

Sablefish (Black Cod) Transcript April 12, 2021 (episode 15)

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there, whether you're an avid angler just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to fish of the week. It's Monday, April 12 2021. And we're excited to talk about all the fish. I'm Katrina Liebich with the US Fish and Wildlife Service in Alaska,

and I'm Guy Eroh, a volunteer seine operator.

Our guest today is Stewart Valladolid from Big Rays Fishing Department in Anchorage. And when I asked Stewart what fish he wanted to talk about with us I got an enthusiastic "Sable fish all the way to the grill."

Yeah.

So that's our fishes that week! Welcome, Stewart.

Thanks for having me, guys. Appreciate it.

Can you tell us a little bit about them, Stewart?

Well, for me, my background with sablefish was through my dad who ran a processing plant out of Kodiak, Alaska. And he would buy sablefish from a lot of the boats. And luckily, since you ran the processing plant, he'd bring home a couple of those sablefish or black cod is what we called them. And it was a staple in our household, at least, you know, once or twice a month. It was really, really good. Outside of Kodiak, I did have an opportunity to observe a trawler that got into a bunch of them, some adolescents, and I kind of got more into the biology and why, you know, these fish hang out in this particular column during the stage of their maturity. And then as they get older, they start going deeper and deeper and deeper, where there's not as many predators and better food sources for them.

They they spawn down deep where the adults are, then, when they go up to hatch. I don't know how quickly it is after hatching, or if they float up before they hatch. There'll be up at the surface and slowly moved down over the life. So it's kind of an interesting vertical migration that they go through during the early part of our lives. Then, as adults, they actually migrate great distances, just horizontally along the sea floor in two different places up there in Alaska,

right. It's amazing the pressure they can handle. And also their diet. I'm a big fan of bioluminescence and they're big squid and octopus eaters and chasing deep you know, just by fishing fishing for blackcod. I've also caught other different species down deep. Many, you know, 100 plus pound halibut, you know, in the 16, 1500 foot range, you know, trying to chase the sablefish

that is so crazy deep. I can't even imagine kind of what it looks like down there. It's super cool. In terms of the name sablefish, kind of like a lot of the other fish we've talked about, it seems like there's a lot of

common names you mentioned, black cod, butterfish coalfish. Some of the names like butterfish are actually names of other species.

Right.

And I was reading a little bit and it said the FDA...sablefish is kind of like the accepted common name of black cod like a vernacular, right locally a lot.

I think that name sablefish actually comes from being related to the texture the fish. Now sable is actually a Eurasian species of martin, a mustelid, you know, like the weasel family and has really soft fur and I was reading somewhere and I don't know if this is true or not, but that the name sablefish comes from the smooth texture of the flesh.

They are very smooth fish. Their meat is also on a softer texture side too.

It's kind of buttery, too, right?

Oh, man. It's amazing. Well, it's got a really high oil content to it...to their meat. So I mean, you can leave that fully on the frying pan for an hour and it still tastes good after we get on the hour.

Yeah, my one friend said you can't really overcook it

Yeah, well, fish. Yeah. So I guess related to that oil. I mean, we were talking a little bit about swim bladders the other week. And, you know, apparently the oil is one of the ways they kind of regulate their buoyancy is that correct Guy?

Yes, sablefish have actually...they're one of these demersal species that have lost their swim bladder through evolution, that just isn't advantageous to have it down there. But you still want to try to be neutrally buoyant in the water column. So some fish that don't have swim bladders or rely on oil to help buoy them up. Most famous example is probably sharks and other elasmobranchs that have big livers full of squalene and even species that live really deep that do have swim layers like cod oftentimes have very large livers. But yeah, this use an oil to help keep yourself neutrally buoyant is common among fishes.

What's the deepest that you've ever set your line for one of these Stewart?

I want 2300 feet just the South in a lot Lone Island there. I went as far deep as I could find in Prince William Sound. And I remember the name of the shark it was a sleeper or shark now because that's where I caught it. It was right off the south end of Lone Island and as we were drifting from 2300 coming up, that's regarding the shark in the 1600 foot mark. And it was pretty awesome. I'm pulling that thing up.

That's crazy.

I want to fight was that I know that sleeper sharks aren't the species this week. But

well luckily, I'm using really big electric reels that helped me bring them up without using a lot of my muscle groups.

I was gonna ask if you had a special workout regime to get your arms ready for reeling them in. But it sounds like the electric reels are the way to go.

