



Halibut, Bob's Way

A charismatic captain finds big fish in the Barren Islands

By Nick Jans

“That’s a fish,” says Bob Ward, his eyes locked on the port rod holder. Cathy Harder from Michigan gathers her hands around her pole. “Wait . . . let it eat the bait . . . let the fish hook itself,” Bob intones, clutching an imaginary rig of his own, pantomiming his instructions. Meanwhile, the twitch on Cathy’s rod builds to an insistent tug, tug, tug. “Reel up the slack. Lower your rod,” he continues. “OK, now, tighten your line!” And Cathy is fast to her first-ever halibut, an enormous smile lighting her face.

The rod arcs as she leans back against the pulsing weight, coached by Bob through the halibut fisherman’s familiar three-step: lift-drop-reel, lift-drop-reel. “Keep her coming,” says Bob. “Keep on the pressure.” Seems like another solid fish, between 30 and 50 pounds—a step above the 15- to 25-pound “chicken”

Cathy Harder from Michigan struggles to reel in a fish under Bob’s tutelage.

Capt. Bob Ward [LEFT] and deckhand Billy Trachsel show off a 330-pound halibut caught on their boat.



COURTESY BOB WARD

halibut that make up the standard haul for many charter outfits. So far, in a half-dozen fish landed, we haven't kept anything that small. As if to punctuate that point, Cathy's rod tip abruptly plunges, her shoulders jerk forward, and the rest of her body follows, headed for the transom. If there's a chicken on the end, its first name is Moby. Out here, in the tide-ripped

own." All of us get a laugh, including Cathy, who seems to be hanging on for dear life. Then Bob adds, "Plus, your wallet would be a lot lighter."

Someone asks, "You're kidding, right?" "Not about the last part," he replies. Grin and blue-eyed twinkle or not, I'd say he means it.

"It's far more than catching a limit. That's the easy part, most days. I want folks to have the time of their lives, and I pride myself on being able to deliver, day in and day out, a high-quality experience that combines great fishing, scenery, wildlife and adventure."

channels of the Barren Islands, fish up to 200 pounds show up on a regular basis, and double that size—or more—isn't out of the question. Mate Billy Trachsel grabs Cathy's jacket and steadies her rod as the reel's drag whirs.

"Hang on tight," Bob tells her. "That rod and reel and line's worth close to a thousand bucks. If you go over holding it, we have an incentive to haul you in. Let go, and you're on your

After a 20-minute tussle, Cathy's fish surrenders and planes to the surface. We admire its rounded-diamond, gray-green bulk as it fins off the stern, exhausted. Not quite a leviathan, but still, at 80-some pounds it's close to five feet, about as long as Cathy is tall. "Keep her or turn her loose?" inquires Bob. Minutes earlier, Cathy's husband, John, elected to release an even larger halibut, his first ever. This one, they decide, is destined for the filet table.



NICK JANS

Bob instructs Anthony Banker of Anchorage on halibut-fighting technique.



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guitarist with a Civil War cavalry general, thrown into a set of Helly Hansen raingear—a guy who, sea gods willing, drives his boat from Homer to the Gulf of Alaska's threshold and back each day, all summer long. Sure, he could cling closer to shore, burn less fuel, and do just fine, like many six-pack charter captains do, but that's not Bob's way.

No Problem, Ward's immaculate 1976 Bertram yacht, is a no-nonsense, 28-foot craft powered by dual Yanmar 240-horse diesels. Bob claims his ride to be the fastest boat in the Homer halibut charter fleet. He bought it specifically to handle the daily, two-hour, 50-nautical mile run to the Barren Islands, through some of the most fickle seas in the world. On our way out of Kachemak Bay, we pass one of the competition—a new-generation aluminum boat with dual four-stroke, fuel-injected gas outboards. When I admire the outfit, Bob sniffs, "All real charter boats are diesel-powered. Besides, that tin can would rattle your teeth out in a real sea."

Welcome to the world according to Ward. A born raconteur, he's never at a loss for words, nor shy about expressing his opinion on any subject, from gas vs. diesel, to offshore commercial fisheries management to foreign policy in the Middle East. And he doesn't just ramble—he lectures, the argument framed in concise, schoolteacher logic, all the while fixing you with those unwavering blue eyes. Yet, he somehow manages to exude a gracious, good-humored civility and a charismatic interest in just about everyone and everything. At the start of our day, he greeted each of us dockside with easy warmth, and all day long, with five clients he had never met before, never forgot a name.

