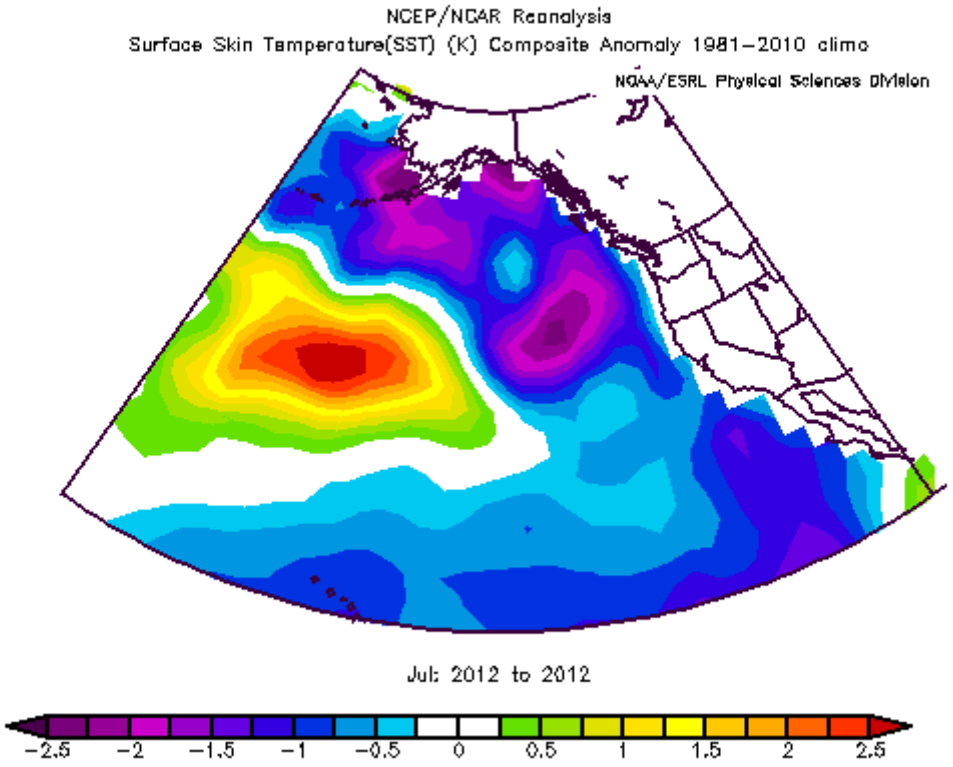
February 2014

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.

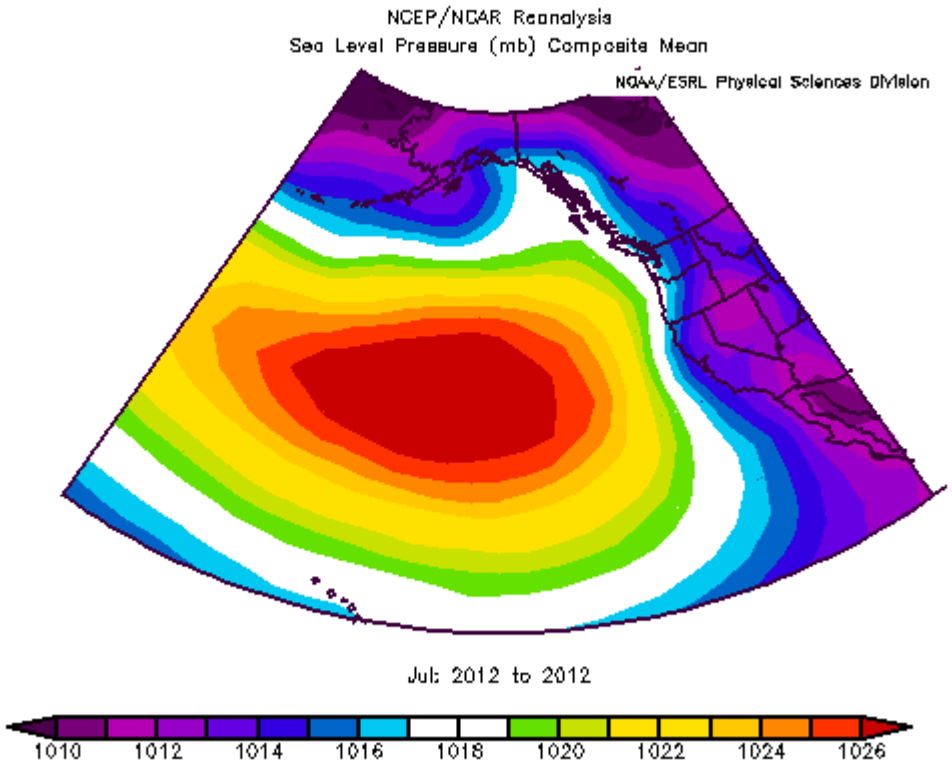
2013 was an odd summer. We are roughly five years into a cool phase of the Pacific Decadal Oscillation, meaning warmer than normal water in the central North Pacific (from Hawaii north to the Aleutian Islands) and in the western North Pacific near Japan, and cooler than normal water along the coasts of Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. The local cool water promotes the growth of zooplankton and copepods that have high fat content, which allows the juvenile salmon to put on growth rapidly and reduces winter mortality. It also promotes the growth of local herring and sand lance populations. This is great for our coho and chinook salmon, and for the halibut and other groundfish.

The diagram below shows sea surface temperatures for the previous year, July 2012, relative to the long term average (in degrees C).

