

Lake Michigan Chinooks

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A few months back Andy Nordquist(Avidfly) and I were chasing quillbacks and buffalo around a Mississippi river backwater. I was commenting on how his boat worked great for sight-fishing to these species, but it could be a little smaller so we could get a little farther back into a particular slough. He agreed, but also added that his boat was big enough to fish lakes Michigan and Superior if the winds are favorable, as well as most other big-water situations you find yourself in. His carp sucker boat could be transformed into a salmon trolling boat in no time at all. Right then and there, plans were made for a trip out to Door County to chase some Chinooks.

It's August 21, 2008. 2:30 am. After a 6 hour drive, we are parked at a small boat launch far up the Door peninsula at Gill's Rock. The launch is owned by a commercial herring fisherman. We rig up the boat, and wonder about what the weather is going to do this morning. Avidfly, Corey, Dad and I made up our fishing party. We decided to fish the more sheltered waters and stay away from the 5 footers banging around out in the main lake. Still, a good breeze persisted and we might see some rough water. A 30 pound carp swam in the beam of a flashlight shone in the clear water by the docks before we pushed off.

It was a long, wet boat ride out to the chosen spot, and the wind threw spray at us as we sped across the choppy waters under the star-filled sky. Upon reaching our destination, we rigged and deployed 7 lines and began a trolling run going with the wind to keep from getting waves over the bow. This was the first time I had fished with dipseys, downriggers and lead-core line. Avidfly gave instruction on how to rig everything and set lines, and from here on out the learning curve was sink or swim. We were all required to know what he was talking about when he said he wanted a number 4 monkey puke diamond behind a cop car on the inside starboard dipsey. Yes, that's a real rig. I didn't see how 9 lines could be trolled without tangling constantly, but looked forward to seeing it done.

We charged all our spoons, dipseys and such with flashers and blacklight, and they glowed extremely bright even 100 feet behind the boat. Once all of our lines were down and we were fishing, attention focused on getting temperature readings from the downrigger ball to look for pockets of cold water, as well as watching the graph for large schools of baitfish and fish marks. We trolled in 140 feet of water. Half an hour went by, maybe more, before one of the rods was jerking violently and the first fish was on! Dad reeled in a 5 pound Chinook salmon, and got the trip started in a big way. I landed another larger Chinook, Corey got a nice little steelhead, and another Chinook found the boat over a 3 hour time span.

After cleaning the morning's catch, we set up camp. Everybody was tired, but the tent was too hot to sleep in so most of us just sprawled out in the shade outside and got a few winks. Upon waking, we fired up a pot of coffee and listened to the weather reports. High rollers were going to keep us off the main lake again tonight, and possibly tomorrow as well. It was decided that we would fish around Gill's Rock once again, and concentrate our efforts around a ribbon of colder water we found pretty high in the water column. We got out to this area in late afternoon, and found pretty rough water out there. Trolling with the wind, we didn't take on much water and I landed a nice Chinook after a short time.

We then turned and trolled back on the same line, this time into the wind. Lots of water came over the bow, and it was a wet and rocky ride for a while but we did manage another nice salmon out here. The sun dropped low in the sky and a beautiful sunset greeted us as we trolled closer to shore, just out from a large cliff that drops into the depths of the lake. A small salmon came first, then Corey battled a fat 12 pounder that took a spoon on the full-core lead trailed in the chute. The bite was on right here, right now, but unfortunately we managed to tangle a few lines and boated only one more small salmon. The graph showed huge schools of baitfish in this area, most likely alewives. We returned to camp dead tired, set the alarm clock, and turned in.

In a few hours we awoke, made a pot of coffee and listened to the weather radio. It seemed scattered thunderstorms were forecasted for the area, but winds remained light for now. Once again, we launched the boat out of Gill's Rock and headed for the cliff we caught fish along last night. Before we even got all of the lines down, a fish was on. Then, another. It was just beginning to get light, and a giant ore boat rode the water next to us through the hazy morning air. Dark thunderclouds sped through the skies around us, one of them enveloping the ore boat. As we reeled in another salmon, it remained calm and hazy around us. Suddenly, a strong wind hit us and we were in choppy rollers and a hard driving rain, with bolts of lightning hitting the water. This was not a situation we wanted to find ourselves in, but here we were, so all the lines had to be pulled in as quickly as possible. It took a good 15 minutes to get all 7 lines in, and the weather punished us the whole time. I reeled in the last line, which had a small salmon on the end, then we gunned the motor and headed in.

Weather kept us off the big water the remainder of the day. However, as we sat and ate brats that night, the weather radio called for calmer winds and smaller waves out in the main lake. We were finally going to be able to launch out of Bailey's Harbor and fish the colder waters out there where more salmon should find our lines. We had been hoping to fish these waters the whole time, and now our last morning will find us there. We slept well and awoke early, then headed to the launch. A brilliant orange and blue sunrise spread across the lake as we headed out, the boat climbing large swells. We slowed down and watched the graph for a minute, and found baitfish and salmon marks right away.

The crew was now fairly adept at setting all the lines, and we had them fishing in no time. Soon after, a good fish hit. Then another. One was missed, one 8 pound Chinook landed. Lines in again, then fish on! Fish on! Two more salmon boated. Action was fast and furious out here, and for an hour or more we were constantly battling fish. Dad landed the two largest fish - 15 and 18 pounds; one of them came on a double where Corey also boated a 12-pounder. Dad's fish ran him out to 600 feet of line. Salmon were smacking spoons, flies behind dodgers, downrigger lines, everything we had. Salmon flopping in the boat, jumping out of the water behind the boat, another rod jerking in the holder...it was really fun when things were hopping. We boated 12 chinooks from 5 to 18 pounds before 7 am, then the bite slowed considerably. As we brought in the lines, the last line was a downrigger. Avidfly reached to unclip the line, a fish took it and yet another nice salmon found the cooler.

Now that was some action! If only we had been able to fish these waters earlier, we would have limited out in no time. All of us were in great spirits after such a successful outing. Corey and dad had the task of filleting about 130 pounds of salmon, and Avid and I packed up our camp. Before we knew it, we were loaded up and headed back to St. Paul. This was a really fun trip. Each boat trip was a unique experience, and learning how to rig all the different lines, planers, downriggers and dipseys was very challenging and fun. A huge thanks to Avidfly for putting up with us greenhorn trollers, and for sharing his craft with us. We caught more fish daily than anyone else we talked to, which is a testament to Avidfly's knowledge of the fishery. The fishing was more than fantastic, boating 24 fish all told, but really just being out on lake Michigan trolling at sunrise or sunset was reward enough for making the trip out to Door County. The peninsula is an interesting area, with fish boils every night and restaurants with grass roofs and rooftop goats. If you have a boat capable of running on lake Michigan, I highly recommend making the trip. I've been eating nothing but salmon for three days now, smoked, grilled, baked...and let me tell you, it's about as good as salmon gets.