

Some of Our Adventures in Pursuit of the Finny Ones

By Bonnycastle Dale

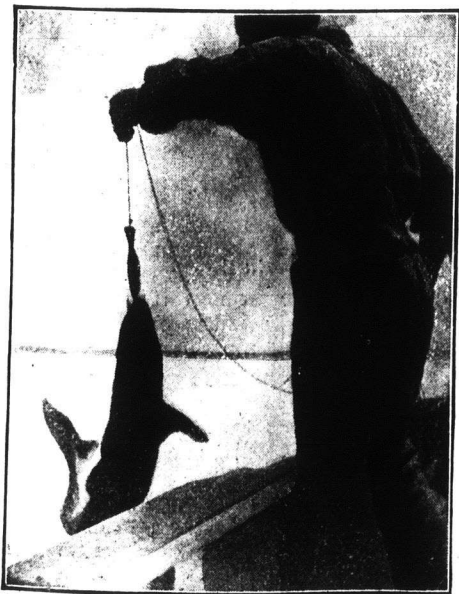
WE WERE standing on top of the high red stone bluffs that encompass Saanich Arm. Through the powerful binoculars we could see two races of animals fishing—a man in a canoe, and an osprey, or fish hawk.

"I'll bet on the man," laughed Fritz. "And I on the bird," said I.

On mighty pinions the great fishing bird floated. It was an old bird with a very white head, all its well oiled plumage glittered in the sun, its breast was as white as snow. No wonder it fished there, right within our line of vision, low down, near the shore line, for, on a tall hemlock, we spied the female sitting in a great tub of a brushwood nest. As early as this late March day she was setting or laying, and the unseasonable fall of snow must have kept her on her nest. Suddenly the male whistled shrilly.

"You win, Fritz," I cried, "the man in the canoe has a salmon on." Intently we watched both man and bird. Again, as the fish leaped in full sight, the great osprey whistled. It knew full well it dared not dive for that fish so close to the canoe that held the dark figure. We saw the Indian pull in his trolling line hand over hand; he reached for the killing stick and gaff hook combined; there was a mighty turmoil in the water alongside, a high-flung body of a silvery gleaming fish—and the salmon was off, free once more to face the swift tides and hunt its daily prey. "I have another chance coming, laddie," I laughed, as we watched the pair of fishing animals. Off set the native paddling slowly against the low spring tide—off sailed the fish hawk on great curving circles. Two whistles, the female on the nest, too, caught sight of the school of smelt that made the water boil, but they are too small for our noble pair. Now see the gulls darting down as a school of tide fishing cut-throat trout are coming into the Arm. Like a flash the female quitted the nest, descending with folded wings like a plummet; the male uttered a short, sharp call ere he headed down, but they struck the water together. Each disappeared in a mighty upthrow of spray and foam and both emerged with a struggling trout in its mouth—good, big fish, too, they seemed—over two pounds apiece, from all that swarming mass, in that infinitesimal fraction of time it took to dive. Up, up, up they both mount towards us, the water falling in shining drops off both fish and bird.

"Look, I've not won yet!" All this time another spectator of the fishing sat unnoticed and, with a rush like the roar of a great mass of flame, the dark body of a great bird passed over us, falling towards the water of the Arm. Instantly the female osprey changed her course and swept into the shelter of the hemlocks; the male, outmanoeuvred by the swooping eagle, was driven out over the water. Down went the Baldhead, down—lower



Dog Fish

than the hawk, driving it up again—then the huge robber swept up at the end of a long curve directly beneath the hawk, and for an instant the eagle seemed to be upside down striking at the breast of the osprey with its long sharp talons. Instantly the hawk dropped the trout, and as instantaneously the aggressor

fell like a flash through the air and caught the falling fish on the surface of the water; slowly it flapped up onto a great fir and deliberately tore the fish to pieces. The robbed osprey sailed up to the nest, beside which, the female sat eating her trout. Did she divide like a good, kind wife? Not a bit of it, for she threw out her wings, ruffled her neck, whistled shrilly as an urchin schoolward bound and drove her lawful mate off the family tree.

As we descended the very slippery path to the shore, we saw the native land a salmon. Here is the place for all my inland dwelling readers who want real fishing. If you ever come to the Coast, be sure and try the salmon and trout off the shores of Vancouver Island, or any island in the Straits and Gulf of Georgia. But Fritz and I this day had our mouths all made up for a feed off the very tasty cod, so we ignored the native's catching two more salmon and paddled out of the Arm, grounding our canoe on a little reef. In a few moments we were afloat again with a large tin full of huge mussels; these shell-fish make excellent bait. Off we paddled until we came to a little deep bay I knew of, where the tide makes an eddy in a pool and the lower places the haunts of several different kinds of cod, each seemingly more brilliantly colored than the other. Once we snubbed our craft—the crevice I passed the bow rope into had been the burial place of a Coast Indian, for there



Saanich Arm in foreground, Straits of Georgia and mainland in distance. From Mt. Malakat, B.C.

were the hand chopped boards, and the white gleaming bones of one who, in times gone by, no doubt drew from out this very pool the ancestors of the very cod we seek. With due respect for the sanctity of the ancient burial place, we drew off across the pool, and no sooner had the lad's baited hook struck bottom than he got a most violent tug. Up he jumped, much disarranging the balance of the none too steady craft—might and main he reeled in, might and main he struggled with that fish, and pulled up a great big dogfish—one of the lesser sharks, a perfect pest in these waters. Well, we caught about a dozen of these nuisances—some as heavy as fifteen pounds—before we hooked our first cod. I wish you could have seen that fish—it was a pale grassy green, all spotted and marked with robin's egg blue, one of the most wonderfully colored fish in the Northern Pacific. We got some with terra cotta spots and reddish fins, some of a deep sponge color with light blue dots—a most odd collection of cod, but all good fish to eat. Finally Fritz caught a big strawberry shaded starfish—a great bottom-feeding, five-pointed thing, without any shell and with myriad feet, each armed with a suction disc. "Come on," he laughed out. "We have the dogs and the cod and the stars, we'll get the moon and the other things up at the 'tide-rip'."

