

Fish of the Week! Sheefish Transcript 2/8/21

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Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week! I'm Katrina Liebich with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska

And I'm Guy Eroh, a not-so-secret admirer of fishes.

It's Monday, February 8th, 2021 and we're excited to talk about all the fish. This week's fish of the week is the Sheefish...Alaska's biggest whitefish species.

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And today we have a special guest with us. Her name is Siikauraq. She's from Kotzebue. Siikauraq we're super excited to talk with you and learn from you today.

Awesome so good to be here. I'm Inupiaq. Alaska Native. Born and raised in Kotzebue. The sheefish is one of my favorite fish so I'm happy to share what I know about it.

Awesome. Ok sheefish. I've also heard them called inconnu. And I think of all the fish we have here in Alaska they're right at the top of my list in terms of being my favorite. There's just something about a fish that lives to the same age as a middle-aged human. I just wonder what they've seen along the way. They get pretty huge too...like 40+ pounds, especially the females, and over three feet long.

These fish...of all the mega fish, if you can call things mega fish, I bet if you were to poll American anglers and try and like "hey, list as many fish that get over three feet long as you can" I bet you hardly anyone is going to think about this. It really is kind of the unknown fish in that respect. When I try and describe this fish to people I'm like "ok. Just imagine a common whitefish, basically normal silvery scales, and now make it two, three feet long and take the head of a snook and put a snook's head on that whitefish's body and you got a sheefish." Where you've got that protruding lower jaw, that superior mouth that opens up towards the top kind of what a snook has if you're familiar fishing down in the coastal waters of Florida and the southeastern US.

It's one of my very, very, very, very, very favorite fish to go fishing for just because it's so much fun. And my husband caught one a couple years ago about 50 pounds.

Oh my gosh.

So huge Sheefish. Everybody looks forward to sheefishing. Most people will go later on in the spring when the weather warms up but it's around throughout the year. People are sheefishing for them right now. People fish for themselves. And we still have dog teams. So people also fish for their dogs. It's a process—an activity we do throughout the year once it starts to freeze up.

So right now how are people fishing for them through the ice? Is it hook and line or is it netting? What's the technique?

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People are using jiggers. And they're using their little individual hooks called niksiks or the little ice fishing jiggers. Through an individual hole. And people are also using the nets. They set a net under the ice through a series of holes.

I'm just curious. That's not something I've ever seen before. Of course you would expect a net to have to be furrowed out across the water column quite a bit. How do you guys go about running that under the ice?

Guy, it's magic!

[laughs]

It's a series of holes that you have to drill oh about 20-30 feet apart depending how long your net is. I used to do this with my father all the time. And I haven't done it in years. It's a pretty cool process. You put your net under the ice and depending on the current it'll go to your next hole. Like a pulley system. You pull it all the way to the one end of your hole, take all the fish off, and you have your little rope on the other side. You pull your net back under the water. You set it again. The next day you pull it out, and take off your fish. Set it again. Anyway, I wish I could be more descriptive but it's a pretty cool way to get fish when you don't want to get one fish at a time.

One question just real quick. Are they running the same direction as the current like one upstream one downstream or are they running across the river perpendicular to the current?

No – it's in the ocean! And it depends on the current. So you make your series of holes...it's all traditional knowledge. Like where are the fish this time of year? So people fish in certain places throughout the year. A lot of people have a big family or a big dog team. It's food. It's food. It's something that we have to live off of.

So yeah you're talking those estuary areas...the ocean. So you've got Selawik Lake which is downstream from the river where they spawn and you've got Hotham Inlet there and Kotzebue Sound. So yeah, these fish have a really neat biology. They're kind of like a salmon where they spawn upstream in the fall and then they move down into these larger waterbodies like an estuary or a lake or the ocean where they're able to feed on those larger, nutritious prey, right? Like Herring or other prey?

When we get sheefish and you're gutting them out on the ice there's herring and tomcods.

[music]

Getting back to jigging for them through the ice. Because of the way the mouth of these fish is, they don't have really any teeth in their mouth or what teeth they have are small, they really have to rely on engulfing anything, so the lures or the jigs that you might use for these sheefish are smaller than you might expect for similar fish of comparable size. Is that true? Is that not true? Can you describe these jigs a little bit more for me?

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Well we buy Doctor Spoons and it all depends. Every fisherman has their very favorite hook. And we have to experiment. We have one with three prongs—those are extremely popular. If you have a small hook the fish is going to get away, you know? My Dr. Spoon is going to be two inches long and it usually has a 3-prong. They all have different colors. They all have different sizes. You get like a 80 pound test because if you get something smaller the fish are so big and so aggressive that you're going to lose the big one. Who wants to lose the big one?

Everybody that I know, they make hand-made jiggers. Hand-made niksiks. You make them either out of wood. You could use like a big moose rib. You know it's kind of curved. You have a handle on one side and you have your line on the other. And you take your line and to the front and the back of the hook to make your line shorter or longer.

Wow so you're not even using a rod. You've kind of got your own set-up up there. You're kind of hand lining in a sense with 80 pound test and a big spoon for giant fish. That amazing!

You know there are smaller rods that you can buy that are 2 feet long or so. But those are wimps! And I kind of say that because if you want to lose your fish up to you! If you want to pull up something that's more aggressive and has more power—more of a backbone in pulling up your fish then you do that. I've seen people using little rods and they're good. But if you're pulling up a 50 pound fish your rod's probably going to break.

Yeah I would feel so weird putting line that strong on a tiny ice fishing reel. I would feel like I'm just setting myself up for disaster. That makes so much sense that's very cool. And just the thought of going out there and using a moose rib or something like that it just feels right...it's just so cool.

