

Tomcod feat. Jimmy Evak

Hey to all you fish enthusiasts out there. Whether you're an avid angler or just curious about fish, we'd like to welcome you to Fish of the Week! It's Monday, December 13 2021. And we're excited to talk about all the fish. I'm Katrina Liebich with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Alaska.

And I'm Guy Eroh, feeling like a Gadidae guy today.

We're very pleased to have Jimmy Evak with us today to talk about what's known locally in his neck of the woods as tomcod. So welcome, Jimmy! Where are you calling in from today?

I'm here at Kotzebue, Alaska. And we don't say "neck of the woods" here. We don't go in the woods, we say "neck of the tundra."

Neck of the tundra. I love it. I know you'd probably rather be out fishing for tomcod right now. And I'm curious what's the Inupiaq word for tomcod.

Tomcod. We say: uuḡaq. I can repeat that. It's got a real strong guttural sound in the middle of that G. Uuḡaq. U-U-G-A-Q. That middle G has a dot over the top to signify the sound uuḡaq.

Beautiful. Thank you. Could you tell us a little bit about this fish? Like what they look like and why you like fishing for them?

Could I step outside for a second get one for you and show you?

Yeah!

Please do.

Hang on a second.

Okay. So Jimmy's just left the room. He's gonna come back and apparently show us what one of these fish look like. So we'll hopefully get a good description for y'all. All right. This is a tomcod.

Oh, cool. And he's frozen.

Is it frozen? It looks almost like a plastic toy it frozen with its fans all out and everything.

This one is...it's about maybe 12 inches or so.

Jimmy is measuring it.

Yeah. 12 and 1/4 of an inch.

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There you go. It looks like a cod. I mean, it's got the fins like like you would see on an Atlantic or Pacific Cod. It's about a foot long Jimmy's holding it. It's frozen.

This particular one is about 12 inches, and they get up to 20 inches. 20 is kind of big but this is kind of medium here. It has a green top and white on the bottom. Always got his mouth open and his eyes are like real big and I mean it look like it's had too much caffeine or something.

That's awesome. Does it have a little chin barbel? The little whisker?

I don't think these have any.

Thank you for showing us that's very cool. We don't normally get a guest who actually shows us the fish and could just go grab one from outside.

Oh yeah, I mean I got over 1000. Some people left town for three weeks and you left me their 4 wheeler so went out there when it was still dark before the sun came up and use a flashlight couple of times and fished through the ice with a flashlight.

I want to know how you how you fish for these lakes specifically how you kind of set up and where you go and how you catch them.

Okay, what I do is I go to the ice or the fish are known to pass and I poke a hole with ice chisel. It's a hand operated ice chisel and I just poke a hole through the ice about six to eight inches, 10 inches in diameter. And then I put my lure in the hole. I figure I better to show and tell today.

Is that your jigger there?

This is what a friend made for me. It's made out of diamond willow.

Okay.

They made this for me and you can see the drawings on there.

Yeah, so Jimmy's holding up, it looks like a jigging tool. It's a piece of wood that's got a curve in it. And then it has some line hanging down from it.

It almost looks like a boomerang but with one of the edges that's shorter than the other

And you hold it like this when you're fishing. You move it up and down like that and you let this lure move around this lower will be way below the ice and when you jig around that lower moves around looks like the fish down there to the other fish. So that's how we get the tomcod.

Okay, and that's a big lure, it's a big spoon. It looks like it's a couple of inches long, so that's a big a big bait for them to be going after. That's cool.

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Some of them got big mouth so we have some big lures sometimes. Like a chihuahua. Chihuahuas are small but they got big mouth.

So very colorful fish it seems like with descriptions. I'm curious if you make any of your fish jiggers as well or any of the lures. Do you make those your yourself as well?

Yes, I'll show you. This one I made out of oak. I think it's an eight out of scrap pallets, you know that we find our own town.

Cool, beautiful.

And I'll show you another one.

Jimmy's showing us his jiggers. They like we described earlier, they kind of have a bend in them a nice handle to kind of grip onto.

This one I made out of willow. And all it is just one piece of willow that I either found from the beach, or maybe from something I cut down from the willows when I pass by. I got a little rubber fish and my favorite bait is blubber because when the fish bite, they can't bite through it. So it's always there. And I can save bait all year round. And the more smellier it gets.

