

A LITTLE LONGLINING

Sometimes the best part of having a 14,000-pound halibut quota is making it last.

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

Eighteen miles north of Juneau, there's a spot off the side of the road with room enough for three parked vehicles. To the left of the area is a rustic staircase that winds down, down, and down through a wooded bank. The bottom of the old steps spits out onto the shoreline of a hidden, majestic setting the locals adore: Tee Harbor.

I arrive at 6:30 a.m. on a late-July morning for a day of halibut fishing with born-and-bred Juneau fishermen Gary Rosenberger and Dave Harris. Tee Harbor is enclosed in fog, and the olive-colored water is still. Houses line the rocky shoreline, and several small boats tie up to one float where, during the day, a woman sells fuel.

Harris waits at the bottom of the steps. Rosenberger, who has been up for several hours, is already on board his 35-foot Goodlooking, a landing craft-style vessel

(called by Seattle builder William E. Munson Co. a Pac-Cat, because of its catamaran-like hull). Twin 250-hp Yamaha two-stroke outboards and the vessel's shallow draft allow Rosenberger to bring the aluminum boat right up to shore, where he walks — bounces, actually — down the boat's ramp and extends his hand in greeting, his voice vibrating throughout the quiet harbor.

I trudge up the ramp; Harris bounces aboard in the same manner as Rosenberger, both men looking forward to a day of longlining.

As participants in the D class of halibut IFQs, Rosenberger and Harris have, between them, roughly 14,000 pounds of halibut quota they pick away at during the late spring and summer months. Rosenberger estimates he and Har-

ris catch about 800 pounds of halibut each trip, and get the entire quota in less than 20 trips out.

"We don't want to get it all at once," Rosenberger says, "because then we can't go back out again."

Rosenberger and Harris, both in their early 40s, are not only friends, but also brothers-in-law. Both were born and raised in Juneau, and they've known each other for 14 years. Harris has fished full-time in several commercial fisheries for 16 years. Rosenberger began at the same time, staying in the halibut fishery ever since he steered a 25-foot open skiff back in the derby days.

"It was rough," he says. "We didn't really get anywhere."

These days, when he's not on the water, Rosenberger manages the apartments and the local shopping center he owns with his siblings.

Rosenberger cruises slowly away from the T-shaped harbor; once out, he kicks it up to 20 knots as he heads around the south end of Shelter Island. The plan is to steam north up Saginaw Channel, around Point Retreat, and then south down Lynn Canal to just west of Point Couverden, where we'll drop the gear in Icy Strait. The air is cool but far from cold, the sky remains gray with fog, and the water's calm. Rosenberger points out three porpoises off the starboard bow and a sea lion bobbing to port, then looks through the corner of his eye at Harris.

"I put Rain-X on the windows," he says. "You know what that means, don't you?"

"It means it won't rain at all!" Harris answers.

Rosenberger stops 100 yards out from a pod of feeding humpback whales near the Barlow Islands in Saginaw Channel. We watch the 40-ton whales roll along the surface and dive, revealing their tails. We linger, hoping the pod will break through the surface and show their faces. We're not disappointed, as the pod bursts and we're treated to an uncommon and fleeting glimpse of four

JUNEAU NATIVES and brothers-in-law Dave Harris (left) and Gary Rosenberger have known one another for 14 years.

schools of feed fish.

We watch for 10 minutes more and then steam away. The sun makes its first appearance of the morning as we steam past the north tip of Admiralty Island and the Point Retreat Lighthouse.

"The boat doesn't like rough water because of the square bow," Rosenberger explains. He picks up the binoculars and searches the shoreline for black bears and deer. He stops again to wait for a new pod of whales about 200 yards out to break through the water cover, and explains how he came up with the curious name of his boat.

"People would always come by my old skiff and say, 'Hey, that skiff's good looking.' I had the new boat built and just thought I'd keep the name Goodlookinging."

He won't have the boat for much longer, however; the Goodlooking, complet-

ed in 2000, is one of several made of the wrong alloy that doesn't hold up in salt water, so Munson will build him a new one. Because the Goodlooking has yet to show any signs of trouble, Rosenberger told the company to wait on building his while they start on the others.

The whales haven't reappeared since their last dive, so Rosenberger puts the boat back in gear.

"I guess they're not playin'," he says.

Shortly before 8 a.m., we arrive on the grounds and Rosenberger studies the cabin electronics.

"Depth finder isn't working," he announces. "It's a bit temperamental. We'll have to throw out a line with a rock on it." He laughs at his joke.