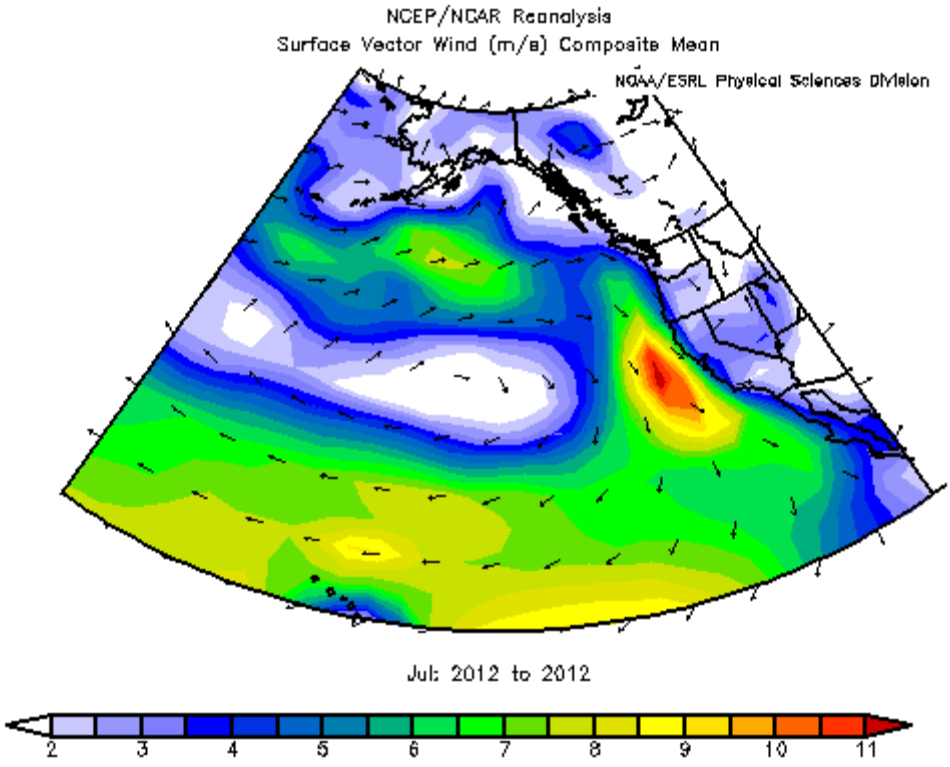


These cool water conditions during the summer are caused by northwest winds, which cause upwelling and bring cold, nutrient rich water to the surface. The upwelling is clearly visible in the diagram above as the dark blue and purple regions. This is excellent for the fishing and indeed 2012 was a great season.

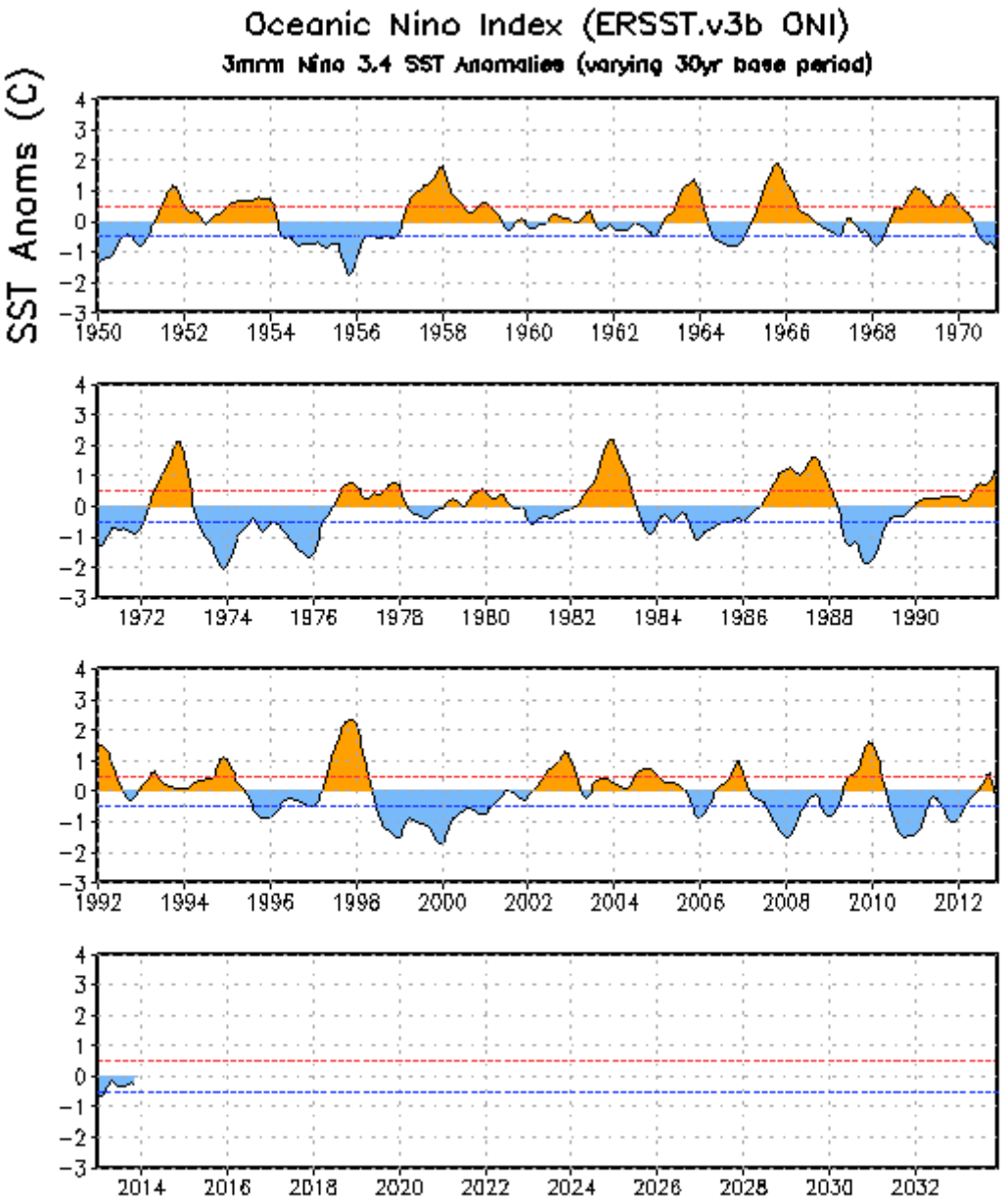
The diagram below shows air pressure at the sea surface, which generates the weather and our winds. Notice the Pacific High, a high pressure region which dominates the North Pacific Ocean in summer. The wind rotation is clockwise around the high and follows the contour lines. This northwest wind along our coast generates the ocean upwelling which caused the water to be cooler than normal.



The plot below shows the resulting winds. The red patch along the California coast indicates particularly strong northwest winds which drive the California Current and generate intense upwelling in that area. These are outstanding conditions for the salmon. The chinook salmon which will be migrating along our coast next summer will have spent most of their lives in conditions like this.



