

To My Salmon Fishing Friends:

This is the time of year when I go through my journals carefully and try to make sense of the last season.

I found 2012 to be puzzling. Early June was slow fishing for mature chinook with most lodges on the north coast, Haida Gwaii and Alaska reporting almost no salmon. The early runs that enter the northern rivers in May and June were far below average (Yukon River, Kenai River, Skeena, early Fraser River) and the West Coast Resort lodge in Whale Channel which relies on the Kitimat River run had a dismal early season with almost no chinook. At North King we intercept some of these Kitimat River fish, and my observation was that the run was far below normal. Fortunately Aristazabal Island also has a large population of resident immature chinook salmon and this sustained the fishing until the end of June when the later runs began moving through.

In contrast, the later runs were good and the Rivers Inlet (Wannock River) run of big chinook salmon which arrives at the end of July was awesome last summer. The salmon were substantially larger than normal and there were many more of them. I've never seen so many fifty and sixty pound salmon. And the fishing near Vancouver and Victoria was excellent in the late summer.

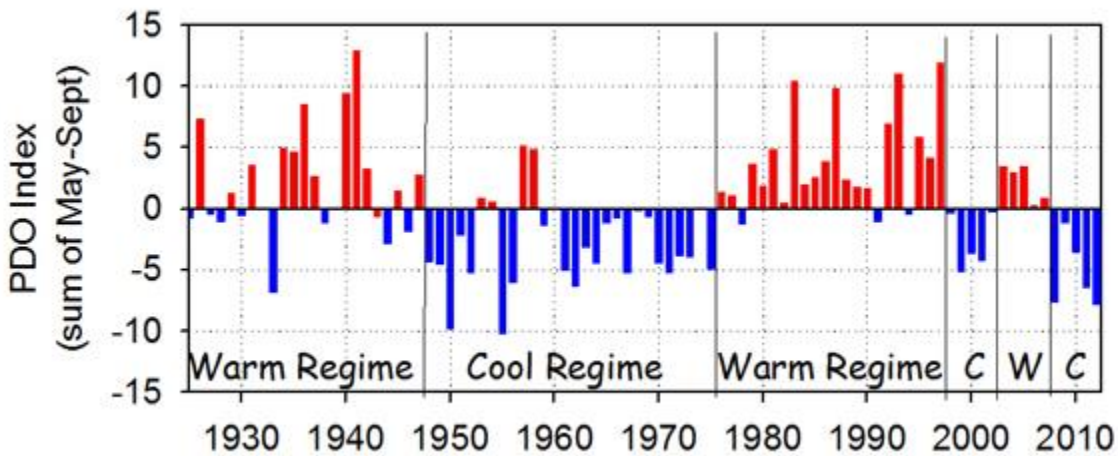
In the fall I purchased "The Behavior and Ecology of Pacific Salmon and Trout" by Thomas P. Quinn, University of Washington Press 2005. It is an outstanding book and helps to explain what might be happening, which I think is associated with the Pacific Decadal Oscillation.

The Pacific Decadal Oscillation (PDO) was named by Steven Hare, who discovered it while studying salmon production in 1996. He noticed a relationship between sea surface temperatures along the west coast of North America and salmon production in Oregon and Alaska. During the "warm phase", when the sea surface temperature along the California, Oregon, and Washington coast is warmer than normal the chinook and coho salmon returns to Oregon rivers tend to be low and returns in Alaska are high. During the cool phase the salmon returns in Oregon are high and in Alaska low.

From 1946 to 1977 the Pacific Decadal Oscillation was in a cool phase where water along the coast from northern California to southern Alaska was cooler than usual and water in the central North Pacific was warmer than normal. We had northwest summer winds along our coast that caused upwelling, where cold nutrient rich water is brought to the surface and triggers strong phytoplankton and zooplankton growth in the spring. This is especially important for the juvenile coho and chinook salmon entering the ocean, as the increased availability of food speeds their summer growth and increases survival during the subsequent winter. It takes two summers in the ocean for the juvenile coho to mature and five or more summers for the juvenile chinook. Then when they return to their natal rivers as adults they are typically more plentiful than average and often larger. However the cool PDO phase only benefits salmon which feed in the local coastal area, which include the coho and the ocean-type chinook (the southern chinook runs that enter their natal rivers to spawn from July through September). The more northerly chinook runs which are primarily stream-type chinook and enter their natal rivers in May and

June tend to migrate offshore and feed in the central North Pacific, where they do poorly in the warmer ocean conditions.

