

A NIGHT FOR KINGS

Gillnetting for salmon is a little different in Puget Sound, where speedboats and seals battle salmon for the nets.



JENNIFER KARUZA PHOTOS

BY JENNIFER KARUZA

I pull into Squalicum Harbor parking lot at 5:45 p.m. to join an old friend and veteran fisherman, Steve Miller, and his girlfriend, Tanya Braumiller, for my first Puget Sound king salmon gillnet opener, which begins at 7 p.m.

I'm wondering if I should have grabbed a burger from the Web Locker Restaurant instead of relying on the Handi-Snacks I have in my backpack when I spot Braumiller waiting for me by the tailgate of Miller's Ford.

Braumiller, 54, a vivacious and petite woman who looks a decade younger than she is, holds a chemistry degree from Reed College in Portland, Ore., and works as a chemist. She keeps Steve company on openings whenever her schedule permits.

"Steve's gone to get ice," she says, and looks down to the dock. "Wait, no!" she says. "There he is!"

The Lady of Fatima, Miller's 29-foot fiberglass gillnetter, idles at the end of the float.

Lined up and down the float around Miller's vessel is a group of anglers. I've never seen men cast inside Squalicum

Harbor, and I feel a bit disoriented. I wouldn't have thought the murky water inside the breakwater to be the hot spot.

"What are they fishing for?" I ask Braumiller.

"I don't know," she says. "But they're always here."

I sit down on top of a blue ice chest on Miller's boat and settle in for the steam out of the harbor and into Bellingham Bay. I'm looking forward to being out on the water again, viewing Bellingham's waterfront and luxuriating in the sunshine-filled evening.

The ride lasts five minutes.

To port, smoke rises from the stacks of Georgia Pacific. To starboard is the Alaska ferry terminal. I spot Frisbee throwers in Boulevard Park up ahead. My parents' house is just around the point further south. I realize that I could, feasibly, swim to the shoreline, climb the bluff, and appear on their doorstep in time for "The O'Reilly Factor."

Miller pulls out his binoculars and spots a gillnetter jogging closer to the shore. "Someone's in my spot," he says, and claims the set just behind the spot-stealing boat. Braumiller, an old salt herself having spent decades aboard a sail-

boat, pulls out a magazine from her bag, sits on the drum and begins reading. In 15 minutes, she looks up. "What time is it?" she asks. "Should I be leaping up to get ready?"

I ask her if she helps to pick fish. "If there are any," she answers, and settles back onto her perch after learning that we've still got another half an hour. Miller and Tanya were neighbors before they began dating four years ago and have known each other since 1996. They live in a town just outside of Bellingham where they each have about 10 acres of land, complete with fruit orchards and large vegetable gardens. They

AS A TANGIBLE reward for his hard work, fisherman Steve Miller holds up a shining king salmon, picked from the net.

FISHING TOGETHER makes for a strong relationship, as proved by Steve Miller and his girlfriend, Tanya Braumiller.

also ride motorcycles together.

