

# **Field Trip: Owen Lightly Fishing For Dinosaurs**

December 23, 2008



I recently visited Harrison Hot Springs, and among some other interesting activities, had the chance to fish for White Sturgeon – a pre-historic fish – on the mighty Fraser River.

A couple weeks prior, Andrew had called and asked if I wanted to go to Harrison Hot Springs as part of a media trip that would highlight things to do in and around this little village. He mentioned that Sturgeon fishing would be involved and my interest was piqued. I somehow wrangled two days off from work, and last Monday I hit the highway to Harrison.

Being a virgin to these sorts of press junkets, I was a little apprehensive. There would be real writers on this trip, and then there would be me: a dirty cook with a blogging hobby. Would they allow me to speak to them? Would they eat steak and lobster, while I ate bologna sandwiches alone in my hotel room? These are the sorts of things that run through my insecure mind. Of course all the worrying was for naught, as everyone was incredibly nice and a pleasure to hang out with.

The drive to Harrison takes about 90 minutes from Vancouver on Highway 1. If you have a little more time, and are a fan of winding, tree-lined roads, Highway 7 will also get you there. All nut-lovers must stop along the way in Agassiz at one of the many hazelnut orchards there.

Upon arriving in Harrison, I headed to the **Harrison Hot Springs Resort and Spa**, where I would be staying, to rendezvous with the media group. After a brief meet and greet, we headed to the **Kilby Historic Site** in nearby Harrison Mills, where Jo-Anne Leon gave us a tour of this interactive museum. The centrepiece of the five-acre site is a hundred year old building, which was once owned by the Kilby family and operated as a general store from 1906-1977. The general store is filled with original packaging for products from the 1920's and 30's, and in the high season has interpretive actors playing out scenes from times gone by. The top floor, which was a hotel at one point, now has many exhibits on the history of the area. With a restaurant, heritage farm, camp site and boat launch on-site, it's a nice place to spend some time. Back at the resort, we checked into our rooms and then had some free time



*Pig at Kilby*

to explore the property. I soaked in one of the five hot springs they have on-site (two indoors, three outside), and then it was back to the room to iron my fancy clothes in anticipation for dinner at The Copper Room, the resort's upscale restaurant. Prior to dinner we met up for drinks and canapés in the one of the suites with director of sales and marketing for the resort, Ian Maw (Jamie Maw's brother!), who prior to moving to the valley seven years ago, worked for both the Pan Pacific and The Four Seasons in Vancouver.

Dinner at The Copper Room is a trip back in time. The restaurant doesn't look like it has changed in thirty years, and I think our server Bart has probably been there since the last renovation. There is a house band which plays lounge favorites seven nights a week and a large dance floor to strut your stuff. Watching the old couples shuffle across the dance floor, holding each other closely, was almost enough to thaw my cold heart for a moment – but not quite. Food was standard hotel dining room fare, but I have to say the steak I had was cooked nicely, which counts for a lot in my books.

Then it was back to my room for a good nights sleep, for tomorrow was the activity that drew me to Harrison Hot Springs: Sturgeon fishing. But first I would have a relaxation massage in the Healing Springs Spa.



*Love is beautiful*

The White Sturgeon has been swimming around the river systems of the Pacific coast for over 175 million years, making it the oldest freshwater species of fish on earth, it can live to be over a hundred years old, with females first spawning between 24-35 years of age, and males anywhere from 11-24 years. They grow very slowly, but fish up to fourteen feet in length and weighing over 1500 pounds have been found. They differ from most fish in that they don't have scales. Instead, they have bony plates called *scutes* along their sides and back, which protect them from predators.

From 1880-1916, commercial fishing took over a million pounds of Sturgeon a year out of the Fraser River, nearly wiping the species out entirely. From 1916-1994, sport fisherman were allowed to harvest Sturgeon for personal use, but a massive die-off in 1993 prompted a moratorium on all removal of the fish from the river. Since then, the fishery has been a hundred percent catch-and-release. With stocks as low as a few thousand in the early nineties, Fraser River Sturgeon are now on the mend, with anywhere from 45,000 to 70,000 now in the Fraser – a marked improvement since the moratorium.

Our fishing guide for the day was Tony Nootebos, owner of **Harrison Bay Guided Services** and its parent company the **B.C. Sport Fishing Group**. Tony has lived in Harrison Hot Springs for twelve years, originally owning a gas station and campsite before starting the charter business in 1996. The first year he only did 8 trips and nearly went bust, but the following year that number increased to 80, with the company growing steadily ever since. He offers seasonal salmon fishing, and trout and sturgeon fishing year round. He now has a 22 boat fleet, 24 full and part time fishing guides and takes out about 4500 guests per year. We met Tony at the dock near the entrance to the resort. The first group of media had just returned from their morning trip and were just beaming, having reeled in a 300 pound fish that morning. Hearing their stories, I felt the excitement building up inside me. Having grown up around commercial fish boats (my cousin and dad were both commercial salmon fisherman), I have a connection to fish that I have never quite embraced fully, but am conscious of it all the same. Every time I'm near the water it reminds me of growing up.

***Eagles wait to kill something***



Now we wait, watching the lines from the comfort of the heated cabin. Tony tells us about the Sturgeon Conservation Society's tagging study, of which he is an active participant. When a fish is caught for the first time, a microchip is inserted into the fish, which is used to monitor and assess these endangered fish.

A bite! There is a pull on the line and Tony jumps into action. He sets the hook and hands the reel off to me. I immediately realize how hard this is going to be. It is raining hard and my weak arms are burning within a few minutes. "Only another hour", Tony says, laughing as I reel in, wince, reel in, wince. After watching me struggle for long enough, Tony gives me a couple of pointers. The first thing he says is to keep the arm you are holding the reel with straight, using the body for leverage rather than putting all the strain on your arms. Another is to not fight when the fish is swimming away from you; there is nothing you can do at this point. When the fish gets tired, pull up on the reel to create slack and then let the reel down, bringing in line as ***I'd never battled a dinosaur before***

you go. This helps a lot and I start to make some definite progress. Half an hour or so later, the fish is within twenty feet of the boat, and does a little jump out of the water. "That's got to be a six footer", Tony says.

We set out across Lake Harrison, heading for the mouth of the Harrison River, which will take us to the Fraser. We stop briefly to do some bald eagle watching and fill out our one day fishing licenses.

We enter the Fraser and Tony takes us to the same spot where the first group made their catch earlier in the day. This time of the year it is harder to get the sturgeon to bite, as the colder water slows down their metabolism and makes them less active. The anchor goes down and the lines are baited and cast into the cold river. Different times of the year calls for different types of bait – right now salmon eggs are appropriate, as that is a large part of the diet of the Sturgeon this time of year.





Holy shit! A couple of minute later it is beside the boat. Tony sets up a hammock kind of setup to lay the fish in when he brings it into the boat to check for a microchip and measure the fish. In one quick movement, he pulls the fish into the boat and I get a look at the pre-historic creature that I have been battling for the last thirty minutes. Tony checks for the chip in it, and finds it has been caught before. It is 6.5 feet long and he estimates its weight at around 150 pounds.

After posing for my obligatory victory photos, we toss the fish back in and re-set the lines for another one in our group to have their turn.



*Owen, Jayne Lloyd-Jones (Spectacular Ink owner), and fishing guide Tony Nootebos.*

I returned home that evening one step closer to becoming a man, having fought a dinosaur and won. Thanks to Spectacular Ink, Tourism Harrison, Harrison Hot Springs Resort and Spa and the B.C. Sport Fishing Group for everything!