From 1977 to 1998 the PDO was in the warm phase, where the water off the BC coast was warmer than normal and upwelling was inhibited. This resulted in good ocean survival in the central North Pacific for the northern (early season) chinook runs and poor conditions along the coast for the coho and southern (mid to late season) chinook runs.



Temperatures in the figure above represent water temperatures off the California, Oregon, and Washington coasts and are averaged from May through September. Note that 2008 was much colder than normal. Juvenile coho and southern chinook entering the ocean in spring 2008 had high survivability and the returning BC coho run in 2009 was the strongest I've seen. Adult chinook returns to Oregon rivers in 2010 were very high.

Some of those southern chinook that entered the ocean in 2008 returned last summer after five summers in the ocean as large adults. The PDO phases typically last several decades and represent average ocean temperatures, however individual years can be warmer or colder due to the superposition of other weather events such as El Nino and La Nina. If this analysis is correct we might expect weak northern chinook runs in May/June and strong southern runs during July and August for the next two or three years, basically a re-run of last summer.

The PDO analysis suggests that last summer should have been a good year for coho, but to me the runs appeared to be well below average in both size and numbers. Other guides have told me that the coho runs were great further south. Normally I use large bait to focus on the big chinook and discourage the coho but last summer on the north coast it wasn't necessary. Flashers were very productive for chinook and except for occasional situations did not attract too many coho. In August I ran flashers most of the time (this was a big change for me, most people know me as a cut plug fisherman).

The salmon behaviour also seems to be changing. For the past three seasons the salmon at Aristazabal Island seemed to be favouring sand lance (needlefish) during June and July and transitioned over to mature herring in August. Even when I fished Milbanke Sound in August I found that most of the salmon were feeding on sand lance, and it was only the very large chinook that were taking herring. Sand lance and herring do well in cold water, and perhaps the salmon have changed their feeding habits as the sand lance population increases.

Last summer there seemed to be lots of big herring near the lodge. I remember counting eight or ten eagles in trees near Arnie's Hole, and watching them pick up herring in the middle of Parker Passage. We had huge numbers of Pacific Cod and small halibut in the passage – crazy fishing, it was easy to fill the boat but difficult to find an “over” halibut. It seemed like Parker Passage was filled with adult herring and this brought in the cod, halibut and salmon. On the west side of the mouth near the Far Side I saw rhinoceros auklet feeding, an indication of schools of sand lance in the area. And our best salmon fishing seemed to be a migration route down the west side of Rennison, through the entrance of Parker Passage to Arnie's Hole, then on to either Moore Island or to Borrowman Bay and Kettle Inlet.

For the third year in a row the salmon seemed to avoid Beauchemin Channel and the Honey Hole. Perhaps this is related to the cool PDO phase and water temperature along the coast.

For several days we also had eight or ten humpback whales bubble feeding in the area. I'm no stranger to bubble feeding, but I've never seen such a large group feeding together. It was absolutely awesome. For that many whales to be bubble feeding together indicates enormous schools of baitfish, most likely adult herring.

So last summer it appeared that the adult herring were back in force, however most of the salmon were feeding on sand lance. It was the really big chinook that were going after the adult herring. I've read that sand lance populations tend to go through boom and bust cycles – perhaps the local sand lance population is in a boom phase and the salmon are taking advantage. I've also read that on the west coast of Vancouver Island most of the smaller chinook salmon feed on sand lance, and it is only the very large chinook that favour adult herring.

Early Season

In June and the first part of July my best success was on flasher with a small spoon, usually a Party Girl or chrome Diamond Lance. I started the season fishing teaser head herring (purple or black size) and had poor results. Most of the salmon in the area were feeder springs and preferred smaller bait.

I had the opportunity to do some personal fishing (mostly experimenting), and one day decided to fish only Borrowman Bay and try different gear to see what was working. Since I was fishing alone, to keep it simple I just ran one rod. I started at dawn with cut plug and released three springs in the teens. At 8:30 am I changed to teaser head and released another spring, then tried several spoons of various colours briefly before lunch, without success. After lunch I ran a number 6 chrome Diamond Lance and picked up two springs in the teens and three in the mid twenties, keeping one at 26 lbs (the other two were

similar in size). That evening I fished with Hill Brandsma (we were now fishing two rods) and we caught five springs on Diamond Lance, keeping one at 21 lbs. Two days later I fished Borrowman Bay again, this time with green flasher and Silver Horde hootchie. In less than an hour I landed two springs and lost several others, then changed to a Diamond Lance spoon and caught one more – my conclusion was that the flasher and Silver Horde hootchie combination was the most effective. I changed my gear because I didn't like using flashers and was concerned that some of the salmon were bleeders and may not survive (my hootchie was rigged with a 6/0 hook which I now realize was too large).