Four rubber garbage cans sit on the stern; two hold 3,000 feet of ground line, and the remaining cans hold two 150-fathom buoy lines each. There are also three metal tubs, each holding 300 baited hooks. Rosenberger baits the hooks with herring and chum salmon weeks in advance and freezes the tubs, then takes them out to thaw the day before a trip.

"This is the smallest of the longline operations right here," Rosenberger says.

He sets the gear off the stern. As it goes out, Rosenberger drives the boat from the aft steering station, watches depth and location with the aft depth finder, and holds tension on the ground line by using a rock climber's belayer. Harris attaches the buoys and anchors, and snaps on the baited hooks.

Rosenberger sets the first one-and-a-half tubs during the first round, where they'll soak

EYEING THE SCALE, Dave Harris weighs a halibut. He and Rosenberger catch about 800 pounds of flatties per trip.



CLEANING FISH is not an undesirable task to Gary Rosenberger, who looks forward to discovering what may wait inside a halibut's gutted stomach.

for three hours; the rest will be set during the final round. Size of the catch depends on where they drop the gear, and that varies from year to year.

"We've caught them up to 340 pounds before," Harris says. "But not very often."

In addition to the twin 250-hp Yamaha two-stroke outboards, the Goodlooking holds a 50-hp four-stroke Yamaha that is used to haul gear, go into the beach, or troll for salmon. It has a one-foot draft with the motors up in the stern. Because the bilge is a void and very small, all storage is above deck, including the totes that hold the halibut. A GPS, fathometer, radar, VHF, compass and CD player occupy the 10' x 10' cabin.

Today, Rosenberger decides to set the first bit of gear in 43 fathoms of water, explaining that it's a bit shallow for halibut fishing. Instead of setting in a straight line, Rosenberger weaves in and out in a zigzag pattern.

"We try to go deep and shallow be-

cause we don't know where the fish are. So if we get them, we try to remember where and set there again." We pass over a 100-fathom drop and empty the first tub. As the gear soaks, Rosenberger makes an announcement.

"We're going to shore," he says.

Soon find out that 'going to shore' is serious business and held in the same esteem as the fishing itself.

Rosenberger takes the boat to a shoreline right outside Swanson Harbor, and I tentatively step off onto algae-covered rocks. Harris leaves with Rosenberger to anchor the Goodlooking.

I'm attempting to stay vertical on the slick rocks when I suddenly remember I'm in bear country. I gaze warily into the forest of Sitka spruce, western hemlock and alder behind me, then turn back to the sea, where the men row toward me in an 8-foot inflatable raft.

Once ashore, Rosenberger says, "I saw the biggest black bear of my life right

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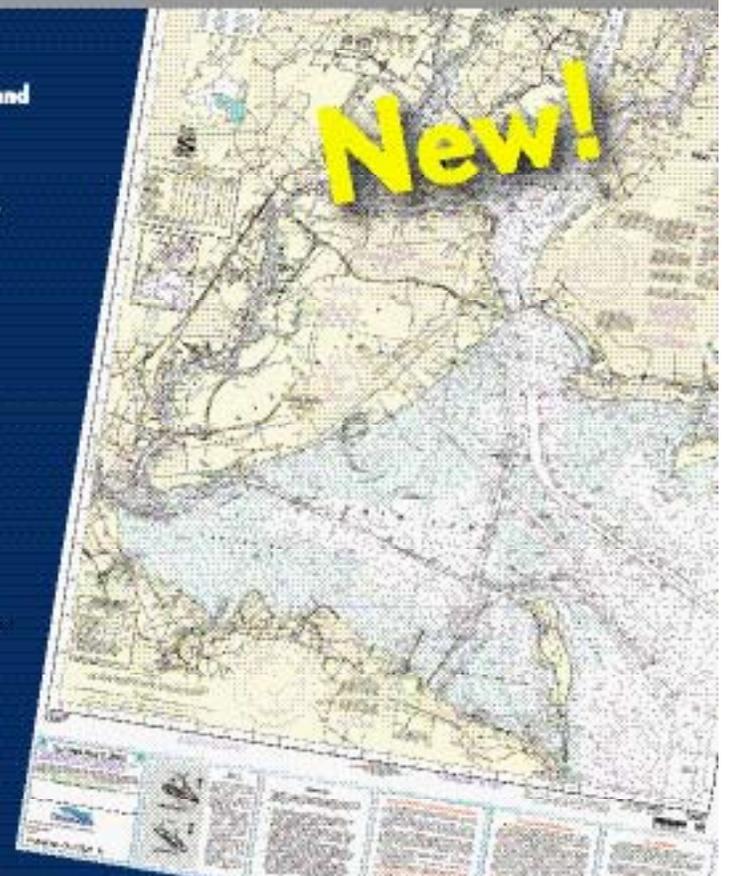
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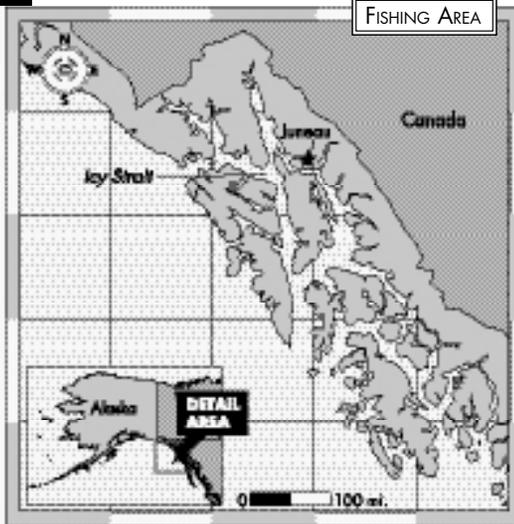
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ALASKA LONGLINING FOR HALIBUT: THE FACTS

