

# BACKCOUNTRY BEYOND THE HORIZON

## Kayak Shark Fishing off Long Island, New York Story and Images by Ben Yeager

I SAT ON A DOUBLE KAYAK with my friend Joe Boy, our eyes focused on the bunker pods out to sea and the sharks I insisted were under them. I couldn't help but glance back at the lifeguard's son on the beach, maybe 10 years old, brokenheartedly watching us paddle away. His father had told me fishing was his life, but I already knew that.

It had been mine too when I was that age: wanting nothing more than to fish, to hook some powerful leviathan that would take me for a ride. Unfortunately for him, today was not his day. He didn't understand yet that fishing is a lifelong progression on which you build your knowledge and your arsenal of equipment and habits and ideas, until you actually know what you are doing. For many it takes an entire lifetime.

My fascination began in earnest when my family went on vacation to the Bahamas. I spent hours sitting with my bowl cut and khaki shorts by the edge of the pier, catching snapper after snapper on a flimsy plastic hand line rig called a Cuban Yoyo.

I'd gasp in awe every time a nurse shark glided by. So I live-lined one of my tiny snappers, and got hooked for life when I felt that powerful tug. The nurse always snapped the line immediately, but I never intended to land it.

Since then, I slip into episodes of fishing monomania just as easily as other people get excessively competitive over a pickup basketball game. I still haven't experienced the real deal, say, mako fishing or spearing a giant tuna in blue water. That's why I didn't feel bad for the kid. When it comes to fishing, you don't always get what you want.

The bow of the kayak rode low in the water under Joe Boy's weight. "Joe Boy" is one of those childhood nicknames that just stick. But now he's the size of a pro linebacker, so it seems ironic; he should be Joe Man. We paddled hard out to sea, searching for the thousands of Atlantic menhaden discoloring the water and breaking the surface in intermittent leaps. Sometimes they breach all at once with a great whoosh that spikes my blood pressure.

That means something is chasing them.

As we paddled out, the cottages of Fire Island, a barrier off of New York's Long Island, got smaller and smaller. It made sense we didn't take the lifeguard's son with us. His father would freak out when our orange kayak disappeared beyond the horizon. I felt relieved as the throngs of July beachgoers sank into the sea, leaving an enveloping silence that emphasized our remoteness. My relief turned to a jittery vertigo, as if we'd left a familiar world for a strange one where nobody could help us. We could see for three or four miles to the horizon line, but not another soul.

I spotted the thrashing turbulence of agitated bunker, and we settled the kayak upwind of them. Thousands of fish swirled beneath us in organized circles with their mouths open, covering a 50-foot stretch. I didn't care about anything else but what might be underneath the baitfish. I sent a treble hook out into the fray and ripped it back to the boat until I felt weight and wiggle on the other end, the pressure of a snagged bunker.

I stuck the bait on the new Cuban Yoyo reflective of my 24-year-old self: a sturdy acrylic spool with 150-pound test (so it wouldn't break or tangle), and two 60-pound steel leaders attached to one weighted treble. I hooked him through the upper lip, and set him back into the bait ball.

After a violent tug, I pulled up an empty hook. We lost fish after fish with no real evidence that anything was eating them. Bunker flesh is soft, like clay, and doesn't stay hooked. I snagged another bunker. The school dove and didn't resurface. The sea was like a mirror, a glaring desert and the air a vacuum. We lounged languidly, the line clasped gently in my fingers. I felt the fish dancing on the other end. Joe shot me skeptical looks.

A sleek brown blur, barely visible, glided beneath the boat. Joe Boy perked up. The shark came right up to the kayak. It swayed confidently, and then disappeared. Then, a series of vicious pulls followed by an extended one. The free line piled on my waist began to peel out. Line looped around my fingers. I yelped in pain,

and out of concern, Joe Boy let out a string of panicked obscenities.

I freed my fingers and the fish ran, taking out most of the 200 yards of line. Like a puppeteer, I slowly worked it back in. It rapidly changed direction several times and towed the kayak toward shore. When it was right beneath us but not yet visible, I felt a pang of anticipation, an uncertainty that any fisherman can understand.

The blacktip came gleaming into view. "It's a shark! It's a shark!" I said. It was about five feet long, with a metallic brown sheen. Then I realized we had no camera. This was all pretty novel to me at the time, and the little boy inside took over: We needed a photo as proof. Joe Boy looked at me, at his house on the shoreline, and then at me again.