Here is a thing I want to warn new comers against—this is one of the natural dangers of the Pacific. Most of us are used to wind and waves running the same way, but here you may have a north wind with a tide from the south running

swiftly, and right up in the very midst of this will rise a "tide-rip." (Pour water from a pitcher into a basin and see the turmoil rise in the middle, and you have the action of the Pacific pouring its mighty tides into the fiords and inlets of the Coast.)

We paddled slowly up tide into the Pass. I could hear the "rip" bellowing and I intended only to paddle up far enough so that we could see it, and then throw out our trout trolling spoons and sweep, fishing back down the Pass—but the erratic "rip" took into its mind to sweep down the Pass too, and the first thing we knew we were tossing and tumbling about in a current that ran and leaped in every direction. The lean angry waves fell splashing into the canoe and, really, I did not know just where or how to steer, as the current and the wind were against one another, and the "rip" was fighting both. We in the centre were fully six feet above the sides of the Pass. With a sort of expiring gurgle, the tumultuous mass sank down and rose again away below us, so out came rods and gleaming spoons and soon we were catching "cut-throat" trout as fast as the ospreys did.

But we have caught much larger fish out here than these hard fighting cut-throats. We have five kinds of so-called salmon, and one big trout—the "Steelhead," this latter being almost exactly like the Atlantic salmon caught off Eastern Canada and Great Britain. Look at the two B. C. salmon fishes and the magnificent specimen of a Spring or Tyee (Bigchief, as the Coast Indians call it). This is the fish called the King, the Columbia, the Sacramento or California salmon—each locality has its own

sand and clay he sent down that I was perfectly useless, so, after we both had regained our breath, we stumbled our way down stream and ate our simple lunch by our canoe—not failing to note that deer had criss-crossed the sands about the bow with their arrow-pointed hoofs since we left. The only thing that



Head of a typical B.C. Eagle.

saved our lunch—there were apples in the basket—was the oilskin coat thrown over it, and the timid deer are afraid of any unusual thing or scent like that.

"Let us paddle home along the outer Kelp and catch a big salmon for the inlet people," said Fritz, so off we started on the ten-mile stunt—tide and light air all in our favor. As soon as we got out to the "Kelp Banks" we saw an Indian Kelp fishing in their midst. This strange work is done under an immense "hat," as big as a parasol—this covers head and shoulder as the native leans over the side of the canoe and gives a good shadow for moving objects below. In his hand he had a copper spear—one I would dearly like to own, as I feel sure an Eskimo had first made it in far off Arctic seas and hurled it into a whale; the slightly injured animal had carried the easily detached head many thousands of miles, and finally some creeping flotilla of natives had surprised it and hurled their seal-skin buoyed spears into it until it died, and had then cut out a spear head none of them could fashion. We watched until the right arm of the hidden figure stiffened, the dark red skin and muscles strained, up went the big brown fist, down into the water it splashed, up raised the dark figure, and, just as we pull a water bucket up on a pole, passing the pole up through the hands, so this Indian brought up the big struggling salmon, instinctively he reached into the canoe, out flew the killing stick, a shower of blows and he lifted a twenty-pound Spring into his canoe.

We left the old dusky fisherman well buried under his "hat" and trolled off. We made some miles swiftly without a strike, and just as we were turning "Sea Urchin Rocks," we got one that made us both drop paddles and get very busy. The fish was on Fritz's line, so my rod must be taken in—it seemed to take a long time to reel in that hundred yards—I had twice too much out by inattention. Then I lit my pipe and watched the lad struggling with a great Spring. Every time he got the fighting silvery thing to the stern he was fairly engulfed in showers of spray and foam—there was a bit of a sea on here. I saw his eyes flash as he caught the "superior" smile on my face, but it would have made a cat laugh to see a big fish neatly catch up a pail of water and dash it in the open-mouthed face of your assistant, who spat it out and shook his head for all the world as if he too were another water animal. (I have seen both seals and sea lions shake their heads in open-eyed, open-mouthed dismay in the churning centre of a leaping school of salmon.) Well, between pulling and yanking and having its head sorely clouted with a big cedar spear haft, the poor salmon finally gave in and allowed the boy to tow it alongside. Do you know, he could not lift it in then—it must have weighed over forty pounds; we had no scales and very few men ever think of weighing a fish out here, 'tis catch them and give them away as soon as you can—so I slid towards the bow and together, by the aid of the tide anchor line, we flopped that huge silvery thing into the big cedar log canoe and off we flew, through the gathering dusk, with the sea doves calling sweetly overhead and the phosphorescent diatoms flaming our wake and paddle strokes, to that dearly loved spot, this wandering animal man calls home.