

The Halibut Hunter

SICK WITH FOOD POISONING, A WYOMING ANGLER SPENT THREE DAYS FISHING FOR GIANT HALIBUT WITH VISIONS OF ELEPHANTS AND JACK LONDON SWIRLING IN HIS HEAD



Large halibut like large baits. The author's big fish took a live pink salmon. (Gyotaku print by artist Dwight Hwang.)

S

Sixty-five miles out of Seward, Alaska, on the 50-foot *Glacier Bear*, I lie in my berth waiting for a bout with food poisoning to fade enough so that I might be able to crawl to the deck and fish for a few hours. Above, I can hear Capt. Aaron “Butters” Tompkins telling his deckhands to cut more herring for a “bait bomb.”

The deckhands — Jake and Garret — spring into action. They wear rubber bibs that repel fish guts and slime. They are quick to produce bait knives, which they wear on their belts. I hear their fluid movements, and I wonder if I’ll ever be able to move like that again.

The other fishermen, three Minnesotans, are trading stories about deer hunting, ice fishing and other Midwestern adventures. It’s 10:30 at night, but no one suggests the fishing is going to end soon. In fact, Capt. Butters plans to sleep on deck atop the giant fishbox. A small, alert man in his 40s with a white beard that flairs out from his intense face, the captain says we can sleep whenever we want, but if we’re not on deck we can’t catch a fish.

“I can guarantee the boat ride, but I can’t catch the fish for you. Know what I mean?” says Butters, who hails from Savannah, Georgia, and speaks in an accent that reminds me of the watermen I knew growing up in the Tidewater region of Virginia.

In the opposite berth is 69-year-old Bill Mixer, my friend. A lifelong fly fisherman



Capt. Aaron "Butters" Tompkins.

and certified casting instructor, Bill is new to charter fishing. He comes from the catch-and-release school, where beauty is one of the goals. But he knows this is not that kind of experience. If we can muster the strength to go top-side and catch, we are not releasing these fish.

The goal on this three-day trip is to "harvest" two large Pacific halibut. Butters is confident we can catch fish that approach 100 pounds, maybe larger. A halibut weighing 100 pounds yields more than 50 pounds of fillets. The idea of all of that organic meat compelled us aboard the *Glacier Bear* even though we were still sick. Truth is, there was also a sense of pseudo masculinity at work, and practically speaking, we had paid for the trip in advance and were worried about refunds. I want to catch two big halibut and bring them back home to Wyoming, but at the moment I can barely lift a can of warm ginger ale to my lips. Jake, one of the deckhands, puts my bottle of Pepto-Bismol on ice, a kind gesture I will not soon forget.

"We're not going to catch a halibut lying down here," I say to Bill, who's curled up in his berth, his hands pinned between his knees in a sort of praying position, or the way ancient Zapotec prepared their dead for their next adventure. He doesn't respond, and I feel guilty.

It was my idea, after all, to go to the Snagg'n Wagon trailer in downtown Seward the evening before our big adventure and rent a casting rod and a snagging hook. This was,

perhaps, the lowest moment of my fishing career; I can't speak for Bill. But snagging is what one does in Seward on a Saturday night, much in the same way farm kids coalesce summer evenings in Piggly Wiggly parking lots in Kansas to listen to rap music.

Bill caught the only sockeye, a nice 6-pound hen I filleted at the public cleaning tables. Back at our hotel, I cut the fish into sashimi and squeezed a lemon over the pieces. Usually I use rice vinegar and an ice bath to make sure the bacteria are neutralized. I skipped that step this time. Thirty minutes later, I was queasy. It took Bill hours to catch up. I was at the Safeway at 5 a.m. buying stomach aids. I wasn't about to let the *Glacier Bear* and Butters leave without us. We got on the boat, listened to a short safety demonstration and a quick description of the variety of rockfish we might catch, and went below to sleep it off.

Waiting Game

Bill isn't saying much, so I stagger to the deck and stand among the Minnesotans. In theory, sea air helps you recuperate. Off the stern is Montague Island, a massive uninhabited land-mass between the glaciated mainland Alaska and the open sea. Shearwaters and glaucous gulls float behind the *Glacier Bear* hoping for scraps of herring. A 500-pound sea lion pops up behind the boat and looks us over. The creature has sympathetic eyes, like a Labrador retriever. The fishermen and deckhands shout at the animal to get lost.

