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Fishing

By Bob McKinney

Kaaaa – whack!
“Welcome aboard,
Little Buddy!”
And into the cooler goes
another big silver salmon, a 50-pound
halibut or any number of other fish
that swarm in the steely green waters
in and around Prince of Wales
Island, a lush wonderland in
Alaska’s southernmost extension.

Fortunately, human arrivals to
Boardwalk Lodge aren’t greeted
by Guide Extraordinaire Jim
“No Last Name,” who uses
his beautifully carved clubs to
dispatch finny denizens unlucky
enough to be hoisted aboard
his boat, *Thunder Chicken*.

I’ve fished and traveled
over much of Alaska, including
Kodiak Island, Dutch Harbor

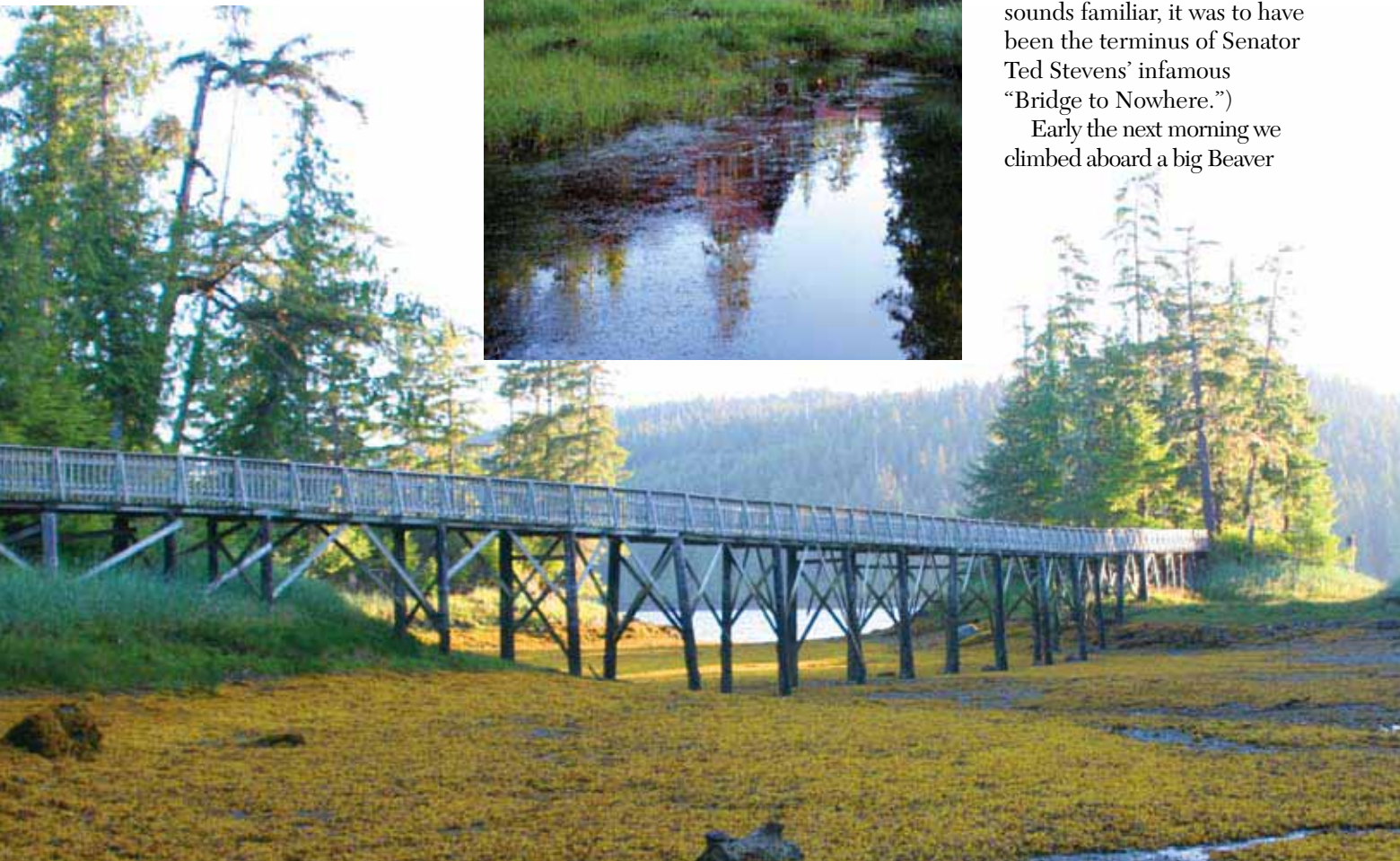
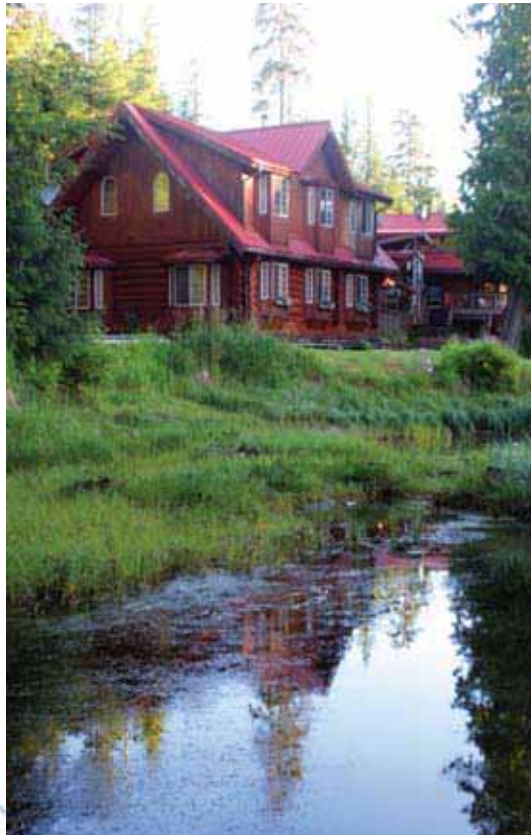
*The name “Boardwalk
Lodge” may conjure up
images of Atlantic City, but
casinos and beaches pale
in comparison to Alaska’s
Prince of Wales Island.*