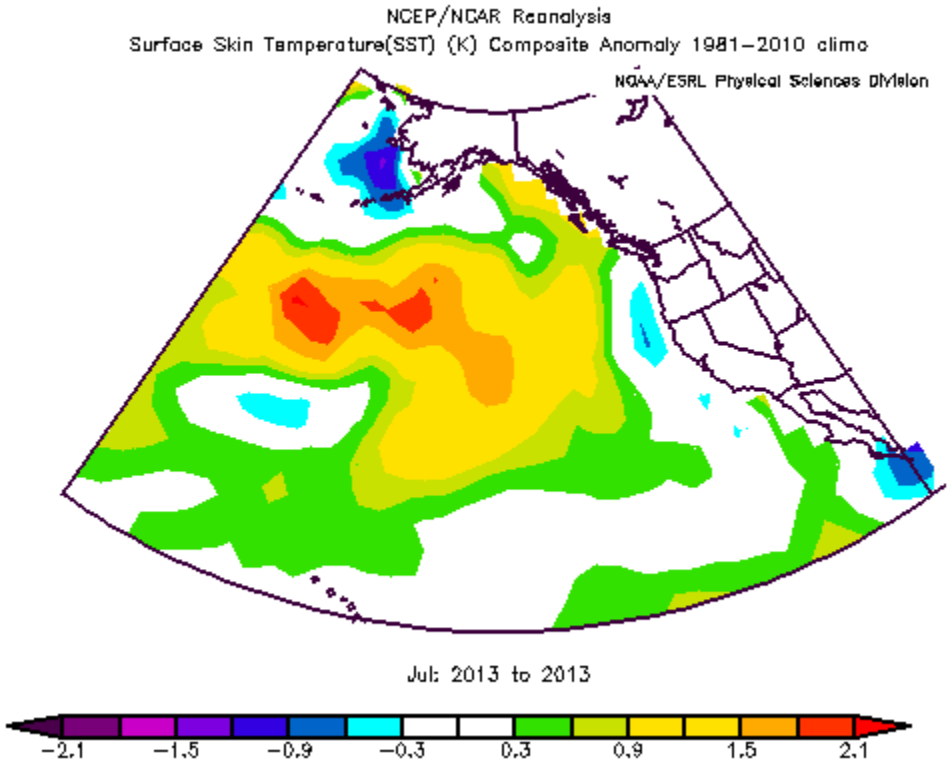
So despite global warming, the long term trend near our coast is for cooler than normal water conditions. However the shorter term fluctuations are hard to predict. In 2012 we were coming out of a La Nina episode (which represents cool wet weather and is good for our fishing) and were in a neutral phase of the El Nino cycle. In the late fall of 2012 the El Nino cycle briefly went positive (which is not good for the salmon), but not for long enough to be officially declared an El Nino.



The diagram above represents sea surface temperatures along the west coast of South America. Positive sea surface temperature (SST) anomalies are shown in orange, and negative anomalies in blue. Notice the El Nino in 2010 followed by La Nina episodes in 2011 and early 2012, then a small positive blip in late 2012 that did not last long enough to be officially declared an El Nino. The index then went negative and has been mildly negative for all of 2013.

I think the small El Nino blip at the end of 2012 messed up our local BC weather in 2013 (there is a delay of several months). The El Nino represents warm water near Peru and Ecuador. This couples through the atmosphere to the northern hemisphere and affects the relative positions of the Aleutian Low and Pacific High weather systems, which determine our local winds and which in turn drive the ocean currents. In particular the El Nino strengthens the Aleutian Low in January and February, which drives warm tropical water from the central North Pacific to the BC coast. In Vancouver we had unseasonably warm weather in March, then settled down to a more typical wet spring. Around the end of June the weather turned nice and for the remainder of the summer we had warm sunny days without the usual northwest winds (which cause upwelling and bring cold nutrient rich water to the surface). Everybody agreed that it was great weather, but the result was a body of warm water along our coast that can be seen in the diagram below (compare this with the July 2012 surface temperature plot).

Notice that from the north end of Vancouver Island to Alaska the water was warmer than normal, and off the coasts of Oregon and California it was colder than normal.



In Caamano Sound and Milbanke Sound this warm water, which was nutrient poor, had the effect of stunting the growth of the phytoplankton and the kelp. Last summer my favourite kelp beds were only a fraction of their normal size and the salmon were not holding in the usual areas. The sand lance (needlefish) were hit particularly hard – I noticed that Borrowman Bay was almost empty of sand lance,

and as a result the rhinoceros auklets had moved up to Beauchemin Channel at the edge of the Honey Hole.

This lack of upwelling and the warm water in the inshore area was a localized short term blip that only lasted a couple of months, however I think one of the results was to change the summer migration route of the chinook salmon – they prefer cooler water and I suspect were migrating deeper and further from shore. The coho salmon like slightly warmer water (roughly 54 degrees F) and at the same time were quite comfortable in the inshore area.

The June chinook runs (primarily the Kitimat run) seemed weak but stronger than the two previous years. The July and August chinook runs appeared to me to be about average, and the coho run was spectacular.

Summer 2013 was notable for the collapse of the Vancouver Island pilchard fishery. This is interesting, because pilchard (adult sardines) are a warm water fish that spend most of their time along the northern coast of California and generally only migrate into southern BC waters during August. The last pilchard fishery collapse occurred in 1949, when the Pacific Decadal Oscillation entered a cool phase that continued for the next twenty five years. This recent collapse is unfortunate for the pilchards but confirms improving ocean conditions for our salmon.

Lodges at the north end of Vancouver Island reported that the fishing was the best they have seen in recent memory, in terms of quantity and size of chinook salmon.

Last summer local fishermen were catching coho and chinook salmon again in the Strait of Georgia, between Vancouver Island and the mainland. This fishery had collapsed in the early 1990s. It seems that the water within the strait is now cooler and the salmon and baitfish near Vancouver are prospering again, something I honestly did not expect to see in my lifetime.

Last summer an angler fishing from a rowboat caught a 61.5 lb chinook in the tyee pool at Campbell River. This was the largest Tyee Club salmon in thirty years. Later analysis showed that it was six years old, indicating rapid growth and excellent ocean conditions.

And this January the International Pacific Halibut Commission noted that halibut stocks in California, Oregon, Washington, British Columbia and the Alaskan Panhandle are stable or rebounding. Stocks in the Gulf of Alaska, the Bering Sea and west to the Aleutian Islands are still in decline. This is consistent with recent ocean conditions (cooler water along our coast and warmer water between the Aleutian Islands and Hawaii) and also occurred during the last Pacific Decadal Oscillation cool phase between 1949 and 1973.

