

FISH

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

Blackfish

Did you ever use fish traps?¹

I have no experience with them. I've never tried. The main time the Eskimos used traps was when fish were running into small creeks for spawning, or going through a small creek to a lake for the summer. When they were coming out, the people sometimes made traps out of willows. Those traps were used more in earlier times, before people had good fiber for making nets.

I think that during the time that we were up there, in some places they used traps to catch blackfish. In times when the water is low, the fish burrow in the mud.



Alaska Blackfish (*Dallia pectoralis*). For a discussion of the species, see http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=wildlifeneews.view_article&articles_id=207
Image: <http://forum.nanfa.org/index.php/topic/9281-alaska-blackfish/>

Would that be out on the tundra?

In some places. But in other places, they caught them in fairly large streams.

I remember visiting an Eskimo family in a village along the Kuskokwim in winter. There was a washtub full of blackfish on the floor, still wiggling.

Are there blackfish around Ambler? I never saw any, or even heard of any.

I was trying to think. They have them out at my place by the lake. In winter the muskrats make a pushup out on the lake. Sometimes the foxes will open that pushup and blackfish will come up in the hole, maybe because it has more oxygen or light. The fox would lay there and flip them out onto the ice, and eat them.

So it's possible to make a hole in a place like that, maybe a foot in diameter or whatever, and put a trap in there in such a way that the blackfish can come up into it but can't get back down. You'd take the trap out, dump it out, and stick it back in. That's one way to catch them.



Blackfish trap.

Image: landbridge, <http://www.flickr.com/photos/24538909@N02/6850605847/>

Another way is to have a dip net. When they come up, you push the net down and around them and catch whatever fish happen to be in the hole at that time.

Blackfish are a favorite of otters. I've seen them in some places where there's a grassy, kind of muddy bottom, I think. I've watched them lying on their backs out there, eating fish. Then they'd roll over, go down and get another fish, come back up on the surface, and lie there eating it. When they came up, they'd have the fish in their mouth just the same way for each fish. I figure the fish were trying to get away and tried to dig into the mud, but then the otter caught them.

One time, during spring break-up, I watched some otters diving off the broken ice and going down for fish. They'd climb out on the ice to eat them, rather than eating them while they were floating on their backs.

Did you eat blackfish?

No. They are edible, though, and many people do eat them. Ordinarily I don't like to fool with small fish.

Sheefish

The sheefish is God's gift to the Eskimos. I've heard them say that. It ordinarily takes at least a 6" mesh to catch a sheefish, but I've had them get caught in a whitefish net. The button next to the nose would get tangled in the mesh, and they couldn't back out.



Sheefish (*Stenodus leucichthys*). This photo and a discussion of the species can be found at <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=sheefish.main>

When sheefish begin to run, they school up in eddies or backwaters and wait for a rain or more fresh water. When the water rises, they move on up the river a ways. We used to fish in those pockets with a rod and reel. Sometimes we'd catch a big one.

I have a picture of Dolly and Gordon Stalder holding a stick with a big sheefish hanging from it. The stick was at the level of Dolly's chin and Gordon's shoulders, and the fish's tail was just touching the ground. That was a big fish for summertime.

One time I drove my boat to the big eddy just above your place to set a net for salmon. Arthur Douglas was checking his net nearby. I called to him, "Art! Bless my net. If I get fish, I'll bring you some!"

When I checked the net the next day, there were four big, beautiful sheefish in it. I took one to Art, and then took one to Maude Foxglove's. Bessie Douglas happened to be visiting her.

Maude immediately put a piece of cardboard on the floor so I could lay the fish down. Then she and Bessie got busy with their ulus. It was amazing how quickly they had the fish scaled and cut up. I have no doubt that pieces of it went to many other families that afternoon.

Maude was always appreciative of birds or anything you'd bring to her.

She certainly was. I once took her the skin of a beaver that had drowned in our net. I figured she'd use it in various sewing projects. Wouldn't you know it—she used it to make me a hat.



Oliver with sheefish in homemade boat.
Image courtesy Dorene Cameron Schiro

Mud Sharks (Burbot)

What about mud sharks?

There are several ways to get them. They're bottom feeders. If there's a little bit of current, you can tie a fairly strong line, 1/4" line, with a little wooden float on the end—not too much, just enough to catch the current and stretch the line downstream. You hang two, three, or four little short drop lines off the main line, with a large hook on each one. You bait them with meat or other fish or whatever you happen to have.

You shove that down through the water so that the tip of the pole is down in the mud. Sometimes you have to wedge it in the hole to keep it down until the hole freezes. The next day you pull it out and take your fish off.

The hooks are big, about an inch or 1-1/4 inches from the hook to the shank. I used to make my own out of wire that I could bend. Lighter weight coat hanger wire was good.

You take your pliers and make an eye at one end of the wire, and then bend it down and back up to form a hook that is a little deeper than it is wide. You bend the tip in a little, to make a little bit of a V. You bend that sharp tip out a little bit. Then you put a strip of fish or meat on the shank so that it completely covers the hook.

Those *tittaliks* have a big mouth and will swallow that. Even if they don't get it all the way down, that barb will catch, and you can pull it up.



Burbot (*Lota lota*). This photo and a discussion of the species can be found at <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=burbot.main>

You can also make larger holes and put your poles across the current, at an angle of 45 degrees or so. You put two to four droppers down from each pole. Each one has to be a little longer than the one below so that they all hang down pretty close to the bottom.

