



At first light in Tofino Harbor, Vancouver Island, B.C.

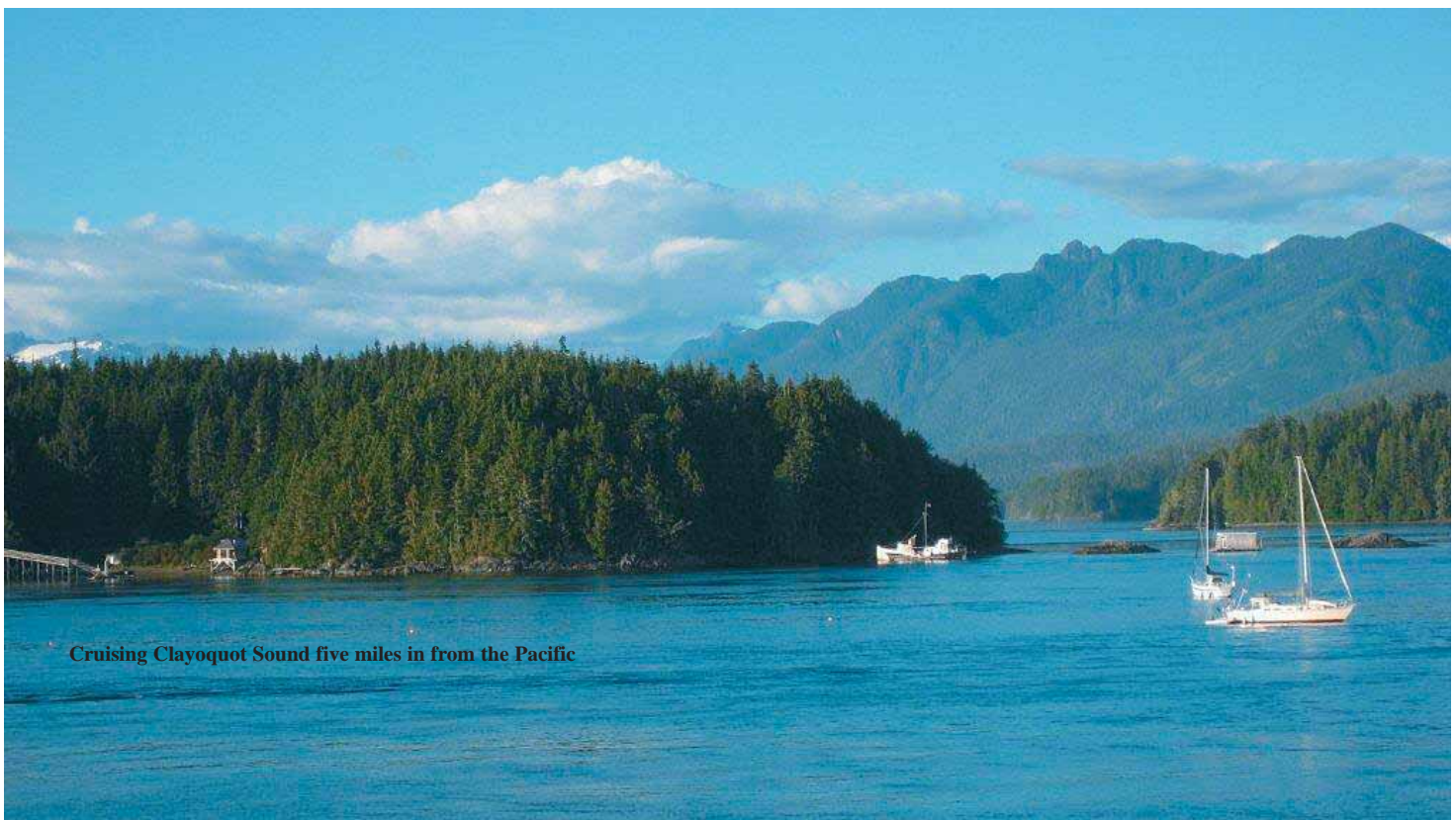
Confessions of a Lapsed Fly Fisher

Story and Photos by Richard K. Priebe

This morning, four days after my first bite of the apple, I was fishing alone on the Pacific 15 miles off Vancouver Island, British Columbia. I was aboard the *LucyB*, the 22-foot Grady White I tow across country from Virginia each summer to Tofino on the island's western shore. I was miles away from where the Tofino sport fleet was fishing. I was glad it was just me and the *LucyB* out on the blue water—we wanted no witnesses. *Hear me, I have sinned.*

