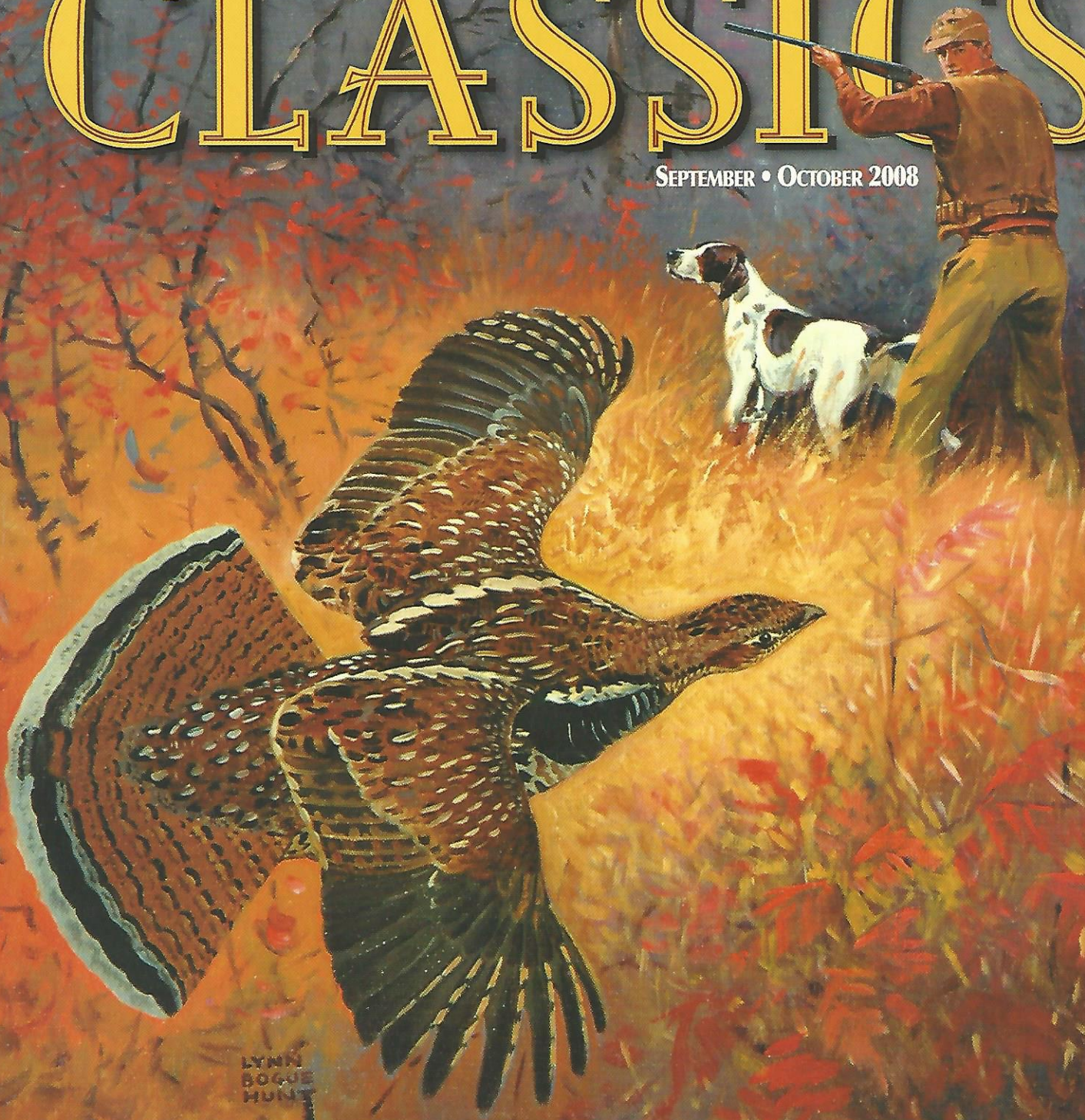


SPORTING CLASSICS

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The Fabled Salmon of Haidi Gwaii

by John Ross

You won't find a better time and place than summer on Langara Island to fly fish for salmon just as these spirited fish are poised to leave the salt and head up the streams of their birth.

Anglers come to Langara Island Lodge to catch salmon. No one returns without a box of fillets. Unless, that is, he chooses not to fish, but to lounge in the hot tub on the deck, to doze beneath curtains fluttered by an incessant yet gentle southwest breeze and to eat three scrumptious meals finely crafted by its chef-of-a-decade, Michel Bertholet, who learned his trade serving Charlie Chaplin at Les Trois Couronne, the five-star hotel in Lucerne where the great comedian dined often in the years before his death.