in the far Aleutian chain, the
entire Alaska Highway by Harley-
Davidson, and even a month-long
stint fighting forest fires near the
unique little town of Chicken, but
I was completely unprepared for
southeastern Alaska.

It was mid-July when I flew
into Ketchikan to link up with
my host, Scott Hed, director of
the Sportsman’s Alliance
for Alaska; Lee Allen, a
freelance writer; and Crispin
Battles, editor and art director
of *Fly Fish America* magazine.

A short ferry ride whisked
us from the island airport
across the bay to Ketchikan
where we spent a comfortable
night at Cape Fox Lodge.
(If the airport at Ketchikan
sounds familiar, it was to have
been the terminus of Senator
Ted Stevens’ infamous
“Bridge to Nowhere.”)

Early the next morning we
climbed aboard a big Beaver



belonging to ProMech Air and took off into unusually clear blue skies for a tour of Prince of Wales Island followed by a silky smooth landing at Boardwalk Lodge.

Since the word “boardwalk” conjures up images of Atlantic City or Venice Beach, at least in my mind, I probably need to explain that this particular boardwalk is a winding, 300-yard affair that takes visitors from the dock to the lodge, which is located well back in the firs and spruces. You obviously won’t find any casinos, hawkers of cotton candy or weirdoes wearing Speedos, though some of the guides are passably strange. Our guide Jim being no exception.

Jim, who has been fishing Alaskan waters for most of his life, is possibly the finest saltwater guide I’ve ever met, but for three solid days he steadfastly refused to tell any of us his last name.

“Just Jim, that’ll do,” he repeated; that was his story and he stuck with it.

After a hearty and unbelievably wonderful breakfast, we boarded *Thunder Chicken* and it wasn’t long before the three of us began hooking up with feisty silvers, all in the 8- to 15-pound range. Then we gave the trolling a break and tried our hands at jigging for halibut – in 500 feet of water! Like the salmon, the halibut seemed eager to play and in a short time we netted several, the largest being an 82-pounder that required nearly 45 minutes to boat and not one but two solid *thunks* on the noggin with Jim’s war club.

The reason we were fishing in “only” 500 feet of water was, according to Jim, if we went deeper we stood a very good chance of hooking a halibut so large that it would take the rest of the day to crank up from the depths or that might take it into his head to eat the *Thunder Chicken*.

“Besides,” he added, “the little guys – the eighty-pounders for example – make much better table fare.”

I had fished for halibut before, but I learned a new technique from Jim: when you feel a bite, yank hard, then reel madly until you have the fish a dozen or so feet off the bottom, then reel him up. Jim said that once a halibut loses contact with the bottom, he kind of zones out and allows himself to be hoisted. Of course, when he does finally spot the surface and the boat, he suddenly remembers the bottom and heads for it faster than a freshly deceased politician plummets toward Hades.

