Ocean Salmon Trolling for the Sport Fisherman Part 1

By: Mark Wagner

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This article is about my suggestions for trolling for salmon based upon my experience, as captain and owner of SunTan Charters, and the experience of those whom I fish with. This may not be what you use and/or might even be what doesn't work for you. It is though what works for many of the best sport fishermen in Santa Cruz. So take it for what it is.

In a nutshell, "There is more to just putting something in the water and dragging it".

So first I will discuss the basics...

EQUIPMENT:

The boat:

As you know you need a boat, (for those who fish from party boats you can stop here). Now, not just any boat will do, but almost any boat will do. And I am not going to go into a discussion of the pros and cons of every boat. All you need is one that has some kind of 12-volt supply and room to mount two downriggers. One in which you can get out of the weather and has a head in it is nicer yet. And!!! One that has a full galley and a ship's cook with lobster for lunch is even better. Short of all that, make sure you are buying a boat that works for this purpose and don't try this in a rowboat.

Radio:

VHS is not just a must but an absolute requirement. Not just to save your life in an emergency but to help you find fish. Remember, if someone helps you find fish return the favor. On a side note, the Coast Guard doesn't use CB's and neither do most boaters.

GPS plotter:

Not a must, but extremely helpful.

Downriggers:

First I have not experimented with every type of downrigger on the market, nor do I have the time to experiment with every type there is, nor do I want to. The choices are not that vast however the best two on the market are Scottyand Canon and I will give you the pros and cons for each type and you decide.

But of course, the first decision is whether to go electric or hand crank. Beyond the cost factor the only place you should use hand crank is in fresh water. The depths alone make hand crank units a pain in the arm. I know because I had four at one time and that was when I didn't know any better.

Next question is how many? You need two. One for each side of the boat. Any more than that and it is just a big mess. In addition you are going to get bit on two downriggers just as often on three or four downriggers. Also with only one, every time you pull up your downrigger you stop fishing. And unless you intend to stop and pull all of your gear up with each and every fish, get two.

Now for the comparison between Cannon and Scotty. Bear in mind that I have not looked at the 1999 models; things change and this is not to knock either product. Both will provide service and do the job required.

Cannon downriggers are a top of the line downrigger. They have a good recovery rate and with the newer motors can lift heavier weights than before, even under power. Their digitroll feature adds additional movement to your bait. They are not as powerful as their counterpart, but you will break off less weights. These are easier to use for the novice, and a decent choice for the fisherman who is not quite a die hard. They also come with more bells and whistles. I am not much into bells and whistles myself.

Scottys are my choice. These can drag a 20# ball up and then some. They have a fast recovery rate with a minimum of problems. The only problem is that you have to be careful on the clutch setting; too tight and you will break off your weights. Set the clutch just enough not to slip. They have stops you put on the cable to stop the motor. (I stop my weight at 40' and 10' with a safety at 5'.) With Scottys you can flip the switch and go do something else. Replacing cable is a bit easier also. Scottys come with less bells and whistles, but are a heavier duty set up for the fishing fools and die hards.

Swivels base:

These allow the boom to be turned closer to the boat and are a must in my opinion.

Extensions:

I don't feel that you need this option, as I like to be able to reach the cable to snap on releases without pulling in the boom.

Weights:

Lead, Need I say more? Just a little on weights. 12# and 15# for sport fishing are just fine. Be careful on 20# weights as those can break the cable. If you use 20# weights I suggest using a rubber snubber between the weights and cable. It helps to soften the bounce and you will break less of them off.

