

Saltwater fishing for cutthroat trout

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By Dallas Cross

Most of my cutthroat trout fishing has been in fresh water, so when it was announced that Dan Lemaich, a salty staff member of our local Creekside Angling fly fishing shop, would give a talk about salt water cutthroat trout angling at a Bellevue-Issaquah Trout Unlimited meeting, I marked it on my calendar.



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Coastal cutthroat trout are somewhat bipolar. Some of them spend their entire lives in fresh water while their siblings mysteriously opt to grow up in fresh water, go to sea and then feed in both fresh and salt water. They all return to spawn in shallow streams. Sea-run cutthroat trout are quite specific to the Northwest Pacific region, from Alaska to Northern California, but are especially abundant in Puget Sound.

For a long time, not much attention was paid to cutthroat trout, and they were below the radar for fish census or management by Washington state fishery officials. In some areas, the cutthroat were mistaken for small steelhead and called "half-pounders" by fishermen. When salmon returns became anemic, more attention was paid and salt-water cutthroat were increasingly sought by sport fishermen.

Cutthroat numbers have increased

Because of increased fishing pressure and habitat degradation the numbers of these fish fell. Hatchery supplementation and stringent fishing regulations were initiated. In response, cutthroat numbers have significantly increased in recent years. Now, cutthroat trout in Puget Sound may be caught using only barbless hooks and they must be released immediately.

Because they can be encountered by wading from shore, caught on flies and are spunky fighters, salt-water casting for them is increasing in popularity. Thus, I expectantly attended Dan's presentation at the thirst-friendly Issaquah Brewhouse, hoping to learn how to fly-fish for them and enhance my spotty success rate.

What appeals to me is that special fly-casting gear is not necessary. A regular, 6-weight floating line or a slow-sinking clear line on a fresh-water fly rod is sufficient. Fine leaders are not needed and 10-pound test is acceptable. Cutthroat are not picky about fly patterns, most of which imitate and are the size of bait fish. However, fly management after casting is the key to getting a hit.

Cover is extremely important

Dan emphasized fast-stripping the line all the way to your feet. Cutts often follow the fly quite a distance and make a last-chance strike just when you think the water is too shallow. Fast-moving flies also reduce the nuisance of sculpin hookups.

Dan said that immediately wading out into the salt water after hitting the beach is counterproductive, because cutts seek bait hiding near protective cover. This condition is frequently found in the shallow water right at your feet.

In fact, Dan explained that cover for bait fish is extremely important and that instead of fishing a regularly pebbled bottom, one should look for patchworks of light and dark bottoms indicating rocky structure and plants, around which bait fish bunch up to get out of the current and hide. Surface action from foraging cutts often lets you know where to cast.

North or South?

It seemed, so far, that salt-water cutthroat trout fishing was a piece of cake, but Dan presented the part that makes the sport a real challenge: times, places and tides.

Most cutthroat trout spawn in winter, when they enter the rivers and creeks emptying into Puget Sound. After spawning, there are two distinct feeding characteristics for these trout. Using Edmonds as a North-South dividing line, the South Sound is fed mainly by small rivers and streams, and the North portion is fed by the bigger rivers. There is less food in the streams and small river. Consequently, South Sound cutts do not tarry in them but return to the salt water for foraging.

However, North Sound cutts stay much longer in the bigger rivers with more food. What does all this have to do with time to fish? It means that early in the year, from February to May, the salt-water fishing for South Sound cutts is good. Beginning in May, North Sound cutts start foraging in salt water, and fishing starts to be good and improves on into the summer.

Places to fish and what tides to fish go together. The only common rule is that either slack, high or low tides are not the time to fish. Points of land and places where there are rips in the tidal current are considered best. However, every beach or rocky point has its own particular tide when cutt fishing is optimal.

In some places, it is during the outgoing tide and for others, it is on the incoming tide. You may acquire this local knowledge, often guarded like the location of a chanterelle mushroom patch, from a fellow fisherperson, or just work both tides and discover the secret for yourself.

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