Miller, 53, is a mellow man of few words. But he's also sharp and witty

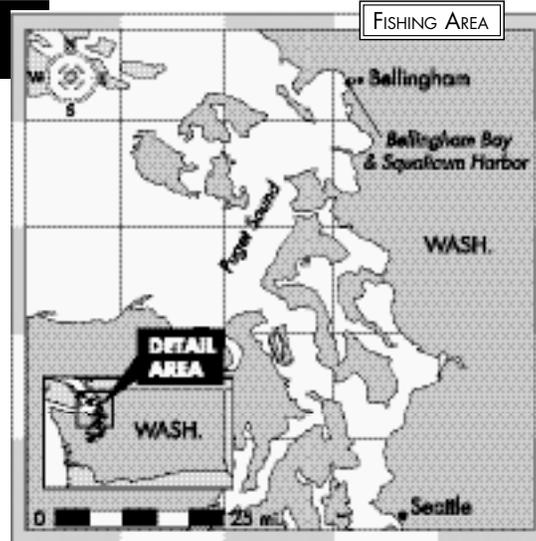


PUGET SOUND KING SALMON GILLNETTING: THE FACTS

- **Number of participants:** There were 675 boats in the fleet before the Puget Sound buyback program was implemented in 2000; 212 licenses remain, but not all are active.
- **Size of boats:** 24- to 38-foot bowpickers and sternpickers.
- **Fishing area:** Miller participates in a very local Puget Sound king fishery, which is centered in Bellingham Bay and Samish Bay. Depth of water is 18 to 35 fathoms.
- **Gear:** No maximum mesh size or depth of gillnet; 1,800 feet maximum length gillnet; net mesh restrictions for target species is a 7-inch minimum mesh for kings.
- **Capital investment:** Boat: \$2,500 to \$50,000. Current market value on a license is roughly \$12,000. Net: new, \$5,000 to 6,000; used, \$700 to \$1,000; lease, 10 percent to 15 percent of catch.
- **Licenses and permits:** No new commercial salmon licenses have been issued since May 6, 1974, only renewals. A Puget Sound gillnet license is good for all commercial salmon fisheries. The vessel license buyback program was in effect to temper the negative effects of the Pacific Salmon Treaty. Gillnet permits were purchased for \$27,500 in the buyback program.
- **General regulations:** Fishers and buyers are reminded

that "quick reporting" of fish ticket information is in effect for all Puget Sound commercial salmon fisheries. Buyer reports must be received by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife by 10 a.m. for purchases made on the previous calendar day. Take-home fish must be listed. Compliance in reporting all fish caught is necessary for proper management of salmon fisheries now and in the future. Must set in straight line and not a circle.

- **Annual landings:** The 2003 preliminary preseason run size forecast for chinook in the Nooksack/Samish region: 45,800. In 2001 the actual run size for this area was 33,000 and in 2000 it was 33,500. In 2001 and 2002 there were five fishing days and in 2000 there were six.
- **Ex-vessel prices:** Kings fetch 70 cents per pound with a possible price adjustment to between 90 cents and \$1.10 per pound.
- **Markets:** Fresh: Solid, mostly local fresh market. Most fishermen sell to Ocean Beauty, Arrowac, Trident, San Juan Seafoods. A new option, the Direct Retail Endorsement, costs \$50 and enables fishermen to sell their catch to temporary food service establishments. Requires a food and beverage worker's permit.



and longlining and crab fishing in Southeast and the Gulf of Alaska.

"Puget Sound got pretty grim," Miller says, "So we eventually just fished full-time in Alaska. We tried the king crab thing in Kodiak, dove for roe on kelp, and a few other silly things."

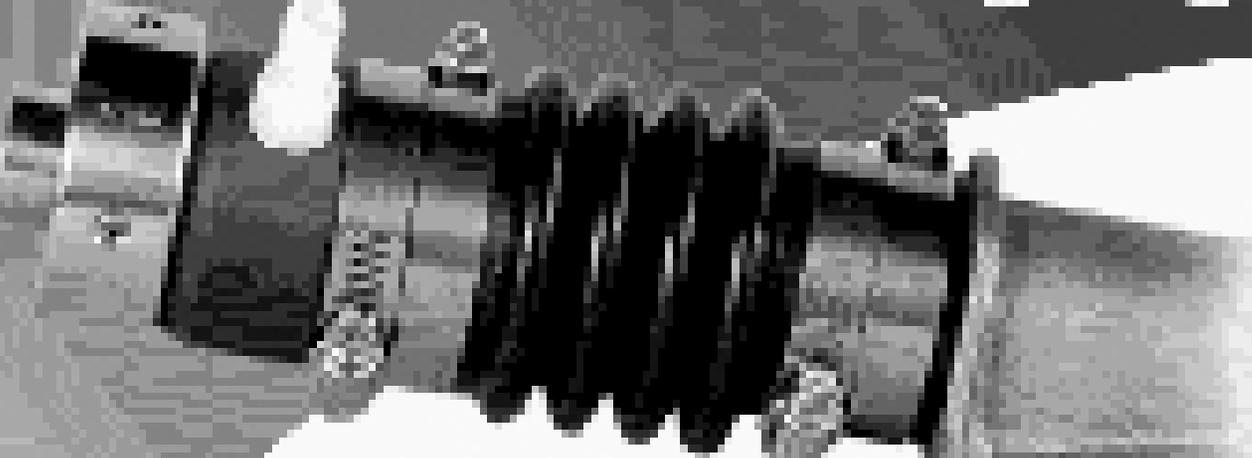
When my dad passed the captain's hat to another cocky, 36-year old skipper — who happens to be my husband, George — most of the original crew disbanded. Miller decided to keep longlining for halibut and blackcod with the boat and easily held his own on deck with a handful of 25-year old crew members who ap-

with a variety of interests ranging from baking to the previously mentioned motorcycles. He has been commercial fishing since 1978, when he left rice farming in California and ventured north in search of the riches he'd heard were to be made in the fishing industry.