- **Number of boats:** There are 3,500 individual quota share holders, and less than 3,000 vessels.
- **Size of boats:** There are two categories of boats: catcher boats and freezer longliners. Catcher boats are subdivided by length into further categories — divisions are at 35 feet and under (D class), 35 to 60 feet (C class), and over 60 feet (B class). Freezer longliners of any size are A class.
- **Fishing area:** The fishing area is statewide, specific to the area stated on quota certificate. Alaska's halibut fishery consists of eight regulatory areas. Each IFQ permit lists the number of pounds that the fisherman is allowed to catch in each area.
- **Depths:** Twenty five to 250 fathoms
- **Gear:** Hook and line, tub gear, skate bottoms and snap-on are most common.
- **Capital investment:** \$3.50 to \$11 per pound for quota shares, \$10,000 to \$10 million range for boat and gear.
- **Annual landings:** Alaska harvesters landed 61 million pounds of halibut in 2001.
- **Licenses and permits:** IFQ shares, IFQ permit, IFQ card. An IFQ permit authorizes participation in fixed-gear harvests of Pacific halibut off Alaska. IFQ permits are issued annually, at no charge, to persons holding a fishable Pacific halibut quota share. Quota shares were initially assigned based on documented catch history. Now they can be leased, bought or sold. Federal Fisheries permits are required for areas outside state waters (3 miles outside the beach). Rosenberger also has a Registered Buyer's permit, which is optional, that allows him to land fish dockside at his house in Tee Harbor.
- **General regulations:** Each fisherman has a catch quota that can be used any time during the open season, from March 15 to Nov. 15. Remaining months are closed for biological reasons. Release fish under 32 inches.
- **Ex-vessel prices:** Currently \$1.80 to \$2.50 per pound
- **Markets:** Mostly domestic



"Catch some fish, explore the shore. Find some garbage and drag it home."

He props what appears to be a ladder in view of Rosenberger, who slowly moves the boat down the shoreline, keeping a close eye on our acquisitions. Harris looks down and finds a piece of rope and a faded red gas can ("A guy can never have enough gas cans!").

Rosenberger shouts that it's about time to return to the gear, and we begin the slow trek towards the waterline. Harris makes one last wistful look back. "Might have to leave Karen's stick behind," he says sadly. "It's way back there."

Harris returns instead with a selection of web and line under his arm, including

THE GOODLOOKING was named after people's reaction to Gary Rosenberger's previous skiff.



a mesh bag ("Has a good lifting strap, even!") and the white bucket; I leave grateful for no bear mishaps.

We board the vessel, which is idling in the middle of a salmon school, and spot another whale frolicking up ahead. Rosenberger nods approvingly at the white bucket Harris sets on the deck. The theory is the more buckets they find while exploring, the more fish they'll catch.

Harris moves the gear from the stern, through the cabin and to the foredeck, and then takes his position to the right of the block. Rosenberger stands to the left of Harris, and I find a spot on top of the wheelhouse. The sky has transformed into a cloudless, piercing blue, and the water glitters in the same hue. Much later, I'll learn that Juneau had only three days of sunshine in July, and it was my good fortune to be at sea during one of them.

Harris and Rosenberger are dressed for the occasion — each wears a short-sleeved T-shirt, a vest, and of course, brown X-tra Tuffs.

The men haul the first of the line in, and with it comes a selection of fish: the first halibut of the day, one rockfish that goes into the white bucket (to be sold to a local supermarket), and one skate, which Harris tosses back.

Continued on page 70

here."

"Did you stand your ground?" Harris asks.