A humpback whale had just breached off the bow when the reel of my portside rod suddenly began to scream. Something large and strong ripped off 100 yards of line before I could set the autopilot, pull the rod from the holder and adjust the drag. I could feel its power in the quivering rod. I knew it was big, possibly a *tyee*, a Chinook topping 30 pounds, the kind of fish I've dreamt about all my life.

Forty minutes later, biceps and forearms burning from pumping the rod, I had the fish in my net. I leaned back hard and hoisted her over the stern, and we slipped to the deck, the 36-pound *tyee* flopping on top of me, and me laughing maniacally. When it was over I peeked over the rail to make sure no other boats had



Cruising Clayoquot Sound five miles in from the Pacific



Big salmon, bigger whales

witnessed my transgression.

The French speak the truth: *le pêcheur est un pêcheur*. The fisherman is a sinner, and I confess, I had sinned as a fly fisher.

Let me explain sin, fly-fishing sin. I am, or at least had been until this morning, a devout fly fisher. A purist. And as all true fly fishers know, there are inviolate rights and wrongs in this piscatorial creed, and form and finesse are important—the light

leader, the delicately-tied fly, the graceful presentation.

I confess the kind of fishing I had just done had none of that. I had used wire cable, a heavy weight and dead bait to entice my beautiful *tyee*. I had tricked her with a herring stinking as if it had been a week in the Tofino sun. A brutish display. Still, while being a lifelong devout fly fisher, I also had been marinating in desire for big fish, especially big salmonids. And therein

sat the apple of temptation. I'll come back to that apple.

Tofino's Many Splendors

Salmon fishing aside, there are many fine reasons to visit Tofino on Vancouver Island's west coast. It has some of the most splendid beaches anywhere and waves that afford world-class surfing, with scuba diving or kayaking in the protected, clear waters of Clayoquot Sound. There are eco-tours for whale and wildlife watching and hiking in a pristine wilderness with old-growth trees. The setting is so uniquely beautiful that it is on the UN World Heritage List. In addition to the natural attractions, the town has accommodations and food and wine as fine as you'll find anywhere.

Local guides take the sports out to find giant salmon and halibut, but not with willowy rods and delicate flies. They go out into the deep Pacific with mechanical down-rigger equipment, essentially an electric winch with a 15-pound ball attached to the end of a narrow-gauge cable. They use mooching rods and reels which look like grossly oversized fly fishing tackle; they attach bait, often a ripe herring, or sometimes a hoochie, a plastic lure that imitates a squid. They then clip the line to the cable

The author with a *tyee*, a Chinook salmon topping 30 pounds





Tom and Jerry with Captain Richard and their halibut and tye Chinook salmon

and lower the weighted ball to depths of 60 to 200 feet. The guides are out to do whatever it takes to get “meat” for their clients, hoping for big halibut running 60 to 100 pounds and Chinooks over 30 pounds, *tyees*.

For the last 10 years I’ve gone out to Tofino for salmon. I love to catch them on flies, usually on the quiet waters of Clayoquot Sound. I’ve always been satisfied with Coho salmon in the 6-12 pound range, respectable, hard-fighting fish on light tackle. On the few occasions when I enticed a big Chinook to take my fly, the fish always won. After they broke off, I felt like an impotent Ahab: I could seduce but not subdue.

