

## Fish of the Week! Burbot Transcript 1/11/21

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Good morning anglers and Alaska fish lovers everywhere! I'm Katrina Liebich with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Anchorage, Alaska

And I'm Guy Eroh, an independent fish enthusiast.

Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week!

It's Monday, January 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021 and we're excited to talk about all the fish. This week's fish of the week is the burbot.

Guy, have you ever fished for these before? Any burbots?

No, there actually one of those fish that are pretty high on my priorities for my life list that I want to catch. You know, they're the only freshwater member of the cod family which, I think that's reason enough to put it up there.

Yeah you can tell burbot are in that family because they've got a single whisker on their chin just like you'd see on a cod coming out of the ocean.

They're kind of a fish you'd maybe consider ugly-pretty. They've got some really beautiful mottling on top of yellow or brown or dark olive skin. But their shape's a little frumpy and they're kinda slimy.

Now burbot...are they native to all of Alaska?

Yeah so they're found everywhere in Alaska except for southeast Alaska. So they're going to be in our National Wildlife Refuges, any of those large river systems, some of the bigger lakes. They're actually circumpolar in terms of where you can find them. That's above 40 degrees north and they're widespread throughout that range. It's a hardy coldwater fish and recruits hardy coldwater anglers to fish for them too. Really cool fish.

The first time I heard about burbot I was in a gas station/tackle shop by Flaming Gorge Reservoir on the border of Utah and Wyoming and they had these really kinda oblong slimy looking sorta eely but fat-eel looking fish that they were catching out of the ice of Flaming Gorge, and I asked the attendant what that was and she said "a burbot" and I'd never heard of it before so I had to look it up as soon as I got home. And I did a lot of reading on it and found out that they're a really cool fish, that they're actually invasive there and they have these tournaments to try and get them out every year out of the ice. And lo and behold about a month later I was down at a thrift store in Salt Lake City and I saw this hat on the wall that read "second annual burbot ice fishing derby" and I just had to have it. And I still have it today and it's one of my lucky fishing hats. I've got it on right now.

Nice. The first time I heard about a burbot I think is through my husband who's from Wisconsin and there's something called the Eelpout Festival that happens every year and it's like a huge deal. People just come out in droves to catch these amazing fish and they have a whole winter festival centered around them.

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For as much as I love burbot, having all these common names does kind of frustrate me a little bit. Not that it has a lot of common names that it goes by but that actually a lot of the common names that it goes by are preferred common names for other species of fish. So it does make it hard when you're talking to people about these fish to make sure that you're getting it right. Sometimes you just gotta go with the scientific name which I think is sometimes easier to say: it's *Lota lota*.

Yeah it's one of the easiest scientific names to say. I've heard eelpout, cusk, Lawyer (because, fishermen say, its tiny heart, slimy), coney-fish, lush, ling, lingcod, mariah, methy, mizay, mudblows, and mud shark. And I think there's probably more. I don't know the history on all those but some of them are pretty funny.

Wait was one of those names you just listed off lawyer?

Yeah, some people call it a lawyer. I've heard it's because they're slimy and they've got a tiny heart.

[laughs]

To all those lawyers out there no offense.

So like I say Katrina this is a fish that I really want to catch, but that I haven't had a chance to catch yet. What do I have to do to be successful out there on the water?

You're always going to want to think about a fish's behavior before you go out fishing. You're going to want to think about how it feeds, what kind of habitat it likes. Those are the considerations you need to figure out where to go and what will actually work. So when you're fishing you're going to want to think about how they're moving, where they're going, what they're eating. In Alaska they're going to be eating suckers – we've got one species of sucker in Alaska and that's the longnose sucker. They're going to eat whitefish. We have several species of whitefish of varying sizes. [Arctic] Grayling. And even occasionally other burbots. They're a well-adapted bottom predator so you're going to want to keep that in mind. You're not going to be fishing for them in fast water. If you're fishing on a river it's going to be on the inside of a gravel bar, the bend of a river, a mouth of a slough, a clearwater creek. Eddies along bluffs. Lakes. They're not going to be in the main channel in fast currents or along cut banks or anything like that.

So are they pretty much hunting all by olfaction? Just all smell and taste no visual stuff, you don't use like any glow baits or anything for them down there?

