

# COASTAL LIFE

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CLOSE TO HOME

## CATCHING DUNGIES

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FOR COAST WEEKEND

*A crab is an ornery crustacean. The four legs on its posterior love to dart and poke and scamper sideways, creating distraction away from the job of the claws or pinchers. The two front legs, complete with finger-tearing claws, seem to have a warrior's disdain (or attraction) for human flesh, particularly the metacarpals. The crab — 60-pounds of crushing and tearing force is equally painful from either sex — seem intent on grabbing and squeezing. Or mangling.*

### Bug-Eyed Boys

This is a story about catching the nasty varmints. Let it be known: that same tenacious creature is delicious to eat, indeed, one of the best proteins one can spoon into the mouth of a hungry human being. But any resident of Pacific or Clatsop county needn't be lectured on the sublime qualities of that white fleshy meat. It is eaten with relish.

The Port of Ilwaco rested quietly, except for the ripple crisscrossing the brown dish-water tide. We loaded 10 heavy pots on board of the good motorboat, Trident, the proud possession of George and Rachael Gana. Florescent-colored buoys came along for the ride. They would decorate the gray ebbing water of the Columbia River like Christmas lights brightening up a quicksilver, rainy December.

We had bait: razor clams and fish heads. We had packed a lunch, most of which we wouldn't eat, due mostly to rough water. Rachael steered the good boat out of the harbor. She is competent and steady. She is kindly. Let it be said, this was sportfishing, Chapter 1 of our story. Someone dear to me is a commercial crab fisherman. Below is his story. We'll call it Chapter 2.

Often professional crabber's stories are war stories: standing at the block (winch) on an angry sea, combers climbing 10 to 15-foot high, sometimes (god forbid)



Photos by David Campiche

**LEFT: The Trident prepares to launch. MIDDLE: Dungeness crabs are the goal. RIGHT: Phil Allen prepares to drop a crab pot.**

higher yet. The sea rolling. Roiling. Legs wanting to buckle, 48 hours after opening day when professionals crab-fish, no-matter what. Bulky rain gear weighs them down. Saltwater finds its way inside. It's cold all the time. Sharp wind rifles out of the southwest. The skipper draws the boat beside one of a couple hundred buoys, each attached to a 90-pound crab pot by a long blue-green line, more weight if stuffed with writhing Dungies. A deckhand corrals them one at a time and watches carefully as the block drags the pot out of the ocean and above the deck. The fisherman grabs the pot, swings it over the deck, unlocks the bale, and unceremoniously drops the crab into the saltwater hold. Before the next retrieve, a minute blows by. Another pot is yanked aboard the vessel. The crabs are dumped, and then they scamper about in the saltwater trough, unaware of their fate. The bait is reloaded. The minutes play out like the surge of the white-hatted combers.

That route continues, day and night, the sodium lights illuminating the night deck, this ocean reality, until the hold is crammed full of squirming Dungies, or exhaustion finally overcomes profit, and the boats slug their way across the Columbia River Bar to Astoria, Warrenton, Ilwaco or Chinook.

### Hard Day for Crabbing

Aboard the Trident, we drop our 10 pots, each one is untangled from a mid-den of steel and net and rope. Each is baited; each dropped as the small boat cuts through surging currents. Rachael is fight-

ing a strong and bitterly cold southeast wind. The river is running high and fast, the waves breaking in 4-foot swells, nothing to a commercial crabber, but plenty enough here.

If it seems a harsh day for crabbing the river, imagine how the ocean is performing. Here, battle leads to battle, leads to battle. The swells on such a day can easily exceed 20 feet. The wind is intense and cold. That east wind throws spume back over your head, or splashes into your face. Fingers are numb. Visibility is poor. Every deckhand knows, there is no sleep. Sometimes you pull a catnap on your feet. The game must play on — the first few days of crab fishing generally produce the bulk of profit for the entire season. "Get 'em now. Get 'em quick." Hard work and endurance are simply parts of the game plan. Truck payments wait at home. The mortgage. Insurance and taxes. Fishermen know the score.

### Homeward Bound

Back on the Trident the crabbing is poor. When the river whips up, the crab hunter down, bury their red-lacquered bodies beneath the sand and wait out the storm. Our first pot generates two keepers. The crab must be male. Must measure 5 3/4 inches (commercial: 6 1/4). Today, most of them don't. The second pot holds just one of the pinchy, bug-eyed boys. The next four pots are empty, and spirits are tumbling the same direction. I feel the blight of seasickness, fight it back. It always arrives for me like a ne'er-do-well relative who enters

unannounced on Thanksgiving Day.

Pot number seven produces a few more crab. Eight has one and nine the same. We retrieve the 10th empty and think about a hot-buttered rum and a fire blazing on the hearth.

The boat rocks and rolls and George thinks, we should play out a raincheck. We begin to load the pots back onto the deck. The gulls rally behind the stern begging for leftover bait. Across the river along the South Jetty, sea drift is being thrown 20 and 30 feet into the cold air. Far west of us, the commercial boats are just starting to get busy. Forget the storm. Forget an aching back and frozen hands. Few if any, will turn back.

On the ocean, combers build as the wind whips into a cacophony of sea sounds. Mostly the wind whistles out a sea ditty. Seabirds duck their small heads under their wings and ride out the storm. They whistle and squeak and cluck. The sea is gray. The vista is a mixture of dirty brown and pewter. Hard to focus on either when the rain turns visibility into a sheet of translucent water. No matter. No matter.

The next buoy appears like a plot in a mystery novel, and the deckhand hooks onto the line, feeds it through the block and drags another pot aboard, always cautious to protect his hands from the grinding winch. Always cautious on a sea that can quickly take his life.

This is the hard and dirty of crab fishing on nasty water on a nasty day. Welcome aboard! 