Summary: What to expect in 2014? Overall the long term ocean conditions look great with the likelihood of more cool water along the coast. The El Nino/ La Nina southern oscillation (ENSO) is currently in a neutral phase, slightly negative but trending positive – NOAA expects it to remain neutral through summer 2014. If an El Nino does develop later in the year it will be too late to affect the fishing

season. I think 2014 will be a good year for fishing, better than last summer but probably not as good as 2012. Keep an eye on how the kelp grows – it's a good indicator of local conditions.

Ocean Acidity

Over the past couple of years I've had concerns about how the increasing CO_2 levels in the atmosphere will affect the ocean, in particular dissolved CO_2 increasing ocean acidity. This affects coral, clams, oysters and barnacles (anything with a calcium carbonate shell) by slowing their growth and I was worried that it might also impact phytoplankton and zooplankton, the base of the ocean food chain.

I learned recently that euphausiid shrimp (Pacific krill) and copepods have a chitin exoskeleton, and that chitin is reasonably resistant to acid. Similarly the diatoms (single celled algae) that they feed on have cell walls made of silicon dioxide which is also resistant to acid.

Summary: The phytoplankton, euphausiids and copepods that salmon depend upon appear to be reasonably resistant to the increasing ocean acidity. Coral, oysters, clams, and barnacles on the other hand are already suffering.

State of the Pacific Ocean Report

I've spent quite a bit of time digging around the Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) website, mainly looking for research papers http://www.isdm-gdsi.gc.ca/csas-sccs/applications/Publications/index-eng.asp. Most reports are associated with the east coast fisheries and very few of the west coast reports are on salmon. Most of those relate to sockeye, which is the main commercial salmon species. Overall I didn't find much of interest except for one really excellent report on the State of the Pacific Ocean which is published yearly each May. You can find the 2012 summary at http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/csas-sccs/Publications/SAR-AS/2013/2013_028-eng.pdf and the full 150 page report at http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/Csas-sccs/publications/resdocs-docrech/2013/2013_032-eng.pdf. The summary and full report are a gold mine of information (and a new report describing 2013 ocean conditions should be available in May 2014).

The other really neat website I've discovered is NOAA. As web sites go it is huge, but there is one page which allows a researcher to mine the NOAA database of global weather and ocean conditions going back to well before any of us were born. Curious what the sea surface temperatures were in July 2013? This is where I got the data: http://www.esrl.noaa.gov/psd/cgi-bin/data/composites/printpage.pl.

Summary: Kudos to DFO research scientists Jim Irvine and Bill Crawford for their excellent state of the ocean reports, I'm counting the days until the next one is available. And many thanks to NOAA for an excellent website and for making their data available to the rest of the world.

Red and White Springs

Last May Kim and I made a trip to Nanaimo to visit friends, and one morning I dropped by the Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Pacific Biological Station for a visit.

Cold calls are always difficult. I had a bunch of questions on salmon ecology and behaviour, but I didn't know anyone in the building and my first problem was getting past the security guard at the front desk. He allowed me to go upstairs to the research library (I think I might have been the first visitor to the library that year). The librarian was very helpful and together we dug through the books and papers, and he pointed me to some research papers that might be of interest. Overall it was a worthwhile visit although I wasn't able to talk to any of the research scientists. Unfortunately during my visit I learned that in a few months the library would be shut down and the books and papers shipped to the DFO offices in Sydney and Vancouver.

One of the research papers that I found was on flesh colouration in chinook salmon. The red colour is caused by their diet, a carotenoid pigment found in the euphausiid shrimp and copepods that salmon eat as juveniles and young adults. This results in some chinook salmon having red flesh. However other chinook salmon have a genetic variation that prevents the deposition of the pigment in their flesh – perhaps they metabolize it instead. These chinook have white flesh (herring and sand lance are similar).

The Quesnel River run has both red and white individuals. Ruth Withler in 1983 performed a cross breeding experiment on white and red adult chinook salmon taken from this run. Red male chinook were bred with red female chinook, red male with white female, white male with red female and white male with white female. The resulting juvenile salmon were raised in a pen for two years and fed commercial pellets, supplemented with frozen euphausiids to provide the carotenoid pigment. At the end of the second summer the salmon were killed and the flesh colour analyzed with a spectrophotometer.

The result was a range of flesh colours from white through pink and red, and not the simple binary combinations that a single gene Mendelian analysis would suggest. The red with red cross in some cases produced mainly red individuals and in other cases an equal number of reds and whites. The white with white cross produced more whites than reds. The red with white cross produced varying percentages of reds and whites.

The study was complicated by the fact that salmon are tetraploid, meaning that much of the salmon genome is duplicated and many genes have two copies. However Dr. Withler concluded that flesh colour in chinook salmon is likely controlled by two genes which are not duplicated.

As chinook salmon reach sexual maturity and prepare for spawning the carotenoid pigment migrates from the muscle tissue to the skin – the flesh of a red chinook turns white and the skin can vary from bright to dark red. The skin of a white chinook develops a uniform grey colouration with black near the fins.

Summary: Salmon are a lot more complicated than I expected. It looks like flesh colour is determined by both diet and genetics, and if the salmon eat the same diet at sea the genetics determines the final colour. Some chinook are marbled with patches of red and white flesh -- I'm not going there. And a big raspberry to Prime Minister Stephen Harper for making it difficult for DFO research scientists to speak with the public.

North Coast Chinook

For the past two years I've attended the annual Sports Fishing Institute conference in early December at the River Rock Casino Resort in Richmond. It's a policy conference, and much of the conference is like watching paint dry – it's important to have low expectations. However it is an opportunity to meet people in the industry. There was one excellent report by Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the presenter, after a few emails, put me in contact with Ivan Winther in the Prince Rupert DFO office. Ivan is a specialist on north coast chinook salmon.

Ivan told me that during June the Dala, Kildala, Kemano, Kitlope and Kitimat runs are passing through Caamano Sound and Whale Channel. He said the Kitimat run has white flesh and is hatchery enhanced, and he confirmed that most of the big white springs that we catch in June are likely Kitimat River fish.

The Kitimat River has both wild stream type and ocean type chinook, however the hatchery only produces ocean type chinook (this makes sense as they can be released into the river a few months after emerging from the eggs and the young salmon soon migrate to the ocean). As a result virtually all of the returning Kitimat River springs are ocean type.