Butters regards the creature with a mix of sympathy and admiration. He says he once saw a video of a sea lion snapping up fish. "They can dive to 400 feet with no problem," he says.

Butters lowers a bait bomb, a plastic bag full of cut herring. Once the bag reaches the bottom, he jerks the line so it rips open and spews herring into the sea. "This should get them going," he says. "Halibut are like catfish, know what I mean? You have to sit and wait them out."

Butters says fishing big halibut is similar to hunting: It requires patience. We will have several eight-hour stints to find big fish in places the captain has never fished.

I drink my Pepto and stand by a rod with little conviction, waiting for a halibut. There's homemade carrot cake in the galley and a fresh pot of coffee. I don't eat. The rod tip is vibrating with nibbles from rockfish and other small fish that can't fit the salmon carcass into their mouths. I'm content to pass the first day sick but alive, and getting a little better each hour. I've told the Minnesotans about the sockeye that did Bill and me in, but they're convinced I'm just seasick. We're not. I tell them I've come to sea to heal myself. They laugh. One of them pushes the joke further and tries to make me feel worse by putting a piece of cod guts in his



Juvenile halibut glide weightlessly in a communal and uncommon surface event.

JENNY HYER



Glacier Bear runs for the grounds, where anglers will chase large halibut for three days. The XXXX with friend Bill Mixer and a pair of nice fish.

mouth. I sip my Pepto and look at the surf hitting the distant headlands of Montague, a flash of white where the waves break on the rocks, clouds shrouding the island.

“Montague Island, the land of broken promises,” Butters says, noting that clients believe Montague is the only place to catch giant halibut. The captain says he can catch big halibut all over the Gulf of Alaska, but people want to go to Montague because they’ve heard the stories.

Meanwhile, my bait is getting shredded by rockfish. The rod tip dances in the air. When a halibut takes the bait, the rod bends in an unmistakable arc. These rods are thick as broomsticks, and the reels are built to hoist. Charter boats in Alaska use circle hooks for halibut, so the fish essentially hook themselves. All you have to do is crank the reel a few times. There’s very little involved on the part of the angler. Just listen to the captain and stay on deck. Try to be pleasant to your boat mates. Avoid the bar the night before your trip.

Too Small

I’ve heard it said many times that halibut don’t fight, which isn’t true, especially if you hook

one in shallow water. We’re anchored in just 80 feet. I’m used to fishing halibut in Cook Inlet, where you often let your bait drop 200-plus feet to the bottom. A halibut hooked in shallow water will plow through the kelp. She will dive and hug the bottom. I’ve seen battles with 100-pounders go 20 minutes on heavy tackle, tiring the angler and tangling lines. On lighter tackle, the tussles can last twice as long. Halibut sometimes come up willingly, then sulk under the boat where they can’t be gaffed or harpooned, which suggests a certain intelligence.

The Minnesotans are complaining about regulations. They’re worried they won’t be able to keep enough fish. Apparently, they were under the impression that they could each take four big halibut, but the regs set the daily limit at one fish of any size, and one under 28 inches. A 28-inch halibut yields about five pounds of meat. We’re fishing for giants, so the bite will be slow. Butters says we won’t see any of those little “chickens” on this trip.

The Minnesotans see no reason to put limits on fishing. They don’t trust fishery biologists. *Why can’t we keep all of the rockfish we want?* Fishing every summer in Alaska, I’m used to

being on charters where anglers dismiss science. But I worry that too many of the fish we keep end up forgotten in the bottom of freezers in places like Colorado Springs and Fort Worth. Don’t they realize that a single halibut carries more flesh on its bones than the scrawny white-tails they shoot in picked cornfields?

The first halibut of note is hooked around 11 p.m. on the first night of the three-day trip. Everyone is on deck except Bill, who is going downhill and refusing to drink or eat. The last time I checked on him he only rolled away from me and said, in his best Russian accent, “I must rest, comrade.” For some reason Bill speaks in this accent only when he’s in Alaska.

A long-distance truck driver from Minnesota cranks on his reel as if he’s grinding sausage. His face is red and grimacing. The rod is still in the rod holder, so he can’t possibly feel the weight of the fish. The line is disappearing off the reel. The captain stands by the man’s side and begins to coach him. “Relax,” he tells him, “this is going to take awhile.” The deckhands ready a harpoon and load a short shotgun with a single shell. (It’s common in the charter industry to shoot larger halibut before hauling



COURTESY J-DOCK FISH CO.