Some people go out at night, make a hole in the ice, sit on a caribou skin, and just sit and jig for them. They use two sticks, one in each hand. They tie a length of line on one stick, long enough to reach the bottom.



Jiggling for tomcod, Kotzebue.
Image: Lorene Cameron

When they feel the tug of a fish on the line, they lift the stick up. Let's say they're holding that stick in their left hand. With their right hand, they use the second stick to lift the line until it's at the same height as the first stick, but two or even three feet apart. Now the line is dangling from the stick in their right hand.

Keeping the line tight, they swing the stick in their left down and around the line, and lift the stick back up to where it was. Now the line is going around both sticks and is dangling from the first stick again. They repeat this process, keeping the loop of line taut between the two sticks, until they've lifted the fish out of the water. By doing it that way, they don't get their gloves wet. Then they take the fish off the hook, re-bait the hook, and drop it back down the hole.

I've never tried that way. I just don't have the patience for something like that, if there's any other way to do it. But I used to fish through the ice once in a while, mainly for pike.

I made a crude jigging stick by cutting off a little tree and then cutting it again about eight inches higher, just above a branch. I'd leave the branch sticking out about 18" or so. I'd put a nail up through the end of the branch and bend it back along the top of the branch, so that it would act as a gaff hook.

I also cut a notch into the bottom of the handle. It was 1 or 1-3/4" deep and was cut in from the side, pretty much perpendicular to the handle.

I tied a slip knot in some fish line and fastened it onto the tip of the branch, just past the hook. I secured it by taking a half-hitch around the branch below the hook. Then I wound the line onto the stick, going from the tip to the notch and back again.

I made the handle long enough that I could hold onto it between the notch and the base of the branch, and smoothed it off enough that I could spill the twine when I was ready to begin fishing.

[Pending: Drawing of this device, or a photo of a replica, showing use]

When I hooked a fish, I'd tip the handle up in such a way that the string was hanging between my hand and the notch. I'd tip the stick sideways, catch the line in the notch, and point the stick back down. With a little twist, I'd pick up the line in the fork at the shank of the nail, and tip the stick up again. I'd repeat these motions until I'd rewound the line and the fish was up to the surface.

Then I'd hold the line, or step on it, and use the nail at the end to gaff the fish and bring it out onto the ice. Without a gaff, I'd often lose the fish in the hole.

I never did use that under-ice stick after I moved to the lake.

Was that your own original design?

Yes. It saves a lot of tangle and mess, and you don't have to carry too many pieces of equipment.

Seining

Did you ever seine?

I didn't own a seine, but I have helped others.

How did they do it?

If the fish are coming upstream, you go up the river a ways. One person rows the boat out to pull the end of the net halfway across the crick or whatever. Someone stays on shore to handle the rope on the inshore end.

You don't let the current drift the net. The person in the boat rows downstream. You want to pull it through the water faster than the water is carrying it along, so that it has a belly in it. When you get down to the end of your stretch of suitable river, the person in the boat brings his end to the shore so that you have both ends on shore and a big belly out in the water, full of fish.

You take ahold of the bottom line and pull it ashore, managing the top line so that you keep a bag there with the fish in it. When you get done, you've got a net full of fish on the beach, flopping around and all tangled up. You take the fish out, remove the sticks and whatnot, and go back up and do it again.



Seine with small whitefish (least cisco) near Ambler, Alaska
Fish and image: Sasha Wik. Boat: Ole Wik

A few times I've gone down to the edge of the river in the fall time and seen the *qallusraq* migrating. They'd be swimming in a continuous band about a foot wide, right at the edge of the water. They'd scatter when they first saw me, but those coming behind would settle down.

I once counted them for a few minutes, and estimated that there were 10,000 going by my place every hour, four or five abreast. I've often thought that it wouldn't have been that hard to make a trap, using a seine. You could set it out maybe five feet from shore, parallel the beach, and wait until the fish settled down and started passing between the net and the shore. Then you could quietly pull the rope at the upstream end to close the trap, let the fish swim into it until they filled it up, and then close the lower end and pull the net out.

But you know how it is at that time of year. I never got around to it.



Qallusraq, or Least Cisco (*Coregonus sardinella*), with centimeter ruler.
Image and discussion: <http://www.fishbase.org/summary/2678>

Aged Fish

The Eskimos eat fish that is quite ripe. In fact they rather like it when it's pretty strong. They call it something like "oolyak".

In the springtime, they prefer it frozen, but they'll eat it fairly ripe when it's thawed out. If it hasn't gotten much warmer than just thawing, they seem not to worry about it. I've eaten quite a bit of that too, and never had any trouble with it.

Did you ever eat salmon heads that had been buried and had fermented?

No, only fresh ones.

Mark Cleveland told me that Olive once got sick after eating some. After that, they never tried them again.²

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) From Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fermented_fish:

Alaska has witnessed a steady increase of cases of botulism since 1985. It has more cases of botulism than any other state in the United States of America. This is caused by the traditional Eskimo practice of allowing animal products such as whole fish, fish heads, walrus, sea lion, and whale flippers, beaver tails, seal oil, birds, etc., to ferment for an extended period of time before being consumed.

The risk is exacerbated when a plastic container is used for this purpose instead of the old-fashioned, traditional method, a grass-lined hole, as the

botulinum bacteria thrive in the anaerobic conditions created by the air-tight enclosure in plastic.