Ivan said that almost all of the northern chinook stocks from the Yukon River to the Skeena River have experienced lower productivity and reduced returns in recent years, and he suspected that this trend has influenced the Kitimat River stock. The Kitimat hatchery manager has noted a decline in chinook returns as well as a reduction in the age at maturity. This year he observed more small (probably age 3) males than normal and fewer large (probably age 4 and 5) females.

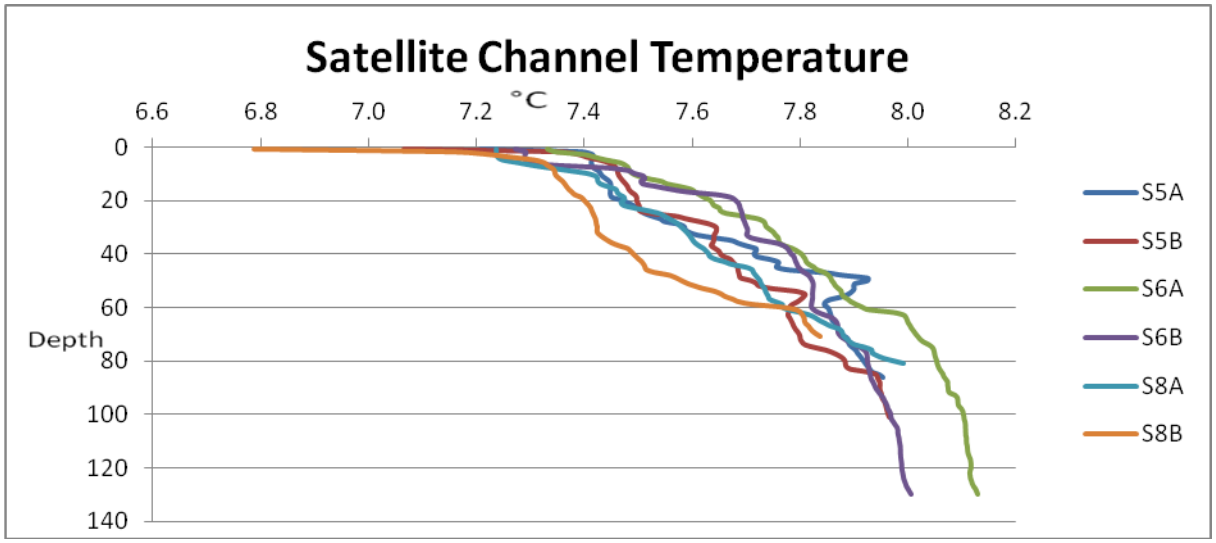
However Ivan sees some encouraging signs for northern chinook. The Bella Coola / Atnarko system return in 2013 was strong, including about 27,000 large fish and 8,000 jacks (sexually precocious males that return to spawn after only one year in the ocean). This is several times the recent returns for jacks and suggests excellent ocean conditions and high survival for the generation that went to sea in 2012. It also suggests improving large chinook returns in 2014 and the years following. The Skeena and Nass large chinook returns were very low in 2013, however they also saw high numbers of jacks which indicates the likelihood of stronger returns in 2014.

Summary: It looks like the juvenile salmon that went to sea in 2012 experienced excellent ocean conditions and reduced mortality through the subsequent winter. This cohort will be returning as adults in the teens in 2014 and as larger adults in the years following. This is good news for the northern chinook stocks (our early season runs).

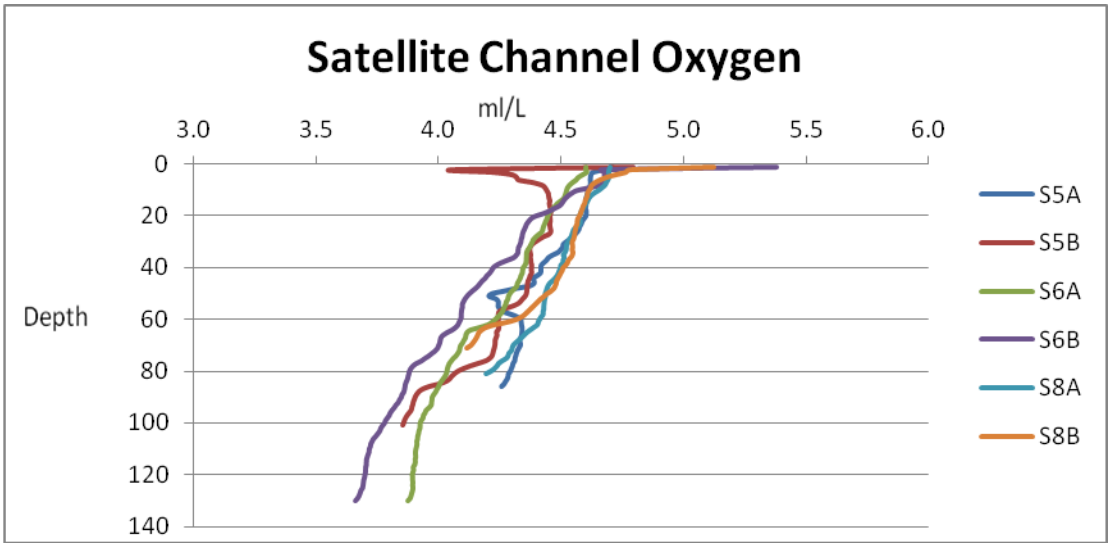
Kevin's Oceanography Research

Kevin Evancio was the fish cutter at North King Lodge last summer. When I chatted with him one day he mentioned that he had taken an oceanography course at the University of Victoria, and gave me a copy of his research report. Interesting stuff, I've included two of his graphs below.

Satellite Channel is in the Gulf Islands north of Victoria, not far from the BC Ferry terminal, and has reasonably good ocean mixing due to the strong currents in the area. The data was taken during a field trip in late January 2013 (depth is indicated in meters).



I found this graph interesting because it shows the deeper water with a temperature of about 8 degrees Celsius (46 degrees F) and colder water near the surface. This makes sense, as in winter the ocean should be releasing its heat to the air above. I've read that coho and chinook salmon have different metabolic rates, which allow the coho to grow much faster than the chinook. To support their higher metabolism coho prefer a temperature of 12 degrees C (54 degrees F), while the chinook like a temperature of 7 degrees C (44 degrees F). That's what I've read, I still regard the actual numbers with a bit of skepticism (the chinook number in particular could be off by a degree or two).



