

From Pink to Silver



By Terry Wiest, Salmon/Steelhead University

EVERETT—If you're looking for a thrill, coho just might fill that ticket – and your punch card.

These salmon are some of the hardest-fighting, acrobatic, maniac fish that Puget Sound has to offer. They can be extremely easy to catch when they're stuffing themselves full of anything that moves, or they can turn off the bite and be the most finicky, frustrating of fish when their spawning instinct kicks into full swing and they become "lock jawed."

Luckily for us, in Puget Sound they're usually still on a belly-filling mission and readily bite any well-presented target. Not only does this generate lots of thrills, but poundage for the barbecue as the coho continue to pack on the weight. Although most fish will be 6 to 8 pounds, some will reach into the teens – silvers from the high 15s to the low 18s have won the Everett Coho Derby in recent years – and will give you all the fight you want.

And there should be plenty of fights to go around. This year's forecast calls for a bounceback from last summer and fall's disappointing return; just under 1 million are predicted back to Puget Sound and Hood Canal.

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ingredients when fishing coho (or any other fish) is, of course, locating them. If there aren't any fish, it's highly unlikely you're going to hook one. So searching for bait, marking fish or spotting jumpers is the first task.

In general, coho will be in the top 30 feet of the water column early in the morning and as the sun sets. As the sun comes out they will drop down to avoid the bright light, even to depths greater than 100 feet. We usually target them from the surface down to 120 feet depending on how bright the day is at any given time.

That said, some coho hang out on the surface all day, even in full, bright sun, so a line trolled in the prop wash is always a good idea.

As for where to go, some of the most well-known Puget Sound coho "points" of interest from central Whidbey Island south to Tacoma include Lagoon, Bush, Possession, West, Dolphin, Redondo and Defiance, as well as Point No Point, Jeff Head and the Slag Pile.

That said, coho will also travel the shipping lanes out in the middle of salt. If you can't seem to locate fish near land, don't hesitate to search the center – just keep your eyes open for cargo ships as well as fish.

SO HOW DO WE get them to bite? We need to get their attention first, then we need to make sure our presentation looks realistic enough for them to attack.

Two main factors in getting their attention are noise and flash. Both can be accomplished with one technique – trolling a flasher. If you're not into trolling hardware, a cutplug also generates both noise and flash, but not to the same degree.

Once fish are located and you know they're on the bite, it's a great time to switch over to a cutplug herring or a spoon without a flasher, or a cutplug 50 feet behind the boat with a 2-ounce banana weight.

When it's tougher to find fish, or at least when they're not biting, split the water column and cover more water by trolling. I like to start with a surface rod then stagger others on the Scotty downrigger at 30, 60 and 90 feet.

If that doesn't generate a strike, vary the bottom two rods – say, 80 and 120 feet. Like all fishing, once you find the biters, get all the presentations around the same depth to see if you can start a feeding frenzy.

I really like to troll a red- or green- label cutplug, and the tighter and faster the spin, the better. I'll use 2/0-3/0 hooks for red, 3/0-4/0 for green label. Kick it up a notch when trolling for coho, especially with hardware – you really want to make that flasher work and whip the presentation around.



George Harris of the Northwest Marine Trade Association shows off a brace of late-September silvers caught out of Shilshole Marina in Ballard a couple seasons ago. (GEORGE HARRIS)

Hoochies are always a good bet. Scent them up and put a little herring teaser on one of the hooks. Make sure and scent the flasher and the leader too. A good trail can only help.

Probably my favorite “lure” is the Grand Slam Bucktail herring trolled behind a flasher just like a hoochie. Just scent the head and hooks of the fly along with the flasher and leader – keep oil off the hair if possible.

For surface rods a “spinner” made out of a herring fillet can be lights out. Start by inserting the knife at the same angle you would a cutplug, but instead of cutting through, fillet along the spine. Run the first hook through the front in a good meaty section and let it dangle. Hook the top hook in the top ¼ inch. Make sure it’s spinning when put in the water. These won’t stay on very long, so a surface rod is your best bet. There’s no better scent trail than a fresh fillet spinning in the water!

SPOONS ARE KILLER lures and probably the No. 1 coho catcher. A lot of this may be due to the lack of precision needed to use them. Spoons will work at most speeds and are manufactured so well now that the action is exactly what the fish are looking for. Even the

hooks are high tech with manufactures like Silver Horde switching to the sickle hook for their spoons.

Some of the top spoons include Kingfisher Lites, Sonic Edges and Coyotes. Greens, blues and purples are my favorites, and if you’re a believer like I am, make sure they are UV coated. Some of the patterns I’ve been most successful with are cop car (my No. 1 choice for coho), Irish crème, Irish flag, purple haze (I won \$1,000 first place in a coho derby on this one), blue spatterback, green spatterback, army truck and watermelon.

I like my presentation to be back away from the boat about 20 to 40 feet which also allows for more action if connected to your downrigger. With a hoochie behind a flasher, I’ll run 32 inches of 50-pound test; with a bait or spoon, 50 inches of 20-pound leader.

ONE OF FUNNEST fishing methods for coho is mooching with a cutplug. It allows you to cover the water column and keep your bait moving. Just don't set your hook too soon with the bite – probably the No. 1 mistake anglers make with this tactic. Instead, feed some line if anything and don't set it until you "know" the fish is on the other end. If you don't feel any weight, the coho is most likely swimming up and you'll need to reel fast to catch up to the fish, then set the hook.

The aforementioned land points will be your best bets for mooching (my favorite is Bush Point). Work the water column and go with the current. When the fish are in, this can be some of the best fishing in the Sound.

Another method that can be effective is jigging. Buzz Bombs, Pt. Wilson Darts and Crippled Herring all can produce vicious strikes and can be completely nuts when the bite is on

... frustrating if you're not over fish.

It's a promising coho year, and while smaller than kings, they're worth it as many consider them to be the Sound's best table fare. They can be very entertaining to say the least. Fish high, fish fast, catch lots.

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