

Fishing the Discovery Passage between Vancouver Island and mainland British Columbia

Most fishing trips start out with the intention of catching as many fish as possible or catching the biggest fish, this trip was a little different. Don't get me wrong, we wanted to catch lots of fish and as big as possible but on this trip we hoped for something more unusual.

My wife, Cindy, and I had spent the summer in Campbell River on Vancouver Island, our third summer spent there, and on this occasion we were joined by our daughter, Michelle, and her partner, Adrian, for a few days. The occasion was a significant birthday for Michelle and we wanted to arrange a special day for her. When she was much younger she used to accompany me on fishing trips to our local lakes but was never that interested in the fishing, more in disrupting my fishing, so it was with no little trepidation that I arranged a fishing trip for her.

We had decided to arrange a day out on the ocean fishing for Chinook and Coho salmon but to also include as much wildlife spotting as possible. Around Vancouver Island there is an enormous variety of sea life and land based wild animals and we wanted to show Michelle as much of this as possible.

I spoke to my friend, fishing guide Gene Berkey of SeaBeyond Adventures, and he agreed to my suggestion of a mixed fishing and wildlife spotting day out. He was quick to point out that although the fishing prospects were good for our chosen date the wildlife spotting could be a bit hit and miss.

We pulled away from the Government dock in Campbell River at first light and headed north towards the Seymour Narrows. The sea was already choppy but nothing compared to what was to follow later in the day. Before reaching the Narrows we pulled into a bay and dropped crab pots which we would pull up on our return to harbour – our insurance in case the salmon fishing was unsuccessful. Dungeness crab currently sells for about \$30CD/lb so are a welcome addition to any day's catch.

We headed back into open sea and towards the Narrows and Ripple Rock, scene of many ship wrecks and lost fisherman both commercial and sport. A few weeks after this trip another boat with four fishermen was capsized – three were saved and the fourth died. The history of Ripple Rock is interesting to anyone who is intending to go on a cruise from Vancouver to Alaska and can be found here <http://www.crmuseum.ca/ripple-rock> The explosion that destroyed Ripple Rock was the biggest non-nuclear explosion at that time in history and can be seen here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=getmLam9H80>

We passed through the Narrows avoiding the many whirlpools, which have claimed so many lives, and proceeded up Johnstone Strait where we had to hug the leeward shore, and travel much slower than usual, due to the strengthening wind.



On a trip about a week earlier we had spotted a lone wolf on the shoreline of Sonora Island, a very rare sight, but there was no sign of him today.

There was only one other boat travelling up the Johnstone Strait today, a sign that other fishermen from Campbell River had heeded the forecast of strong winds and remained in dock. However, when we arrived at our fishing mark there were about 20 other boats already there. They had come from closer fishing lodges located in the north and hadn't had to endure the whirlpools and strong currents of the Narrows and the choppy waters of Johnstone Strait.

We set up our rods and lowered our plugs on the downriggers to a depth of about 200ft (this is where the Invicta dry fly purists might want to stop reading!!) and joined the other boats trolling up and down the mark. For those of us who try to adhere to the etiquette of the 50yd rule between boats at Grafham and other UK fly fishing lakes this would be an eye opener as it was more a case of trying not to ram the other boats that were almost within touching distance at times and avoid the other lines trailing from the boats.

The fishing was a bit slow and very few rods bending on any of the boats but eventually one of our rods bounced into action resulting in Adrian catching his first ever salmon, a nice spring salmon of about 15lb



Adrian and his 15lb Chinook

We caught another couple of fish before deciding to move away from the other boats and head to another a mark. On the way we encountered a pod of Pacific White-sided Dolphins. There were over 300 in the pod and they decided that they wanted to play around the boat, a spectacular sight as they cavorted in the wash of the boat engines



Pacific White-sided Dolphin



Whilst others put on an aerial display

The display around the boat continued for quite a while but we dragged ourselves away from this spectacle in search of more fish.

Gene took us to another mark where he told us that we should catch Coho salmon, and how right he was. This time it was Michelle's turn, a magnificent, fin and scale perfect, Coho estimated to be about 16lb – a far cry from the days when she accompanied me to Fen Drayton lakes in search of small Rudd and Roach.



Michelle and her 16lb Coho.

As I mentioned at the beginning, this day wasn't meant to be all about fishing, we had five nice fish in the boat so we decided to start for home and do some sight-seeing on the way back. Instead of making our way back down Johnstone Strait, Gene took us around some of the islands which make up Desolation Sound. This is a beautiful area with many islands and hidden inlets between Vancouver Island and the mainland of British Columbia. George Vancouver, who discovered these islands and named the area, must have been having a really bad day to name it Desolation Sound – it's one of the most fantastic places to be – awesome as they say on the West Coast!



On our way past Sonora Lodge on the east coast of Sonora Island we spotted some basking Stellar Sea-lions



And Harbour Seals

Near the basking Stellar Sea-lions there was a seal carcass which Turkey vultures were feeding on with Bald Eagles sitting in the trees above awaiting their turn to feed.

Up until this point we had been in the shelter of various bays around Sonora Island but as we rounded the south of the island into the Okisollo Channel we encountered strong winds and heavy seas which made our journey back to the shelter of Campbell River an extremely choppy one. On our return to Campbell River we learnt that there had been some concern for our safety as the wind speed had reached 25mph – much stronger than is considered safe for a small boat.

This had been a memorable day, not only had we caught some nice fish but we had seen magnificent ocean wild life – Pacific White-sided Dolphin, Stellar Sea-lions, Harbour Seals, Turkey Vultures, and Bald eagles all in their natural habitat and surroundings of the Pacific North West coast, but we weren't finished yet as we needed to collect our crab pots on our way home.

We dodged the whirlpools as we passed through Seymour Narrows again and pulled into the bay where our day had started. As we motored slowly towards the buoys marking the crab pots the huge dorsal fin of a male Orca appeared in the wake of the boat- Michelle first spotted it and alerted Gene at which point he brought the boat to a standstill. We patiently waited and were rewarded when the fin re-appeared followed by the smaller fin of a female Orca. They followed us into the bay and swam past us towards a log sort at the head of the bay. These were the transient Orca which feed on mammals and they were on the hunt for seals and sea-lions around the log booms.



Orca hunting around the log booms



There she blows!
(but in this case it was a male)

The Orca were unlucky on this occasion and swam off leaving us to pull up our crab pots – no Dungeness crab this time but enough Red Rock crab to feed us all that evening, followed by fresh barbequed Coho salmon - thanks to Gene and his wife Shauna.

We didn't encounter any of the Humpback whales that frequent this coastline on the way to their feeding grounds in the North Pacific (although we had seen one the evening before heading north past Campbell River) and neither did we spot any of the Black bears that can often be seen foraging along the beaches. We felt very privileged to have caught Chinook and Coho salmon, and to have spotted Stellar sea-lions, Harbour seals, Pacific White-sided Dolphin, and the top predator Transient Orca was sufficient – one has to leave something for another day.

With special thanks to Gene Berkey of Sea Beyond Adventures – Campbell River



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