In early July Steve Wagner and his wife Carolyn had good success with green flasher and a four inch party girl spoon, at 37 feet. Normally I like to fish different gear on each side and at different depths, just in case. However Steve had confidence in his gear and set both rods exactly the same, limiting out on nice chinook and releasing one spring in the 20s. Well done, Steve and Carolyn.

Summary: Next year I'll be fishing sand lance imitations early in the season (flasher and small spoons, flasher and Silver Horde hootchie).

Rivers Inlet Run (Part One)

The Rivers Inlet salmon typically pass the north coast the last week of July and first week of August. These are big salmon, and last summer they were even bigger than usual.

I was at North King Lodge July 31 to August 4 as a guest with my fishing partner Tom Miller. Ray York, Steve York and Jeff Rowan were our "buddy boat". The first afternoon I helped Ray, Steve and Jeff set up, then Tom and I headed out to Borrowman Bay to try our luck. A few minutes later Ray, Steve and Jeff were ready to fish but decided there were too many boats at the normal spot (I was fishing near the rock where the seagulls sit) so they turned right and trolled down towards the channel. On the way Ray found a little bay that he thought looked perfect for big chinook, with lots of kelp and rocky structure (I should mention that Ray has had quite a bit of experience mooching for salmon). It was a very good observation.

Later when we compared notes at supper, Tom and I had very little to report. On the other hand Ray, Steve, and Jeff had a great afternoon – they had several double headers and one triple header, landing 12 lb and 23 lb springs, four coho, and lost a salmon Ray thought might have been a tyee. They promised to show us their spot.

The next morning Tom and I were first off the dock again so we set up in Borrowman Bay at the normal location. I saw Ray, Steve and Jeff pass the Bonsai tree and watched as they began fishing on the other side of the bay, then they spent the next hour or so fiddling around in the middle of the bay. Finally I got a call on the radio that they had a huge salmon in the boat and we should "get our butts down there".

The salmon was 44 lbs, definitely a keeper, and they showed us the little bay and how they fished it. Normally I fish as close to kelp as I can, but not too close because of the possibility of hanging up and losing gear or a cannonball. Ray is fearless and just runs through the kelp. We watched for a bit then lost track of them, and learned later that while they were charging along the kelp one rod bent over with the reel screaming, obviously snagged. They pulled the other gear and turned the boat to go back and try to recover their gear, except that the “kelp” they were snagged on was now motoring out towards the middle of the bay. Half an hour later I got another call on the radio that they had another salmon in the boat and this one was four inches longer than the fish box, later we learned that it was 60.5 lbs. Both salmon were caught on a purple haze flasher and five inch watermelon spoon at 27 feet. Well done Ray, Steve and Jeff.

Summary: I had heard that big salmon don't like flashers but Ray has proven the opposite. And troll as close to the kelp as possible (or even closer).

Rivers Inlet Run (Part Two)

A couple of days later I was guiding at another lodge about seventy miles south in Milbanke Sound and the fishing was crazy.

Butt Plug

Cory was using “butt plug” and was making out like a bandit. Over a one week period he guided six salmon in the mid 50s and caught a 48 while doing personal fishing. The “butt plug” is basically an Alaska rig whole herring with the tail bent up 90 degrees and secured in position with a toothpick (Deryk calls this a “whale tail”). I think the secret is the acoustic signature – the roll moves a lot of water, and likely attracts the salmon by sound from quite a distance away similar to a small flasher. There is no question that the butt plug is effective, during the first week of August one of my guests landed a 43 lb spring and lost another probable tyee, both on butt plug.

After testing the “butt plug” for a couple of days I found that I could get a similar roll with teaser head and ProTroll by bending the tail 90 degrees in the “butt plug” fashion.

ProTroll

North King is the only lodge where I've seen ProTroll used and Paul (Chief) has done well with it. I still consider myself a beginner with this technique, although I am learning.

The ProTroll has an “E chip” which generates an electrical pulse each time the ball rocks inside the little tube. Theoretically the salmon should be able to sense the electrical field and this might excite them. The ProTroll also has a severe “chopper” action which most guides don't like. I suspect that the chopper action moves a lot of water, and in the process creates an acoustic signature that the salmon can hear

or feel quite a long distance away (similar to a flasher). I think this chopper effect might be one of the reasons the ProTroll attracts salmon.

