

The Sea Grant Files
Fresh News About Fresh Water

Kala! Kala! Kala!

For Sept 27, 2016

(cow bell + someone in the room calling “Kala! Kala Kala!”) Kala-kala- kala....that’s Finnish for “fish-fish- fish.” This call punctuates a Lake Superior charter fishing trip on a boat called the Happy Hooker. If you are on this 32-and- a-half foot Marinette boat out of the Duluth Harbor, Peter Dahl’s your captain and John Meining is your deckhand.

Hi I’m Jesse Schomberg and you’re listening to the Sea Grant Files. Today I’m going to talk about charter fishing on Lake Superior and “the catch of the day”.

Charter fishing here has a history that dates at least to 1909. That’s when Captain Peter’s grand- dad got his charter captain’s license. Peter’s dad was also a charter captain and Peter has been a charter captain himself for going on 30 years. His son is also in the business of leading people to fish on Lake Superior. The Dahls aren’t the only charter captains on Lake Superior, or in Duluth, or but they are certainly one of the most notable families in the business, a business that requires 12-14 hour work-days during “the season,” a large boat, ample insurance, licenses, downriggers, electronics, rods, gas and so on. On the Happy Hooker, John or Peter will bait the spoon lures with smelt and WD40, net your fish, pose for a photo with you, ice the catch and even clean your catch.

All you need, if you charter a boat to fish on the Minnesota waters of Lake Superior, is a MN fishing license, trout stamp, a lunch ...that doesn’t include bananas (we’ll get back to bananas in a minute), and whatever you care to drink. Oh, and don’t forget appropriate clothing and multiple layers for what can be variable temperatures and winds. Charter rates hover around \$450 for a half day and \$700 for a full day for up to four people.

These charter captains troll mainly for two species of fish: lake trout and coho salmon. Trolling involves throwing lines out...2 per person...and slowly motoring over areas of the lake where the captain has located fish through experience and his sonar. Last summer, Peter led 174 chartered trips with an average daily catch of about 8.5 fish per trip...about one fish per hour.

Now, about those bananas.....recreational fishing is a sport that mixes skill, science, and abundant superstition. One of the most pervasive superstitions among charter captains anywhere ... make that everywhere ... is that when bananas are aboard, you are calling calamity to the boat: equipment malfunctions, no fish, wild weather and/or weird random accidents. The most sound explanations for this fear of bananas date back to the 1800s, to the the days when rickety ships overloaded with bananas plied the treacherous seas from South America to the ports in North America and Europe. Many sailors breathed their last breaths aboard these banana boats, and bananas got the blame.

Banana's aside, superstitions on the Happy Hooker are mostly wrapped around getting the fish to bite. Peter and John conjure fish with (cow bell and "kala-kala- kala")... a secret location...which I'm sorry, must remain a secret.... placing a quick call to Sue, who manages the bookings and evidently the fish; and the "FM" — Fishing Music ... Peter can summon more than 270 songs about fishing and, if fishing is slow, a change of the music seems to step up the action. From a more scientific perspective, water temperature is a driving force for where and when one might land a Lake Superior fish. Lake trout like their water cold, around 50 degree F. Early in the season coho salmon and lake trout tend to be in shallower waters but by September the cohos aren't biting and the lake trout are lounging just below the thermocline, maybe 60 feet below the surface's warm water. Peter and John agree that this year's catch has been a little slow; they attribute the slow to this year's warm temperatures.

Though the Duluth-area fishery in Lake Superior has changed over time with the unplanned arrival of invaders like sea lamprey and rainbow smelt, the purposeful addition salmon and the rebound of lake trout and ciscos has increased angler success. Peter said that his charter fishing business and the fish they bring back has remained about the same since the '90s. There are Minnesota Department of Health consumption advisories for Lake Superior's lake trout. Men, and women not planning to be pregnant, should eat no more than one lean lake trout a week and no more than one siscowet lake trout a month. What's the difference? Though leans and siscowets are the same species, they are different strains. Leans are much less fatty, and fat is where toxins like PCBs can accumulate. Leans are faring well in their native waters of Lake Superior and siscowets are absolutely thriving. Siscowets live a deeper life than leans but they still can become part of a charter fishing haul. Siscowet, which typically occupy deeper waters than leans, are the most abundant form of lake trout in Lake Superior, but recently their fatty content has been decreasing, which could be a product of diet changes and their higher population density. Though they have high levels of heart-healthy omega 3 fatty acids, siscowets are not considered good eating. The aversion? As Matt Straw wrote in an In Fisherman article, "With that high fat content, a big one will burn your grill to the ground, then horrify your taste buds."

Over the years, Sea Grant has funded research to understand the complexities of the Lake Superior food web. UMD biology professor Tom Hrabik and his students published work showing the largest observed differences relative to historic Lake Superior diet studies are that cisco are eating invasive spiny waterfleas in summer and fall and lean lake trout are eating fewer rainbow smelt and more ciscos. Many of Lake Superior's fish species are primarily founded on a diet of Mysis and Diporeia, which in turn are supported by the lake's phytoplankton that photosynthesizes sunlight into sugar. To a much lesser extent, this food web taps into the energy of the organic debris on the bottom of the lake.

If you want to learn more about fishing in Lake Superior or just enjoy an adventure out on the lake, consider a charter trip with the experts and maybe take home something for the diner table.

This episode of the Sea Grant Files was produced by Sharon Moen, Mariah Schumacher, and me Jesse Schomberg. To listen to more episodes of The Sea Grant Files and to subscribe to our podcast, visit the Minnesota Sea Grant website at www.seagrant.umn.edu. You can also follow Minnesota Sea Grant on Facebook or Twitter. Thanks for listening.