The graph above shows the decrease in oxygen with depth.

Summary: Thanks, Kevin. It gives me a better understanding of why the resident, winter springs tend to run deep (the water is warmer down there in the winter months). The decrease in oxygen levels with depth would discourage an active fish like salmon from going too deep, and might explain why halibut spend so much time laying on the bottom.

Spectra Line

Two summers ago Chief (Paul Gladue, at North King Lodge) showed me how he puts a hundred meters of 50 lb Spectra on top of the monofilament line on his mooching reels. The Spectra has roughly the same diameter as 12 lb monofilament, so the line hangs nearly vertical with less drag in the water. The Spectra also has less stretch so the strikes are much more positive. He was not using Spectra when trolling with downriggers because it is too small in diameter for the release clips.

I thought Paul had a great idea, and last spring I spooled my Islander reels with 200 meters of braided nylon backing followed by 300 meters of 30 lb nylon monofilament, 50 meters of dark green 50 lb Spectra and 12 meters of 40 lb nylon monofilament. I attach the downrigger release clip to the 40 lb nylon monofilament near the Spectra join. The Spectra is used between the release clip and the rod tip – the small diameter has low drag and minimizes the belly in the line, and since the Spectra doesn't stretch it telegraphs the strikes to the rod tip (in comparison nylon monofilament stretches about 30% when wet). What used to be a soft one inch tap at the rod tip now shows as a hard twelve to eighteen inch deflection and the strikes are much easier to spot. I really enjoy playing the fish on the fine Spectra line, and when the occasional big salmon takes off on a long run I play him on the 30 lb nylon main line. An unexpected benefit is that since I normally fish shallower than 60 feet, more than half the dark green Spectra remains on the reel and protects the nylon main line from UV damage.

One caution – since there is almost no stretch in the Spectra line, when fighting a salmon you feel every twitch and it is easy to pull the hooks out or break off the fish. A light touch is recommended.

The join between the Spectra and nylon monofilament is tricky and takes a while to learn, as the knot must be small in diameter and pass smoothly through the line guides. I'm not going to describe it here but if you are interested in trying this approach send me an email and I'll provide information on the knot.

Summary: Paul had a great idea and I've already re-spooled my reels this way again for next season.

Pro-Troll

Last summer Clint brought in some green (seven inch) herring and they were perfect for the Pro-Troll – as a result I fished it a lot. Then Doug and Paul (Chief) showed me how they file a 45 degree bevel where the lead hook contacts the Pro-Troll, to hold it so that it points out away from the bait in perfect position to hook the salmon. What a neat trick! Paul also mentioned that he does the same with teaser heads. It worked like magic and four of my tyee last summer were on Pro-Troll.

Summary: In the past I've used a lead #1 treble hook on my Pro-Trolls. Now I file a bevel on the Pro-Trolls and use a lead 5/0 single, which I believe works much better. Thanks Doug and Paul.

The Bevel Holds the Hook Facing Outward

Teaser Head Filed With a Bevel

Blue Pro-Troll

I was fishing Honey Hole one morning in late July with Rick Snyder and Scott Colyer, and Rick was using a blue Pro-Troll (I didn't even know they were available in blue). Anyway it was the very early appearance of the Rivers Inlet run and Rick picked up a 41 lb salmon. My past experience with teaser head is that during early August the big salmon seem to prefer blue – Rick very kindly gave me the blue Pro-Troll and I had good success with it over the next couple of days, until I lost it in a nice halibut.

Summary: I'm ordering some blue Pro-Trolls. Thanks Rick and Scott.

Clear Pro-Troll

And don't ignore the clear Pro-Troll. Randy Calvert very generously gave me some clear Pro-Trolls, and I found that in late July they worked better than the standard Chartreuse green, and glow green versions.

Summary: Clear Pro-Trolls are now part of my standard kit. Thanks Randy.

Pro-Troll Maximum Rotation Speed

Two summers ago Clint mentioned to me that if a Pro-Troll is rotated too fast the ball inside the E-chip won't have time to fall to the end of the tube and it will stop clicking. Absolutely correct and a very interesting problem. This fall I realized that it could be set up as a relatively simple physics problem. The math was more challenging as it was a second order differential equation, and it took me two days to work out a solution (it's been a few years). To verify that the solution was correct I solved the problem a second time using a Matlab computer simulation and compared the results. It was a lovely problem, very interesting, and deceptively simple.

Summary: The Pro-Troll E-chip works properly past four revolutions per second and stops clicking at roughly five revolutions per second (I normally run it between one-half and two revolutions per second).

Glow Paint

Last winter I came across a terrific glow paint at http://glonation.com/. This is doped strontium aluminate, a new generation of paint which was developed for use in highway signs. I've had the best results with their Super Phos Green unpigmented glow paint. I've also tried their pigmented glow paints and found that the pigment reduced the brightness of the glow.

A big advantage of the unpigmented paint is that it can be used on top of a favourite plug or spoon. It goes on creamy/clear, leaving the plug or spoon the original colour but with the glow powder on the surface so it glows in the dark. It works best on a light background, so the background reflects the glow instead of absorbing it.

In my home shop I've tested this glow paint against commercial glow lures such as Rhys Davis teaser heads, Hot Spot flashers, Pro-Trolls, and Tomic 602 plugs. They all glow about the same for the first fifteen minutes, then the standard products fade pretty quickly and usually are dark within an hour. The GloNation paint continues to glow brightly for many hours.

I painted the Super Phos Green unpigmented paint on a white plug, then applied a clear plastic finish coat as protection. In late June at Whale Channel as an accidental test of the paint I had the plug sitting on the table in my room, exposed to fluorescent light for about half an hour while I tied leaders before going to bed. Six hours later when I got up in the dark the plug was still glowing brightly.

Summary: The GloNation Super Phos Green unpigmented paint is terrific (and it catches fish).

Red Hooks

At the end of July I was fishing with Kim at Eclipse, and we were both using clear Pro-Troll with seven inch herring. I had filed a bevel on the Pro-Trolls for use with single hooks. She was using my standard leader which consisted of two black 5/0 Gamakatsu singles, but on my side I had run out of black hooks and was using a beat up old red single as the trailing hook. The result was surprising and amazing – I had five to ten times as many strikes as Kim. They were almost all coho and there were so many coho in the area I couldn't really tell if the springs had any preference, but during this period I also caught several springs.

