

Offshore Fishing from Vancouver

By Brad Fenson

Walking to the main wharf in Port Renfrew my senses were overwhelmed by the picturesque environment. Rugged mountains towered over the inlet with mature fir and cedar trees stretching skyward and providing an odour that was pleasing in the early morning dawn. The sea air wafted towards us with the pungent smell of kelp and shellfish that triggered vivid memories of fishing the Pacific. The excitement was building.

Our Captain, John Wells, of Hind Sight Fishing Charters, met us at the boat. John's rugged frame, wool sweater and weathered hands said a lot about the man. His face was dark from days of exposure to sea air and the coastal sun beating down

on him. My brother, Tim, and I were welcomed aboard and little time was wasted



Captain John Wells knows the seas well and got us to the hotspots quickly.

before departing for the open seas.

The sturdy fibreglass boat was soon racing over the calm water and John instruct-

ed us to settle into a comfortable seat and enjoy a coffee. We would be traveling about 25-miles offshore to the Swiftsure Bank, a well-known hotspot for salmon and bottom fish.

It was a beautiful June day, with clear blue skies and calm water. Breaking around the rocky outcrops of the protected inlet, the waters stretched to the horizon. The snow-capped Olympic Mountains in Washington State towered across the Strait of Juan de Fuca in a postcard-like setting. A pod of gray whales traveled north, breaching on a regular basis. Traveling up the west coast of Vancouver Island, we passed an array of beaches, waterfalls and rugged, rocky shoreline. Killer whales were hunting the productive strait and



Tim Fenson leaning into a bottom fish jigged with a spreader bar and spoon

Island

John cut the engines back to allow us to take pictures when he spotted a 400-pound sunfish basking on the surface. The trip was worth the journey offshore just to see the beauty of the West Coast.

Our big boat didn't take long to arrive at the productive fishing banks and, when the GPS started beeping, John had the stubby, solid fibreglass rods in our hands without delay. The braided line was attached to a swivel and spreader bar with a large weight to get us to the bottom fast. The Swiftsure Bank erupts from the depths of the Pacific to less than 100 feet of water in several spots. The productive flats are a fisherman's dream, teeming with halibut, lingcod, rockfish and salmon.

We were using lightweight spoons with

no bait to attract our quarry. I questioned John about not using bait and he explained that it simply wasn't needed, and that we would catch the fish we were after without having to deal with sharks and other undesirable species. I flipped the lever on the level-wind reel and watch my spoon disappear into the depths.

When the weight hit the bottom I tightened up on the line and immediately had a strike.

WHEN TO PLAN YOUR TRIP

Halibut fishing is good all year but the season is closed in January. For a multi-species trip, anglers should consider timing their trip to coincide with the best dates to take advantage of the superb salmon fishing. According to John, June 4 until September 15th is typically the best time for Tyee (chinook over 30 pounds) but this may fluctuate by as much as two weeks. Winter

chinooks (Kings) are excellent from November 6th until March 30th. Coho or silvers are available throughout most of the year but are best during

the last few months before heading up river when the fish will range from 6 to 20-pounds. The larger Coho show up around September and last until late November.



FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

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PORT RENFREW ACTIVITIES

Port Renfrew is located on the west shore of southern Vancouver Island, British Columbia, just a two-hour drive from Victoria. Along with the saltwater fishing, anglers can also fish for steelhead, coastal cutthroat trout and rainbow trout in the area. For a different kind of fishing, visitors can try their hand at crabbing or smelting.

The community boasts many other outdoor adventure opportunities that could be taken in with a fishing adventure. Port Renfrew is the starting point for the famous West Coast Trail, where hiking and mountain biking can be planned for the day or an entire week.

Watching wildlife is popular in the region and there are an abundance of sea and land birds along with elk, deer, cougars and black bears. Eco-tours to see Orcas (killer whales), gray whales, and humpback whales, as well as seals, porpoises and sea lions are also available in the area.

The ever-popular Botanical Beach offers world-renowned tidal pools full of intricate marine life, and is quickly becoming a favoured location as a storm-watching viewpoint. The mouth of the San Juan River is close by and provides angling, canoeing and exploring along the Juan De Fuca Marine Trail.



When traveling through Victoria, avid anglers will want to check out Island Outfitters, the local tackle and sporting goods store. They have angling reports and recommendations for most of the region and offer a superb array of fishing equipment for salt and fresh water. They also offer charters right from the inner harbour in Victoria.

I set the hook with both arms, reeled down quickly, then set the hook again. The rod bounced up and down, straining my muscles from my thumbs right up through my neck.

With a sheepish grin, John exclaimed, "Looks like a hali."

I was inching the fish towards the surface when Tim reeled on his rod to set the hooks on another fish. My brother, Tim, has been fighting cancer for over 13-years and has not been able to get out and enjoy the great outdoors as much as he would like. This was a special trip for him, as it was his first saltwater adventure, and it was shaping up to be a real winner.



The author's brother, Tim, poses with his first halibut taken on the trip.



The over-sized cooler was used to safely store some of the fish kept on the trip.

Several minutes passed by before I caught a glimpse of the mottled green skin of a good-sized halibut. John was ready with the gaff and gave us instructions on how to help with the fish so that nobody got hurt. These huge, flat fish are extremely

powerful and can create chaos if simply dumped into the boat. I held the over-sized cooler lid open while John flipped the halibut in. I slammed the lid shut and immediately the cooler started bouncing around on the floor like a giant Mexican jumping bean. John then headed for Tim's side of the boat where he helped land a gorgeous red snapper. The first ten minutes had simply been incredible. We could hardly wait to see what the rest of the day would bring.