"Are you serious?"

I kept the shark by the kayak, and Joe Boy, the ox, paddled us back to shore. The shark swam alongside. Before long we were within swimming distance, and saw a tiny, expectant figure standing on the beach. It was the lifeguard's son.

"Catch anything?"

I gestured to the thrashing shark next to our kayak. The boy's mouth hung open. I told Joe that one of us needed to jump overboard, swim to shore, get the camera from Joe's house on the beach, and come back out on a stand-up paddleboard. I gave him the offer: hold the shark and remove the hook, or swim for the camera.

"Are you kidding me, Ben?" He said with a fiery indignation. "No." He dove over the side of the kayak, swimming exaggerated strokes with his long arms toward shore. I half-expected the shark to lunge at him.

I made courteous eye contact with the lifeguard's son and got my pliers out for when Joe came back. When Joe returned, we took our photo, and I pulled out the hook. The shark blasted out to sea like a rocket. The whole ordeal didn't take more than three minutes, and the shark never left the water. The lifeguard's son and I looked at each other reverently, acknowledging the milestone that had just passed.

Over the next month, I began to love that isolation and spent every free moment on the kayak. My family began to think I

was an oddball for spending entire weekends far enough out to see the curvature of the island, where the occasional humpback whale, huge, gasping beasts, dove beneath me. "Out there" is a place for meditation, a watery backcountry where I can see the distant melee of a Long Island summer weekend – crowds, lifeguard chairs, volleyball games, beach umbrellas – but hear nothing. I'm only 40 miles from Manhattan, but sitting atop a swirling ball of thousands of fish under assault by sharks and whales, I feel very much a part of the food chain. The malaise of a life spent in concrete geometry evaporates. Nothing cleanses the mind and staves off the de-

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mons like attention only on the sensation at your fingertips – and the expectation that you never really know what might surface in front of you. For that reason, I upgraded to a trolling rod.

My family's – and the community's – concern grew along with my new obsession. "You go out how far exactly?" "What if it tips you over?" "Has Ben gone off the reservation?" My mother and I debated for hours. She would ask sarcastically: "Remind me how what you're doing isn't dangerous, again?" I couldn't come up with a satisfactory answer for her.

On a calm, overcast day around Labor Day, the sea a gelatinous gray, I caught a bluefish on my first cast and hooked it up through the nostril. It jumped three times as I towed it out to sea until the water turned the kind of cosmic blue in which big things can swim beneath you undetected. Out to sea again, where your kayak is your entire world, where you are an insect clinging to a stick.

I sat for hours with the fish twitching deep below, hearing nothing but water lapping against the boat and the wind whistling through the braided line like an eerie wind chime. Finally, I felt that something had taken interest in the bluefish. A series of little tugs, then the rod tip dipped deep

into the water with that wonderful buzzing sound of drag. You don't get that on the hand line. The force pulled the kayak broadside.

We fought for an hour. I let it run and run. Finally the creature emerged, the brown blur. When I brought it up, it thrashed, slapped, and then sounded again. The line peeled away. It was another 10 minutes to bring it back to the kayak. It was a sandbar shark. Then I measured it: a little more than double my 36 inch leader, about seven feet, nearly three quarters the length of the 12-foot kayak. I marveled at its girth, its broad head, big eyes and steep dorsal fin. The hook hung in its mouth like a lip piercing, and the shark rocked to and fro as if hydraulic. I tried to remove the hook with a pair of pliers, but the shark's jaws snapped loudly like a bear trap. I used the kayak paddle to wedge into the hook and pop it out. The shark lurched away.

There was no photographic evidence this time; over the course of the summer I'd stopped caring. As I paddled slowly back to shore, self-satisfied, I saw the lifeguard's son on the beach. I yard-saled in the surf, and he helped me collect my gear.

"Did you catch anything?" he asked, trying to control his excitement.

"No," I said. "Just a bluefish."

I don't know why I didn't tell him about the shark. Maybe I didn't want him to feel left out again. More likely, I didn't want him to think it was easy. I didn't want him to think that when you're older you can always go fishing, always catch something, and that your friends and family will always understand. I wanted him to think that even 15 years from now, sometimes he won't catch anything, or his father or mother or girlfriend won't let him go out, or his tackle will break, or he'll have school or work, or the weather won't cooperate. Although I have yet to get a trophy shark, maybe I'll have my day. And the lifeguard's son will have his. 🐾

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