Perri Domm, one of the best Canadian guides in the business, and I have had an ongoing dinner debate about the “sportiness” of deep-water fishing with “gear” versus fly fishing the surface waters. I’d maintain, “Fly fishing is an art – process is more important than product.” Domm would counter with, “Willow twigs and gossamer—an effete, finicky, feckless, fatuous form of self-abuse!” I know he has to please his clients; nevertheless, gear-

fishing seemed very wrong, a violation of everything that fly-fisher saints like Lee Wulff and Lefty Kreh had preached, and I had accepted as gospel.

But in truth, I confess to having felt shameful envy on luckless days when I returned to the dock with an empty fish box, and there, as always, was Domm with huge Chinooks and halibut and smiling clients. Domm enjoyed sidling up to me and hissing in a voice like Lucifer: “My friend, come over to the dark side, just one time. Put aside your foolish things and come out to the deep for real fish.”

Paved with Good Intentions

My fall started innocently enough one evening when Domm found me dockside hosing down the *LucyB*. “Captain Richard, help! I’m double-booked for the morning! I badly need you to take a two-some offshore. I’ll be forever grateful—and take you out for the finest dinner in town.” I knew what was going on: He was asking me to step over to the dark side. I’d have to use deep-water gear with his clients. But I liked Domm, and it would be just this one time. As we fitted the *LucyB* with

downriggers and weights, I kept repeating to myself, “Just this one time.”

My party of two, Tom and Jerry, had zero off-shore fishing experience, and it was a tough day to learn. By the time we were 15 miles out, we were cold and wet from wind-driven sheets of rain. Tom chattered, “If I’m going to catch pneumonia, I better catch some fish.”

I was setting the first line when a halibut hit the bait while the ball was taking it down. Tom was up first and pumped the rod until he had a 27-pound fish on deck. It was not a big fish, but he yipped through purple lips, “I got \$500 worth of meat!”

It was a good start; but then there was nothing but wind, waves and rain. Over the radio captains reported their parties had started “chumming” for fish, a nice way of describing seasick clients. Many boats headed back early to Tofino.

Hours passed slowly as we bobbed and shivered. When it was finally close to noon, I shouted over the wind, “Time to go! Need to pull up gear.” Just then the port side rod popped the clip off the downrigger. “Whoa, fish on!” Something had taken on the bottom at 180 feet. As I set the hook I felt that something move slowly and deliberately away, like a bulldozer with business elsewhere. I adjusted the drag and handed the rod to Jerry.

Then it took off on a drag-screaming run showing it was a large Chinook, a *tyee*! Jerry let the fish run, then took up line inch by inch. The fish made hard run after hard run, ripping the line to the backing each time. The 20-pound mono held, and Jerry brought the fish to the stern only to have it dive under the hull when it saw the net. The salmon rolled over the line, but Jerry kept the line tight and brought it alongside. I swooped the net under her, and hoisted aboard a 33-pound *tyee*, a beautiful hen. I admit to feeling both pleased and outraged. This rookie caught my dream fish! I stared at the *tyee* and, like Jimmy Carter, felt lust in my heart.

Domm was waiting at the dock

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scales. Tom piped up, "Captain Richard got us more than \$1,000 worth of meat!" His math was questionable, but not his enthusiasm. Domm must have sensed a change in me. He pulled me aside and hissed, "Welcome to the dark side." I pulled away.

The next three fitful nights I dreamt of my *tyee* out in the deep Pacific. The following mornings I fly-fished with light tackle for Coho on the protected waters of Clayoquot Sound, whipping the rod until my arms ached, seeking absolution. Then on the fourth day, this morning – well, I slipped. But just this one time!

And yet the marine forecast says tomorrow will be a fine day out on the blue water. Saint Augustine got it right—*Lord grant me chastity and continence, but not yet.*

For more information on Tofino, see: www.tofino-bc.com and www.gotofino.com.

Richard K. Priebe is Professor Emeritus at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is a devout fly fisher and avid cook, the latter passion occasionally conflicting with the former. He spends much of his fair-weather time aboard his Grady White, the *LucyB*, out of Deltaville, Virginia. He welcomes comments at rpriebe@vcu.edu.

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