

COASTAL CUTTHROAT TROUT

WHILE WE OFTEN STALK TINY STREAMS FOR TROUT,
SOME CAN BE FOUND IN THE WORLD'S LARGEST OCEAN.

BY DON VACHINI

The scent of salt air and conifers dominated my nostrils. Although the early-March air was frigid and mid-morning temperatures hovered in the 40s, the sleek, dime-bright 21-inch trout at my feet had me warm all over. Initially resembling a rainbow, its pale-orange slash marks firmly identified it as a sea-run cutthroat — my biggest yet!

THE QUARRY

Though not high on the list of Pacific Northwest anglers who regularly pursue larger salmonids, the coastal cutthroat still remains an enviable target among tight-lipped locals. Also known as salter, native, coaster, sea-run or cutt, they are the smallest of the western anadromous trout, commonly measuring between 12-18 inches and 1-2 pounds. Although individuals can range over 20 inches and approach 3 pounds, their aggressive takes and pugnacity often belie their size.

Beginning in March, millions of out-migrating salmon and steelhead fry and smolts attempt to run the gauntlet from freshwater to the Pacific

Ocean. Upon approaching salt chuck, however, they often run headlong into early-migrating cutthroat, which get pretty locked in on these targets and eagerly ambush them. When this rendezvous of sorts occurs, many in-the-know anglers along California, Oregon and Washington's coastlines brave the weather and start gearing up for some notable, light-tackle action. Although seasonal stream closures remain in effect, their tidal portions are open year-round, offering solid chances for long-line connections.

SALT TIDES AND ESTUARIES

From NorCal to the Olympic Peninsula, sea-runs migrate in and out of coastal area, patrol estuaries, move into freshwaters of coastal creeks and rivers during the rainy season, overwinter and spawn in the headwater sections, then drop back down into salt water to resume the cycle again. The most consistent places to find them are in the estuaries where they fin amid such cover as stumps, rows of pilings, kelp beds, the mouths of feeder streams and rocky dropoffs near shore.

According to Alan Campbell, of the Eureka Fly Shop (707-444-2000), this wandering species spends considerable time in the food-rich brackish blend of estuarine waters before entering the bays and ocean. When at sea, they tend to grow rapidly as they travel in small schools, often doubling their size in the first year. "Evidence also seems to indicate that they seldom venture too far from the mouth of their home stream when they go to salt."

Heavy winter runoff replenishes coastal estuaries, endowing them with a constant influx of nutrients. Here, churning masses of plankton, shrimp, tiny marine life forms and small baitfish blend with sweet- and saltwater, not only creating a sanctuary, but a high-caloric hub of feeding activity. Small wonder that cutts spend much of their first two years swinging between top ocean and estuary feeding areas, often schooling in the smaller salt flats for lengthy periods.

STATE HOTSPOTS

By far, the most voluminous cutthroat



The author revives a healthy sea-run cutt taken near aquatic growth. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

habitat occurs in the Evergreen State. Here, according to Doug Rose, of Doug Rose Flyfishing (360-374-2635; www.dougroseflyfishing.com), they are found in every part of western Washington, from the streams flowing directly into the Pacific Ocean to the myriad rivers entering the Puget Sound Basin. While the ocean-facing coastline harbors such haunts as Gray's Harbor, Westport, La Push, Neah Bay and Willapa Bay plus the Queets, Bogachiel and Quinalt rivers, there is little doubt the protected waters of Puget Sound and Hood Canal remain shielded from harsh coastal conditions and consistently harbor thriving popu-

lations. "The Hood Canal's numerous feeders, clean gravel and relatively shallow depth not only account for abundant marine life but a safe sanctuary as well," explains Rose.

Oregon has sea-runs in nearly every river along its coast. The bays of Oregon's Newhalem, Yaquina, Nestucca, Coquille, Trask, Umpqua, Alsea, Elk, Rogue, Siletz and Coos rivers are sufficiently diverse in nature and offer productive salter angling.

In addition to the Eel, Klamath and Smith river tidewaters, Northern California's rugged Pacific Coast provides a few protected bays which host thin densities of coasters. Besides

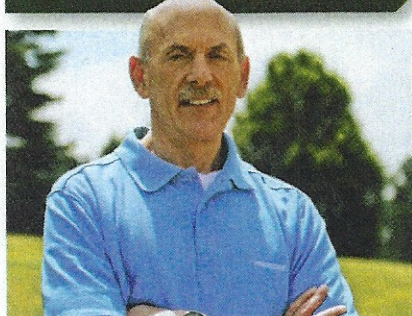
massive Eureka and Humboldt bays, Campbell notes a handful of freshwater lagoons, which are cut off from the sea by narrow spits of land. During heavy winter rains, spillage creates breaches to the ocean, allowing cutts to enter, then imprisoning them for a season or more when they close. "Trapped, fresh-run fish can provide torrid action as they consistently cruise along the shoreline of their temporary homes."