I dropped my line back in the water and found bottom again at 120 feet. Keeping my spoon close to the bottom, I lifted the rod and let the weight fall until I felt it hit bottom. The vibrations and action help to attract fish in the dark, deep water.

The tide worked the spoon in a continual fluttering motion and it wasn't long until there was a solid tug on the end of the line. I set the hook hard but there wasn't much give in the line. The violent headshakes surged powerfully through my stubby fishing rod. I simply hung on and waited for the thrashing to stop. This was a bigger halibut that caused the muscles in my arms to start burning. I love fishing the bottom; you never know what is going to come to the surface and the action is always steady.

The halibut came into view, holding flat in the water, parallel to the surface. The strength of these bottom dwelling predators is incredible. When it finally broke the surface close to the boat, John gave instructions to flip open the cooler lid and I was finally able to take the strain off my arms.

We did several slow drifts with the tide to stay over productive areas of the bank.

Tim and I fought fish for most of the day, often having double-headers.

We landed some terrific halibut up to 40-pounds along with red snapper, lingcod, tiger rockfish, and an assortment of other rockfish that provided a spectacle of colours, shapes and spiny features.

John knows the Swiftsure Banks well and he has most of the productive, fish holding areas logged into his GPS. We tried a variety of depths where flats or shelves were present. The Bank is an ideal feeding area for the bottom dwelling fish

► For more information on activities or accommodations in Port Renfrew contact: Soule Creek Lodge
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of the Pacific. The relentless tides provide a continuous food source and the toothy creatures of the depths seldom pass up an

Tiger rockfish and red snapper are species commonly caught on the Swiftsure Bank.



easy meal. We fished the Bank for most of the day before deciding to pack in the jiggling gear and clamp the downriggers to the gunnels. With the abundance of feed in the open water, schools of actively feeding salmon work the deepwater areas around the Bank, so we decided to troll back towards Port Renfrew before having to bring an end to our fishing adventure.

The sonar unit showed lots of activity in the deep water and the long trolling rods were put to use with the same spoons we had used for jiggling. We placed the rods in the holders on the downriggers and sat back to soak up some sun and reminisce about the awesome bottom fishing we had experienced, however, there wasn't much time for nostalgia.

I heard the line release from the rigger with a resounding "pop". Tim jumped for the rod and made sure the hook was set. The line peeled off the reel and a big grin emerged on Tim's face.

I asked, "What do you think of the fishing on the salt?"

Tim's excited laugh was the only answer I needed.

After a solid battle, the chrome, 17-pound chinook was carefully guided into the landing net. We rushed to get the line back in the water. The chinooks were

down deep while the coho salmon were working the surface in a feeding frenzy. It was a good thing that John kept the boat headed for port or we may have never got off the water. The salmon kept us busy for more than an hour before John gave us the signal that it was time to head for the inlet.

I have fished the West Coast on many



Tim Fenson and Captain John Wells with a 17-pound chinook.

occasions but I will always fondly remember the Swiftsure Bank. It is simply incredible. Tim had a tremendous day of firsts, catching at least ten different species of fish he had never experienced before. It was a real thrill being able to get him out on the open seas and John made sure that both of us were comfortable and well taken care of.

The trip back took longer than expected as we stopped to take pictures of anglers

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Author Brad Fenson holds up a couple of Dungeness crabs.



fighting big Tyee-class chinook along the shoreline. John does offer strictly salmon charters, but there was no way I would have passed an opportunity to bottom fish the Swiftsure Bank. We cruised back towards the protected port and John insisted we make one more stop. Our Captain

in sunscreen before leaving. We cleaned the few fish that we had kept and thanked our skipper for an outstanding day on the Pacific.

We drove our tired bodies back to the comforts of our cedar guesthouse at the Soule Creek Lodge, a local Bed and Breakfast. The lodge was built on the San Juan Ridge, providing a view of the Strait of Juan de Fuca from one side, and the protected inlet housing Port Renfrew on the other. The brothers that own the B & B are both internationally trained chefs and they treated us to a dinner that was fit for royalty. Standing on the

TOURISM CONTACTS

There is so much to see and do on Vancouver Island and in Victoria that anyone planning a visit to the region should plan for extra days. To check out activities, features and attractions for southern Vancouver Island visit any of the following web sites:

- Tourism British Columbia: www.HelloBC.com
- Tourism Victoria: www.tourismvictoria.com
- Tourism Association of Vancouver Island: www.islands.bc.ca
- Island Outfitters: www.fishingvictoria.com

had several crab traps set close to town and he offered us the chance to pull them and treat ourselves to some Dungeness crabs - if there were any in the cages. I think questioning whether there were any crabs was John's way of teasing us at the end of the day. The traps had enough legal-sized crabs to provide us with a feast and another great experience to round out the day.

By the time we tied up at the wharf, it seemed like we had put in a very full day. It wasn't hard to tell how John developed his rugged outdoor appearance. I was awfully glad that I had smothered myself

deck to let our dinner settle, we enjoyed the show as two black bears frolicked on a hill. We watched them until the sun set on our great day on the West Coast. 🐾