He was working at a job building crab pots in the late 1970s when he heard of a guy who had just traded in a couple of gillnetters for a purse seiner. "I figured he might be looking for crew," Miller says. He met with — in Miller's words

— a "cocky, hardworking, 36-year old cigar-smoking captain" — who happened to be my dad. That meeting led to a 25-year working relationship that included, among other things, seining in both Puget Sound and Southeast Alaska,

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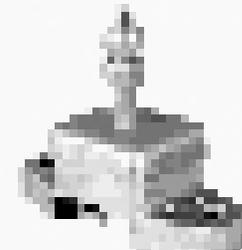
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Miller has fished the Lady of Fatima, which is outfitted with a drum and a crab block, since 1985 for the Puget Sound salmon and Dungeness crab seasons.

"Did you come up with the name of the boat yourself?" I ask.

"I'm not religious," he responds.

"There's a few bucks in the crab," he says. "I pay expenses and moorage with the salmon, live on the longlining, and put the crab money in my pocket."

Inside the cabin, Miller has a radar, depth sounder, plotter, citizens band

radio and VHF. Although sparse, it's a sleek and comfortable boat that boasts a bunk big enough for a small family.

"The fishery doesn't justify cosmetic repair," he says. "All in all, it's poor, although there's always someone who catches a few fish. The price of salmon goes down while the cost of everything else goes up."

In one 1985 opening, Miller caught 33 kings and made \$1,000. Last year, he caught 90 kings for \$900. "That same year, fuel was 60 cents a gallon," he says. "Now, it's \$2 a gallon. Speaking of which," he says, and cuts the engines.

He didn't sell his permit in the

Puget Sound buyback program, which lasted from 2000 to 2002, because he thought that with fewer people fishing, it might go better. "But that didn't happen," he says, and gestures out to the bay. "It used to be wall-to-wall boats," he says.

Just before 7 p.m., Miller moves to the stern of the boat and Tanya hops off the drum. "Get yourself ready!" she calls. "Put away the fashion magazines and get your gloves!"

She notices a nicely constructed, hand-made gaff lying against the bulwarks. "Hey!" she says to Miller. "You made a new gaff!" She turns to me. "Steve's

very creative," she says.

Miller smirks in appreciation. "It's more like, I'm cheap and the other gaff broke."

He doesn't plan to haul his net until 10 p.m. For the three hours we have to wait, we entertain ourselves by doing what one always does on a Puget Sound opening: eat and talk. We help ourselves to Miller's homegrown pears and freshly baked blackberry tarts. I trade Tanya one of my Handi-Snacks for half of her fresh chicken sandwich. It's a warm and sunny evening without a breath of wind. It's quiet but for the splashing of seals playing nearby.

And, of course, the yelling.

It's Herculean yelling, executed with power and intensity. It's yelling done by the gillnetters around us, forced to engage in an all-night and constant battle to save their nets from pleasure boats flying through the bay at top speed toward the entrance to the harbor. It's tragic and comical all at once.

The gillnetter waits until it's clear the speedboat either doesn't see, or isn't going to stop for, his net. That's when he begins The Charge. The gillnet engine revs up with an angry roar. The chunky boat kicks it into high gear and, with a mighty puff of steam pouring out of its stacks — resembling an irate, red-eyed bull — the vessel races noisily alongside the length of his net. At this point, the

"I pay expenses and moorage with the salmon, live on the longlining, and put the crab money in my pocket."

—Steve Miller

PUGET SOUND FISHERMAN

approaching speedboat is supposed to see the charging gillnetter — or perhaps the lights or buoys missed before — and avoid a T-bone collision.

At night, the warning flash of a spotlight up and down the net precedes The Charge. The speedboat is shocked into submission and quickly backs off its course. Some cut too close for comfort, which is when the yelling starts as the gillnet captain comes out on deck for a bitter and resounding exchange.

As soon as we hear the beginning of The Charge, we halt our conversation and lean into the direction of the excitement. Miller shakes his head in disbelief every time. "Right for that guy's net again," he says. We hear the angry tone across the water, but not exact words. We surmise what is being said and chuckle in disbelief.

"It's really bad," Miller says. "I charged a guy who did run right into my net. He said he didn't hit it, but when I hauled it in, sure enough I had a huge tear."