Tlingit master artist Israel Shotridge captures the abstract beauty and power of the Pacific halibut.



The halibut's thick back has the patterns of galaxies and the landscape of America sewn in. I can see the contours of family farms, hamlets and maps of rural areas. (Ashley Seabolt painted this interpretation of the author's vision.)

them on deck, where they can cause serious damage to people and gear.)

When the fish finally appears beside the *Glacier Bear*, Butters looks it over and decides it is not what we're after. Too small. To me, a 70-pound halibut is one you keep. Out here, off Montague, with a few days to spend soaking salmon carcasses, a 70-pounder isn't that unusual. The captain and mates free the fish.

Hardly any time passes before another rod buckles. This is the fish we're looking for. Even I can tell. The man fighting the fish is a soybean and corn farmer who sails his tractors over 4,000 acres of farmland. His ball cap promotes a brand of herbicide. He's a small man, and he doesn't seem to be enjoying the power of the fish. After a laborious fight, the halibut, which is pushing 60 inches, appears in the nacreous light. It's 11:20 p.m., and the sharp pop of the shotgun sends the glaucous gulls wheeling toward Montague in the falling light.

The water is calm, and there is a cargo ship in the distance. The deckhands grunt as they haul the halibut over the rail. It lands with a thud and begins to thump its broad tail on the metal deck. The tail has been the fish's engine its entire life; the slowing rhythm as it strikes the deck is an elegy of sorts. The reverberations course through the hull, and I wonder if Bill can hear them from where he lies. *Get up, Bill*, I say to myself.

One of the Minnesotans says the halibut is ugly. I've been catching halibut for more than 20 years, and I've heard the same tropes about how Pacific halibut are homely but nonetheless worth eating. I disagree.

To me a halibut is evidence of intelligent design, an economical creature content to live its life as an apex predator. It captures and eats its prey with a terrible ambush. With their mottled, camouflage backs and brilliant white bellies, I'm dazzled each time one is brought alongside. Compared to their overall size, their pelvic and pectoral fins look miniature. Their dorsal and anal fins radiate out from their clean lines like a patina of gold and copper, and are ringed with delicate fins. The lateral line runs the length of the fish, and there are often pearlescent sea lice riding them like jewels. Halibut are not slimy. They have a tough skin that reminds me of the gamefish I touched as a boy at Oregon Inlet, North Carolina, when my parents took me to watch the charter boats return. Marlin, tuna and wahoo.

"That fish is *soooo* dang ugly," says the happy farmer.

"Well, you're no Emmy Rossum," I say, my first attempt at humor since coming aboard. Only Butters snickers.

What's most beautiful about a halibut is its firm grip on life. Even after being shot and

harpooned, a fish will gasp and flutter on deck. They expel octopus beaks, whole Dungeness crabs, candlefish.

The larger halibut don't go easily. Each time I kill one I'm reminded of George Orwell's essay "Shooting an Elephant," which was required reading in 10th grade. Orwell, stationed in Lower Burma, has to kill an elephant that has ravished a village and killed a man. Even after several devastating shots, the elephant refuses to die. "It seemed dreadful to see the great beast lying there, powerless to move and yet powerless to die, and not even to be able to finish him," wrote Orwell, whose great anxiety was that truth would become extinct. He worried that great books and divergent opinions would be extinguished by the noise of populism, the clichés of consumption.

I worry about this, too. As we headed out of Seward, Jake, the deckhand and cook, had mentioned Jack London's story "To Build a Fire." *Has he read Orwell?* It's difficult to tell as he bends down to bleed the great fish with a deft slash to the gills.

'Kill Her'

The crew and the Minnesotans are already wrestling with another big fish. At my feet, the first halibut holds on to life. The beautiful lines that sustain the fish through months of dark-

ness begin to break, and the fish sags. Soon she will look like meat, not the fierce creature that stuns me with her beauty. I fight sentimental-ity because I'm sick, and because I desire a fish like this to feed me through winter.

The halibut gulps air and persists at my feet. Her thick back has the patterns of galaxies sewn in. She's still connected to the sea, but that's about to end. Pity sweeps over me, but that's not useful given the circumstances. Light rain falls around the *Glacier Bear*.