"I love Alaska, and I love what I do. And I want to share it with my guests,"

Bob says. "It's far more than catching a limit. That's the easy part, most days. I want folks to have the time of their lives, and I pride myself on being able to deliver, day in and day out, a high-quality experience that combines great fishing, scenery, wildlife and adventure." As he speaks, he ticks the items off on his fingers, as if making sure he hasn't missed anything. And, as his high return-rate of clients over 21 years indicates, Bob Ward walks his talk. He flips through photos of orcas five feet off the stern, breaching humpback whales, halibut so big they need a hoist, endless racks of chunky, smaller fish, and page after page of grinning faces.

Unlike many charter captains, Ward targets only one species. "You won't find a salmon rod on this vessel," he says. "Halibut is the one fish

that says Alaska. It's what people want to catch—giant, abundant fish that fight hard and taste great." Thirty-one years of experience as a commercial fisherman and charter operator, and meticulously kept records, allow him to zero in on fish as they move with the season. He also avoids areas where slow-growing, long-lived rockfish and lingcod dwell, to avoid depleting them. If you want a smorgasbord haul, you're on the wrong boat.

Bob's tackle is a somewhat unorthodox amalgam of high-end and low-tech—sort of like the guy and his boat. Custom-

built rods fitted with Spectra-spoiled, top-of-the-line Penn reels are paired with terminal gear that any commercial long-liner would understand: No. 18 circle hooks tied to braided line that practically qualifies as rope. "Halibut aren't leader-shy," Bob explains. "This setup is simple, tough, and it works." No fancy sinkers or spreaders, either; two-pound flat weights are threaded directly onto the line, stopped on each end by a simple granny knot.

Not just any bait will do, either. He favors magnum herring imported from the Atlantic coast of Canada, infused with his secret weapon—an ounce or two of herring oil injected with a plastic squeeze bottle just before the bait gets dunked.

At first glance, the Barren Islands, Bob's favored fishing grounds, live up to their name. But this scattering of craggy, wind-and-wave-scoured pinnacles teems with life. Upwellings and tidal rips create blooms of invertebrates that drive a massive food chain. Tens of thousands of nesting sea birds, including puffins, murrets and black-legged kittiwakes, fill the air; Stellar sea lions and humpback whales blow and dive. And down below, millions of fish swirl unseen in an endless ballet,

the large feeding on the small. "No hurry," says Bob, "The tide's just getting where we want her." We drift in the shadow of ragged cliffs, wrapped in the cacophony of life. When the whirl of video cameras and camera shutters slows at last, he suggests, almost as an afterthought, "Well, let's go find some halibut." We run less than a mile, then anchor.

Within minutes we have our first fish in the box, a chunky 30-pounder. The action's not fast enough to suit Bob. "Everyone pull up. That spot across the way should be getting active." And sure enough, after less than two hours of reel

time, our party of five has just about closed out our limit of two fish apiece, averaging nearly 40 pounds, plus a half-dozen releases. Gulls wheel and keen, fighting over a scrap of bait; the prehistoric, rocky heave of the Barren Islands looms, surreal in the early afternoon light as we prepare for the homeward run. For some of us, it's the making of a lifetime memory. For Bob Ward, it's just another day at the office, doing things his way.

Nick Jans has lived in Alaska for 28 years. He is a contributor to *The Last Polar Bear*, published by Mountaineers Books.

Bob's fishing secret: injecting magnum herring with extra oil before using them as bait [RIGHT]. Deckhand Billy Trachsel [ABOVE] boats a mid-size halibut.

Bob returns from the wheelhouse with a .44 Magnum revolver. "We don't club fish to death on this boat," he says. "Everyone, you might want to cover your ears for a second." He administers the single-shot coup de grace and Billy sets the hand gaff, hoisting the big fish over the rail into the fish box.

Almost immediately, Anthony from Anchorage is onto another halibut; his father-in-law, Wayne, from Alabama, has a bite, and I watch, already limited out. Meanwhile, a party boat anchored a few hundred yards away, with at least a dozen anglers at the rail, shows few signs of action. When I ask about the discrepancy, Ward grins. "I'd say we're in a little better spot, with better bait, and we got a head-start on a scent trail." The halibut, he explains, will swim up-current along the bottom, following their olfactory lobes to our oil-laden herring. He moves sternward to direct traffic as Anthony's fish comes up. "OK, keep her coming . . . step to the corner rail . . . nice and steady . . . swing her this way . . ."

Burly and big-handed, craggy face framed by a chest-length, yellow beard and a British-style, wool sports cap, Bob Ward cuts a one-of-a-kind image. Envision the melding of a ZZ Top



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