### FREE TAKE ONE!

# Puget sound blackmouth trolling

The resident chinook inhabiting Puget Sound consist of mostly hatchery salmon raised by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) that were held past their normal juvenile release which caused them to reside within Puget Sound rather than migrate to the ocean. Although they are available year round, the prime time to catch these fish is from November through March. Referred to as "Blackmouth" by local anglers these resident chinook salmon are what this report will help you catch.

#### FINDING BLACKMOUTH IN PUGET SOUND

Successful salmon fishing in Puget Sound begins with understanding the immense body of water you're fishing. Puget Sound is not a lake or a bay or even the ocean, it is an inland waterway that due to its unique shape more closely resembles the tidal portion of a humongous river than anything else. Daily tides cause the water and current to change direction twice each day. Not wanting to battle heavy currents, Puget Sound Blackmouth position themselves to the downstream side of points of land that extend into this waterway with each change of the tide.

In the many years fishing this sprawling saltwater complex I've learned that Puget Sound Blackmouth relate to three things: feed, tide-caused current, and structure.

We have all heard the line, "Find the bait...find the fish." It sounds so easy but many anglers ignore this simple advice when trying to locate salmon. Salmon are voracious feeders and are constantly on the hunt for sand lance (candlefish) and herring.

The sand lance, which are known locally as the "candlefish," because of their high oil content which pioneers took advantage of and literally used as candles, are an ecologically important forage fish throughout Puget Sound. So, where you find sand lance you will find salmon. Sand lance school in Puget Sound's many bays, banks and inlets. They are an important food source for juvenile salmon who crave their high oil content; for example, 35% of juvenile salmon diets are comprised of sand lance and resident Blackmouth salmon depend on them for 60% of their diet. Sand lance spawning occurs during the spring, at high tide, usually in shallow water associated with sand or gravel beaches; and although sand lance are seldom collected and used as bait they definitely draw hungry salmon to areas where they congregate.

Herring, like salmon, will seek out resting spots that are dictated by tidal current. As in river fishing, bait will be pushed into the lee (downstream side) of a current flow behind points, islands, and land masses. The same is true in Puget Sound, knowing the position of the tide will allow you to find areas where currents are slow moving. What I've noticed is that baitfish and Blackmouth are usually found where currents are running 1.2 knots or less.

Examples of outgoing current fisheries are Point Defiance in the south sound and Point No Point in the north sound. The bait gets pushed in behind the land mass as the current in Puget Sound runs back out. Examples of incoming tide caused current fisheries would be Point Dalco in the south across from Point Defiance and Double Bluff in the north located across from Point No Point.

Tide books and daily current charts are readily available in print, on the web, and even on most modern marine electronic GPS programs for Puget Sound.

The third factor in locating resident chinook is structure. When the bait moves out of an area most of the schools of salmon will follow. This means that if great fishing reports are coming from the San Juan Islands, more than likely the bait has moved to the north end of Puget Sound and the bulk of Blackmouth with it. In fact, during summer it's not unusual for resident salmon to sometimes migrate out to the ocean off the coast or Vancouver Island following bait movement.

However, there are exceptions and this is where structure comes into play. For whatever reason, there are salmon that will not leave the local area and follow the bait migration. These Blackmouth tend to be long and skinny but extremely aggressive and will take a lure or bait at the first opportunity. Puget Sound Blackmouth can be found along underwater drop offs, ledges and on, or around, bottom ridges or humps that break the current flow.

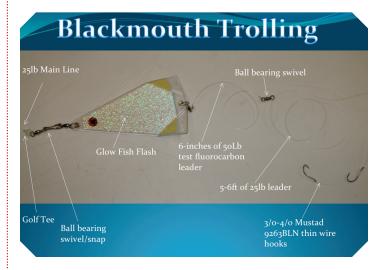
Sunlight plays an important role in locating resident chinook. As a rule, these fish avoid strong light and move into low-light areas. While they may be near the surface at dawn feeding on herring they will go deep as soon as the light begins to intensify. Once the sun is up you should have your gear fishing just off bottom in 90-120 feet of water. During midday, when the sun is brightest, try moving to deeper water of 200 feet or more where Blackmouth can be found lurking near the bottom.

You should also understand that locating active feeding salmon requires an understanding of their prime feeding periods. As previously mentioned, salmon can be found where bait concentrations are located. They are aggressive feeders and tend to feed when the current is minimized to expend as little energy as possible. That means the best time to catch them is when you're fishing in the right current flow or areas where currents are soft running. You may have heard that the best time to fish for salmon is one-to-two hours before or after a tide change. Really, it's right before or right after a current change. That's when the water goes slack and the fish will be on the feed.

#### RIGGING FOR BLACKMOUTH

Blackmouth fishing, like all salmon fishing, can be divided into two basic fishing methods: bait and hardware.

A favorite local tactic is to fish light gear with a cut plug herring behind a Big Al's Fish Flash®. The horizontal, strobe-like flashes of light produced by the Fish Flash attract salmon. Because the Fish Flash attracts salmon without the drag associated with other attractors, this flasher combined with bait or lures, is hard to beat when it comes to having fun, especially if you're a light tackle enthusiast like me. My favorite Fish Flash sizes are the 8 and 10 inch. I tend to use the 8 inch size most, but switch to the larger 10 inch size when chasing Blackmouth in deep water.



