



TERRY W. SHEELY PHOTO



SURFING WITH THE *Doryman*

Pacific City, Oregon. It's different here.
In a good way, of course.

By TERRY W. SHEELY

IT'S 6:45 IN THE HALF dark of pre-dawn on the empty sand outside the Pelican Pub.

Gulls whisper overhead. A string of brown pelicans disappears toward the hard silhouette of Haystack Rock. The soft whoosh of rollers melting into beach sand floats up from below.

Mark Lytle walks around his trailered boat, inspecting 22-feet of flat wooden bottom, checking gear, walking out of the dark toward me, stepping through 115 years of Oregon history and storied coastal tradition.

Mark Lytle, bearded, dressed in rain gear, is a Doryman, one of the select few.
Doryman.

It's a special calling, an edgy specialty honored among Northwest guides, unique to one small piece of beach in all of America—Cape Kiwanda, Pacific City, Oregon, sanded-in mouth of the Nestucca River.

Fishermen come here to fish with a doryman, for the dory boat experience, for the rare chance to say they did it, perhaps to brag a bit. Of those who haven't yet, most want to. Nowhere else, except with one of these chosen dorymen, can everyday anglers climb into a grounded, flat-bottomed boat, and launch from hard-pack sand directly into the teeth and froth of an ocean rolling into shore—sometimes with attitude.

No ramp, no dock, no breakwater, no jetty, no protection. Just you, your dory, skipper and whatever the ocean is throwing at you that day.

Timing, skill and experience—and always a dollop of good luck.

There are 300 maybe 400 dories in Pacific City, most in garages or living under tarps. A few dozen fish hook and line commercially, another 100 or so charter sportfishermen, only a few fulltime and rarely more than a couple of dozen at a time on the water.

Mark's dory is wooden, solid and heavy. It thumps off the trailer into the sand on a lap of a skinny water. Natalie and I climb in, dry, excited and superfluous to the launch.



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Above the beach toward the hills an orange sun rises around the Inn At Cape Kiwanda. Last night I stood on the balcony up there, ice-clinking in amber, fireplace warming the room, I thought about this morning and watched the sun drop into the ocean behind the Haystack, turning the beach to black but angling an orange light up and across the sculpted sandstone and wind-brushed dunes on Cape Kiwanda. Geologists say Haystack and the Cape were once connected but the connection long ago eroded and all that's left is a basalt reef that can load up with game fish.

Three times I've tried to make this trip, but something always got in the way. Until this morning. I'm really here. Anticipation tightens my belly. I'm grinning for no reason. It's the same grin that broke out when I shouted from my kayak at Granite Creek Rapid at the top of Hells Canyon, when I tackled the curl at Box Car on the Salmon, hop-skipped a float plane across waves in the Gulf of Alaska, blew 50 miles into the Gulf of Mexico, helicoptered to a bobbing boat deck in BC, and pointed a wooden drift boat down the Rogue. This morning is on that level—more tradition than adrenaline but it's exceptional and far more than just another fish trip.

It takes two people to spin the pointed

upswept bow to the ocean and push out until the incoming surge lifts the hull. Our second is Bob who wades in, steadies the boat against the buck and sway, while Mark scrambles over the transom, turns the key on 115 horses of outboard. A wave rolls under the hull, Bob pushes hard, jumps to the side, shouts "clear," Mark drops the four-stroke into gear, climbs and blows through the first roller, rises through the second and third waves and hammers down into the ocean. In the old days they did it with oars, strong backs, skill and guts. Skill and guts are still required.

The second shot of adrenaline comes after the fishing, comes on the run and gun surfing return to the beach, typically loaded with salmon, rockfish, or ling cod and limits of sweet Dungeness crabs. Done right, it's a photo op for every camera on the sand. Dory bow hanging in air beyond the white curl of the roller, transom riding the wave, flat hull surfing straight at the sand, doryman braced and rigid, passengers big-eyed and holding tight. You don't get this picture anywhere else in North America.