At 10 p.m., Miller moves to the stern again and slides the level-wind over. "I pick up the net after twilight," he explains, "because that's when the fish seem to move a little bit." About 16 boats around us are doing the same thing. Midway through the haul, we have one algae-and-barnacle-covered Coke bottle, hot red jellyfish whose

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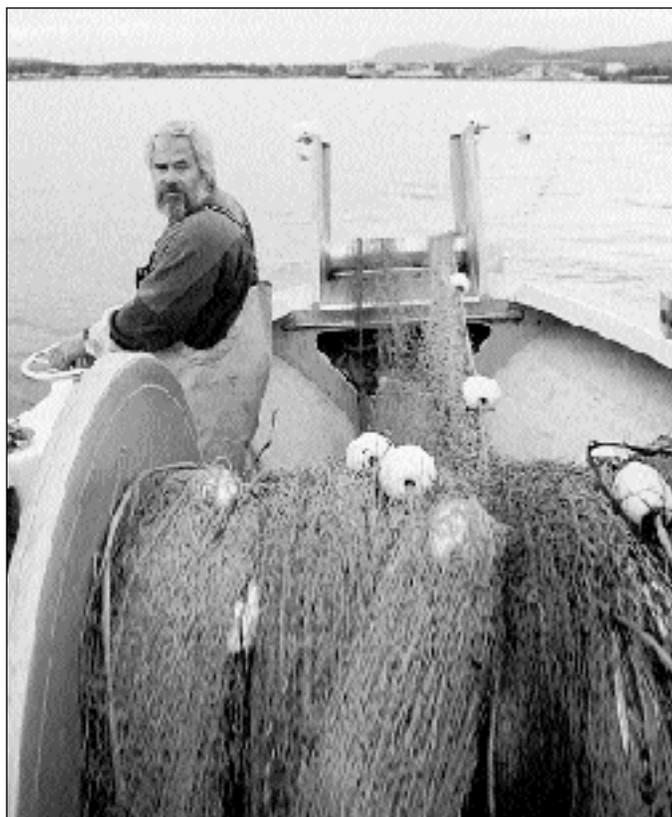
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KEEPING AN EYE on your net is a necessity in Puget Sound, where speed-boats are a constant threat.

patiently.

"There's a picker," Miller says, nodding in the direction of a seal bobbing off starboard.

"If there were fish, wouldn't he be picking the net right now?" Braumiller asks.

"Maybe he already has," Miller says.

Finally, a hearty king rolls up. It's silver skin glitters with the reflection of deck lights.

"Well, that's what we're here for," a pleased Miller says. "At least we're not skunked."

flecks keep finding their way into Braumiller's eyes, one stray sockeye and a handful of dogfish. A seal or two wait

The end of the net rolls one more king on board, which gives Miller two for the set.

"I was hoping for 30 or 40," a now less-pleased Miller says. "I thought maybe this late in the season... but without the rain... the tides..." His voice drifts off and he shakes his head as he looks out into the bay. "It's all just speculation."

On the first opening of the season, Miller caught 20 fish; 10 fish in the first set and 10 in the second. His expectations were greater for tonight, the second opening of the season.

An hour later, Miller sets the net back out. We congregate on deck and notice a few less deck lights shining on the bay. We hear a constant rumble of gillnet engines — whose numbers have dwindled by half — either charging speedboaters or heading back in. We have another three hours to wait, a portion of which we spend looking for Mars and the Big Dipper. By 2:30 a.m., when I grab a couple more blackberry tarts and Miller and Braumiller haul in the second set, there are only three boats left.

"You should call them and get the report," Braumiller suggests, as she pulls seaweed from the net.

"If they're heading in, you know the report," Steve says.

Our second set turns out to be the final set. It brings two more kings on board, for a grand total of four.

Miller decides to pack it in. As we make our way back into the entrance of the harbor, we pass a gillnetter who is still trying to make a go of it. This is a fisherman who, instead of spending the long night picking kings out of his net, has spent his evening charging speed-boats in efforts to save his net. Braumiller gives him an encouraging wave. The weary captain, sitting inside a dimly lit cabin, lifts his hand and gives a feeble wave in return.

We idle slowly past Bellingham Cold Storage into a desolate and quiet harbor. As we cruise past the yachts on the way back to the commercial section, Miller points out one named "Beagle II."

"Funny thing is," Miller says, "when I got ice earlier, there was a golden retriever on the deck of that boat."

At the dock, Miller kills the engine and helps Braumiller tie up the lines. The silence of early morning is interrupted by multiple sounds of smacking and splashing. I turn around; a lone salmon jumps high in the air and crashes down behind me.

Miller stops what he's doing and looks at the playful fish. "Humpies," he says. "Harbor is full of them. Saw a school of 'em jumping like crazy the other day."

Jennifer Karuza is a freelance writer living in Seattle.

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