

Tuna fishing trip worth the rock-and-roll

The ocean serves up a different adventure on every trip

By RICH LANDERS
The Spokesman-Review

WESTPORT, Wash. — There's nothing canned about the tuna fishing experience on a charter boat out of Westport, Washington.

With a state-average catch rate of eight fish per person, charter boat anglers are almost sure to return with the makings of a saltwater feast. But the ocean serves up a different adventure on every trip.

Anglers lining up at boat docks before sunrise are aware that venturing 25-60 miles offshore leaves no place to hide if the wind fouls the mood of the sea.

If you're game, September is prime time for albacore averaging roughly 20 pounds or more, and October is known as big-fish month. The local derby-leading tuna last week was 43 pounds.

Westport charter boats are up to the challenge, landing 88 percent of Washington's sport albacore catch, the Fish and Wildlife Department says.

Even though schools of these tuna are measured by the acre, they are a speck in the open ocean. Skippers find them in 3,000 feet of water by trolling while scouting the horizon for jumpers and seabirds flocking to feed on bait boiling to the surface as tuna slash and feed below.

A deliciously blue-collar experience

Pursuing the albacore and some yellowtail that cruise within striking distance off the coast from mid-June into November is a deliciously blue-collar experience. A certain toughness is required. A cast-iron stomach helps.

Tuna anglers tend to be on whack-and-stackers. There's no catch limit. Skippers warn that customers should be capable of boarding a carnival ride and lifting 50-pound bags repeatedly.

Some anglers bring beer aboard for refreshment. Chardonnay? Probably never.

Choosing a smaller six-angler vessel is the newer, faster alternative for getting lines in the water, fish in the hold and back to the marina before the traditional larger boats and overnight charters.

At the helm of a 29-footer powered by twin 250-hp outboards, Capt. Mark Coleman of All Rivers & Saltwater Charters warns anglers on his website that these are "hardcore 8- to 12-hour fishing trips!"

Anglers must have full rain gear that includes rubber boots, bibs and coat with hood. "And no cheap crap, either," he says.

Rain and saltwater spray can be expected and everyone is hosed down in the bloodbath after a bite. Skippers worth their paycheck immediately bleed and ice every tuna that comes into the boat.

"These are physically demanding, fast-paced trips that require coordinated movements on a busy, moving deck among other anglers while battling a powerful fish," the website says.

"These trips are not appropriate for people with balance, spine, neck, limb, or severe health issues, recent surgery, require canes, crutches or disabled in any manner that would inhibit keeping up during the trip.

"Depending on the ocean conditions, the ride to and from the tuna grounds can be bumpy with occasional harder bumps as you'd expect."

Smitten by the promise

My friend Jim Kujala and I signed up without hesitation.

Costs are a bit more than tuna in a can: \$400



Rich Landers/The Spokesman-Review

Puget Sound fishing guide Keith Robbins poses for a photo in September in a boat off Westport, Wash. Robbins switched positions to be a client on an All Rivers and Saltwater Charters tuna trip out of Westport. "Albacore are delicious," he explained.



Rich Landers/The Spokesman-Review

Capt. Mark Coleman coaches his group on an All Rivers and Saltwater Charters trip out of Westport, Wash. Multiple hookups are the norm when tuna boats get their anglers into a bite.

per person, plus tips and extra for fish cleaning if desired. But we were smitten by the promise of hooking fish that accelerate like sports cars and feed friends like a gourmet chuckwagon.

While Westport also is known for introducing masses of anglers to Washington's iconic salmon runs, tuna are another animal - one of the bright spots on an otherwise concerning Northwest saltwater scene.

Albacore, which venture into cooler water than most of the 15 tuna species recognized worldwide, are large, sleek predatory fish that spend their lives in the open oceans. That's in contrast to salmon, which hatch in rivers and migrate to live most of their adult lives at sea before returning to natal streams to spawn.