In addition to halibut and silver and pink salmon, we caught several different types of rockfish, a cod or two, and a really ugly character known as a shark-tooth flounder. One really interesting catch was a haddock, a “cheap” variety that’s ground into fish sticks, but which fought surprising well and was quite beautiful. I’d always figured that haddock were some sort of ugly bottom-feeder, but they are,

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Jim said, Alaska's most important commercial fish – even more significant than salmon.

The next day the weather turned windy – as Jim had accurately predicted – with rough water full of “sheep,” as he calls whitecaps. Although the sky was clear and blue, the fishing was mediocre and the heave factor high so we called it a day early and spent the time enjoying the various amenities inside the lodge.

On the third day, a misty and wet Wednesday, we headed for some fly-fishing streams and spent most of the day teasing chum salmon, most of which were holed up awaiting deeper water before proceeding to their spawning beds. Crispin, who apparently eats and breathes fly fishing, quickly made fools out of the rest of us as he netted and released fish after fish while we struggled to hook three or four apiece. Later that day we drove to Luck Lake where

we netted a few dolly varden until the wind got so strong that we – Crispin being the exception – found casting impossible.

That evening we packed our gear and drove up Prince of Wales Island to the village of Klawock and our host Fireweed Lodge. The next morning we canoed through heavenly stands of old growth forest with Michael Kampnich of the Nature Conservancy, then linked up with some folks from Tongass National Forest who gave us an eye-opening and fascinating tour of some of their projects to save and restore salmon spawning streams, several of which have been rendered nearly useless by clear-cutting and other destructive logging operations.

In the interest of full disclosure, I used to work for the U.S. Forest Service and left thoroughly disgusted with the agency's bureaucratic deadlocks, political correctness and top-heavy, do-nothing management.

The attitude and energy of the Tongass staff, however, put a lie to everything I thought I knew. The people there, from the top right on down to the lowest-level technician, have an enthusiasm and “get 'er done” mentality that is translating into some truly spectacular stream restoration projects.

Working closely with other federal agencies, state agencies, Native American governments, loggers, commercial and sport fishermen, and several sportsmen's and environmental groups, the Tongass staff is well on its way to permanently changing for the better what is billed as America's Rain Forest. Encompassing 17 million acres, the Tongass is, by far, America's largest national forest. It's home to 4,000 salmon spawning streams, 7,000 grizzlies, 10,000 bald eagles, 18 nationally recognized tribes of native peoples and 30 percent of the world's remaining old-growth temperate

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rainforest. It also gets some 200 inches of rain per year, just over four times what we get here in the Blue Ridge Mountains – and we thought that we were wet!

Foremost among the groups involved are: The Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska (a program of the Alaska Conservation Foundation, (907) 276-1917, www.akcf.org, or www.sportsmansalliance4ak.org; Alaska Wilderness League (202) 544-5205, www.AlaskaWild.org; and The Nature Conservancy, Alaska Chapter, (907) 826-2100, nature.org/Alaska. All of these, as well as Tongass National Forest, Alaska tourism agencies and the Prince of Wales Island Chamber of Commerce (www.princeofwalescoc.org) have plenty of colorful and informative brochures free for the asking or downloading.

This was, for me, first and foremost an opportunity to fish a part of the world I hadn't explored, at least so I thought, but the fishing is just one small part of the experience that is southeast Alaska. And at its heart lies Tongass National Forest – huge, beautiful and truly unique. ➔

IF YOU WANT TO GO

I flew to Ketchikan on Alaska Airlines and lodged that night at Cape Fox Lodge (866) 225-8001, then flew ProMech Air to Boardwalk Lodge (www.promechair.com). Everything about Boardwalk Lodge is exceptional, from the fishing to the beds to the gourmet food to the friendly service – even if Jim refused to reveal his last name. Visit www.boardwalklodge.com or call (800) 764-3918.

We also stayed at Fireweed Lodge (www.fireweedlodge.com), which isn't nearly as fancy as Boardwalk, but is still far above your average. Then we boarded Alaska's Inter-Island Ferry (www.interislandferry.com) for a pleasant but somewhat bouncy three-hour ride back to Ketchikan. Ketchikan has a number of nice little shops and galleries offering souvenirs better than what one usually finds in such places.

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