One note: When going from a 15# weight to a 20# weight you need to re-pack your cable. Do this by dropping your 15# weight to the last three winds and then slide 5 extra pounds down the cable. Wait until it reaches the bottom and then bring in your cable. This will pack it tight enough for the 20# weight

Stops:

This is for those using Scottys downriggers and any other that shut off with a stop. Don't use the plastic types where the cable is flexed through the stop. First they can slide on their own. Secondly because the cable is flexed in the stop, when it winds onto the spool thee part that is flexed along the body of the stop rubs on the rest of the cable. The next time you drop your weight -- kerplunk. Believe me I know. Use the brass crimp-on stops. These don't bend the cable, are smaller and they protect the cable from abrasion

Cable:

I haven't found good cable yet. Most of what you will find is 150 to 200# stuff. This is great as it is small in diameter. But I would rather use 300# for the abrasion resistance. Nonetheless, pack your riggers with at least 400' of cable. Most importantly have an extra spool of cable and weights on the boat, as well as extra snaps and crimps. (I don't mess around. I have two extra spools and three extra weights.) Crimps are sufficient to hold a snap on the end of the cable. In other words you don't need fancy plastic ends. I have rarely broken a cable at the weight. Usually it breaks mid way down, due to fraying in the spool. Check your cable periodically during the day and if you find any frays cut and crimp the snap above the fray.

Cable releases:

This is one item on which everyone has their own preference and I have tried everything I've seen. The ones I like the best are the plastic push in type. These are white plastic with the plug attached to the barrow. These work just as good as the 30 dollar ones and cost less then ten dollars. I also don't buy the most expensive ones as they have a tendency to go away (with your weights). For the snap to the cable I use a commercial grade clip that is designed to pinch the cable. Then I use 200 -600 mono long enough so that you can attach your line without having to swivel your downrigger. 3 - 4 feet will do. I also use this size mono because if your release gets wrapped around the cable it won't go away as fast. I have to re-rig the releases every time I buy them.

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FISHING TACKLE:

Fishing Rods:

By far and above all the rest, and not withstanding anything else, better than anything on the market, and the best ever made (need I say more) the Berkeley cherry wood CRC22-8-6 is the best salmon rod in the world. It is by far the best mooching rod and the best downrigger rod. I have had this rod on my boat for 5 years and it is has been known to catch 50% of the fish and has always been the high rod on the boat. There is just one problem.

It's a big problem.

Berkeley isn't making them anymore.

They made a major marketing error with this rod. They called it a downrigger rod and, as we all know, everyone mooches around here most of the time. Oh, well. I have, though, found the closest thing to this rod. Also poorly marketed by being called a downrigger rod is the Fenwick Classic glass DR82C. This rod has almost an identical action as the cherry wood, so much so, I bought eight of them for mooching.

Now you are probably thinking, "What am I talking about mooching for?" Well a good mooching rod makes a good downrigger rod. And as I have noticed the trend in mooching rods is to go to noodle rods. So a good steelhead rod makes a good mooching rod as well as a good downrigger rod. In a nutshell, if you have a good noodle that you like to mooch with, use it to troll with.

Just one side note which has to do with sealions, "\*&$%%#!^^@@@." In the event of heavy sea lion action fishermen have been known to troll with high speed tuna gear and hump the salmon in. It takes the sport out of it but you lose less to the sea lions. A Penn 16H two-speed in high gear makes short work out of bringing a fish in.

Fishing reels and line:

I shall just give you a brief opinion on this subject. I have seen fish caught on Penn 60s and fancy Calcuttas and both brought the fish to the boat, so any reel will work for that purpose. What doesn't work is to compensate for a stiff rod with a light reel. And you don't need a Penn 113H either. I do feel that you need some line capacity. 200 yards is nice. Counters are nice as well, they are just not exact, so don't complain when the counter doesn't match the depth sounder. Look for a reel that has a good drag system. The smoother the better. And I personally don't like the knuckle busters either, although many people do. One last thing; the recovery rate should be around 4 to 1.

As for line I land more fish with 30# line than people do with 20# line. They just don't break off as easy. What I use is 30# line that has 20# diameter. That way I still have my line capacity with less breakage. The color doesn't seem to matter much as long as you are not using bright orange or yellow, get my drift?

TERMINAL GEAR

Rigging the bait:

I rig my bait 30 to 40 inches behind the flasher. I have caught fish with bait 12" behind and five feet back and I don't think it really matters as long as you get good action out of your flasher.

Flashers in general:

Put your flasher in the water and watch its action. If it is swimming side to side then your speed is OK. If it is twirling or erratic slow down.