Salmon have orange or pink meat while

albacore are pale-fleshed - the advertised "chicken of the sea."

Unlike salmon, which are cold-blooded slaves to their environment, albacore are basically warm-blooded. They can regulate their body temperature. These speedsters come into a boat about 15 degrees warmer internally than the water. This gives them an advantage over their blue-water prey, researchers say.

Swim bladders

Albacore don't have swim bladders, so they must be constantly on the move. To fuel this activity they eat around 25 percent of their weight every day, according to some reports.

All of this works to the advantage of the angler. Tuna are a scream to catch.

We were nearly 30 miles offshore when Coleman found the first school of the day. He eased the boat in and shut it down while deck hand Travis Richey grabbed a plastic whiffle ball bat with the end cut off. He stuffed the bat with live anchovies and swung it to spray bait out from the boat as though he were a priest flinging holy water over churchgoers.

The congregation responded. Hooks baited with live anchovies were flung over the boat side facing the wind and allowed to swim and free-line into the school.

"Virtually no thumbing," Coleman yelled. "Keep the line coming off the reel. To do it right, you're always on the very edge of a major backlash."

Soon, line started peeling off quickly. Count to two, Coleman said, and then shift the lever smoothly from free-spool to let the drag take charge of a tuna that's about to go ape.

"Don't jerk the rod up to set the hook," Coleman had said in his prelaunch briefing. "We have strong gear, but tuna can be stronger."

The anglers had to dance around the boat,

lifting rods over one angler's head, under the rod of another and back again as their quarry darted around like aerial fireworks gone haywire.

Some of the tuna made five or six arm-aching runs before coming to the boat. The fish were gaffed - it's faster than netting - and hooks immediately were rebaited and put out until the bite waned.

Six albacore - known as "longfin tuna" because of their unusually lengthy pectoral fins - littered the boat floor after the first siege.

Coleman kicked into gear again, trolling jigs as he searched the horizon for a run and gun. Both methods found schools in a pattern he repeated until shortly after noon, when the four anglers had caught 33 albacore.

With the wind picking up, he gave us an option to call it good, and we did.

Filletted the catch

Richey filletted the catch on the salt-sprayed deck as the boat rocked and rolled during the rough run back to port. By the time Coleman eased off the throttle at Westport Marina, all the fish were processed and bagged, including a neat kite-shaped tuna belly slab from each fish.

Depending on the weather, bar conditions and tides, the return time to Westport may be slightly early or late in order to be safe. The ocean calls the shots.

But on this September day, we were easily back by 3 p.m. - soon enough to load ice and fish into our vehicle, avoid the traffic gridlock on I-5 and beat the 6:30 blasting closure on I-90 at Snoqualmie Pass by three minutes. We called it a day back in Spokane in time for a good night's sleep.

The gourmet part of albacore fishing started the next evening, complemented by a bottle of chardonnay.



9-1-WHAT?

THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

Unsavory character

Most of the odd callers to emergency dispatch live in a world of prose, not poetry. But kudos to the caller from Seaside who reported "an unsavory character loitering."

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT.

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{9/24 @ 8:56 p.m.} Caller reported an unsavory character loitering. #Seaside

6:47 AM - 28 Sep 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{9/27 @ 2:34 p.m.} Man throwing garbage around on the street. #Astoria

6:47 AM - 28 Sep 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{9/27 @ 3:01 p.m.} Man lying across the #Astoria Riverfront Trolley tracks.

6:30 AM - 28 Sep 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{9/27 @ 6:53 p.m.} Several juveniles harassing elk. #Warrenton

8:51 AM - 28 Sep 2016

9-1-WHAT? 9-1-WHAT? Following

{9/27 @ 4:46 p.m.} Report of people on a hill throwing rocks down onto the Clatsop Community College campus. #Astoria

6:47 AM - 28 Sep 2016

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From left: Mateusz Perkowski, Paris Achen