And then my own rod, baited with a sockeye carcass as long as my forearm, buckles, and I come tight to a force that thrusts me into the present and makes me forget I'm feeling punky. The compassion and lessons of literature disappear. Initially, I think the sea lion may have grabbed my bait. But Butters is at my side, telling me it's a good fish. The enormous power and violent head-shakes make me forget about the anemic winter. I'm finally alert in the manner of boat captains and deckhands. I cautiously work the fish toward the surface.

"When he comes up, keep his head in the water. He's lived his whole life in the water, and he won't like it if you pull him out," Butters says. My fish comes easily to the surface. She holds in the current, the circle hook firmly in her jaw. I say *she* because I know any halibut that weighs more than 50 pounds is a female.

This fish, perhaps 80 pounds, maybe 90, is exactly what I'm looking for. Butters isn't sure she's big enough, but I want the fish.

"Kill her," I say. The deckhands descend on her with gaffs, and the wild, powerful force is suddenly on the deck at my boots. It's dangerous to be this close. I loosen the drag and step away. Garret calls for the bat and stuns the fish with a single, powerful blow.

My fish slides on the deck, matching the motion of the waves. She hasn't given up quite yet. Her tail thumps. Her eyes go blank. This is one of the best fish I've ever caught, but I don't want high-fives and fist bumps. Bill is not present to take a glory shot. The golden fins that frame the halibut flutter slightly, then start to pulsate as if she is coming back to life, but she's not.

Silently, I promise I won't waste her flesh. I remind myself that if I'm going to avoid industrial animal husbandry, I have to capture my own meat. This sadness is a small price to pay. I'll stack chunks of this fish in my freezer like firewood, which I'll use all winter to warm myself. I'll give hunks to my friends, but only those I trust will eat the fish.

"Garret," Butters says, "kill these fish and get them off the deck."

Garret puts on gloves and, with an all-purpose knife, cuts a semicircle around the

biggest fish's gills. He's kneeling beside the fish as if he's telling it a secret. Halibut are mostly meat and bone, with small heads and relatively small guts. Garret reaches through the gills and yanks out the internal organs in one movement, tossing them overboard. Gulls scramble for them, but they sink fast.

Feeling woozy, I want sleep. I've tagged my first fish. The captain says it's just a few minutes until midnight, when our limits reset. This is the first night of our trip, so I don't want to be done too quickly. I'll become a spectator once I get my second halibut. I stay on deck until 1 a.m., jigging an artificial lure off the stern. I catch a few rockfish and a halibut that is not a keeper before going below. I climb into my berth and listen to the sound of the sea. The engines rumble to life, and I hear the anchor chain clink over the rail. The captain moves *Glacier Bear* a mile to the north. Everyone sleeps for a few hours. The soybean farmer above me snores lightly.

Peace is Elusive

Jake makes coffee, biscuits and gravy. I sit in the galley with a cup of coffee. The captain drops a chum bag and begins to bait the lines with fresh salmon carcasses. I study Butters for a while. He's quick and quirky and tells stories of wharf characters and other colorful sorts



Skillful hands fillet a smaller halibut. A 100-pound halibut can yield 50 pounds of meat.

he's met over the years. He has a knack for detail. He's a relatively young man, the white beard notwithstanding. And he doesn't seem to require sleep.

During winter he's an engineer on cargo ships that make 75-day voyages to Africa and Asia. On *Glacier Bear*, he moves with a type of grace I've never seen at the community college where I work, where people seem to be walking in mud their entire lives. Butters sprints and darts with a kind of inexhaustible energy one rarely encounters.

Bill appears in a new pair of bibs. He brushes his teeth, eats an English muffin and sips water. Feeling better, I have eggs, bacon and several cups of coffee. I hack a piece of carrot cake from the pan. The other anglers gulp down food and take their positions on deck. It's day two, and each of us can catch and keep another large halibut.

Bill squats by a halibut rod and looks out at the water. I take the jigging rod and stand between the Minnesotans. Bill hooks a halibut the size we want, and Butters sprints up to him and offers advice. Bill listens to the captain, and soon the fish is coming over the rail, harpooned through the midsection, raging and wreaking havoc. Garret leaps upon the fish and dispatches it with the bat.