Not only is it cool but that's how we lived for generations. They made their own stuff. You couldn't go to Walmart and buy a fishing pole. People make all their own stuff. You make use of all the resources that you have in front of you. People made their own hooks. They use to make them with a little baleen and sinew and ivory. People have to be creative in how we fish. If you don't get food you starve...you die. All this stuff we learned – thank goodness for our elders who taught us how to fish, how to survive.

[music]

One thing we always want you to keep in mind regardless of what you're fishing for is safety. Every week we're going to give you a tip or two you can use to stay safe while you're out on the ice. Today's tip is straight forward. When you're going ice fishing pack a rope. If you see your friend bust through the ice your immediate reaction might be to rush to their aid. Although quickly getting into rescue mode is advisable, getting physically close to your partner in distress could prove perilous to the both of you. One thing that is far worse than one fisherman in the water is two fishermen in the water with nobody else on study ice. A rope will allow you to reach out to your friend without putting your own life at risk. Make sure that the rope you bring is long enough to be useful and weighty enough to be thrown. Considering keeping the throw rope neatly coiled in a bag so the entire bag can be tossed to improve the ease and accuracy of the throw while allowing the rope to unfurl behind it. They design throw bags

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for this purpose, I'm just not making things up here. Go check out some instructional videos on the internet if this isn't clear.

[music, cooking sounds]

So in terms of like how you prepare and eat them, is there a certain way that you're filleting them, preparing them? How do people like to eat sheefish? What are the different options?

Yeah cause I've heard conflicting reports out there. Some people say that the sheefish is delicious to eat, other people say it's not all that good, isn't worth the time, it's too oily/too fishy. And I've got a feeling that maybe those people just don't know what they're doing so I'm curious to hear from an expert.

It depends on the time of the year. We don't fish in the summer time because they might be a little too watery or no taste or fishy. So those people that said they're too oily blah blah they fished at the wrong time of year. So we fish in the spring time in April or so and that's when the fish are fat and oily. And it's rich, delicious, yummy. So when we fillet a fish out on the ice. They'll be between a foot and two feet long. It's like a butterfly fillet and it's just a beautiful slab of fish and there are so many ways to make sheefish. Last year I learned to make fish oil. I've dried sheefish. If you get a small sheefish I can cut it and dry it into what's called paniqtuq in March/April. There's still a lot of snow here at that time and it's a great time to dry sheefish cause there's no bugs. People will eat sheefish frozen with seal oil and it's called quaq. People make akutaq. Akutaq is Eskimo ice cream. You boil sheefish. You squeeze out all the water so it's extremely dry and flaky. And then you can mix with caribou fat or moose fat or muskox fat. And add a variety of berries...whatever berries you have. And you can mix seal oil in there and sugar. And you whip it up, kind of like a whipped cream or something? You just whip it. The fat of the caribou, moose or muskox once you whip it, it turns just like a whipped cream.

I've had that before. It's actually really, really good. I've heard it called akutaq. And yeah, it's pretty amazing.

You know you'd think "oh my god, muskox fat? Caribou fat? Ew. Fish? Ew." But when you taste it you're like "Holy smokes, this is good."

It sounds like you would really have to do quite a few sessions of working out at the gym after you have some of that. Like if I had that every day I'd be putting on the pounds. Which, if I was living up in the arctic circle, you'd have to.

IF you're outside in the cold man it burns those calories super fast so I totally get where you'd want to have that fish oil and seal oil.

Down here many with me working at my desk all day for 8 hours sitting in my office chair probably wouldn't be the best thing for my diet.

There's so many ways to have it. People bake sheefish. We boil sheefish. When I bake mine I slather a little bit of mayonnaise on top, garlic, any kind of species that you like. Hot spicy flavoring. I like to put bits of bacon

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Oh my gosh I'm getting hungry.

Oh my god. You guys gotta try blackened sheefish. You gotta cook it high heat with your cast iron and you fry it with your hot and spicy rub and it's blackened sheefish and its to die for.

Oh my gosh that sounds amazing. That's an amazing diversity of preparation techniques for a single species.

We eat a lot of fish up here. Salmon, trout, etcetera. The one fish we harvest and make sure we have available throughout the year because it's a very well-preserved fish. And we actually use our vacuum sealer. So we go fishing all day and the next day you spend the whole day vacuum sealing because the fish is already cleaned out on the ice and you take it home and put it away and share it. We send a lot of sheefish out all over the state and locally too.

Man, I'd love to catch the next flight up there if it wasn't coronavirus and bring you something to trade and eat some of that blackened sheefish. That sounds amazing.

Siikauraq it's been a big pleasure talking with you today. I learned a ton and you've got a wealth of information and knowledge. We're just really appreciate of your time coming on today to talk to us about sheefish.

Sure. Sure. So when you're fishing you're never grumpy. So there's nothing like that tug. It's a beautiful fish it's a lot of fun. It's just the best to eat.

Alright thank you everyone for listening. Thank you to Siikauraq for joining us today. That was really interesting. I learned a lot. I hope you learned a lot. I want you to go out and enjoy this fish and enjoy all the fish.

We'll see you guys next time

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Thanks for listening to Fish of the Week!

My name is Katrina Liebich, and my co-host is Guy Eroh.

This show is produced by David Hoffman of Citizen Racecar, assisted by Garrett Teidemann and Kelsey Kohrs.

Fish of the Week is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Alaska Region, Office of External Affairs.

As the Service reflects on 150 years of fisheries conservation, we honor, thank, and celebrate the whole community – individuals, Tribes, the State of Alaska, sister agencies, fish enthusiasts, scientists, and others – who have elevated our understanding and love, as people and professionals, of all the fish.

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