I later learned that fishermen in North Vancouver have found that the Capilano run of chinook and coho salmon have a strong preference for red hooks.

Summary: Over the years I've used both red and black hooks. Now my standard kit is black in the lead and red for the trailer, except for cut plug leaders where I do it the other way around (Harry Nilsson showed me that trick).

Tomic Plugs

Last summer the coho run was spectacular, to the point where it was often difficult to keep the gear in the water long enough to find a spring. During the peak of the run many guides changed to big Tomic plugs, which attract fewer coho. There were days in early August when I was fishing bait, generally Pro-Troll or teaser head herring, and I later regretted not changing over to plugs.

Most of the guides I fish with are familiar with plugs and use them occasionally (myself included), but I would consider Scotty (Scott Eustis) to be an expert. He told me his favourite colours are 602, 500g and 232g (all in glow) and that he typically uses the five inch models.

These colours are also the favourites among the other guides I fish with. Most run the six inch (and occasionally seven inch) models as the coho seem to be discouraged by the larger plugs. Run them fast – typically 3 mph, or alternatively use the "tubby" model which is designed to have good action when run slower (for example at teaser head herring speeds).

Summary: I don't expect the coho run next summer to be as spectacular as 2013, but it could still be strong. Consider bringing a couple of Tomic plugs.

Bottom Fishing

I've done lots of bottom fishing but still consider myself a beginner. I've tried the standard jigs and circle hooks with salmon heads and salmon bellies, but my favourite rig is to use a big whole herring on a spreader bar, the method Jim Decker pioneered at North King Lodge. This technique catches big halibut and is also excellent for ling cod and yelloweye rockfish – in general whatever is in the area.

At the other lodges the guides tend to use jigs or big circle hooks. When I'm not at North King I use my own hand tied leaders (tandem 8/0 single hooks on 80 lb monofilament, like a cut plug leader on steroids) and usually have to hunt around the tackle room for some old spreader bars. And I usually have pretty good fishing success, even in Milbanke Sound. We are spoiled at North King Lodge with the abundance of halibut, ling cod and rockfish in the area.

Last summer Ron LaForce and Jerry VanDerPol told me about a favourite halibut spot near Cape Mark in Milbanke Sound, where the 240 ft shelf extends out into deeper water with the bottom dropping off quickly on three sides. I found a spot on the chart that matched Jerry's description and fished it several times in August, and caught some nice fish during a period when few of the other guides were bringing in halibut.

There is also a kelp covered rock nearby which is just under water on a low tide. One morning I had three guests who wanted bottom fish. We fished for halibut until the tide began to flow, then we moved to the rock. I was thinking of it as a rock in a river -- the fish are likely to concentrate in the pocket of slow water directly behind the rock, so we began our drifts at the rock and bounced bottom as the current pulled us downstream into deeper water. It was a blast – not only were we able to fish in the shelter of the rock while the current was running strong, but we picked up two or three halibut, ling, or rockfish on each pass. We returned with a boat load of bottom fish, which is rare in that area.

Summary: Thanks Ron and Jerry for the tip on the halibut spot. On reflection it's obvious that the bottom fish would move to the downstream side of the rocks and pinnacles while the current is running, but for me this was a new fishing method.

Halibut on a Salmon Rod

Johnny is a very good guide. He is also a friend and a really fine person (he was my roommate for several seasons). During a trip last August his guests had "tubbed out" on chinook and coho and wanted to catch some ling cod. Johnny feels that halibut gear is unnecessarily heavy for ling and prefers to use normal salmon gear instead, set up for mooching with an eight ounce sliding ball weight. Since the ling have very sharp teeth he ties his own leaders with 50 lb monofilament line, and fishes whole herring with the Alaska roll.

They were fishing the 80 ft flat near Cape Mark, slowly trolling along the bottom for ling, when one of the guests hooked up on a big halibut. Then the other guest hooked the same halibut (it had swallowed both herring). The two guests were using lodge salmon rods with bait casting style reels and forty pound nylon monofilament, and it was an epic battle.

Eventually with both guests working together to put maximum pressure on the halibut they got him to the surface. The big halibut was obviously too large to keep. Johnny used the harpoon shaft to measure the halibut for length and then cut both leaders, releasing the fish. Later back at the lodge with the aid of a set of tables he estimated the weight at 250 to 300 lbs.

Summary: Well done Johnny, Milbanke Sound is usually a difficult area to find halibut.

Confidence

Winston Churchill once said that "success is the ability to go from one disaster to the next without a loss of confidence". When I first read those words I thought he must have meant it tongue in cheek, however after learning more about his career in politics I realized that it was a serious comment. In life in general and fishing in particular, it is very important to have confidence.

Wayne is a very experienced guide, in my opinion one of the top guides on the coast and I'd like to think of him as a mentor. When we first met about six years ago he took me under his wing and showed me how he does a cutplug. He also mentioned that the most important factor in fishing is to have confidence, in yourself and your fishing methods. Since then I've thought of him many times when the fishing was slow.

Last summer Wayne and I were fishing in Milbanke Sound and it was Wayne who was having a tough trip. There were occasional big salmon around but Wayne wasn't catching them. It was also the peak of the coho run which made fishing for springs difficult. One evening Wayne seemed particularly down, describing how that day he had gone through four boxes of bait (perhaps 200 cut plugs) and hadn't caught a spring. The other guides, myself included, tried to be positive but we were facing the same devils – too many coho and not many springs in the area. In a sense it was refreshing that even Wayne, who we all respected enormously, was having difficulty finding springs -- it took a little bit of the pressure off the rest of us.

The next morning his luck changed. Wayne tried a different fishing method (flasher and hootchie!) in a less popular area and nailed a 51 lb chinook. And later that afternoon he returned to fish in the middle of the pack with the rest of the fleet at Cheney Point and picked up another salmon in the low 50s, this time on whole herring with the Alaska roll. Thirty guided boats on the water that day and he got the only big salmon, and they were bruisers.

Later in the week I was sitting in the staff lounge after a difficult day of fishing, just chatting with the other guides, and one of the more experienced full time guides looked up and said "Wayne is a god – he caught two fifty pound salmon in the same day". Everyone agreed.