FLASHERS

Hot Spot or Big Shooters:

This flasher is used by many in the commercial fleet. If you have ever seen salmon free swimming you know that they swim in formation. A flasher attracts fish because, in my opinion, it looks like another salmon. When the fish gets close to the flasher -- wham! -- he hits the bait. These by far attract more fish.

Kelp Kutter:

These work just about as well as the above and should be used on boats that can't troll slow. These troll faster than the Hot Spot or Big Shooters.

Dodgers:

I have had very good luck with these in the past. These troll at a relatively slow speed, slower than the Hot Spot and Big Shooters. Many boats can't troll that slow, so make sure they will work for you.

Apexes:

These work well if you have the right color. These come in a multitude of colors too many to list here. The most commonly used colors are light green (chartreuse), regular green, bright silver, blue and clear. Kinda like tuna fishing, you have to find the right color for that day. I have a few on board that I use off and on. They have good action and can be used by themselves without flashers.

Rotary Salmon Killers:

These require special rigging but can work real well. I don't really think the color matters a whole lot with these. I buy either the blue, green or clear or whatever is in stock. Now rigging these is more important. The hook has to be rubber-banded on and I use a toothpick to pin the line so that the hook stays at the end of the bait. These have one downside, they will twist up your line like no tomorrow. The best way to avoid this is to not put it too far behind the release and/or use a flasher

Hoochies:

These are the choice of many of the commercial fleet. Now talk about a choice of colors, in this category you have more than you would ever need. But you only need a few primary colors. Top color is purple haze (golden bait #OA12R), Second to that is all white (golden bait #OA11R) third is blue and white (golden bait #B44W) and a couple of others are Speckled Frog (golden bait #OG140R) and also a couple that don't have trade names are (golden bait #29CLRP and #J82). Rig these 30 to 40 inches back from your big flasher and put it on the bottom rig.

Crow Bars or Cable Baiters:

When using whole bait these are the best. I have found no difference between the catch ratio of either of these. Make sure you use the right length for your bait. The hook should come out the tail and pin and wrap the nose. Use the pin and cooper wire setups for this purpose. Rig this so that it is about ten feet above your bottom flasher and run it without a flasher.

Spoons / Crocodiles:

These are used by about 60% of the commercial fleet and hardly at all by the sport fleet. Weight doesn't matter with these too much. Primary colors to start with are blue mackerel, chrome and silver, white or pearl and green or chartreuse. Rig these the same as Hoochies, 30 to 40 inches back from your flasher, or above the bottom rig, instead of bait. Now if you are in the Great Lakes fishing for salmon this is all you would use. (I can remember being on a charter boat and the captain had no less than 300 spoons hanging from the curtains down below.) Don't ask me why sport fishermen out here don't use them that much.

Speed:

The best speed for trolling for salmon depends on several factors. Depth of fish, weight used, flasher used and surface conditions. Best rule of thumb is slower is better. 1.2 to 2 knots is best. Now, if you are trying to get to deeper fish you might have to go with a bigger weight and also go slower. If there is a headwind you will have to adjust your speed and also if there is a following wind or seas. If you cannot run at that slow speed then you have the following choices: get a pair of sea anchors or have a trolling valve put in.

Sea Anchors or Drogues:

The best sea anchors I have ever found for the money are made by Moss Landing Marine Covers. They're in Moss Landing, California. They make them to order and they are super duty. I have two and they will last me until I die. Rig these along the side of your boat. Tie one end to a side cleat and the other to a stern cleat. Make sure that the anchor has enough slack to open properly but not so much that it can reach your propeller. As for size, Moss Landing Marine Covers can help you with that. If there is any doubt go to the bigger size, you can always throttle up.

Trolling valve:

A trolling valve is basically a switched valve that allows your transmission to spin the prop at a slower speed. It does no harm to the transmission. This is only available for some transmissions and is not cheap. Check with your local mechanic for specific details.

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NOW FOR THE MEAT OF THE ISSUE: HOW TO TROLL, WHAT TO RIG, ETC.

What did I say in the beginning? "There is more to just putting something in the water and dragging it."