FINDING THEM

Oncorhynchus clarki clarki's propensity to go off the radar and travel between fresh- and saltwater makes

BONUS TIPS

GREAT IDEAS FROM EXPERTS



4 QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT A USED BOAT

If you're in the market for a used boat, this is your year to buy. But shopping for, and insuring, an older boat takes some time and thought. Answer these four questions and you'll be on your way to finding the boat and insurance coverage that fits your needs.

1. WHAT'S THE BOAT WORTH?

Depending on the year, make, and model of the used boat, it may be difficult to get accurate information about its value. You can find useful information in various "books," such as *nada.com*. For higher-end boats, I recommend getting a thorough evaluation by an accredited marine surveyor.

2. WHAT CAN I AFFORD?

To focus your search, you need to know what you want to pay for a boat. Asking that same question will help when selecting your insurance company and coverage, too.

Raising your policy's deductible will save you money. Some companies will reduce your deductible as much as 25 percent for each claim-free policy term — another great way to save.

3. HOW DO I WANT TO USE MY BOAT?

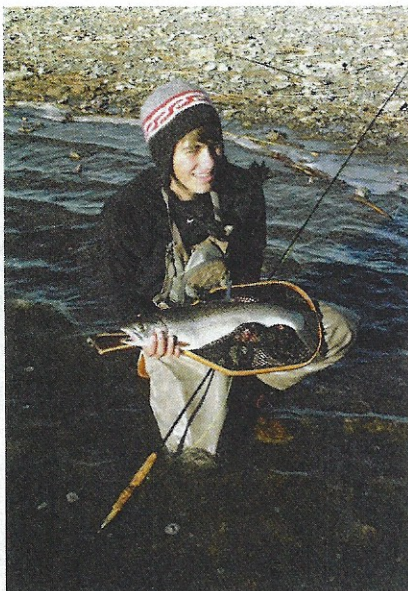
Whether you plan to fish inland coves or cruise open water will determine what kind of used boat you buy. What and whom you bring on board can also help you select the right coverage.

For example, if you bring your dog or cat along for the ride, check with your boat insurance company to see if your pets are protected.

4. HOW DO I TAKE CARE OF MY INVESTMENT?

If the used boat of your dreams is a classic, consider joining a club where you'll meet people who can help you with maintenance questions and upkeep questions. Be sure to get the boat's maintenance documents from the previous owner, read the owner's manual and follow the manufacturer's recommendations. ■

— **RICK STERN** is boat product manager at Progressive Insurance.



Ken Eide duped this hefty 17-inch sea-run by stripping a minnow-imitating Woolly Bugger. ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

them both elusive and intriguing at the same time. In fact, locating them can often be more difficult than duping them.

Timing outgoing migrations of immature salmon becomes a crucial factor in successfully zeroing in on salters. When timed correctly, huge concentrations of both baitfish and predators can provide phenomenal action. The tidal sections of longer stream systems usually produce more prolonged action than shorter drainages.

Moving tidal flows are more apt to harbor sea runs, which seem to prefer slow-swirling water or the soft edges near shore. In virtually all instances, fishing sessions are strictly dictated by tides and the movement of baitfish.

With mobility the key to pinpointing both structure and fish, anglers regularly opt for small rowboats, canoes, float tubes or paddleboats to efficiently explore and maneuver these vast estuaries or lagoons. Campbell suggests focusing efforts on dropoffs, submerged riverbeds or channels, shorelines with reeds or overhanging brush, mats of kelp or other aquatic growth, and diligently probing their margins.

FLY GEAR

An increasing number of anglers sportingly pursue these elusive trout

utilizing fly tackle. A 9-foot, 5- to 6-weight system with either a floating or fast-sinking, shooting-head line, 7- to 9-foot leader and 3X fluorocarbon tippet (cloudy water quality nullifies the need for gossamer tippets) will handle most estuarine endeavors. A floating line is perfect for working over the shallow water, but if using a sinking line, a stripping basket comes in handy for line management during lengthy casts.

Retrieved in a strip-pause sequence, minnow-imitating, size 6-10 cone-head Crystal Buggers, Night Leech, Matuka and Clouser Minnow streamers in white, yellow or olive or Epoxy Minnows with green backs and silvery sides can be deadly baitfish imitators. Size 8-12 Hilton, Brindle Bug, Black Rogue, Scud and Golden Demon are excellent shrimp replications. Dark skies = dark flies; light skies = light flies, is a solid rule of thumb, according to Rose.

He advises matching the size and silhouette of your fly to that of the baitfish and keeping the rod tip low to the water in order to maintain efficient, hook-setting line tension.