All fishermen have slow periods. It's important to have confidence in yourself and in your fishing methods. During the slow periods the best fishermen work harder and don't give up, if the fish are there you'll get one. There's another old saying that I like: "Tough times don't last, but tough people do".

Summary: Wayne, you're one tough dude.

Solitude

I love guiding, but there are times when it is really pleasant to get away from the lodge and just be alone. For me that means fishing by myself, usually after supper for an hour or two before dark.

When I fish by myself I only use one rod. Partly this is to reduce the workload, as the intention is to relax after a long day on the water. However it is also so I can clear the deck quickly and follow the occasional big salmon. Landing a tyee without assistance is difficult, especially if it is big, and the satisfaction is enormous.

The same day Wayne picked up his two 50s I went out after supper and fished Cheney Point by myself. Harry Nilsson (you might know Harry as the author of The Little Red Fishing Knot Book) is a fellow relief guide and was also fishing Cheney Point that evening. Harry was running two rods.

I was using a green glow Pro-Troll with large herring and a toothpick to hold up the tail "butt plug" style, at 57 ft. As I passed the hole just north of the rock at Cheney Point a huge spring hit it. No foreplay, the rod suddenly hammered down hard with line screaming out, and going very, very fast. I turned the boat immediately and pressed the downrigger button to bring the ball up, and began to chase the fish as I held the rod and watched the line scream out. There was one guest boat near me and I called on the radio to warn them about the fish – they turned south to what they thought was a safe distance.

The salmon was running fast, much faster than the boat could move into the wind and waves at a slow idle. I had to speed up the motor, steer, and try to recover line. Still he was taking out line on me. At first it was no problem, I had confidence he would turn and still had lots of line on the reel. I followed him for several minutes (it felt like ages) before I became concerned about running out of line. I remember looking down at the reel arbor and realizing that less than half the line was left, and then the line went slack. Did he spit the hooks? No, I recovered the green bead but not the stainless steel swivel. I wasn't putting a lot of pressure on the fish and the line had parted above the swivel.

Wow. A high adrenaline experience and a lesson in humility. I wasn't playing that salmon, he was playing me. I had followed him for 300 to 400 yards and probably lost more than 300 yards from the reel, that was quite a run. The guest boat was the only boat near me and they were almost a quarter mile away, and through luck or intent I think the salmon had taken the line into their prop.

The only similar experience I've had with respect to the speed that this fish ran (really fast) or the length of the first run (six hundred yards and still going strong when the line parted) was the 57 lb spring at Englefield Bay. I think this one might have been similar. He was much more powerful than any of the 30s or 40s that I've guided or caught personally.

A wonderful experience for me, but it was unfortunate that he left with the hooks and leader as it reduced his chances of survival. It was my birthday, and I would have released any fish I caught that evening. I tried to fish another pass but couldn't settle down, I was so pumped with adrenaline I was practically bouncing off the gunnels. It was still early but I called it a night and went back to the lodge.

A couple of nights later I was fishing Cheney Point again. Harry was also on the water, and as we passed I noticed that he was only fishing one rod. I commented, and his reply was "I get it". He had also lost a big salmon that evening.

Summary: I value the experience and in any case would prefer to see a big salmon make it back to the river to spawn. Clint and Nigel are probably laughing as they read this, because over the years I've had a couple of encounters with salmon or halibut that I couldn't quite handle – I don't mind. To me if it's a sure thing it's a lot less interesting -- I'm just happy that the salmon came out to play.

Silver Horde and Bug Eye Hootchies

I don't like to use flashers, but there are days when it's necessary to put a salmon in the boat. Early in the season the young herring are small and at some locations (for example Borrowman Bay or Eclipse) there can be a lot of sand lance in the area. At Whale Channel the most popular hootchie is a Silver Horde Ace Hi "Needlefish" Fly http://www.silverhorde.com/id163.htm. I like it in the Glow Green Splatter Back colour (142) -- it imitates a sand lance or immature herring and glows in low light conditions. I've used them for several years and they can be deadly.

Wayne's all time favourite is the Four Inch Green Alien 450 Max Flash Bug Eye, which is available from Deathwish Lures Inc. http://bugeyefly.com/bugeye-fly/max-flash/maxflash-greenalien.html. He's used it for years, and this is the hootchie that got him his first 51 lb salmon this summer. This hootchie is similar to the Silver Horde but a bit bulkier.

Summary: My tackle kit is already well stocked with Silver Horde hootchies and I've ordered ten Bug Eyes for next season.

Flashers

I don't like running flashers (I think I've said this already) but when the fishing is slow it's often necessary. The general rule for chinook seems to be green in the early season, purple haze in late July and early August and red later in August. The salmon seem to interpret the flasher as another salmon competing for the bait or lure, and the colour of the flasher might match the colour of the other chinook salmon in the area. These are generalizations – when coho and chinook are feeding actively on euphausiid shrimp they often prefer red flashers. Last summer the chinook didn't seem interested in the purple haze flasher and favoured red most of the season (which might be related to the earlier observation about red hooks).

Late in the run when red fleshed chinook salmon approach their natal rivers the pigment begins to migrate from the muscle to the skin, turning it a reddish colour. White springs develop black areas on their skin. At Whale Channel in late June, nearing the end of the Kitimat run of white springs, one of the guides did well with a cop car (black and white) flasher.

Summary: I now have a cop car flasher in my kit.

Pressure

Dave Drever is a friend and we've guided together since the St Johns Lodge days. It was near the end of August, the fishing had dropped off and the weather was turning nasty. I had completed my last trip and was packing to go home but Dave was staying. He told me that the next trip was a "couples" trip and he had been assigned to guide Mark Pendlington. I've met Mark and I regularly watch his fishing program. Mark was going to videotape the trip and would likely televise it later – I could only imagine the pressure Dave felt, and be thankful it wasn't me (not a chance, Dave is a much more experienced guide and was the obvious choice to guide Mark). Wow, Dave must have been sweating bullets.

A month later we exchanged emails and I learned that since it was a short trip they only had two full days of fishing. One day was 40 knot winds and they couldn't get on the water. On the other day Dave guided Mark's wife to a salmon in the low 40s that they tailed and released – fantastic. He got the tyee on teaser head herring with the tail pinned up "butt plug" style.

Summary: Well done, David, what a great way to end the summer. And thanks again for showing me how to do a "butt plug".

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

Bill Haymond