

THE OUTDOORS REPORT



A whale of a trip to the West Coast

IN the distance, among a group of boats, I could see a huge fluke slapping the water. John Toone, my partner on this salmon fishing trip to the West Coast, turned around in the boat to get a better view. "Probably a killer whale feeding on salmon," he exclaimed. Pulling in our two fishing lines we motored closer to get a better view.

What unfolded before us was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, a spectacle that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. A massive killer whale had its jaws into the side of a humpback whale twice its size. As this drama unfolded in front of us, the group of fishing boats clustered around Coho Point off Langarra Island moved to get out of the way of this fierce fight for survival. One of the fishmasters from Oak Bay Marine group stayed a short distance away, making sure to warn anglers to move out of the area of the battle. In the 20 minutes we were able to watch, the two whales would dip below the surface of the ocean only to resurface five minutes later a fair distance away, the humpbacks fluke or pectoral fin slapping once more in a desperate attempt to shake its attacker. We never did see the final outcome as we had to return to our home base, the MV Marabell, for the trip back to Winnipeg.

What a trip it was! Four days earlier we had flown to Vancouver, then hopped on a charter flight from Vancouver south terminal to Sandspit on the northern end of the Queen Charlotte Islands. Along on the flight was a group of anglers headed to three different Oak Bay resorts in northern British Columbia. One group was going on to the Salmon Seeker floating lodge on the west side



The Complete Angler

DON LAMONT



Don Lamont with a beautiful coho salmon caught off Langarra Island, B.C.

of the island. We boarded a Twin Otter float plane for the half hour ride to the MV Charlotte Princess and the MV Marabell (our destination). These two refurbished boats were anchored side by side in the channel between Queen Charlotte Island and Langarra Island, the gateway to some of the most spectacular scenery and salmon fishing in the world! I had been up to this part of the world about 10 years ago and when an invitation was extended to make another visit, I quickly accepted.

I have been to a number of the Oak Bay resorts over the years and have always been impressed with their ser-

vice. This trip was not to be any different, though the fishing was a little slower than my last visit. Part of the problem could have been the pods of killer whales that continued to move through the area. Attracted not only by the amazing amount of marine life, the presence of a number of humpback whales that were feeding along the rocky shorelines of Langarra was probably a factor as well. In fact, two days previous in Explorer Bay on the east side of the island, we had a huge humpback dive right under our 17-foot fishing boat and out the other side. For a couple of prairie lads it was a little bit

disconcerting. Still that wasn't nearly the adrenaline rush that occurred later the same day. I had just landed a 12-pound coho salmon and was holding it up for a picture, when a killer whale surfaced right beside our boat. Wow! Both John and myself jumped about two feet in the air, the camera not quite ready to capture the moment but that moment will not be forgotten.

Yes, we did have some excellent salmon fishing with mostly cohos landed along with a few chinook. When the weather finally settled down on day three of our trip, we were able to drive our boat around Langarra Island,

checking out the sites along the way.

Our first stop was a sea lion haven, on which these huge animals lounged in the sun. Atop the rocky atoll, a bald eagle perched, ever watchful for scraps. Out front anglers were catching red snapper off a rocky reef. We headed out a little deeper to try for some other bottom fish that were extremely abundant. These included loads of halibut, mostly in the five- to 10-kilogram range.

As we drifted along, another pod of killer whales cruised by on the glassy ocean, Alaska a backdrop in the distance. A short boat drive later we stopped to view the Langarra Island lighthouse perched atop a cliff on the northwest corner of this desolate island. In the distance, we could see a fleet of trawlers out in the large ocean swells. Then it was back south past another group of anglers fishing for larger halibut a kilometre out in the ocean. You see, it's not just the great fishing that brings me back to this part of the world. To see whales firsthand and personal is pretty special, never mind the battle between a killer and humpback whales — it's just a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

For information on the resorts owned by Oak Bay, visit their website at www.obmg.com.

A trip of a lifetime is probably more affordable than you think.

Anglers' Notes:

According to tournament organizer Bob Goodfellow, the Lac du Bonnet Walleye tournament, held July 5-6, was a huge success. Twenty boats competed in the two-day event, the first of its kind in Manitoba. All the fish caught were quickly weighed and released. The winning team of Andrew and Cory Klopak had a seven-pound average weight for the 10 fish allowed. Goodfellow anticipates a full field of teams for next year's event.

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Prehistoric lake sturgeon fighting back

By Ben Graham

IT was a hot summer afternoon on the Winnipeg River. My fishing partner Darren James and I were at the mouth of a small river inlet and all around us huge sturgeon were surfacing like killer whales at sea. With the amount of sturgeon around us, could they really be endangered? There were a few moments where neither one of us cast a line in; we simply wanted to soak up this beautiful spectacle that was happening around us. Then, of course, the angler in each of us kicked in and we immediately wanted to catch one. That day, only Darren would be so lucky.

The lake sturgeon is said to be an endangered species in Manitoba. Due to human overharvesting, a decline in water quality and hydroelectric dams, sturgeon populations have dipped to dangerously low levels. Fortunately, due to the recent efforts of Manitoba Fisheries and Manitoba Hydro, the sturgeon's numbers are on an incline and they're making somewhat of a comeback. Stocking programs through both Manitoba Fisheries and Manitoba Hydro have played a big part in this. Manitoba Hydro also funds research projects to help gain a better understanding of this prehistoric creature.

