

In  
profile

# Gail's **force**

By Sierra Golden

Southeast skipper Hollis Jennings is breaking the wheelhouse mold on her seiner Natalie Gail

**D**espite the fact that women make up 47 percent of the work force in America, the balance in commercial fisheries still tips heavily toward the male contingent. This is especially true when it comes to the wheelhouse. For example, the South-



Skipper Hollis Jennings sets up the deck as the purse line comes aboard off Dall Island in the hunt for Southeast Alaska salmon on her 57-foot seiner Natalie Gail.



east Alaska salmon seine fishery is known as a gentlemen's fishery. Even most of the old-timers in Southeast can't remember the last time a woman skippered a seine boat there — that is, until summer 2012 when Hollis Jennings climbed into the wheelhouse of the 57-foot Natalie Gail.

In the spring of 2012, Jennings,

FEODOR POPOV PHOTOS

Hollis Jennings keeps an eye on her set during the 2012 summer salmon season near Craig, Alaska.



then 28, bought a wood McKay Cormack out of Canada, assisted in rebuilding her main engine (a Caterpillar 343) and stern, purchased a permit, hired a crew, and ran from Seattle to Ketchikan. By July 2012, she was catching chum salmon in Kendrick Bay at the southern tip of

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Southeast Alaska.

Jennings is a Lexington, Ky., native who can kill fish, tell a bunch of dirty boys what to do, and look good doing it. One can't help but wonder how she got the nerve to do what most guys don't have the guts or wherewithal to do: buy and run her own seine boat.

As I board the Natalie Gail, a diver splashes overboard to check the rudder for stray net. Soon, she, her diver, and her four-man crew settle onto the blue bench seat curving around the galley table. Her hands twist and coil her long strawberry blonde hair. A pot of coffee steams on the table. Hollis is in her element, bullshitting with the boys, swapping stories, laughing, reminiscing and dreaming.

Since starting her fisherchick career in 2006, Jennings has worked for many

The Natalie Gail tied up in Craig, Alaska, for some minor net repairs.



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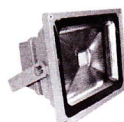
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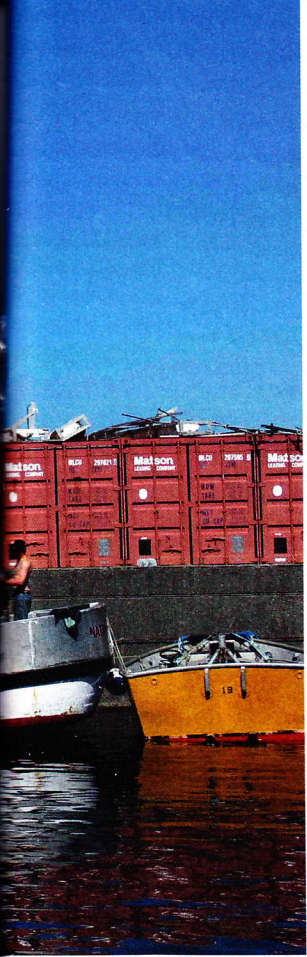


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SIERRA GOLDEN

different skippers in several seine fisheries, including salmon, squid and sardines. In summer 2011, she crewed on Dave Jones' boat Zealot out of Ketchikan. That season, three women — Jennings, Amy Wadley and Brooke Bourne — made up Jones' deck crew. Jennings admits she was nervous to work with an all woman deck crew, but added that it went off without a hitch.

"All the girls I've fished with, you become like sisters," she says.

Jones came to appreciate the "hen party," and Jennings calls the trio the most seamless, team-oriented crew she has ever worked with. "You don't need guys when you have hydraulics," she says simply. The sentiment is echoed by several guys in the kaffeeklatsch. "Work smart, not hard," they concur.

Jennings was introduced to fishing while traveling in Mexico, and after her first job fishing

Southeast on the seiner Quandary in 2006, she left behind life as a VW mechanic in Kentucky. "After my first year, I knew," Jennings says. Being a mechanic taught her not to be afraid to take things apart. Usually, she says, you'll find a piece that is cracked or broken. Then, you can take it to a shop and ask for one of these.

"Just make it up as you go and hope," Jennings says. "That's what everybody does, it seems like. Talking to other skippers always makes me feel better. It's like it's normal, 'Oh

OK, you have a leak like that, too? Great. The mast is supposed to wiggle like that? It's fine."

Her spirit has also rubbed off on her crew. They seem happy to learn their way through everything from piling gear to fixing the clogged coffee maker that delayed our next pot.

As she notes, it's partly the "good people" that make seining so enjoyable. "I got so much help from so many people. From pep talks to a free

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— Hollis Jennings  
SOUTHEAST ALASKA SEINE SKIPPER



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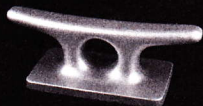
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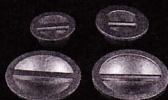
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boom, to teaching me a new set... I could not have done this without the support of the [Southeast] fleet."

Jennings fits in perfectly. Despite a summer fueled by a "stress diet of coffee and cigarettes," she welcomes friends onto her boat, and it is clear that someday she will pass her growing knowledge along to another skipper. She explains, "The fleet's been great obviously, but I don't think that's because I'm a girl... It's because everyone's had to [be a first-year skipper], and it kind of sucks."

She illustrates the willingness of the fleet to support her and each other with a story from Dave Jones. After Jennings experienced several problems with web caught in the rudder, Jones told Jennings that when he began running his own boat, a seasoned skipper helped him retrieve his net from a dangerous situation.

The next opening, at the same set, the same skipper helped him retrieve his net again. In the bar later, the older skipper approached Jones and requested that he never ask for help with his net again — but then proceeded to explain all the secret tricks to making that particular set, ensuring that Jones would never need his help there again.

This sense of shared suffering is as old as Alaska commercial fishing. Hollis knows she owes the success of her first year to being fully engaged with the community of fishermen.

My father, also a skipper in Southeast, keeps a little scrap of paper in his wheelhouse. It says: "The charm of fishing is that it is the pursuit of what is elusive, but attainable. A perpetual series of occasions for hope."

There is a reason fishing is called fishing and not catching. It's not the catching that's exciting, but the occasion for hope. The fishing is what makes our work challenging yet enjoyable. But that's also the part that requires smarts, guts and attitude from any person — male or female — who wants to be a skipper. NF

*Sierra Golden is a seiner deckhand and freelance writer serving as the Island Institute Resident Fellow in Sitka, Alaska.*