I think it's probably a lot of olfaction. You know, fresh bait is ideal. You can try whitefish, herring, smelts, squid. Do remember that you're not allowed to use the meat of sport-caught fish. It's a regulation we have here in Alaska. Burbot have a really large mouth. If you look at their body it's a lot of head and it tapers into that eel-like tail. Large chunks of bait can be used. Big baits catch big fish. Like us they prefer fresh-smelling meat. That will attract them in. They're going to be kinda scouring along the bottom looking for something to eat. They're not going to be cued into a spoon or something like that. You know you always want to remember to check your current Alaska Department of Fish and Game regulations before headed out and you also, you know, if you're ice fishing, check the ice conditions

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especially if you're on a slough or any kind with current underneath. You want to be making sure that you're safe when you're fishing

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Hey everyone, one thing that we always want you to keep in mind regardless of what it is that you're fishing for is safety. Every week we want to give you a tip or two that can help you stay safe on the water. This week's tip is to fish with a friend. Last week we let you know the importance of having a contact at home but this person wouldn't be able to help you out on the water. If you fall through the ice or go overboard or otherwise find yourself in harm's way, you'll definitely want a buddy that can provide immediate emergency assistance. Make sure that you and your friends are well versed in emergency preparedness so that aid can be administered to whichever party is in need. Also, fishing with friends is just more fun.

[music, cooking sounds]

Alright Katrina, how do you cook a fish like this? How do you clean it, how do you cook it, how do you make this a meal?

Yeah so let's talk a little bit about what to do once you catch it. Like how are you going to fillet it? They are beautiful on the inside. They're a white meat—delicious, so there's a lot of ways to cook 'em and prepare them.

Burbot have fine, embedded scales that produce a lot of mucous. So when you actually catch one they're going to be kind of slippery to hold onto. The body tapers, finding a handle on the burbot is pretty difficult so everyone kinda struggles making awkward attempts to handle it once you catch it. But it's flesh is white and delicious, it's delicate, and it's actually got a really large liver that's actually pretty tasty, and it's really rich in vitamin A & D and the liver is large compared to its body size if you're looking at a burbot compared to other fish. I'd encourage folks to test that out as well.

You don't wanna get rickets!

Again you're again need a sharp fillet knife and actually some pliers for a burbot with a squarehead and teeth on the end. The first thing you're gonna wanna do is skin the burbot. Get a handle on it once it's dead. You're going to make a very shallow cut with your knife just behind head all the way around. Get a good grip on the head and use your pliers to grip the skin slowly peel it off. You might have to rotate the burbot as you do it. It should slip off kinda like a sock. If it gets stuck anywhere you can just kind of use your fillet knife to gently separate it. Next you're going to want to remove the dorsal and anal fins. And it's actually pretty simple. You'll grab the fin at the base, with your pliers, near the rear and gently pull. They'll come off kind of like you're unzipping it from the back and bottom of the fish. Then you're going to fillet each side and you can actually get a really nice big fillet. It's not like the pike where you have 5 different fillets. You're going to get two long fillets and you're basically going to start at the head. Follow your knife on either side along the spine. You'll hear and feel your knife bumping along the ribs. Just carry your cut down along the ribs until the fillet is separated. And again it'll go all the way

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down to the tail. Repeat that on the other side. Some people like to soak their fillet in cold water and salt briefly to remove the slime and any blood. Again this is a white meat so I think it's mostly for dealing with the slime.

In terms of how you eat a burbot, some people call it the poor man's lobster. I think the way it kinda firms up when you boil it, it kinda feels texture-wise like lobster and then when you dip it in butter it's a similar taste and texture. Not a fishy flavor like you'd get off some other fish.

I've heard a lot of things referred to as "poor man's lobster." Having people say they taste like "crab lobster" and stuff like that. I find that they never really do. I had someone sell me a mushroom earlier this year, saying "hey, it tastes like lobster. You cook it up, put it on tacos, like a lobster taco." And it was not. It was a mushroom taco.

We'll let you guys be the judge

Again with this you can boil it and then dip it in butter, it can be fried, you can make chowder. There's a whole lotta things you can do with a nice fillet of white meat that the burbot has. Guy, how would you want to eating one if you caught one.

I haven't eaten one before but my first instinct would be to turn it into a fish 'n chips style of thing with a little shot of burbot liver oil on the side.

[laughs]

That would be my guess how I'd want to eat it.

I think that sounds really good.

I mean it's a cod. That's what you gotta do with cod, right? I mean it's not a cod, but it's a cod relative!

However you cook it it's going to be tasty!

[music]

Ok so that's your fish of the week! This week we talked about burbot. And we hope you all get out there and enjoy all the fish.

All of the fish Katrina! Why don't you do it Guy, you do a good job too. And we want you to get out there and enjoy all of the fish.

Nice. Very good!

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Thanks for listening to Fish of the Week!

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

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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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