I used the ProTroll a number of times at North King Lodge and had my best success with coho salmon. In Milbanke Sound one evening I was doing personal fishing with a ProTroll and used a toothpick to lift the tail “butt plug” style, in an attempt to reduce the chopper action. The result was a tiee in the low thirties. Another evening I was fishing ProTroll with a chopper action and watched on the depth sounder as a huge salmon came off the bottom and approached the bait, then turned away. A few minutes later Cory hooked his 48 lb chinook nearby on a “butt plug”. I couldn’t say for certain that it was the same salmon, but it left me with a definite preference for the raised tail.

Summary: For me the ProTroll works best with the tail pinned up 90 degrees in the “butt plug” style. I’m still undecided about the E chip.

Glow

The more I use glow lures the more I like them. One morning in mid August I was setting up the gear in the half light of dawn, and asked my guest to use his camera flash to energize the green glow teaser head -- a few minutes later we were into a 35 lb spring. Later I learned that most guests are hesitant to expose their cameras in the rain or run down the batteries for such a mundane purpose. More recently I’ve found a little waterproof LED flashlight (\$8.00 at Steveston Marine) which is perfect for energizing a glow lure or reading the counter on the downrigger in the dark, and fits nicely in a pocket or purse.



Later I realized that glow lures work very well during the day without being energized. Sunlight is attenuated as it passes through water, and the longer wavelengths (red, orange, yellow, green) are filtered out first. Eventually all that remains is blue and ultraviolet. Glow lures are energized by ultraviolet light and typically glow green or white – in effect they are converting UV light to a different wavelength, to which the salmon might be more sensitive.

More recently I've tested all my teaser heads, spoons and plugs in the dark with the LED flashlight to figure out which lures are "glow". I've also bought some glow paint from GloNation, and have been experimenting by painting some older spoons and flashers.

Tomic Plugs

Scotty showed me how he rigs his Tomic plugs (photo below). He cuts off the tow bar and pulls it out, leaving two holes. The 30 lb Maxima UltraGreen leader is passed through the rear hole and two clear beads, then is attached to the swivel and hook. This rig has several benefits over the standard method. It allows the plug more freedom to waggle back and forth, and if the leader breaks the plug will float to the surface where it can be recovered.

Scotty's favourite plugs are the 602, 500 and 232, all in glow. The five inch size is a good all around choice for springs and coho. Many guides move to a six inch plug if they want to avoid catching coho. I've found that four inch plugs are a lot of fun for big coho late in the season.



Teaser Head Herring

I fished teaser head herring quite a bit, and early in the season it was mostly unsuccessful. I suspect the salmon in the area were resident springs feeding on sand lance. The big migrating springs often prefer big bait, but there didn't seem to be many big springs in the area. A notable exception was when Denis Dubord picked up his 30 lb spring at Kettle Inlet in early June after an epic fight on the light rod. We hooked the salmon at 9:35 pm as it was becoming dark, and Denis fought it for the next hour in the rain and pitch black until he was finally able to ease the salmon into the net – well done Denis and Noel. Until the end of July that really was the exception for me and the salmon seemed to prefer spoons or hootchies.

When the Rivers Inlet run arrived everything changed and big bait started working again. In Milbanke Sound I ran “butt plug” for a few days, then went back to teaser head (often with a raised tail “butt plug” style). Although most of my subsequent tyees were on teaser head alone, I found that it helped to run an in-line flasher on one rod to attract the salmon to the boat. During this period we landed five tyees and lost two on naked teaser head. With the in-line flasher and teaser head we landed one tyees and lost two.

In the early season I tried tandem 5/0 single hooks with my teaser head instead of the leading treble, and it was not successful – lots of soft strikes where I was unable to connect with the salmon. Later I changed to a leading #2 treble but lost two tyees by the boat when the hooks pulled out, suggesting that the treble was a bit small. Next year I will use a #1 treble (I think I'm copying Deryk on this).

Summary: Teaser head is very effective when the salmon are feeding on large herring. Use an in-line flasher or pin the tail up 90 degrees in the “butt plug” fashion.

Sand Lance Imitations

When I arrived at the West Coast Resorts Milbanke Sound lodge in early August the most consistent guide (of about thirty, it's a big lodge) was Craig, who was using spoons which imitated sand lance (needlefish). Usually he would run a spoon with in-line flasher on one rod and a “naked” spoon on the other. Craig was very consistent, landing many springs in the teens and low 20s and the occasional tyees in the low 30s. However he did not land a salmon in the 40s until mid August, suggesting to me that it was the smaller springs that were feeding on sand lance.