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Great bait is essential to salmon success and herring is a solid choice for Puget Sound salmon because it works and is easily available compared to candle fish. When choosing frozen herring, you'll find that the best are those having bright scales and clear eyes.

Herring is available in different sizes with the "green label" size my personal favorite for Puget Sound's resident salmon. You should realize the color ink used on packaged herring signifies the bait size; for example, while green label herring is my favorite when chasing Blackmouth blue label herring are larger and widely used for fall chinook. Although fresh herring have softer flesh than herring that has been starved for a time and then flash frozen, some anglers prefer fresh. Frankly, both work and on any given day can be a winner.

You will want to rig your herring so that it spins when pulled through the water. Although whole and plug cut herring can be rigged to spin, I normally plug cut my herring. To plug cut a herring, begin your bait preparation with a sharp knife and cutting board. Lay the herring on your cutting board and with the head to the right and make one clean cut at a 45-degree angle behind the gills with the knife handle slightly angled toward the tail. Once cut, you should remove the head and viscera from the body cavity.



Plug cut herring rigging is the most popular and effective bait for catching Puget Sound Blackmouth

In advance of my trips, I pre-tie several 72-inch leaders using 20-or-25 pound test fluorocarbon in combination with Mustad 9263 thin wire barbless 3/0-4/0 size single hooks. To rig a herring, run the first (bottom) hook through the abdomen and out the lateral line on the side of the herring, leave it hanging free. Take the top hook, the 4/0 and turn it into the bait at the front of the cut at the top of the spine. If you cut and rigged your bait properly it will spin like a drill bit in the water. Blackmouth, like most salmon, love a tight spinning herring.

My rod and reel setups consist of Shimano Tekota 500LC reels and G. Loomis 10.6-foot SAR1265C rods. The reels are spooled up with 25-pound test main line. This is the one fishing method where I prefer monofilament line over super braid.

The medium & large size Big Al's Fish Flash flashers in glow and UV colors are the work horse of my winter salmon fishing. I prefer to troll herring on the 6 foot leader but if bait stealing dogfish are around I couple my Fish Flash with some of the popular four inch salmon trolling spoons in UV glow green, chartreuse and blue color combinations.



Big Al's Fish Flash is the ideal flasher for Puget Sound Blackmouth. No drag, lots of flash and glo finishes make it the best choice for Puget Sound salmon.

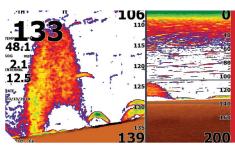
The way I rig my Big Al's Fish Flash is to add a golf tee shaped bead to my main line above the ball bearing swivel that comes with the Fish Flash. I then attach a 12 inch piece of 50 pound test fluorocarbon to the back swivel of my flasher. To the end of this leader I add an additional ball bearing swivel where I then attach a 6 foot leader back to my herring or salmon spoon. Having three swivels included in

my set up eliminates all chances of line twist while trolling. I run this back 15-20 ft behind the boat and clip it into my downrigger release.

#### **PROVEN BLACKMOUTH TACTICS**

Using a downrigger to take your flasher and bait/spoon combination to the depth the fish are holding is, in my opinion, the best method for consistently catching Blackmouth from Puget Sound. I spend much of the winter season employing this fishing method. I run 3 Scotty electric downriggers from my 26 ft. Salt Patrol Team Lowrance Boat; they're hard to beat for producing Blackmouth day-in and day-out. Being able to cover lots of water with your tackle at a controlled depth is an extremely effective way to take chinook from the deep waters of Puget Sound and the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Trolling downriggers means I spend much of my time glued to my Lowrance HDS sonar screen watching for bait and fish and adjusting my downrigger depth to match what I'm seeing on the screen. I like to run my gear about 1-2 feet above where I spot salmon marks on the HDS sonar. Salmon look ahead and up when searching for prey but generally don't look down as they prefer to strike their prey from below.



Premium electronics are essential to success in catching Puget Sound Blackmouth. Here, you can see feeding Blackmouth and bait balls.

I like to bracket the water depth I'm trolling by adding depth on each pass until I hit fish or locate bait. I'll then try to stay with the bait or fish I'm seeing on my sonar and keep trolling through them until I get a hookup. After landing each fat salmon, I'm back on the troll, eyes glued to my fish finding sonar.



Captain John Keizer is a columnist/photographer/videographer for Salt-Patrol.com. In addition, John is a featured columnist for The Reel News where in each issue he shares his 40 year knowledge of saltwater fishing and boating in Washington, Oregon, Alaska, British Columbia, and Mexico. Specialties include salmon, tuna, blue water, and kokanee fishing and travel. As a pro angler and Captain of the Team Lowrance Boat, John is a featured speaker at NW sports shows and conducts classroom instruction seminars at other events. In addition, John is host of the Salt Patrol annual Marlin Tournament held in Baja Mexico every year. Check him out on SaltPatrol.com or find him on Facebook.



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