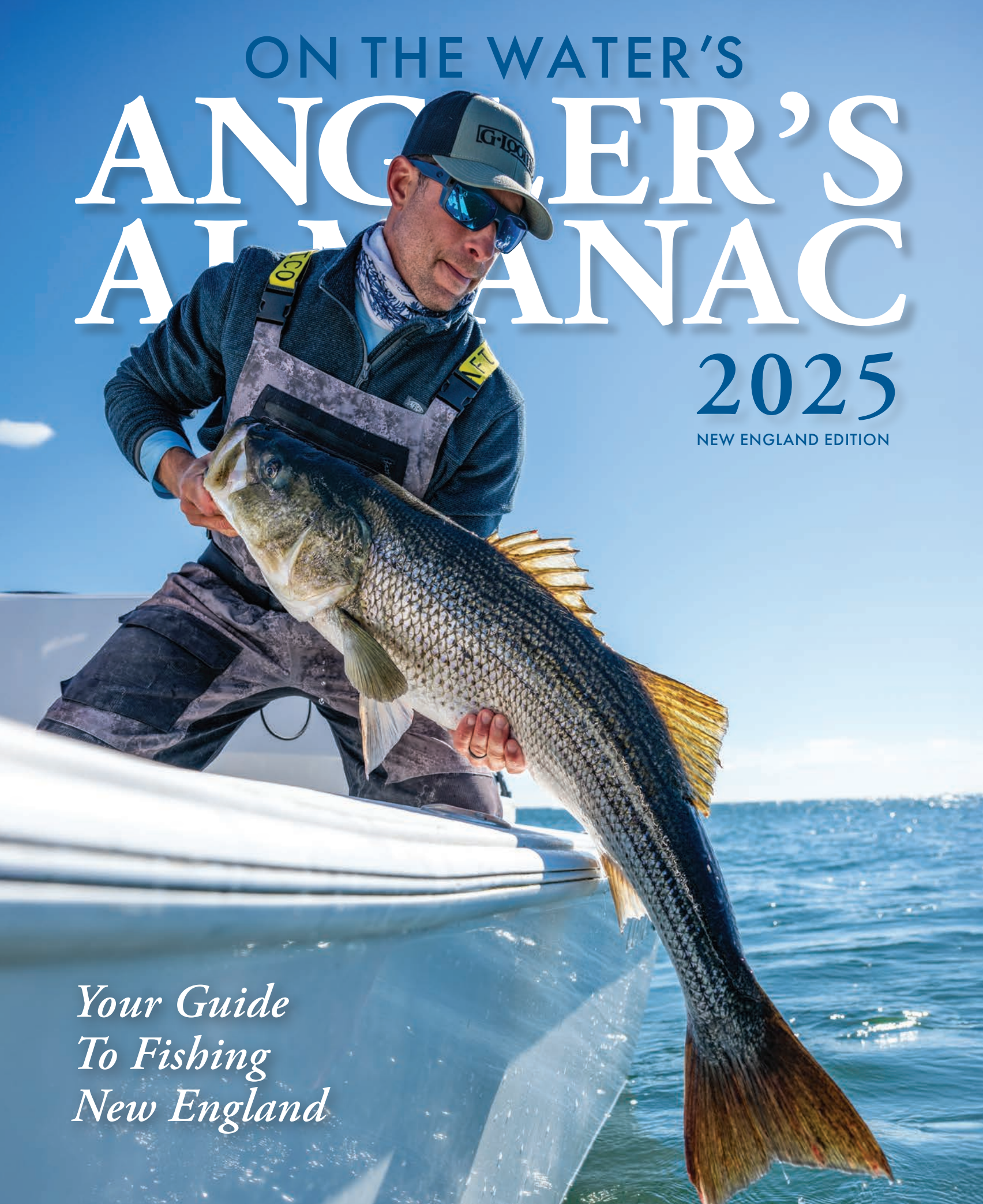
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ANGLER'S ALMANAC

2025

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I Hope This Finds You Well…

As a polite email opener, "I hope this finds you well," is so ubiquitous that most of us plunge right past it without ever considering if the email had, in fact, found us well. In most cases, an email finds its recipient well *enough*, but when I'm most well, I'm doing something other than scrolling through my inbox.

A magazine, however, seems more likely to find its recipients well, and I hope this one does. I hope this magazine finds you in a tackle shop where you're already stocking up for the coming striper season. I hope this magazine finds you at a sportsman show—after you've bought your specialty jerky and before you sit in on the seminar you couldn't miss. If you subscribe, I hope this magazine finds you at your mailbox on one of those gray December afternoons so it can help you daydream of bright June mornings.