Mark says to stash our stuff where it won't bounce around, and to move to assigned positions at the stern, brace and hang on. We're balanced ballast. The doryman feathers the wheel and prowls like a

surfer-dude watching for the perfect wave. The perfect roller will skate a couple of tons of flat-bottomed boat toward the beach, 22 feet of center-console surfboat roaring to shore, alarm horn blasting, clearing out the kite-flyers, shell-pickers and sand castle builders. There is a written law that gives boats right-of-way, and a blasting horn for those with less than common sense.

Pick the right wave, line up, power up, do everything right and the big boat rides the roller until it collapses. You hang on tight for the slam and stop. And suddenly the boat is square and dry on hard sand. If it goes right. If it goes wrong you get your name in the newspapers.

A 4x4 with special gearing, sand tires and an empty trailer will come at us. The trailer, like others on the beach, will be of a special design evolved expressly for this one launch and retrieve. A fold-down roller ramp at the back to lift the bow and powerful winch in the front.

But that's later at the end of the day. We've still got fish to catch and crabs to pot.

Dorymen of Pacific City have been doing it this way for more than a century. A metal and stone memorial monument is etched with the names of dory men and women, past and present. On the left side of the Dory Association names is a spit-in-your-eye poem, "The Devil With Dorymen."

Mark's been guiding for 17 years, here for seven, and his eyes still shine when he talks about a typical day. His turquoise and white dory, with its busy console and tower of backup oars, is open, comfortable and efficient. His pride and joy and when he points the big bow at the ocean and touches the throttle it seems to me that he fits into dory like a piece of the boat. He makes it fun, and loves his work.

His boat, like many others in Pacific City, was built by one of the last of the wooden dory builders. You can buy a good dory molded from fiberglass or other artificial materials. But, Mark tells me, there is tradition in Pacific City, and a long waiting list for a small brass plate with a wooden boat built around it, imperfectly lettered "Home Built By Shawn Farstad" with the year and a serial number.

The beach launch and the specialized dories of Pacific City evolved not for the thrill or uniqueness but from necessity. In the water just offshore is a saltwater fisherman's dream: reefs and points and ledges, the angled tower of Haystack Rock, the ragged bottom off Cape Kiwan-

No boat ramp needed. Dories launch from the beach.



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da and the anadromous natal pull of the Big Nestucca River.

It's the kind of habitat and structure that attracts Chinook and coho salmon, big rockfish, ling cod, halibut, and grows enviable acres of crabs. It's so productive that commercial dorymen with hook and line fish side-by-side with sport-fishing dories and no one argues. The good water is so close that beach walkers watch the boats fish.

If it wasn't for the Kiwanda beach launch, it would mean that to fish these productive waters boaters would have to run 20 miles from the protected harbors in Tillamook Bay or 35 miles from Depoe Bay to the south. For most, that's an extreme run in a small boat through an unreasonable ocean.

Bottom line—If you want to fish here, you launch here, and you launch a dory from sand. The only nearby alternative is Nestucca Bay at the south edge of town and it's not a reasonable option.

The big Nestucca River is why the salmon are here, steelhead and cutthroat too. It flows 57 miles through western Oregon winding toward Pacific City, much of it slow and pastoral in a valley shared by Highway 101. A little east of the beach, below Cannery Hill, the big Nestucca slides into the Little Nestucca in a soft-water confluencing of sedate estuary bay water that lacks the punch to blow out the impassable sand bar that builds at the mouth.

Where the Nestucca meets salt south of Bob Straub State Park water ripples over wrinkled sand and washes around the skinny yellow legs of standing gulls. There are rare times, high-water times, when the tidal push and river surge will combine to dig out enough sand to create a tight shallow channel that salmon fanatics with big guts in small boats follow into the ocean. The sandbar crossing is a dangerous bet just to win a fish and it's not for the inexperienced boatman.

Just south of Haystack Rock, one of several so-named monoliths in Oregon, Mark swings the dory to a stop and watches the drift. A raft of black and white scoters lifts off the water, and small birds, perhaps puffins or red-billed oyster catchers flicker around the Rock.

Nestucca River spring chinook start to show in April and filter through the fleet into June, Mark tells me. Fall kings

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Catches of salmon like this are the draw in the summer, as are limits of Dungeness crab. Doryman Mark Lytle hauls in a pot of Dungeness crab.



