

# "Just For The Halibut"

by J.R. Warnet

We pulled into port at about 6:30 in the morning on a very foggy and chilly day. From my balcony view I could see the fog taper in and out of the evergreen trees which stood over 100 feet tall. The mountainous terrain and its dark green color stood out against the pale, misty fog. Cool, crisp mountain air flowed through my nostrils filling me with the scent of wilderness and wonderment.

The fog had become so dense in parts that I lost sight of the Canadian shoreline with its brown bears and mountain goats that I had seen the day before. It was a shame to miss humpback whales break the surface with their glorious spouts of air and seawater. They must have been right next to the boat, but I could only guess as to how close they really were.

The ship docked at Prince Rupert, BC, which is home to some of the best halibut fishing the west coast has ever seen. I still remember researching my trip beforehand and seeing a 686-pound leviathan caught in Norway less than 5 months ago. Just reading about it brought a slow chill down my back which finally ended in my arms. I knew I would need those same arms to pull such a halibut from the depths. After a quick rendezvous with our captain, our fishing party walked down to a small dock next to our cruise ship. His 21-foot Grady White was loaded with Penn reels and heavy ball weights, alluding to the deep waters we would be attempting to conquer.

One would think that even in Canada the weather would be warm in the first week of August, but I guess our travel agent had actually never traveled to Canada during the summer. I was shocked when our guide told us to bring long sleeves and jackets, so I dressed in breathable layers and ventured off. We were told that the sun didn't come out until the afternoon and we would be fishing in the thick, cold fog most of the day. I brought my camera even though the conditions would be less than favorable. If I hadn't brought a camera, I most likely would have caught the 150 pounder I had been searching for.

The scenery up to Alaska had been marvelous; I had witnessed some of the most wonderful sights nature can offer. The mountains

around the icy blue Dawes Glacier and wild sockeye salmon spawning in the Skagway River are truly too hard to explain with just



*One of Canada's smaller halibut during the summer months.*

words. The trip to the fishing grounds was just as beautiful, with plenty of wild things to see and take pictures of. An immature bald eagle without its trademark white head still had a wingspan that could rival a Sesna. As we zoomed past Digby Island, we saw humpbacks again. This time the fog had lifted just enough to see their tail flukes dripping with cold, clean tidal water. Even the gulls had feathers so white they could be mistaken for the year's first snowfall.

After a 30-minute trip, we stopped in 140 feet of water to set up the gear. Although it's very similar to fluke fishing, halibut fishing requires heavy-duty gear, to say the least. Ten/0 hooks linked to a two-foot spreader bar all held together with 150-pound braid is enough to land East Coast canyon bluefin. We dropped down to the bottom and let the scent of the fresh herring and coho salmon steaks do their magic.

The instructions were simple: jig like you were fishing for fluke and set the hook hard. It seemed simple enough, but as we discovered, halibut are masters at stealing bait.

I had my first hit within minutes. It was subtle and quick and extremely similar to their smaller, flounder relatives. Two hits in a row sparked me to try for a hookset, much like pulling largemouth bass out of a wooded stump pile. It must have been too fast since I pulled up my battle-ready rig to find empty tandem hooks. The captain smiled and offered to re-

bait my hook with his rigging tips. Normally, I never let anyone bait my hook, but after two misses in a row, from 140 feet down, I was willing to take a lesson from an experienced fisherman.

Instead of rigging the herring last, he baited it first to a two-hook rig, much like a stinger hook on a bucktail. Then he filleted a searun coho salmon down the center and rigged the fillet through each side of the skin. The final product looked horrendous, but I'm not a halibut, so I couldn't offer any insights as to how appealing it is. Ten minutes after I dropped down, our boat had its first fish, an ugly little fellow the locals called a ratfish. Apparently, it is terrible tablefare (much like the infamous skates we know and love), so back to the jade-colored depths it went.

My hopes of catching a barn-door halibut were slowly coming to an end. It had been four hours and we were without a flat fish to send home. I looked at my companions and gave the stare of sadness I usually have when I get skunked. Then, halfway through a jig I felt a bump. If I hadn't been paying attention, I might have missed the slight hint of a fish nibbling on my line. Another hit, followed by an even harder hit was all it took to set the hook. When it finally emerged at the surface, a look of shock came over the faces of everyone on board.

To be quite honest, I don't know why, or how, the captain gaffed the little creature. For a moment, I honestly felt as if I had caught a barely legal fluke from the East Coast. In all the pictures and articles I have read on halibut fishing, I had never seen such a small fish. When we weighed it back on the dock, it registered a whopping 7.2-pounds. Since halibut has no size or weight limit, we were able to take our tiny catch to the local processing plant and ship it home, in addition to purchasing a few extra pounds so that we could all have a piece for dinner.

After the trip, I wondered where the 200- and 300-pound halibut had gone since the fishery opened up in the early 1900s. I looked at my plate with the few small fillets in white sauce and began to understand why fishing regulations are written in the first place.