My first issue of *On The Water* found me in Grumpy's Tackle in Seaside Park, New Jersey. I'd just finished my junior year of college, and was kicking off the summer with a marathon surfcasting trip at Island Beach State Park. I'd stopped in Grumpy's for surf clams, pyramid sinkers, and fresh intel when I saw the magazine on the counter. I grabbed a copy, and remember reading through it in my driver's seat, with the window down while watching two sand-spiked rods at the edge of a gentle late-May surf. That magazine had, indeed, found me well.

Our goal with every issue of *On The Water* is to provide information and inspiration to anglers in the Northeast. We do it with the help of the most passionate fishermen who ply these waters, the most talented photographers in the fishing community, and the most skilled outdoor writers keeping the written fish story vibrant and exciting. We do it eight times a year and would love it if you'd subscribe so that you will receive every issue throughout the entire fishing season. I promise this will be the only one that begins with "I hope this finds you well."

- Jimmy Fee, Editor

PUBLISHER
Chris Megan
cjm@onthewater.com

EDITORIAL
Kevin Blinkoff, Editor-In-Chief
kevin@onthewater.com
Jimmy Fee, Editor
jimmy@onthewater.com
Matt Haeffner, Assistant Editor
mhaeffner@onthewater.com

DESIGN & PRODUCTION
Andy Nabreski, Design Manager
andy@onthewater.com
Ed Giordano, Digital Content Editor
egiordano@onthewater.com
Patrick Washburn, Senior Designer
pwashburn@onthewater.com

VIDEO
Alex Blackwell, Creative Director
ablackwell@onthewater.com
Adam Eldridge, Video Production Manager
adam@onthewater.com
Liam O'Neill, Video Specialist
liam@onthewater.com
Robbie Tartaglia, Digital Content Coordinator
robbie@onthewater.com

CIRCULATION (SUBSCRIPTIONS)
Bill Dean, Circulation Manager
bdean@onthewater.com ext. 233
Nick Cancelliere, Audience Development Coordinator
ncancelliere@onthewater.com

BUSINESS
Valerie Watts, Business Manager, In-House Editor
val@onthewater.com
Matt Ryan, Director E-Commerce & Retail Division
mryan@onthewater.com

SALES & MARKETING CONSULTANTS
Anthony DeiCicchi, Director of Sales
anthony@onthewater.com • 508-944-5733
Bob Potter, New England North Region
bob@onthewater.com • 508-776-5502
Robin Davis-Minichino - Mid-Atlantic Region
robin@onthewater.com• 609-204-4060
Joe D'Onofrio – Business Development, Chesapeake Region
joed@onthewater.com • 201-906-2586

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circulation@onthewater.com
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Submissions:
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THE FISHING SCENE

Survivors

Every striped bass you catch has already defied the odds. First, as an egg, it had to be deposited in the ideal conditions at exactly the right time. Had the water been too high, it would have washed too far downstream; too low, and it would have sunk to the bottom and suffocated under silt. Had it hatched too soon, the larval fish would have found no plankton on which to feed; too late, and it would have been outcompeted by the larger, stronger larvae that hatched earlier.

If it then avoided predators like bluefish, birds, blue crabs, and blue catfish, it eventually grew large enough that its quiet, protected nursery waters no longer provided enough food. So, the fish took to the ocean, where, as it traced the outline of the Northeast coast, the threats escalated into sharks and seals, hooks and nets. Each time the striper made this journey, north in the spring and south in the fall, it faced greater dangers as predator populations grew and the ranks of its school shrank against the Atlantic's battle of attrition.

Then, by some minor miracle, you placed yourself in the path of the striper's migration, and you were given the chance to marvel at its might and its will to survive. Above all, striped bass are survivors, but they still need our help, first with gentle handling when caught and released, and next by sharing our voices with the fishery's managers on how we'd like to see these fish given a greater chance to continue defying the odds.

Photo by John Fallon







ROBBIE TARTAGLIA

The fly-fishing experience is more fun when you catch a bass on one of your own flies.

Why Tie Flies?