Roughly 100 miles off the coast of British Columbia, Langara is the northernmost of the Queen Charlotte Islands. It's a headland of conglomerate rock that butts hard into the Alaska current. Welling

south from the Gulf of Alaska, the current streams around the island, carrying with it stocks of chinook and coho, sockeye and pink salmon.

From mid-May into the shank of September, the numbers of salmon were and are prodigious, even in lean years. The Haidi, the native people there, believe the mythical Raven nested on Langara and caused people to be brought forth from the sea. A fable to be sure, but no one can doubt that the sea sustained the Haidi on their island home, or Gwaii.

Most of Langara's guests, like Brad and Delene Brown of Pasco, Washington, have been coming for years. It's a pleasurable vacation, a gourmand's getaway, and a chance to stock the freezer with salmon that you know is utterly and absolutely fresh. Salmon that's wild and fresh, at least in the environs of Washington, D. C., where I live, is not easily obtained,



ISLAND LODGE

protestations of my grocer to the contrary.

Most supermarket salmon is pen-raised. We know the horror stories of wild stocks that no longer spawn because they've been interbred with aquacultured fish. Equally repulsive is the plague of sea lice that infests young wild salmon that swim too near the pens. The concentration of thousands of salmon in but a few acres breeds disease. Salmon, like some anglers, were not meant to live in confined spaces. Though my palate yearns for salmon basted with ginger and lemon and grilled over mesquite, I refuse to buy it or order it in a restaurant because I am suspicious of its origins.

The most effective way to get your own salmon in Lanagara's waters is to fish plugg'd herring. Now primarily a fisher of flies, fishing with bait lies deep in my past. Like most of my peers, I began my piscatorial pursuits with a glob of worms carried in an empty can from Prince Albert tobacco, which my father occasionally smoked in his pipe. I graduated to Kounty Kist corn in its green can, and thence to glaring red Balls of Fire salmon eggs.

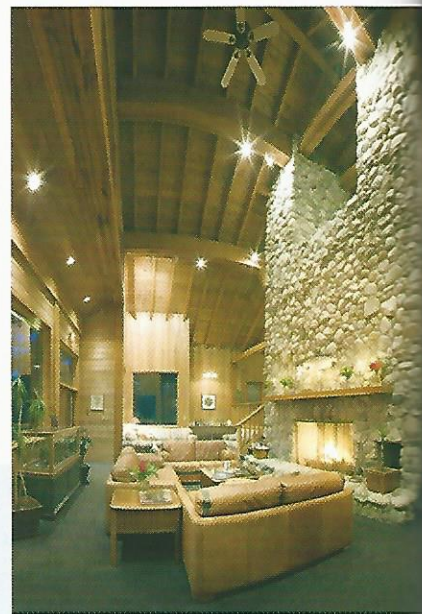
The ability to cover more water and use movement and flash to provoke a strike led me into the world of ultra-light spinning and ultimately to flies. I've never given fishing with bait the slightest backward glance. On my trip to Langara I would learn the arrogance of my ways.

The daily fishing drill at the lodge is simple and straightforward. Rise as the horizon turns the color of old tin. Grab yogurt, fresh fruit, a croissant and coffee from the buffet in the great room. Downstairs in the dry room, climb into your bright red survival suit provided

by the lodge. Catch the tram for the near vertical 100-yard descent to the dock. Meet your guide on his 25-foot center console boat, settle onto the deeply padded bench seat, motor out of the sheltered cove into Parry Passage, then turn north toward the lighthouse or south toward the boulders along Graham Island. Your choice depends on the tide.

A 10- to 20-minute ride takes you to where you will start fishing, generally off one of the points – Coho, Andrews, McPherson – that separate cusps carved in the island. Upon arrival, your guide will idle the twin Yamahas, then fetch a brined herring and slice away its head with a deft draw of his knife. The cut begins just behind the gill plate and is angled just so. The idea is to create a surface that will cause the bait to spin in the current. With a rotating flick of the knife, he'll eviscerate the herring.