What kind of line do you have on that?

This is 100 pound line. And I usually put about 30 feet and I put a snap swivel so I can take off this lure. And when I want like a sheefish, I'll put a bigger lure on there. And then I can change it over to sheefish. So that's why this looks kind of heavy.

So you could catch both species kind of same time if you wanted to.

I'm curious with heavy tackle like that, what does it feel like when the saffron cod hit the lure? Or hit the blubber? Can you really feel it? Because it seems like that's pretty stiff and pretty heavy.

You can feel them pretty good. I've been doing it all my life. So I know when they hit, and sometimes the fish will be down deep. They're just biting and they will catch on the hook, but they try to eat the bait and I can feel them doing that. That's the reason for jigging, you know, so you can hook on to them somehow and pull them up.

So where exactly are you making these holes in the ice relative to where the river is and where it meets the ocean? Where are you actually doing your fishing?

Usually where there's some kind of current in the fish are coming in. The fish come in from the ocean...from the Chukchi Sea, then they make their way to the waterways here to spawn and stuff like that along Kotzebue. And we try to intercept them while they're coming by and catch them.

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So this time of year is when it's happening. So when do you start fishing in like November?

usually start ice fishing well soon as it freezes up. We can get cod all year long. Some people get them in their nets or when they're rod and reeling and stuff like that. There's certain times of the years that we try to get them when they're full of eggs and stuff like that. Because a lot of people like myself, we prefer eggs, and we'll eat the rest of the fish, but eggs are kind of like the prize or delicacy.

on a fish that's about the size of what you showed us earlier, how many eggs can you actually get out of that? What's sort of the mass that we would be talking about?

About three inches long, about two inches wide. And they're all clumped together. And I don't know how many eggs are in that but we try to get that that big mass and it's yellow. It's a yellow mass and it tastes...well to me it tastes pretty good I mean I eat them raw, frozen.

Are there any other ways to prepare the eggs that folks do up there? I guess is it mostly just the frozen raw?

Well the people that I know that eat the cod, Inupiaq like me, we eat them raw. But a lot of people that boil I guess they eat the eggs while they're boiled but myself I like mine frozen raw dipped in seal oil, salt on top.

Ooh.

Sometimes Worcester sauce.

What does the seal oil taste like?

It's kind of hard to describe because it's not in your culture and I wouldn't know what to compare it within the store. It's oily like olive oil or vegetable oil but it tastes different. And seal oil is made from the blubber of the seal. But to do when you get seals is we cut up the seal, cut off the blubber, we cut the blubber into small chunks and then we put it in a container and we let it what we call render. We let the oil come out of the blubber and then we use the oil for dip and also storage. We store dried foods and roots and other stuff inside there for the winter.

So this is interesting with this fish. So it sounds like they're kind of along the coast right so I mean, they have a marine part to their lifecycle and then they're coming into spawn. Could you just kind of do...could you walk us through what these fish are doing throughout the year?

I don't know the complete life cycle. But I know that's when we start getting when the the fall time they're coming in from the ocean from the Chukchi Sea, and they're coming here to Kotzebue Sound to spawn and we start getting them soon as it's freeze until the summer but they're here all year long. And I read where an elder said it's best to catch him until like end of November or something then after November they start to not taste as good as fall time fish.

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Do you know anything about what else is eating tomcod? Is it an important species for for example, seals or other fish that you know of?

Well seals eat them. All the seals the tomcod and probably every other fish that comes through our channel there. Sometimes when we leave tomcods on the ice, foxes will come around grab a tomcod and bury it and come back for some more. And seagulls eat tomcods, ravens he tomcod. So they're are kind of a popular fish with animals and birds here in this region.

How many people might you see fishing for these tomcod during kind of peak season in the fall out on the ice, it's a pretty popular?

It's pretty popular, there's quite a few people that go ice fishing and maybe people just do it to just go have fun and get fishing. They won't waste and they'll give them away. I go out there because I've been doing it since the late '60s. And I've been fishing since I was a kid. So it's kind of like what I do some years I'll fishing quite a bit, some years I won't go at all.

Are there any kind of safety notes for people that would be pursuing this fish through the ice in terms of...I know you mentioned you fish overcurrent? Are there any tips you have for people that they should be aware of for fishing in the winter?