Lake sturgeon can be found in a few bodies of water in Manitoba. The Winnipeg River and the Nelson River most likely hold the highest populations; however the Assiniboine River and Red River also support stocks of Canada's largest fresh water species. There are other rivers home to the sturgeon in Manitoba, but their numbers are quite low.

Angling for the lake sturgeon in Manitoba is a possibility, and a very fun and challenging one at that. However, great care and preparation is needed when targeting them. The first thing to keep in mind is that sturgeon are a very protected species and they are completely catch and



Andrew Klassen with a 72.5-inch lake sturgeon.

release no matter where you fish for them. You can't just go out with your day-to-day walleye gear and expect to catch a giant sturgeon either.

"Using the proper tackle would be the best way to increase the odds," says Andrew Klassen, owner and operator of Andrew Klassen's Canadian Guide Service. "Big sturgeon are very powerful, and like any fish, they should not be played to the point of exhaustion to be brought in the boat. The longer a fish is played, the more stressed the fish will be and the greater the chance of delayed mortality."

It's recommended that someone targeting sturgeon use a medium-heavy rod like a St. Croix musky rod and a high-capacity bait-casting reel such as a Shimano Calcutta with heavy braided line in the 80-pound range. As far as rigging, Klassen recommends similar tackle as you would use when fishing for large catfish. A large 4/0 to 6/0 octopus hook with as much weight required to keep contact with the bottom is ideal. Night crawlers, salted minnows or even your favourite catfish bait, such as shrimp, all work quite well for bait.

Pointe du Bois and Nutimik Lake on the Winnipeg River system are two great access points to start looking for sturgeon. Look for areas of the river where there is a fair amount of current and focus on the bottom. Sturgeon will often hang around bottom structures like shoals, but current seems to be a more important element to their ideal hangouts. They are a cool-water species, so you'll find them in moderately shallow water in the spring, and they'll progressively move to deeper water as the water warms.

If you're looking to tie into one of these special fish, careful attention is needed to ensure they aren't kept out of the water for too long and that they're released unharmed.

If you're interested in fishing for sturgeon but don't have the proper gear or expertise, don't hesitate to look for an experienced guide. Andrew Klassen is not only known for putting people on giant sturgeon, but also for teaching them how to do it on their own for future trips. For more information on a guided trip, visit his website at www.andrewklassen.com.

As pond numbers drop, duck populations shrink

WHEN I was a young biology student one of my professors said: "Listen up. Wildlife ecology is real simple. We want to know how many individuals of a species there are and where they live. The rest is just window dressing."

And in spite of high-powered computers, fancy electronic tracking devices, and aerial surveys, wildlife biologists are still trying to figure out how many animals live in what places. This is especially true for game species since the success of the breeding season plus the survival rates of the young have a big impact on the number of animals in the fall.

Duck populations are very sensitive to environmental conditions, especially the number and extent of the wetlands in prairie Canada. And according to the recent waterfowl surveys conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Canadian Wildlife Service, the number of "May ponds" in Prairie Canada showed a 39 per cent decline from last year. Early spring ponds are vital to ducks and fewer ponds means fewer successful nests. I am constantly amazed at the "boom or bust" cycles that ducks undergo. One really big late March blizzard across the Prairies and we may have had a 39 per cent increase in May ponds. And under the right conditions ducks, with their large broods, are capable of explosive population growth.

The Canadian waterfowl surveys are the longest continuous population monitoring program of this scope in the world and Manitobans should take pride in knowing that much of the development work for these surveys took place at our very own Delta Marsh.

These surveys allow biologists to track populations with a fair degree of precision. And knowing the actual numbers of birds, while important, is not only difficult to attain but is somewhat secondary to a determination of population trends. Because the surveys are precise in terms of location, timing, and techniques we have this real long "data set" to compare this year's results with.

According to the table, breeding duck populations have declined by nine per cent from 2007 but are still 11 per cent above the long-term average. Now this sounds better than it actually is since we have lost a lot of wetland habitats over the last decades. And that reduces the ability of ducks to rebound from bad years. Actually, prairie marshes need droughts to help them rejuvenate but dry sloughs are easily farmed and once farmed, a slough is really hard to bring back.

However, these last rains will still be helpful even though they would have helped a lot more in late April. That's because the broods that have hatched now have a lot more cover around the wetlands to hide in and hence avoid predators like mink and great blue herons.

Canada geese, however, are a different story and it seems that their numbers just keep going up regardless of whatever Mother Nature throws at them. To me it's all about their "behavioural ecology" whereby they raise young as a pair. And both parents aggressively fight off predators as anyone who has come close to a goose brood will readily attest! So they nest where they want, bring off their broods, keep going up in number, and provide ever-better hunting. And they taste good to boot! My take, then, on the fall waterfowl seasons is simple.

It will be fantastic as usual but we may have to work a little harder for our birds.

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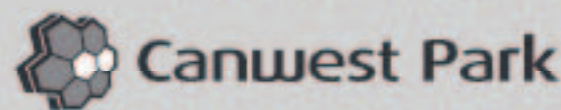
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