At West Coast Resorts instructor guides (like me) are required to use the tackle supplied by the lodge, rather than personal gear. Sometimes I would break the rules and try some personal gear, but for the most part I used the supplied tackle. This is similar to a cooking contest where the chefs are required to make a creation with the materials in the kitchen. I would try to figure out what the salmon were doing, then dig through the tackle box in the boat to see what I could come up with.

The only spoons supplied at the lodge were too big to imitate sand lance and were very badly corroded, and generally were not worth polishing. Craig was breaking the rules and using his own spoons (P2Bs and number 5 Diamond Lance), but in any case I didn't have any of those spoons in my personal kit so ran flasher and hootchie instead. The lodge did supply needlefish hootchies in glow white and green/white, which I rigged with green flashers and purple flashers (Deryk's Pacific Net and Twine hootchie leaders which he supplied to the lodge were excellent).

The green flasher and glow white needlefish hootchie combination produced two tyees for me. Two other guides (Todd and Harry) found that reducing the leader length from 42 inches to 18 inches made a big difference – the salmon seemed to really like the faster action. Perhaps sand lance are quicker than herring or squid, and the shorter leader provides a better imitation. The amusing part of this is that a 20 lb spring hooked on the short leader would take off like a rocket and act very convincingly like a tye – the first run would seem to go forever until the salmon finally stopped, gasping on its side at the surface ready for the net. We realized later that the leader was shorter than the salmon and the flasher was hitting the salmon on the back and tail as he ran, like a jockey whipping a horse.

I run flasher and hootchie fast and teaser head herring much slower, and until now would never consider running both at the same time. However one day in August I was working as an instructor guide, responsible for two boats, and gave my guests a short tutorial on fishing methods. For each boat I set up gear for teaser head herring (with and without the in-line flasher) and for flasher and hootchie. The next morning just after dawn I was in one boat fishing Cheney Point when I got a call over the radio that the other boat had just landed a 46 lb spring. The two guests had each picked up a rod from the night before, one rigged with flasher/hootchie and the other with teaser head herring, and without concern about trolling speed just started fishing. I suspect that the big spring was attracted to the boat by the flasher but he preferred the big bait, so took the teaser head herring. In my boat we had been fishing flasher/hootchie but quickly changed our gear to in-line flasher with teaser head herring on one rod and naked teaser head on the other, and we landed four more tyees that day (and lost several more).

Summary: If you don't know whether the salmon are interested in big herring or sand lance, run flasher/hootchie on one rod and teaser head on the other. Use a short leader on the hootchie (18 to 24 inches) and run the motor at 900 rpm. The flasher will attract the salmon to the teaser head.

Flashers

Last summer was definitely the year of the flasher, at both lodges. I think partly this was because there were fewer coho than normal (many years there are too many coho to run a flasher), and partly because the flashers really were necessary to find the springs. All along the coast more guides are using flashers, I think because the early season runs are weaker and the fishing is more competitive.

Many guides believe that the flasher represents another salmon and I agree. The flashers attract salmon to the boat and also cause the strikes to be much more aggressive. Following this argument the flasher colour should match the salmon in the area. I've found that green flashers work well early in the season,

purple in mid season, and red towards the end of August. Experienced guides have told me that the early chinook runs tend to have green backs, the Rivers Inlet run have purple backs and later in August there is a run of copper backed chinook passing Milbanke Sound. Coho have green backs but go crazy over red flashers, possibly because they have memories of feeding on euphausiid shrimp (krill or red feed) earlier in the year.

One afternoon in Milbanke Sound we were running teaser head herring and the fishing was slow, so I suggested that my guest put a purple flasher in-line with his purple haze teaser head. He only had it down for a few minutes when he hit a salmon in the forties that we played for half an hour, then the hooks pulled out at the side of the boat. The salmon was laying on its side gasping, a few feet from the boat, and we tried to chase it down with the net but were unsuccessful. Later as we were setting the gear I noticed that the flasher was rigged backwards with the big end facing the boat. Set like this it would not roll properly and would just wag back and forth – but the big salmon had loved it. In the past I've been very careful to get a good rolling action with the flashers, but now I'm thinking that maybe it doesn't matter. In fact when there are a lot of other boats in the area running flashers, a slower wagging action might set the gear apart.