And so it goes. About every eight hours we move around the undersea pinnacles and trenches off Montague. We catch enormous fish that exceed my expectations. Jake cooks slabs of halibut, and we sit down to a dinner of blackened fish and Cajun grits. The meat is so good I nearly swoon. I'm getting stronger. I eschew conversations about politics. I avoid swapping cellphone photos of dead deer and lunker fish. I refuse the offers of cold beer. When the deck is clear, I go out to be alone with the gulls and to feel the salt air wash over me. I look out in the direction I believe to be

Japan and try to fathom the distance, the freedom of the sea, the life of a halibut.

If I could teach myself not to desire, perhaps I could gain some peace, which has proven elusive. Desire reigns as I travel the world to catch fish and bring them home in vacuum-sealed bags. I am drawn to charter boats and characters like Butters. I don't know how else to live. Humpbacks, cows and calves appear off the bow.

The One

Butters deploys a chum bag in 20 fathoms. The plan is to sit at anchor for six hours until the tide changes. I watch the other anglers catch and release halibut that go 60 to 70 pounds. Bill enjoys fighting chunky rockfish on light tackle. He smokes a cigar and jokes with the mates, who call him "Wild Bill" now that he's upright and gaining composure.

Not much happens for me. My circle hook is baited with a live pink salmon, so I know that anything big enough to take it will be a special fish. I settle in for a long wait. Hours later, just as Butters warms up the engine and prepares to pull the anchor, a fish eats my salmon. I lift the rod out of the holder so I can feel its wildness. The heavy rod bends to ridiculous angles, and I'm afraid it will snap. The reel, an example of mechanical ingenuity, shudders but feeds line.

Butters is at my side, telling me again how big halibut don't like being lifted out of the water. Garret loads the gun. Butters says this fish is enormous and asks the other anglers to reel up their lines in case the halibut decides to sulk under the boat or run.

It takes me about 15 minutes to get the fish off the bottom. It wants to stay deep, and I'm trying to muscle it toward the sunlight. "Oh yeah, it's a good one," Butters says. "Garret, you ready?"

Butters reaches out and grabs the leader. He tells me to walk toward the bow so that he can get the fish to plane in the water, just inches

from the surface. The captain and mates obscure my view. Garret aims the gun, the barrel inches from the surface. The pop coincides with the tumult of the thrashing fish. Gaffs impale the halibut, and suddenly the biggest fish I will ever catch comes over the rail. Stunned by the gunshot, she lands on the deck. The other anglers, sensing there are big fish around, drop their lines. She probably weighs about 125 pounds. A truly enormous halibut will tip the scales at 500 pounds.

Butters sprints off. Garret hands me the empty shotgun shell as a souvenir. It's just me and the halibut. She rocks with the sea. The gunshot wound is devastating, yet she clings to something I hesitate to call life. I sniff the shotgun shell, and it transports me to a pheasant hunt in North Dakota.

The farmer comes to my side. We'd talked about pheasants earlier that morning. He lives in Ada, near the North Dakota border. He caught his second halibut that morning, so he's done fishing. We're both done. He congratulates me on my fish.

He tells me about his farm and the wild birds there. There's a slough, he says, where you can flush 500 pheasants in one push. There are neighbors who let him hunt. He invites me out, but not opening day. We're talking as if we're at the VFW, not 65 miles at sea. As if there isn't a great fish expiring at our feet. We are both products of public schools, the end results of what Thomas Jefferson had in mind, the byproducts of a watered-down democracy, the fury and genius of Frederick Douglass.

In the halibut's camouflage is the landscape of America. I keep this idea to myself. In the patterns, I can see the contours of family farms, maps of rural areas, interstates, hamlets built by rivers. High school football under the lights. This farmer is a pretty good guy. When he discusses his farm his eyes light up. He talks with his hands and shrugs a lot, as if he's hesitant to be disagreeable. He laments the loss of habitat and says he remembers prairie chickens flooding the sky as a boy. Looking at Montague, he says it makes him feel as if he's back on his farm, even if he can't explain why.

I decide to take a risk. I enjoy taking chances. I ask the bean farmer if he's ever read anything by Orwell. Why not make friends with someone outside of your political affiliations, connect with a fellow countryman when you get the chance? I ask if he's read the essay about shooting an elephant. The farmer's eyes illuminate. 🐟



Three crew, a shotgun blast, two gaffs and a baseball bat subdued the 125-pounder thatXXXX caught largest ever.