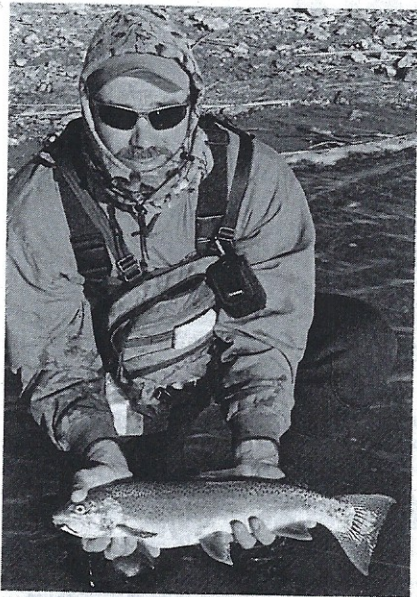
SPIN TACKLE

A 7- to 9-foot, light-action spinning rod matched with a reel loaded with limp, thin-diameter, 6-pound fluorocarbon line and a smooth-operating drag is necessary for negating wired-up salter's high-voltage surges. While most boat anglers prefer to hand-hold their spinning rod to "get a feel for the strike," a rod holder while rowing is a useful tool, especially if using more than one rod.

Proven hardware includes lightweight, silver/blue Kastmaster, Little Cleo and Crocodile spoons, Bingo Bug and Rapala plugs and "noisy" Vibrax, Rooster Tail and Panther Martin spinners. A red, single hook attached to any of these lures adds an enticing "wounded" appearance, while towing a fly 3 feet behind can also sway a curious chaser.

Yellow or white mini-jigs suspended 3 feet under a bobber are perfect for slightly choppy water conditions and, where permitted, a whole nightcrawler bounced along bottom on a sliding sinker can be highly productive.

Continued on page 54...



Simon Bell waded a freshwater lagoon to fool this land-locked sea-run cutt.
 ■ Photo by Don Vachini.

TACTICS

To search out and take advantage of opportunistic predators, Rose and Campbell concur that cutthroat anglers must be flexible in their efforts.

Since the nomadic residents often dine on shrimp-imitating flies or local forage fish replicas, the same tactics and offerings that worked one day might not work the next. Observant anglers should scope out distinctive landmarks and locales during high water levels and make specific notes of exposed structure when the tide is low, and document them for future reference.

Natural baits include nightcrawlers, sand worms and herring or anchovy filets. Some prefer tipping their spoons or spinners with 'crawlers when trolling or casting, while others douse them with various scented oils to lay an attractant trail.

Although always available in saltwater, cutts don't always stay in one place for very long. Basically, as the forage moves, so do they. While oar, fin or paddle power allows for a less-intrusive pursuit and a quieter approach to working near them, drifting or anchoring and then fan-casting offers another worthwhile option. Be prepared to change locales often, alternate depth, speed and direction of presentations and retrieve with and

against tidal currents to create action.

The dynamics of moving tidal flow stages have a great influence on the successful pursuit of this fish, which frequents the slower-moving or slack water near man-made or natural current breaks. As a rule, the ebb through slack tide period is more productive than the flood tide.

To avoid spooking fish, make short initial casts, then incrementally work up to lengthier heaves. If no action occurs using a steady retrieve, mix things up, hints Campbell. "Impart erratic action to the offering, vary retrieval speeds and impose radical directional changes."

Utilize a sideways hookset rather than an upward one. If the strike is missed, the lure or fly remains in the water, and can be hit again. Don't give up on the retrieve. Sea-runs are notorious followers and often form a bulging V-wake in their pursuit followed by a jolting strike, sometimes only feet from the rod.

While some boaters prefer to topline or sideplane hardware while slowly contour trolling shoreline structure points, others maneuver the transition zones along deeper water.

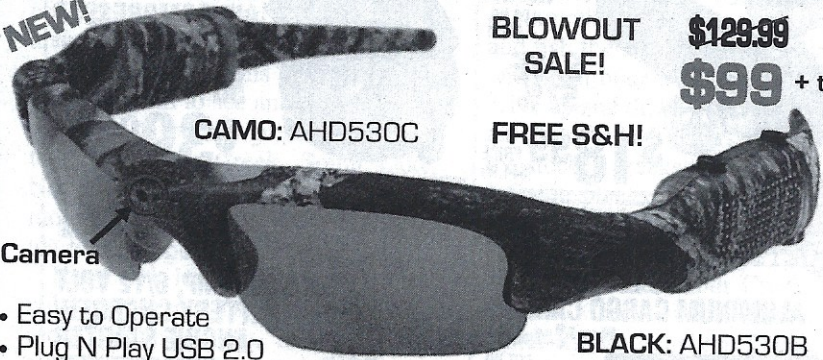
Wading the gently sloping, easily-attained banks, persistent anglers can commonly locate sea-runs in 2-3 feet of water. Always be alert for visible signs of surface-feeding fish. In many cases, placing an offering a few yards in front of a cruiser will result in a take.

No matter which waters you choose to ply, the bleak, non-descript, Pacific Northwest coastal waters remain well-guarded secrets. However, those who do their research and put in an honest effort will find they house some remarkable trout, which, pound-for-pound, are truly "worth their salt." □

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