Major bonus when it came to the electric reels It pretty much took away the fatigue and the me to motivate myself to start cranking up that 1000 yards of line

So you usually use those electric reels when you're fishing for these guys all the time?

Yeah, back about 11 years ago, when I started getting into it, I used to use really big Pen Senators that were not traditional Alaskan size they were more in the 10 to 16. Which, if you think of a regular watermelon, that's how big the reel was at the time that I was using. And I would have about 800 yards of 65 pound dacron, which is way thicker than what our braids that we're using under fishing reels now, and I would fill up a...since we're only allowed to hooks on a rod reel for per resident, I would send out I would fill up a can of a Campbell's soup cans with quikrete with an I bolt and a rubber band. And I would donate the concrete to the bottom of the ocean because I didn't want to bring up that extra two, three pounds of weight as I was fighting the fish. And that was kind of how I started. And then technology, you know, got better. And I fell in love with these electric reels that, you know, I almost had to donate a kidney to get back then, because they were so expensive. And once those electric reels got in my possession, it opened up every single part of Prince William Sound for me without having to do any cranking and got me the explore areas that no one would ever think about reeling in or checking down there.

Is there any safety considerations for those electric reels or are they just kind of good to go,

they are pretty much good to go. And so we're gonna fish down 1000 feet, you descend it by, you know, free spooling it all the way down. And as it hits bottom, you've flip the bail. And I generally take it up about 15 to five meters off the bottom. And if I get a fish on, I hit the throttle. And there's a default to where the line will stop about 15 feet underneath the boat. So I don't have a fish swimming around the top or my leads or jigs banging against the boat or the or the outboard. And then the nice thing about that is I just crank the rest of the 15 up with the manual crank versus using the throttle because having that throttle that last 15 feet can create problems where you want to suck the line all the way in through the rod and break the rod. So I always recommend everybody to crank the last 15 feet and really keeps safety you know, high and any other human error problems low.

Hey there everyone. One thing that we want you to always keep in mind regardless of what it is that you're fishing for is safety. Every week we're going to give you a tip or two that you can use to stay safe while you're fishing. Today we're talking about hook related injuries, how to prevent them and how to treat them. If you fish long enough, eventually somebody hook is going to end up hooking you. Anglers often find themselves hooked when fishing and close quarters such as on a boat, but can also get

snagged a myriad of other ways such as when freeing a snagged lure from across the river. wearing long sleeves, pants and sunglasses can block some hooks from going into the skin. But some will still find a way barbless hooks are easy to remove simply by backing them out of the way they came in. However, if a barbers pierced his skin, things can get more complicated. First method which will save the hook is to apply perpendicular downward pressure to the shank of the hook and then back the whole thing out the way it came in, possibly with the assistance of some string around the bend book. If that method doesn't work, and continue pushing the hook through the skin until the barb reemerges on the other side, then you can snip it off with some pliers and back it out. Remember the easiest hook to remove is the one that never gets in the skin. So always check over your shoulder so that you don't snag your buddy on your back cast.

How far offshore are you having to go to get these guys?

You know it's not that bad a Prince William Sound. It's such an abyss out there. I mean, he could be on Port Wells and we have for four miles from Whittier and you're in a great sable ecosystem or habitat for them. Pretty much any bays that any salmon feed into I fish outside those bays where it drops off in the extreme depth so as bay's get flushed out through tides, those stable fish wait for a lot of that fall to come down or also there's a ton of spotted shrimp out in Prince William Sound for them to vacuum up and a vast amount squid and octopus out there too. So their habitat ecosystem, they're in Prince William Sound is great. And the pressure isn't that bad I feel for them.

in terms of what stable fish are eating naturally, what kind of bait are you using when you're fishing for them?

Primarily, I'm using octopus just because it's a little tougher to not get robbed by any other fish species. I've noticed that if I put herring or anything like that, it gets robbed and pick that, you know, piece by piece, because we're displaying this bait anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour, you know, and when you got 800 yards aligned down there and you're in you're feeling you know, it's hard to even see the nibble. So you got to see the main take down when they get hooked up.

Are you fishing right on the bottom for them?

I am fishing right on the bottom about I tried to get about 15 feet off the bottom. So I have indicator line that lets me know how each color lets me know a depth. So I crank up a color. And that lets me know that I'm 15 feet off the bottom. And then I've got some...my theory to catch them is sight sound and scent, you know, is my theory. So a blinking light by the sound of my jig clanking around and then the scent of the bait, you know being around.

Okay.