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arrive in September and October, and in late August the dory fleet starts to work passing schools of coho.

Expect summer steelhead in April and winter steelhead in November—and in between are big black rockfish, yelloweyes, ling cod, halibut in season, maybe albacore tuna if they come close, and some of the best crabbing I've experienced. The variety of fish and shellfish is one of Pacific City's unique draws and the lack of non-local fishing pressure means full fish boxes.

The dory fishing season, depending on fickle ocean weather, runs March-November, but can spontaneously break out whenever weather and fishing seasons cooperate and coordinate.

While Mark's running through his calendar of dory fishing options for me, he's baiting and dumping crab pots. Two licenses, two pots, two orange markers, two 12 crab limits. When the last pot drops Mark predicts, "those will be filled in an hour." It's that good here.

We start with black rockfish. Kiwanda slabs average 2 ½ pounds and are the backbone of the Pacific City dory fishery. Natalie nails the first one four minutes into the mooch. We're using 6-foot spinning rods, suited for pan size trout, mooching shrimp fly ganglions over a row of pinnacles, some within 25 feet of the surface. We're close enough to Pacific City to see a guy walking his white dog up the beach.

Stacked fish appear and disappear on the Furuno 620, the bottom is an upheaval of reefs, rocks and pinnacles. Mark points at a spot in the water says, ling cod, points at another where halibut feed, sweeps his arm across black rockfish territory and then we head for the mouth of the Nestucca to see if there's a salmon at home.

Some pass-by salmon come through headed elsewhere up or down the coast. But most of the anadromous targets of the Pacific City dory fleet are homing in on the Nestucca River and that's where they're fished—on the beach.

We're parallel to the sand, trolling over a flat bottom in 37 feet of water.

Rollers start unrolling toward the beach just a few yards away. With rare exceptions, the Cape Kiwanda salmon fishery is a beach troll in shallow water—20 to 40 feet.

This is where Nestucca salmon stack, Mark explains, waiting for the right conditions to scoot over the bar and into the river. Some are hatchery, some are wild.

In April, dorymen start trolling the beach for spring Chinook, mostly hatchery adults returning from a plant

of 230,000 smolts at Cedar Creek Hatchery in the upper tributaries.

Another 105,000 fall Chinook and half a million pre-smolt coho go into the Nestucca to supplement a population of wild fish, according to ODFW. Fall kings move into the beach in late September, peak in October and stay into November. A few Chinook will continue to trickle past Haystack deep into December, maybe even January. These are typically the season's big fish, 30- to 40-pounders.

Coho are here July into September, most in concentrated schools passing through to other river systems, but some heading into the upper Nestucca. Coho have had tough sledding everywhere in the Northwest the last few years, but enough come down the beach to produce decent late summer catches. When a run moves in the action is fast, until the run moves on and it dies until the next school arrives.

Kings are different. Most that come through here are headed up the Nestucca and hang along the beach, sometimes for weeks before kicking across the sand bar in sweetwater.

We've switched out the rockfish spinning tackle for Berkley salmon rods rated for 10- to 50-pound line, with Shimano and Tekota reels spooled with 65-pound braid. You could anchor a boat with these outfits—or catch a 40-pound Nestucca king.

Nothing special about Pacific City salmon rigs, Mark says; 12 to 16 ounces of lead on a spreader bar, a Fish Flash or Pro Troll flasher and a herring—probably dyed green and coated with scents. Keep it close to the bottom. Kings hug the sand, belly down, waiting for a thumping flasher and herring to aggravate them.

The salmon rods nod in rhythm to the flasher wobble, the lead occasionally kicking up sand. Next month the Furona will be loaded with king salmon marks along this beach, I'm told. "It can be really hot, especially later in the year," Mark says. A little high water wouldn't hurt.