Yes. When adults take little children out there always watching them real carefully and talking to them. Tell them not to get too close to the hole because our holes can get so big that a child can slip through and they could go under there. And so the parents are always watching them.

When you're out there on the ice. Is there anything that you do to stay warm? In particular? Is it just a seal oil that warms you up? Or do you have any structures of any sort out there on the ice.

We have no structures out there. But I think about it when I'm outside getting near hypothermia standing on the ice. If I start getting too cold, I'll put everything down. I'll take a quick walk and get my hurt going, get my blood flowing and try to warm up that way.

So I'm curious on a good day of tomcod fishing or saffron cod fishing rather, how many fish do you typically bring in? And then what's your process for processing those fish after you've brought them up?

It varies from day to day. Some days, I won't get anything at all. But I'll stand there for like one hour or something just in case the might a school might come through some days I get one sometimes five sometimes 10. I was keeping pretty close track this fall when I was out fishing. The most I got was 194 in about two or three hours and another day 150. Another day 160 something. Sometimes I'll get 80, 60, 50, 100 and so I've gotten like over 1000 tomcod through the ice and out of all those I probably got about 10 Arctic cod, or those blue cods.

Frozen or do you leave them outside? Do you have a facility where you keep them maybe not a facility but some sort of area where you keep them outside?

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Outside because the temperatures below freezing a certain time of the year and I have some totes so it's keeping them inside there. We don't process them. We keep them that way. We're ready to eat them. They'll put the whole fish a bunch of them inside some pots and they'll start boiling them besides boiling or eating them raw. Some people will bake them in the oven, or some people will fry them. So there are different ways of cooking them and you can make them taste as good as you want to. During springtime when they give a lot of cod, what they'll do is they'll string them up side by side like this and they'll make a whole string. And they'll hang them up to dry outside so you can dry them. And I've given fish to people from lower 48. And from there's a lady from Haiti here, she likes the tomcod. But she cooked some and she'll fry them. So you can make them taste all kinds of different ways. And it's up to your imagination, how you want it taste.

If they taste anything like Pacific Cod, they're very good. It's a very mild meat. We catch Pacific Cod down here in my area, and I love that fish. It's a very tasty fish to eat. So be curious to try a tomcod someday.

I think you'll like it. It's probably not too different from Pacific cod. It's a white meat and has a real mild flavor, even other natives from the streets and like from upriver when they ate our tomcod, their lips will start to get tingling and itchy because they're allergic. So there's some Natives they can't eat the tomcod because of that. Other Natives can them boiled, it won't affect them. But some people have to cook them in people like myself, we can have it in the old way. I grew up on the coast, and I'm used to all this taking everything for strength here. Yeah, I was born and raised in Kotzebue, and I was right on the ocean side. I was born in a house here right on the ocean side. So it means the all the fish and seals and anything that's in our waters and the waterfall and everything and anything that we harvest.

Kotzebue is one of my favorite towns in Alaska, I've been up there, I don't know, maybe five times and it's a very nice town. Is there anything else you want to talk about in terms of these tomcod or saffron cods, Jimmy, that we've missed?

Yes. One important thing about getting a lot of cod and stuff like that. I can't eat over 1000 tomcod by myself so I do a lot of sharing. And then on top of that I make AC bags, you know the bags from the store and I'll fill up AC bags and I'll go give them out to people or on tone that somehow they can go fishing or anything but they still appreciate the fresh fish. I usually try to give to people that are older that can get around too well.

I bet they appreciate that.

can be stingy when you get something you got to you got to share. That's a big part of our culture and you got to share with the best of what you get. You can't try to share what you don't want yourself.

That's real nice. Well, thank you so much Jimmy, this was very interesting to learn all this stuff from you. So we really appreciate you coming on today and talking to us.

Okay.

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We hope everybody gets out there and enjoys all the fish.

Thanks for listening to fish of the week. My name is Katrina Liebich. And my co host is Guy Eroh. A production partner for this series of Citizen Racecar. Produced and story edited by Charlotte Moore. Production management by Gabriela Montaguin. Post production by Alex Brower. Fish of the Week! is a production of the US Fish and Wildlife Service Alaska Region Office of External Affairs. As the Service reflects on 150 years of fisheries conservation, we honor thank and celebrate the whole community, individuals tribes, the state of Alaska, our sister agencies, fish enthusiast scientists and others who have elevated our understanding and love as people and professionals of all the fish.