Next he implants two 1/0 hooks in the baitfish. The lower hook is pushed down into the belly cavity, drawn out through the side so that the eye of the hook remains in the herring's flank, and the stiletto sharp point is embedded in the tail. The point of the upper hook is buried in the chest cavity on the side opposite the hook in the tail. This balances the bait and



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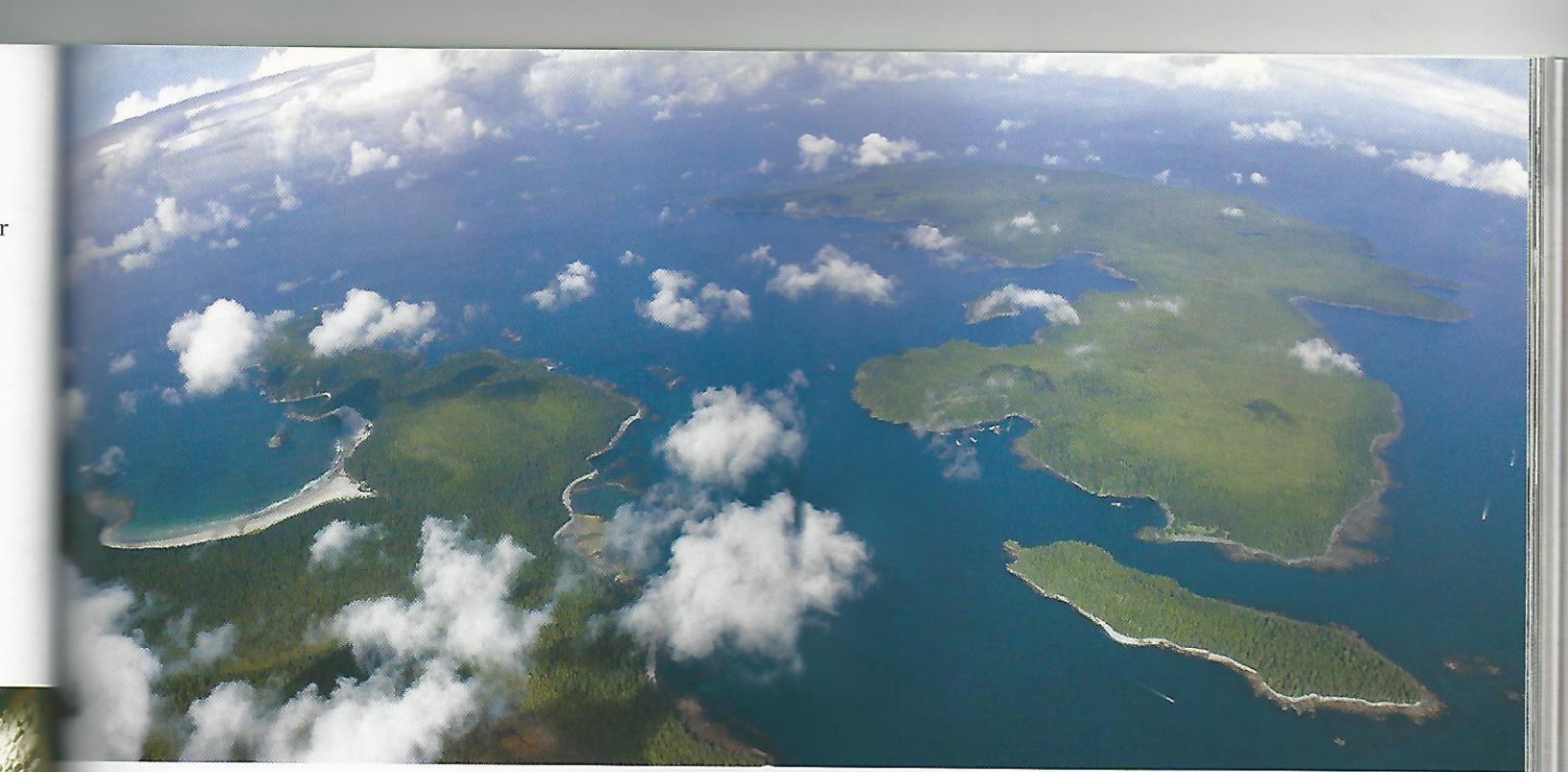
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Langara (just right of center) is the northernmost island in the Queen Charlottes. Opposite: With a small fish in tow, a bald eagle lifts off the water near Langara Rock, which is home to a large colony of Steller's sea lions. Centerpiece of the 12,000-square-foot lodge is this beautiful fireplace built of river rocks.

allows it to spin evenly. The hooks are barbless so they can be easily removed from fish that are to be released.

While preparing the bait is as malodorous as it is messy, the speed with which a good guide can fix a bait to flash in the water with the efficiency of a six-inch silver spoon is an art in itself. Why not use a spoon or plug? These artificials fail to appeal to the olfactory senses of salmon, particularly when trolling deep where migrating salmon usually travel.