This is what I suggest:

To start with, I have stops at 5 feet, 10 feet and 40 feet. I drop my weight down until the 10 foot stop shows. I want the stop to stop the motor before the release clip hits the pulley of the downrigger. You can drop the weight past that point and then lift until it stops automatically. If your downrigger doesn't have this capacity you will just have to improvise.

I stack my lines two on each side.

The bottom line I clip on below the ten foot stop. Attached to that line is a Hot Spot chartreuse or white followed by a Purple Haze Hoochie or any other bait I want to use. This rig is dropped back behind the boat anywhere from ten to 50 feet. I like to go 20 to 30 most of the time. This allows me to drop the downrigger faster without the fear of tangles. It also allows the bait to swim more naturally.

Then I drop the weight down somewhere between 10' and 30', and add the next line. Now the distance between the bottom and upper line is up to you. If you want to cover more of the water column and you are going to drop your bottom rig to 240', then attach your second bait at 180' feet. This is up to the individual.

The second rig I use is usually a fresh mackerel on a Crow Bar hook. I use this because it doesn't have a lot of drag and I can send the entire rigger deeper with less blowback. Now I will rig the other side the same or I might use a different color Hoochie. One side I will send to the bottom and the other I will put half way down to start

Release tension:

Very important! You want just enough tension to allow you to hold your line back (so that you don't get too big of a bow in the line) while you're dropping it down, but also you don't want it so tight that a small fish won't pop it off. In general less is best.

What you use during the course of a day will vary as the day goes on due to what you hear on the radio, your gut feeling, the way the wind blows, what you got your previous fish on and if you haven't been bit yet

Check your lines at least every 30 minutes or less depending upon the sea trash in the water. Watch the poles at all times; a small fish will only shake the pole once when it first strikes. If it doesn't pull the line off the release the only other time you know that you have a fish is when a sea lion bags it or you are changing tackle.

Trolling:

Remember when you are trolling that your boat is the combined length of the boat and the lines in the water, so no sharp turns. Also remember that as you are moving your lines are being blown back. The more tackle and seaweed you have attached to them the worse it gets and the farther back they are.

Now you are trolling along trying to avoid other people, watching for nets and other types of sign and so on. And you see your rod pump. Now if you haven't over-tightened your snap and it has released, the fish is being drug to the surface. You have two choices at this point: stop and bring up all of your gear (if you stop and don't bring all of your gear up you will have the worst tangle known), or slow down.

Don't panic, unless you haven't discussed this with the rest of your crew, then, go ahead and panic. If you discussed it beforehand, you had two choices and you picked one.

If you stopped and fought the fish it will be close to the same effect as mooching providing you haven't dragged the fish and drowned it. If you have a good crew on the boat it can be easy. The downside is that you have just stopped fishing entirely until you get that fish in.

If you slow your troll, you keep fishing. You need to only run up the rigger that the fish came off if you want. I do that to clear one rail. This is the best way if you are meat fishing (like most people) because no time is lost.

While all of the above decision making is being done and at the same time that the call 'fish on' goes off the driver needs to punch in a way point on your GPS. He should if he can, turn the boat (without screwing up the catching of the fish) slowly back into the area that the fish was caught. Also in the midst of the confusion someone needs to start bringing up the rigger that the rod came off of so that you don't waste any time and there is one less cable to foul your fish.

Net the fish off the back or on the side that doesn't have the rigger on it any more (the one someone hopefully thought to raise after the fish was hooked). Very importantly people should remember that when the person with the net reaches for the fish to slack the line so that they don't lead the fish out of the net. (I can't imagine how many times that has happened to me.)

Now before you beat that fish to death make sure it is legal. Check before you go out as the Fish and Game has a propensity to change regulations when you are not looking. Then on the head above the eyes goes one sharp blow (some people think this is the best part). The next thing is to put the fish in the fish box and get your gear back in the water.

Now gill and gut the fish. First open the belly and remove the guts, then cut open the blood line and clean it out. Last cut at the base of the gills and slice around the gills cutting them loose. Rinse it all out and ice the fish.

In conclusion, if you have the boat, the terminal gear, the downriggers, bait, and three of your best buddies (none of which will give you gas money) what do you do now?

Go fishing!

Captain Mark Wagner