

Patrick Olson Goes From Local Favorite to National Celebrity



Patrick posing for a photo at the Valdez Small Boat Harbor. Photo by Sharon Crisp

By Sharon Crisp

Patrick Joseph Olson (Pat) has become somewhat of a celebrity for a unique skill that he's mastered over the years. He's been called the 'Fastest Fish Filleter in the West'. We locals like to think it might even be the world.

Patrick Joseph Olson was born in Cordova, Alaska in 1964, and moved to Valdez with his mother and father and 12 siblings before he was a year old.

Pat is a graduate of Valdez High School. After graduation, and considerable encouragement from Mr. Widmer, one of Pat's teachers, he headed off to Tempe, Arizona to attend draftsman school. He graduated in December of 1988 and returned home to Valdez and began working. The following year, was the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill. Pat, like so many others, worked hard during the oil spill. He worked at night for the oil companies and began cleaning fish for tourists during the day and on weekends.

Pat remembers getting his start from Claire, an elderly woman from Iowa. He began by watching her fillet her own fish. Soon, he couldn't take it anymore as he felt she was butchering them. He wanted to see her take more of the meat home with her. Pat showed her what he could do and once she saw him, she knew he had talent. She asked him to fillet her fish for her. He did for the rest of that summer, and continued every summer for the next seven years.

Claire isn't the only person Pat remembers from over the years. He has met many interesting people from all over the world, including India, Russia, China, and Korea. He has filleted fish for the son of Sam Walton, founder of Walmart, and the crew of Ice Road Truckers.

One of his most memorable came 17 years after he graduated from draftsman school. Pat met the creator/developer of the Mountain Cascade Auto Cad program, the new program he was trained how to use while in school. Student

became teacher as Pat taught him how to properly fillet fish to be efficient and save as much meat as possible.

Pat was 9-10 years old when his father taught him how to clean and fillet fish. Pat's family would get huge fish totes full of pink salmon to dry. They all had to be cleaned and filleted, so Pat's father, Helmer Olson, put his children to work helping. His father would finish six fish in the time it took Pat to finish one. He remembers an expression his Dad used frequently, "I don't pay you to stand around and talk, I pay you to fillet fish." It wasn't until years later, though, that Pat perfected his filleting technique.

In 1996, Pat's father passed away. Ironically, this was also the year that Pat perfected his filleting skills. Pat recalls one day, he and his friend John Boone were down at the docks. Pat noticed how John filleted his fish. They discussed their techniques and both came to the same realization at the same time. They realized the secret to a perfectly filleted fish is that you must start on the side opposite the hand you use. If you are right handed, you need to start by cleaning the left side of the fish first. In addition, Pat says, "you should never touch the same place twice. It only takes one clean cut."

The following summer, in 1997, Pat decided to clean fish for visitors full-time during the summer months and started his own business, A-1 Fish Fillet. When he opened his business, he charged \$1 per salmon and \$2.50 per halibut. Pat still charges these prices today, making it an unbeatable deal, especially when you're tired after a long day of fishing.

You will find Pat at the fish cleaning stations at the Small Boat Harbor from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily, and in all kinds of weather, during silver salmon season. Pat fillets an average of 20,000 silver salmon each summer, with a summer best of 31,728. Pat recalls his record day,



Left: Pat Olson filleting a silver salmon at the fish cleaning stations at the Small Boat Harbor. Below: Pat Olson jokingly filleted a herring for the crowd.

Bottom: Pat wearing the Sea Otter coat he sewed in 2003-2004 and holding a teddy bear that he made more recently.

Photos by Sharon Crisp

filleting 1,578 silver salmon, on August 20, 2005. He also fillets red and pink salmon, rockfish, black bass, ling and pacific cod, and halibut.

With time, lots of practice, and a desire to make more money, Pat began to increase his speed. Pat now averages only 10 seconds per salmon and has perfectly filleted a silver salmon in an amazing 3.4 seconds. This speed has given him his 'Fastest in the West' title and caused others to take note.

In recent years, Pat has gone from a local favorite to a National celebrity. He has been covered in the *New York Times*, and the *Philadelphia Times*, *Alaska.com*, *Alaska Daily News*, *American Trails*, and on the *History*, *Discover*, and *Learning Channels*. Pat was also covered multiple times in *Trailer Life Magazine* and even made #34 out of their "Top 50 Reasons to Celebrate Alaska's 50th Anniversary" list in 2009. Pat is also featured in the newly released *Valdez Coloring Book* and has other projects currently in the works.

When asked how long he thinks he'll continue doing this, he says, "until the day I die or the day my body won't let me do it anymore." When asked what the most difficult thing about his job is, he responded, "the long hours."

But, the long hours spent filleting fish in the summer, afford him the luxury of working only part-time or not at all during the winter and allow him to spend time traveling and doing the things he loves. Pat heads South every fall to visit family and attends events like Hot August Nights, in Reno, NV, the Best of the West Rib Cook-Off, and the NCAA Basketball Tournament in the spring.

Pat also uses his time in the winter months to sew. He has become an expert fur sewer. Taught by his friend, John Boone 12 years ago, Pat now knows the entire process from cutting the fur skins, to stretching them, to the various stitches used. In 2003-2004, Pat sewed his own fur coat. It took 80 hours of work. Pat works mostly with sea otter pelts, but also does some work with seal.

He makes hats, coats, bball caps, mukluks, slippers, baby slippers, and even teddy bears. He makes items for gifts but will also make items for sale upon request. Pat is also able to repair damage done to existing fur items.

Pat loves what he does and his customers love him. Many times throughout the summer you will find Pat surrounded by a crowd of visitors who enjoy watching his amazing talent but also



enjoy his magnetic personality. He laughs as he tells me his favorite responses to common questions. When asked "what kind of fish is that", he comments, "a dead one." When visitors inquire about the best kind of fish, Pat offers, "the best fish is a free fish." ■