The hooks in the bait are tied with improved clinch knots to a long leader of 20-pound monofilament. The leader stretches to a swivel. Above the swivel is a sliding sinker stop — $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch of surgical tubing through which the line passes. A cribbage peg is inserted up the tubing to snub it tight on the line. Next comes an eight-ounce round sinker, and the rig is capped off with a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch piece of tubing that protects the rod tip from being battered by the half-pound sinker, which weighs more than a small ball peen hammer.

Rods, called mooching rods, are about ten feet long. They carry a single-action reel — not unlike a fly reel — with an excellent drag and spooled with 300 or more yards of 20-pound test mono.

Once the rig is prepared, the guide will demonstrate how to make a pull of line: one pull equals a two-foot strip. After checking the depth-finder and listening to chatter on the radio, the guide will tell you to swing the baited and weighted line into the heaving swell and strip off the number of pulls — 20, 60 or more — that will

sink the bait to where he supposes the fish to be. Rods are then placed in holders that flip up for traveling, but pivot down and out-board for fishing.

A boat may fish from one to four rods and may carry up to four anglers. The guests are instructed to sit and watch the rod-tips for a sudden downward pull that signals a strike. When a strike happens, and it surely will, the guest stands up, wrests the rod from the holder, reels in line as fast as possible, and when the rod tip bows down to kiss the water, rears back with as much force as can be mustered. Many anglers prefer to hold one rod while watching another. That way, they can feel the pulse of the ocean, the instant a salmon begins to feed on the bait, and the moment of hooking when the salmon and man are drawn together in the aged struggle.

No doubt, those who assiduously fish with plugged herring will catch more salmon than those of us who fling flies. And if your pleasures are measured by catching what will become 50 pounds of salmon filets; the joy of easy conversation with old friends with whom you share stern seats in a fishing boat; and the promise of exquisite accommodations, dining and service, then among the 150 or so lodges along the coast of British Columbia, Langara will more than fill your bill.

But addicted to the fly I am, and several Langara guides, on their days off, cast streamers with eight- or nine-weight systems. They hook and land silver salmon in the 20-pound range and chinook up to 40.

The prospect of playing large coho — and the improbable possibility of playing chinook on a fly rod — drew me to the island in late August. While one can catch spawning salmon on the fly in virtually every river that flows into the Pacific north of the 40th parallel, I am put-off by the thought of targeting these spirited fish much later than the moment when they leave the salt for fresh water, the act that some scientists believe triggers the end of their life-cycle. Why interrupt the fulfillment of their sole purpose in a life so near its end?



Chinook salmon in the 50-pound range (left) and silvers (below) weighing 15 or more are caught in the waters off Langara Island. Below: Anglers head out to the fishing grounds paced by a pair of killer whales. Orcas and humpback whales are familiar sights during the angling season from early May to late September.



Fly-fishing for pre-spawn Pacific salmon is a special game. The requirements, in order of importance, are four. The salmon must be there in sufficient numbers. Bait – pilchards and needle fish – must be cruising high enough in the water column to draw salmon to depths less than 50 feet, within reach of a fly. Tackle must be suited to the task. And you must be prepared to fish from dawn 'til dusk to maximize the amount of time the fly is in the water.

There is a fifth criteria as well: One must have a guide who knows where the salmon are to be found and who is adept at diagnosing and remedying the ineffective fly-fishing styles of his angler.

In the fifth criteria, I was phenomenally lucky. When we met at Vancouver Airport on the morning of our trip into Langara, Delene asked if I knew whom I'd be fishing with. I didn't, of course.

"Well, if you're lucky you'll be fishing with Mark." The lady was prescient. Mark was waiting for me, wiping down his boat when I arrived on Saturday afternoon.

I carried four rods – a pair of eight-weights, and a pair of sixes. The latter were to be used where the silvers were

cruising within a dozen feet of the surface. To get down, I'd need the eights. A seven-piece Orvis Trident, which I prefer for trolling, and the six-piece Thomas & Thomas better suits my casting style (or lack thereof). I suspected that we'd need to troll with an ounce or two of weight. So I'd spooled an old reel with 30-pound braided Dacron line, figuring that for stripping or pulling line, the braided fabric would provide better purchase than sea-slickened monofilament.