And that blinking light is key because of the bioluminescence. I mean, you're 18, 15,000 feet, there's no light penetrating down there. So having that little blinking light's, like a pretty good beacon to give them a

little target. Please, a little target to go to. Yeah, no, you just you're just digging it up and down slightly or what's your motion?

A little bit, I try not to let the boat kind of do it for me. What happens is they get too excited. And then I'll get frustrated if I if I'm on top of the rod. So I just let it do its thing until it starts dancing. And my friends in the meantime have either are fishing a different column because generally not everybody has an electric reel that can go that that deep. So it's generally like one or two reels that are doing it.

Are you using the circle hooks or j hooks for these rigs?

Yep, so good question. I'm using circle hooks, since I'm not really paying attention to the rod and reel that often. So I let the hook do its job.

There any considerations with title movement or anything at that depth?

And so I try to use the lower moon face to lower tides. That way my bait's displayed a little better and my gear isn't getting thrashed around because it could be quite turbulent, you know, down there.

Are these kind of like a fish that when you find them, you start hooking into them. You can hook into them all day or do you got to keep searching around

No this is one that you kind of have to search around I when it comes to the adolescents, they will concentrate more, but when it comes to them, the adults, they're more sporadic then the adolescent. The adolescents will school up more. And I've seen them, you know, into the 100 foot mark, and I've caught them, you know, jigging for rock fish and stuff.

So Stewart, you mentioned bioluminescence. Are they eating stuff that glows or you know, yeah, just tell us a little bit more about that, please.

Yeah, so they do. I feel personally I'm sounds got the highest abundance of spotted shrimp. So I feel they're going to be the highest food source for your sablefish. And then also your squid and octopus, which are also deep dueling fish down there. I know spotted shrimp. When they feel attacked, they will poop. And when they poop, it's actually thrown out a blue light is what they're doing and what they do. What that blue light is, it makes the predator think that that blue lights the shrimp instead of the shrimp and it gives the shrimp a chance to swim away.

Interesting.

So the phrase of scaring the crap out of shrimp is...

That's funny. We deal with a lot of shrimp poop when we go shrimping.

I think that was really cool that they shoot these blue light side of their butt. And then that's when I started putting blue lights in my shrimp pots and on my on my black cod jigs.

Okay, so you mentioned you like to go during shrimp season right? So that's coming right up here. April 15 is the opener, right?

Yep. Can't wait. And then I'll probably hang out in the sound most through April through the mid July and they'll bounce back from Seward to Prince William Sound throughout the year.

Okay, you catch him out of Seward too?

I have I have I've caught them inside Resurrection Bay, about 800 feet. Bad, you know, bad weather day where we couldn't go outside and I was like, well, let's go deep and we got the electric reels and we got in to sablefish and a bunch of halibut there were 60 to 80 pounds at 800 feet deep.

That's crazy.

Okay, so you mentioned grilling these fish. Is that your favorite way to cook them? Or do you have some favorite recipes?

I do in three different ways grilling is probably the most popular, just because the time of season. I lay tinfoil on the group and I lay the fillet down. And then I really don't have to do much to sablefish. Literally, you can put it on there. A little bit of garlic and salt and pepper. And that's it. I mean, I mean, taking a bite of that is, I don't know how to explain it. I mean, it's like holding your child for the first time.

It's like awesome. It's so good.

And it's like a really white meat right?

It is a very white meat very soft. The other style that I do, which is really popular in the restaurants is the miso style, more Asian style of cuisine. And that ginger flavor and everything is awesome...To die for. I mean, that's that's what got me into spending 1000s of dollars to go out there and chase these fish, you know, from April to July. and acquire I try to acquire at least 18 a season and then I'm done. And that's enough for my you know for me and my family to be happy for the whole year. But when it comes to cooking and diet I would say the grilling little the salt, you know salt, pepper and garlic and even some flakes and ginger is all you need to do.

Awesome. Thank you so much, Stewart It's doing great learning about the sablefish for me, this was fascinating.

Thanks for having me, guys. Yeah, please try it guys give it Please try it. You'll appreciate me after that.

Okay, yeah, get out there and enjoy all the fish, everybody.

Thanks for listening to fish of the week. My name is Katrina Liebich. And my co-host is Guy Eroh. Our production partner for the series a Citizen Racecar. The show is produced by David Hoffman co-

produced and story edited by Charlotte more post production by Garrett Tiedemann publication facilitated by Kelsey course. Fisher 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, our sister agencies, fish enthusiasts, scientists and others who have elevate our understanding and love as people and professionals of all the fish