

Salmon Fishing with Capt. Mel Christensen



As the sun poked its yellow fire through the early morning haze, there was nary a ripple on the water. The guide motored his Lund Pro V 2025 through the no wake zone of Waukegan Harbor and headed east toward Lake Michigan, following the old government pier to right.

I looked around his boat, checking out his equipment. The big motor was an Evinrude 225 and the kicker a Honda 15hp. Up on the bow was a Motorguide trolling motor and the electronics on the dash were Lowrance. It looked like he had the latest and greatest stuff.

My guide for the day was multi-species angler Mel Christensen of Spring Grove, Illinois.

When we were out of the no wake zone, he nailed the big motor to put the boat on plane, and we blasted out to 90 feet of water. Once there, Mel fired up the kicker and turned off the big motor. Then we began to set the six rods we were allowed to use.

On each side of the boat there was a Stinger fly and red dodger attached to a Dipsey Diver, a side planning device that takes the fly and dodger down and away from the boat. These ran about twelve feet deep.

Another rod had ten colors of lead core line with a 50 feet mono leader and about 100 feet of backing. To that Mel attached a Grisley Spoon which ran approximately 40 feet deep.

Spoons were attached to two down rigger rods and the sixth rod was dodger/fly combination fished off a yellow bird trolling board.

It didn't take long to get bit, and by 6:30am we had the first Coho in the box, coming on one of tinsel flies and 20 minutes later, BANG! Another Coho.

We settled in for a half day of fishing and a bunch of talking. I asked him how he got started in this business.

"It was back in the 1970s, I was fishing a lot of salmon here and one thing just led to the other. I did all the paperwork and took the tests, finally earning a passenger license from Illinois and then a captain's license from the coast guard.

"Mel, what else do you guide for?"

"Jim, I really don't have one favorite species but I like to target them all, and so do most of my clients. "Earlier in the year, deep-water fishing for yellow perch is a good bet."

All of a sudden one of the downrigger rods sprung violently upward, meaning a fish had pounded the spoon and released the line from the downrigger, snapping the rod to attention!

"Grab the rod, Jimmy!" shouted Mel and I dutifully followed his orders. A few minutes later, Capt. Mel netted a very nice Coho that hit at 70 feet.

At 7:05 am, lead core produced a beautiful king, so by this time, we had four fish in the box.

When the action subsided and calmer moments were to be had, Mel mentioned Lakes Geneva and Delavan are very popular with customers, and especially so with young children because of the variety and ease of catching fish. Northern pike, small and largemouth bass, and pan fish are popular there.

I looked a little more around his boat and saw his coast guard information and all the safety riggings required in connection therewith.

At 7:27, another downrigger rod snapped to attention yielding a nice, fat lake trout on a monkey puke spoon.

"The Chain O'Lakes is a good spot for action, too. In the spring, the walleye catches can be very good, providing you don't mind culling few a sheepshead."

I wanted to know where he got his start, where he cut his teeth, how he learned to fish. "I started on the Chain, actually, fishing there on weekends. Then, we used to take family vacations up to Hayward. I enjoyed every trip."





I inquired as to what makes a good client. It wasn't hard for Mel to answer. "Be: on-time, willing to learn, flexible, and patient on tough days."

A few minutes later, another rod was jerking down toward the water and it yielded a nice, chunky Coho, which went into the fish box meaning we were done for the day. As we stowed all the gear and battened down everything for the ride back to the dock, I asked Mel what advice he has for beginnings.

He paused to reflect on the question. "If you can, find a mentor. But most of all, temper your expectations to the reality of whatever situation you're in."

Good words, indeed, Captain Mel Christensen. www.fishwithmel.com

Jim Zegar can be reached at outdoors@zegar.com.