I've heard that some guests intentionally rig their flashers backwards so if they catch a big salmon there is less resistance when it goes on a long, hard run.

Another slow day in Milbanke Sound my guest asked me to run cut plug with a flasher. A couple of years ago I would have considered this to be a serious social gaffe (sort of like serving red wine with fish), but this time I just shrugged my shoulders and set the gear. The difficulty is that cut plug is very fragile and is usually ruined on the first hit, which may not be noticed if it is run with a flasher. Also the flasher is normally run much faster to get a good rolling action, and the speed would quickly destroy the cut plug. At any rate we only had the gear down for a minute when the rod bent double with a hard strike. My guest was looking the other way and missed the salmon, but it was clear that flasher and cut plug does work.

Summary: Flashers can be run slow, they don't need to roll. On a slow day consider setting the flasher backwards so it waggles back and forth. I've bought a couple of small dodgers to try with cut plug next season.

Spoons

At North King Lodge, June and July was primarily a spoon fishery. The guides were running small spoons with flashers and larger spoons "naked". I had good success with the Party Girl, chrome number 6 Diamond Lance and a six inch Tomic 602 spoon (a pinkish white that glows). Ray caught his big salmon on a five inch watermelon spoon run behind a purple haze flasher, and Steve Wagner did very well with a green flasher and Party Girl spoon.

I suspect that the salmon were mainly feeding on sand lance. At Milbanke Sound Craig was using the smaller number 5 Diamond Lance spoons and they were working very well (and he occasionally caught pilchards!).

The larger spoons probably move enough water to provide an acoustic signature that can be heard some distance away. The smaller spoons require the flasher for a strong acoustic signature which attracts the salmon to the boat.

In the past I've been uncertain about when to use shiny spoons and when to use darker spoons. Tim said that he had been told to use "bright spoons on bright days and dark spoons on dull days", which is not intuitive. Later I realized that on a bright day near the surface there will be a direct path from the sun, and the sunlight glinting off a shiny spoon is likely a strike trigger. On an overcast day, when fishing deeper, or at dawn or dusk there will be no direct sunlight, just a background glow around the lure. In these conditions a darker spoon provides contrast which makes it more visible.

Summary: Run small spoons with flashers and larger spoons "naked". Dark spoons on dull overcast days, bright spoons on sunny days.

Islander Drag in Wet Weather

I struggled with my Islander MR2 reel early in the season. Every time it got wet the drag became scratchy, for example while Denis was fighting his tyee in the rain. Finally I realized that the only realistic solution is to cover the reel overnight and avoid using it in the rain.

In August I had the opportunity to use the new Daiwa M-One Plus reels with their redesigned seven disk drag. This is an excellent reel, almost as good as the Islander in dry weather and far superior in the rain. And it is less than a quarter the price.

Summary: If you are thinking about buying an Islander reel, first check out the new Daiwa M-One Plus.

Bleeders and Siwash Hooks

I used to think that spoons were good for catch and release fishing, because a small spring or coho could be released quickly and without touching the fish. This year I caught quite a few springs in the teens, and when using large spoons noticed a high percentage of bleeders. The problem was the Mustad 6/0 "J" style Siwash hooks – I think with the large gap opening there is a higher probability that the point will come out near the eye, injuring the fish. Claw style hooks have a smaller gap and cause less damage to the fish, and when barbless also tend to hold better during the fight than "J" style hooks.

Previously I used 6/0 "J" style Siwash hooks with my hootchie leaders, but this summer changed to tandem 4/0 offset claw hooks to reduce the injury to the small springs.

I also discovered that DNE makes Siwash hooks in the offset claw shape. These have an exaggerated claw shape, almost like a circle hook, so they hold the salmon well and have a relatively small gap, minimizing injury to the fish. I used them on my smaller spoons and they worked great.

Disposable Spoons

The Coyote and Tomic spoons are now made overseas of thinner metal, and appear to be aimed at the recreational fishing market rather than the commercial fishing market. It's not a problem with the small spoons, but with the larger sizes an active salmon can bend the spoon like a pretzel. I ruined several Coyote and Tomic spoons last summer, particularly with coho salmon that tend to spin.

In Milbanke Sound Craig noticed the same thing and now almost exclusively uses the older style commercial spoons, which are made of heavy metal and are intended to catch hundreds of salmon.

Summary: The commercial spoons are great if you can find them (Pacific Net and Twine has a large stock and Deryk Krefting is very helpful in this regard).

Good fishing, and I hope to see you on the water this summer.

Bill Haymond