.