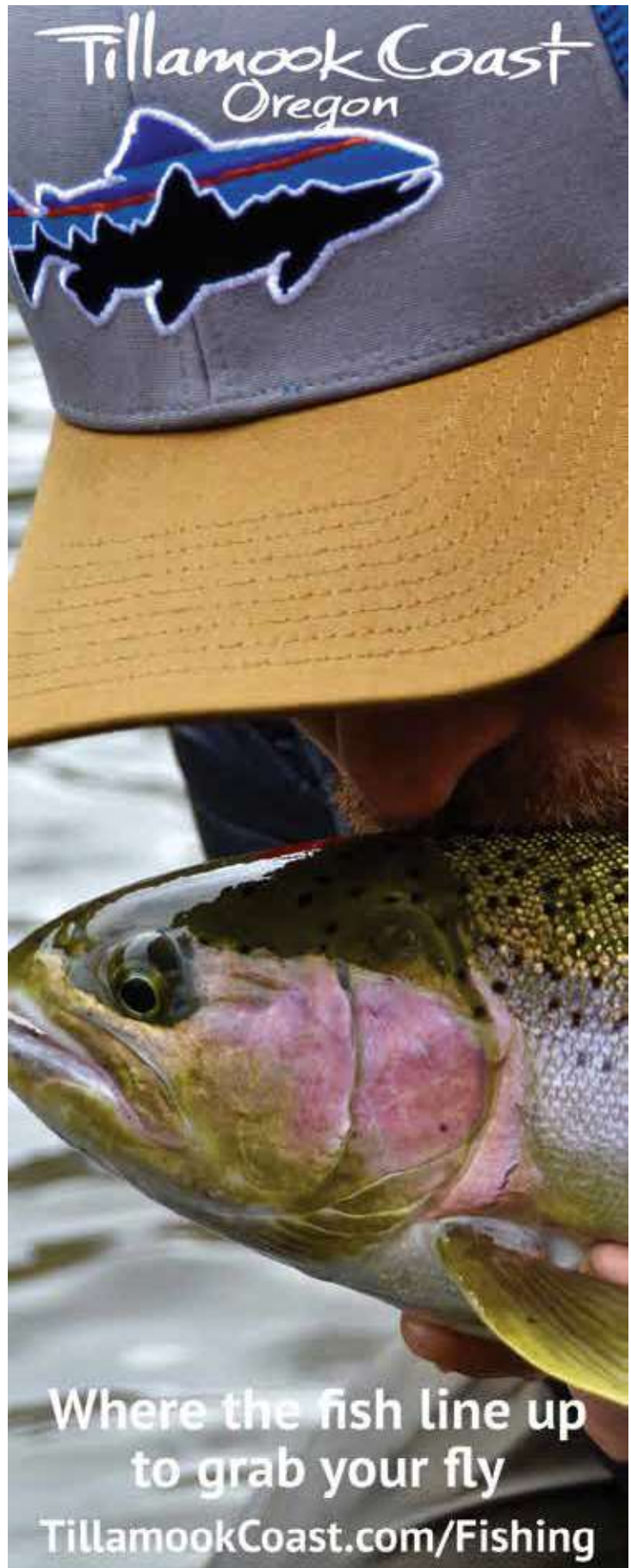
Cape Kiwanda is one of those rare places where most of the chartered dories bring in a mixed catch. In a typical six-hour trip, anglers will load up with big rockfish, maybe a ling cod or two, put salmon in the boat and take a good haul of fresh crabs. If they go for limits that's 12 male crabs, 6 rockfish, 2 lings and whatever ODFW decides for salmon—usually two: Each. Put four to six anglers in a boat and that's a pile of fillets.

Mark acts like that's an everyday occurrence. Maybe here it is. Most places it's a dream trip. He says there is no cut and dried trip. "I'll put a trip together for whatever the fishermen want. We'll have a good trip."

We call it, head for the crab pots, sort through literally four dozen crabs, release the females, small ones and soft shells and go in with 24 prime eaters.

In a couple of hours, Natalie and I will be in Mark's garage and he'll be cleaning and boiling our catch. "Part of the package," he says, and I accept the beer in his right hand. Two dozen steaming hot crab are dumped in a pile on an old round table. Some will go into the cooler but the best ones never make it off the table.

Elbows, fingers, steaming hot crab, fish in the cooler and a surf with a Pacific City dory man. I fished into history today and it was even better than I dreamed. **ssj**



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