Mark began to fill me in. Water temperatures were three or four degrees warmer than normal for late August. Why? He wasn't sure. But the water temperature drove baitfish down and thus the salmon. We'd be very, very fortunate to find fish close enough to the surface to cast to. Afternoons had been slow, he reported. The salmon did not seem as



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concentrated as they were early in the morning.

Our first task would be to locate a pod of salmon, and to do that, we'd fish plugged herring. That wasn't what I had in mind, but we needed to know where the fish were before we could target them with flies. So we rigged up a pair of mooching rods with plugged herring.

Langara boats seemed to be clustering in the waters off McPherson's Point. Mark held off from the main group, motoring instead about a half-mile up-tide, or to the northwest, of the others. We dropped the baits over the side, reeled the heavy sinker up as close to the rod tip as we dared so we could see the bait flash in the current. Then he told me to make 40 pulls while he did 30 on the other rod. Once dropped, the heavy weights pulled the rod tips down each time a wave lifted the boat. The motion was rhythmic and, following the massive luncheon smorgasbord laid on at the lodge, tugged at my eyelids as well.

With baits in the water, we began to explore each other's pasts. A 44-year old native of Campbell River, Mark had grown up on Roderick Haig-Brown's home waters. Haig-Brown, whose paeans to trout and salmon and their rivers in the Pacific Northwest still resonate though the proliferation of dams and logging and pollution that have stripped the rivers of their vitality, would have liked Mark. He seems to have been born to fish. After working at two other lodges on the Campbell River, he hooked up with Langara and in the past decade has become head guide. Come September when Langara's season draws to a close, Mark heads for the Babine

and Lannie Waller's Silver Hilton and steelhead, his first love.

Not told of my coming, Mark had carried home all his fly gear on his previous week off. We rummaged through mine. Unless salmon were feeding within 40 feet of the surface, my floating line and 200-grain sink-tips would not reach them. A better bet would have been a 700-grain full sinking line. Mark approved my choice of the 30-pound braided dacron line because it would be easier to grasp when stripping in or pulling for depth. Still, we needed weight to get down – a minimum of two-ounce round sinkers – and neither of us carried anything that'd do the job. So on the first afternoon, we set out a couple of plugged herrings and mooched with the tide.

No sooner than we dropped the bait did the port rod dip sharply. I grabbed it, set the hook, and felt the surge of a heavy fish. I pressed the rod's butt into my belly and began to crank, lifting the rod and then dropping it to gain line.

"Keep your tip high," Mark firmly told me. Slack line would allow the barbless hooks to pull out.

As if hooked to a bulldog, the fish thumped hard on the line. Only when I'd worked it to within ten feet of the surface did it run. Within a dozen minutes I brought it to net. A slap with a wooden marlin spike killed it, and Mark dropped it into the fish box. Not half an hour later the scenario repeated itself. We had two chinooks of 21 and 24 pounds aboard, our limit for the day.

Without a doubt, we could have filled my limit of eight salmon – four chinook and four cohos – in fairly short order had

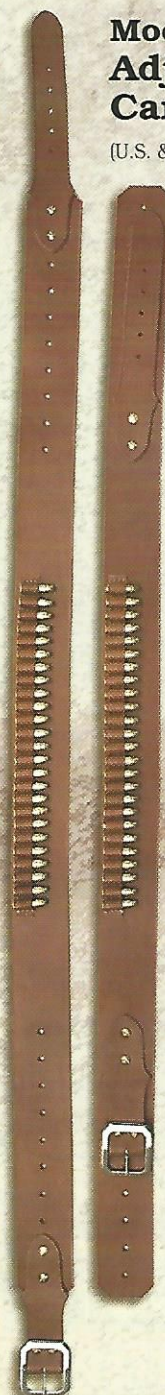
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Haidi Gwaii

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we continued to fish plugged herring. But we wanted coho on flies.

Mark and I reconvened on the dock at 6 a.m. and he showed me a pair of two-ounce sinkers he'd scrounged from somewhere. Delene had given us two, one-inch-wide tear-drop spinners, which we'd mount ahead of the thick, white, six-inch streamers that Mark had tied from polar bear hairs. The flies resembled pilchards, a member of the herring family, on which we knew cohos were feeding. I rigged my eight-weight with the dacron line, placing the sinker between two swivels, and running eight feet of twenty-pound mono down to the fly. Mark set up one of the lodge's 9-weight rods, this one carrying a 400-grain sinking tip melded into an intermediate sinking line, in similar fashion.