"No." Rosenberger answers. "He was a big bear who stood *his* ground. We turned around and walked back to the boat."

Fears unabated, I trail behind the two as they begin their all-important business of looking around for treasures, holding them up for inspection, and deciding whether to keep them.

Harris discovers a white bucket. "We can use this!" he calls to Rosenberger,

who is busy inspecting a hard plastic orange buoy, turquoise line still attached.

Rosenberger decides to head back to the boat early and pick up the anchor. He makes his way down the beach — new orange buoy flung over his shoulder — with the confident gait of a man who's spent countless days traversing the shore.

"This is a nice board," Harris says, bending down to pick up a faded wood two-by-four. "Karen [his wife] would love this board. Maybe I should take it home for her."

"This is the whole point," he continues.

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Continued from page 26

Harris gaffs the halibut, removes the hook, and measures them on a grid on the railing. Sub-legal fish go back over, where they instantly swim and disappear into the dark beneath the surface. Halibut weighing over 80 pounds hang from cleats on the side of the boat, where they calm down before going into the white totes.

Just 15 minutes after starting the haul, five 30- to 40-pound halibut lie in the tote, and a 130-pound halibut dangles off the side. Rockfish — swim bladders protruding unnaturally from their mouths — fill up the white bucket. As more interesting creatures come up — sponge, coral, shells — Harris plucks them from the hooks and props them on the railing for curious observation before tossing them back. Rosenberger guides the line coming through the block, and it occasionally pushes over the garbage cans containing line that has already piled up.

At the end of the set, the two estimate about 600 pounds of halibut are aboard, most of it caught in depths of 45 to 60 fathoms.

"A little bit above average so far this year," Harris says. "It's the average we'd like to have, but don't always get."

Rosenberger and Harris move the gear back to the stern, readying it for the second and final set of the day.

"That was a nice set for us," Rosenberger agrees. "We couldn't do that all the time, or we'd run out of quota."

"This is the smallest of the longline operations right here."

—Gary Rosenberger

OWNER OF THE GOODLOOKING

The two clean, dress, and weigh the just-caught halibut after the second set is out. As you'd expect, they're thrilled about the prospect of gutting the fish and discovering what surprises wait inside the bellies.

Rosenberger discovers a cod inside one of the halibut. Unfortunately, nothing of interest is inside the cod. Of the more extraordinary surprises found over the years, a block of cheese and a celery stalk rate highest on the list.

Because Rosenberger has gone through the paperwork to make himself a Registered Buyer, his home in Tee Harbor is an official landing site. He buys the fish from himself to legally get them off the boat, and then takes the iced fish in a tote in the back of his pick-up to the actual buyer. He can sell the catch any way he chooses: to individuals, stores or the local processor. He has his own terminal to perform the necessary landing chores that document the amount of quota landed — his own as well as quota from people (such as Harris) who fish with him.

"At any time during the offloading process, NMFS enforcement officials, as well as the [International Pacific Halibut Commission] data collectors, can and will and have shown up to make sure all is copasetic," Harris says. Even the Coast Guard has been known to show up when the other agencies are busy.

After lunch, eaten on top of a covered Atote, it's time to haul the second set.

The first few halibut, too small to keep, are released. Harris peers into the water and finally spots a possible keeper.

"Oh, here we go!" Harris calls.

"Is he gonna make it?" asks Rosenberger.

"Hard to tell," Harris concedes.

Rosenberger decides. "He's too short," he says, and Harris throws him back.

"I was afraid of this," Rosenberger says.

"We put the gear down too shallow." They are disappointed by the small halibut, especially after the success of the first set.

"Maybe it will get real hot and heavy at

the end or something," Rosenberger wonders out loud. As if on cue, one that looks like a keeper rides up on the line.

"Here we go, ladies and gentlemen!" Rosenberger announces. "We got it!"

Harris measures it to make sure, trying to calm the flopping fish by gently rubbing its belly and head. It passes, but the next fish is deemed too small.

"Return to sender," Rosenberger says.

The end of the second set brings a total of 532 pounds aboard. Combined with the the first set, they're well above their average with a total of 1,301 pounds for the day, and the two are exhilarated and

upbeat. Rosenberger will sell today's halibut to Juneau's Taku Smokeries, and the rockfish to a local supermarket.

"That's all she wrote," Rosenberger calls as he kicks the boat into gear for the cruise back to Tee Harbor, where he and Harris will clean and weigh the halibut from the last set.

We head back to shore with Harris acting as disc jockey, spinning requests. Rosenberger sits at the wheel, smiling. He's excited. He gets to go back out for another day of fishing real soon. **NF**

Jennifer Karuza is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

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