

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

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September 14, 2009

To Catch A Truck

Chinook salmon offer anglers' special ride

By Dick Ellis



This 26 pound Chinook salmon picked a fight with brothers Jacob and Josh Branaean and lost in early August on Lake Michigan. The young anglers were vertical jigging with Great Lakes Captain Brian Settele in the Milwaukee Harbor

Great Lakes Skipper Brian Settele let his 18 foot fiberglass ship settle into the Lake Michigan blues just inside the north gap of the Milwaukee Harbor, then let the white Zoom fluke plastic tail drop to a hard bottom 31 feet below. The black clutter of baitfish on the electronic screen sent the exact message he was hoping for.

"The biggest key is finding the bait," Settele said. "Find the bait and these Chinook salmon

will be nearby. Ah, man right now this screen is full of alewife."

Through May, June and July, in the harbors of Port Washington, Sheboygan and Milwaukee, Settele had found the baitfish and found too the nearby predators before the frantic bite began to fade in August. All summer long, the bite had been nocturnal. As summer faded and crawled into an early September, Settele was guessing the Chinook salmon would be better targeted at mid-day.

The Chinook's changing feeding habits, he surmised, were being triggered by physical changes in the fish as autumn loomed and with it the annual spawning runs up the tributaries of the Great Lake. . Settele evolved too to stay on a bite that had offered fast, furious and often non-stop action.

"Fishing has been just excellent," he said. "We'd get on the water in the evening and fish into dark. Their bodies started going through a transition in August. Their stomach shrinks. Their eyesight changes and isn't as good. Instead of biting to eat the Chinook are striking from aggression. In the night we would have to use glow-in-the-dark spoons and crankbaits. But I think that fishing now on these bright sunny days will allow the salmon to see the lure and hit."

Settele has been a student of the feeding Chinook, and uses his observation and reading as an angler to try and imitate the alewife that serve as a salmon staple. On the Port Washington harbor, he had watched a Chinook torpedo into a school of roving alewife, and was intrigued at the number of injured baitfish that skittered and flailed in the water from the initial assault. The show became

even more intriguing when other salmon followed up to gorge on the easy pickins'. He used the unexpected field lesson to offer a jigging lesson to Randy Rothenbueler and me as we prepared to work the harbor last week in 70-degree temperatures under pure blue skies and bright sunshine.



Jason Bach of Brown Deer with a 25 pound Chinook salmon taken in the evening vertical jigging with Captain Brian Settele August 1st on Lake Michigan. (Photo by Brian Settele)



A Chinook Salmon is ready to give up the fight in the Milwaukee Harbor. The 15 pound fish was taken the first week of September vertical jigging.

“Drop the lure straight down until it hits bottom,” Settele said. “Hold the line against the rod with one finger so that you get a good hook set when you feel the strike. You can’t rely on the drag to bury the hook. Twitch the fluke several times steady just a few inches off the bottom and then every once in a while pop it up a few feet and let it fall like an injured baitfish. We use Gulp or Fluke Tails in white to best resemble the coloration of the alewife.”

Confident in the time of day and presentation, Settele said he would also continue to adjust the depth of his lure until he found the predator’s location in the water column. Aggressive or subtle jigging would also be determined after the salmon let us

know their preference on this afternoon. As we entered the fall transition, it was likely that a brown trout would hit instead of the targeted Chinook.

“We have to see where they are in the water column,” he said. “It’s 62 degrees on the surface right now. The fish have liked it at about 50 degrees the best. Most of the time, they’ve been tight to the bottom because of the cooler water temperatures there. A west/southwest wind will bring the cooler water in.

Armed with 8-1/2 foot medium action rods with the backbone to handle an extraordinarily tenacious fighter, it was time to go to work. We dropped 5/8 and three-quarter ounce jigs dressed with Zoom Flukes or Berkley Gulp plastics on 10-

pound Seaquar fluorocarbon line. This was not to be a motor-trolling cruise in a charter boat built to handle the high seas. Settele uses equipment and tactics that the common man can afford and use, on fertile harbor water easily assessable with small outboards and most often protected from the winds and waves.



Room for all on the Milwaukee Harbor. When vertical jigging for Chinook salmon in the Milwaukee Harbor in early September, Ellis and partners had to make room for other lake traffic from schooners to kayaks and sailboats to other fishermen.

If we did hook up with a Chinook, Settele said to expect 150 yards of line to be ripped off the reel in seconds. In response, the skipper would do his best to follow with the Minn Kota trolling motor until we could wrestle the salmon into submission. The largest Chinook to fall to Settee’s tactics and equipment this summer weighed 26 pounds.

“We’re using stainless steel or forged galvanized hooks because the fish would straighten out the hooks I used on the store-bought jigs,” he said. “They were too thin. I make these. We’re going to try aggressive jigging and hardly jigging at all until through trial and error we find out what they want. When we do hook up, just imagine hooking

and early release

I’m not sure what the fight looked like beneath the waves. But I do know that three men riding the waves in a small boat, one with a rod, one with a net and one with a camera, trying to get out of the way of each other as the fish traveled this way and that was no less than a KeyStone Kop remake.

When Randy led the 15 pound salmon to net, one thing was very clear. We wished Settele had called in the heart of summer, when 20 fish harbor days and monster Chinook are the expectation rather than a fleeting autumn hope.

“It has been so good I could catch a limit of five fish in 90 minutes of fishing,” Settele said.



Captain Brian Settele and angler Randy Rothenbueler with the 15 pound Chinook Salmon caught vertical jigging in the north gap of the Milwaukee Harbor the first week of September.

your jig to the bumper of a truck on Highway 41. Because that’s what it feels like.”

We missed a half dozen strikes over the first 90 minutes. The fish were banging the lures and disappearing before any of us were able to bury a hook. With expectations high, Rothenbueler’s rod bent over the weight of a good fish hell-bent on a pardon

“And this is something that any fisherman with a decent boat can do.”

Contact Brian Settele and Fish Chaser Guide Service at 414-559-9238 or connect at www.fishchaserguideservice.com. In addition to Great Lakes Harbors, he also guides on Green Bay, Winnebago and other inland lakes. ^ow_o