We bounced on the choppy swell out, heading north and west to Langara Rocks where scores of sea lions lay, grousing their disapproval when boats came too close. We worked the outbound tide, trolling our flies, but to no avail. A mile run due north toward the low blue mountains of the Alaskan panhandle carried us to a water-line heavy with rafts of kelp and shorebirds where the ebbing tide butted against the incoming current. Working the outside of the line, we picked up our first coho on a fly.

There was no mistaking its strike. The rod bucked in my hand as if I'd snagged a horse. Thirty yards out a billet of silver erupted from the inky sea, rolled, splashed and bore off to port. I kept my rod high so its suppleness would absorb the fish's runs. A dozen flights, some short and others much longer, made the reel sing the song I love. Some time later I'd worked the fish to the boat, but still it surged deep and rose to thrash on the surface. Eventually, spent, it allowed Mark to tail it. I dropped the rod, grabbed the camera and fired away. Here was evidence that we could take coho in deep salt on flies.

Over the next two days we played and released 30 fish. Most were hooked 30 to 40 yards behind the boat with the fly trolled 20 to 30 feet deep. Occasionally, they'd follow the fly up into the wash of the Yamaha's props and slam it there. Once, lulled into that lethal "I've-got-this-game-all-figured-out" overconfidence, I'd loosened the drag on my reel so I could pull line off faster. As I was stripping line from the reel, a fish hit and tore off to the south. The spool raced and when the fish slowed, the spool did not, causing a horrible backlash. Its second run snapped the line, losing us a spinner, the fly, and worst of all, one of our precious two-ounce sinkers.

Try as we might, we could not raise a chinook with a fly. The most likely reach was the stretch west of the boulders along the northern coast of Graham Island. We fished it hard on the flooding tide, but to no avail. Oh, the chinook were there. Doug Norris, a guest at the lodge on a boat skippered by Frank, a Haidi native, hooked and landed a 55-pounder, the biggest fish of the week. We couldn't buy one with our trolled bucktails. The problem, said Mark, was water uncommonly warm at 64 degrees, about six degrees above normal temperature. That drove schools of pilchards and needlefish down and with them the salmon that feed on them.

As is always the case with fishing, there's more to it than hooking and boating fish. One afternoon we were encircled by a pod of 40 or 50 orcas, rolling and blowing as they surfaced to breathe before diving for more salmon. Early mornings would find tiny Sitka deer grazing along the water's edge, nibbling kelp that had washed ashore in the night. Bald eagles battled sea lions for pinks and sockeyes on the surface. Deep-gray clouds poured slashing showers only to give way to a sun that flamed the sky with rainbows and turned anvil-head tops of thunderclouds a rosy pastel. Each afternoon, the marvelous Jennifer would find our boat and bring us freshly baked chocolate chip or oatmeal raisin cookies and a thermos of



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fresh coffee as sharp as it was black.

The meat and potatoes of Langara are the slab-sided flanks of filleted salmon flash-frozen and flown out with anglers. Often, halibut, ling cod and red snapper (not a snapper in the Florida sense but a yelloweye rockfish) are taken as well.

Like Mark, many of Langara's guides have a passion for fly fishing. And on their days off, they hone their skills by casting for salmon near the surface. Had I the time, I'd spend a season here, arriving in mid-June and decamping as the frosts of September pull steelhead up the rivers of mainland British Columbia. When not on the water, I'd recline on a chaise on the spruce-shaded deck overlooking the bay, with a book open on my chest, and cookie crumbs littering the plate by my side. 

IF YOU WANT TO GO

Langara Fishing Adventures operates four lodges in British Columbia. Of post-and-beam construction high on a cliff, Langara Island Lodge accommodates 22 guests in the main building and another 12 in the Upper Cottage. The cottage is booked exclusively by groups and the main lodge can be engaged by a single party as well. On the bay a quarter-mile to the east floats Langara Fishing Lodge with accommodations for 65 guests who fish either with or without personal guides. Anglers in hot pursuit of rainbows and cutthroats might opt for ten-person Moosehead Lodge, in B.C.'s Chilcotin region. Those chasing steelhead will find Langara's small lodge on the Kumdis River in the Queen Charlotte Islands to their liking.

Rates vary. A guided four-day trip at Langara Island Lodge runs about \$5,000 U.S. double occupancy, per person. Staying at the floating lodge, but retaining use of a guide and boat, reduces the per person tariff by about \$500.

Anglers fly into Vancouver, overnight at the Fairmont right at the airport, and catch the morning charter to the lodge. Round-trip transportation from Vancouver is included in the accommodations package.

For complete information go to langara.com or call 800-668-7544.