BY PETE BARRETT

Someone told me I'd save a lot of money tying my own flies. That was a fib, though it was said with good intentions, and it missed the point. Tying flies isn't really about saving a few bucks. It has much more to do with making an angler a better fly fisherman. The fly-tying task is a pleasant chore to help pass a rainy evening (or the winter), and has value beyond the cost of the vise, tools, hooks, feathers, hair, and other materials that all tyers accumulate. As an added bonus, tying flies is supported by wonderful friends and characters that add enormously to the overall fly-fishing experience.

An upside is that there is a big advantage to creating flies that match the natural bait or insect hatch where you locally fish. Home-tied flies are generally significantly more durable than factory-tied ones and can take a lot more abuse from raspy-toothed striped bass and largemouth bass. Even sharp-toothed chewers like bluefish and pickerel do less damage to fly wraps protected by resin or acrylic coatings. Adding a dab of Hard As Nails or CA glue at every step of the process adds enormously to a fly's durability.

Other important advantages include the ability to infinitely customize your selection of fly patterns as to size, color, length, fullness or sparseness, flashy or plain, and to vary the size and choice of hooks. In total, all these factors come into play and give the fly-tyer a huge advantage over the angler who buys factory-made flies.

Take a Clouser, for instance. My Clouser box has about two dozen flies in it. Some are tied bushy in chartreuse for better visibility in dirty water; others are sparsely tied in olive and white for clear water; some are long and thin like a sand eel; still others are short, more like an anchovy. A few have the eye at mid-hook while others are tied with the dumbbell eyes lashed closer to the hook eye for a more pronounced up-and-down action.

Of course, you can customize any fly. You can make them full like a shaving brush or very lean and sparse. You can lash in lots of



Add a drop of glue at every tying stage for a more durable fly. This well-chewed Clouser, tied by the author, was still fishable after catching several schoolie striped bass.

tinsel for a glitzy appearance that bluefish relish or mute the presentation to appeal to stripers with only two or three flash strips. Controlling the length, fullness, amount of flash, and even the materials themselves, such as bucktail versus nylon hair versus ostrich herl or rabbit strips, are potential choices.

You can also choose hooks that are more fly-fisherman friendly than what's shown in a book's tying instructions. While many textbooks and online videos call for a certain hook size, going to a smaller hook often gets more hook-ups and allows the fly to work with a more lifelike presentation. I look for hooks with large eyes because it's easier to re-tie a knot to the fly when fishing at night. The eye of an Owner AKI 5170 or AKI Light 4170, a traditional Eagle Claw 254 or 253, or Mustad's 34007 are a lot friendlier for those of us who need "cheaters" to tie the fly to the bite tippet.

If you're just starting out, the task of choosing tying equipment and supplies can seem daunting, so a visit to a local fly-fishing club or a local fly-fishing tackle shop is a good idea to check out what's required and the cost of the equipment, tools, and materials. Resist the temptation to buy everything "right now." Shopping around is more about being sure what you want to purchase rather than getting the best price possible. You might save a few bucks on an impulse buy that sounds fantastic today, but next month, you may find that it doesn't really fit your needs or lacks quality. A visit or two at a local fly club will identify the specific tools necessary to tie the most fish-catching flies for the local area where you fish. Back that up with more information from a local tackle shop.

Veteran tyers often suggest starting simple. You don't need every tool, every color feather or bucktail, or every possible hook. You can start with the basics of black, white, and maybe chartreuse threads. All the other stuff like various stick-on eyes, an extensive hook selection, special coatings and curing lights, multiple scissor options, weights, tool stand, and tying desk aren't needed in the beginning. While veteran tyers often have dedicated work spaces, a kitchen table or basement workbench are just fine.

At the heart of the fly-tying equipment list is a vice, which is also the most expensive tool in a fly-tyer's workshop. Bargain-basement vises offer tempting prices, but some of them lack long-lasting quality. Some cheap vices have soft metal jaws that may not hold a hook securely over time. Without question, it makes better economic sense to put your money toward the purchase of a basic but better-quality vise.

Buying a used vise is an alternative that can save a lot of money. Fly shops often

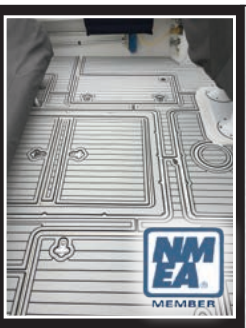


Brad Buzzy of Buzfly.com *(left)* hosts a fly-tying session and gives expert fly-tying advice. Most clubs and fly shops offer hands-on tying instruction and classes during the winter.

have great prices on trade-ins from customers replacing a basic vise with something more sophisticated. Many fly clubs host annual flea markets where you can find a bargain without sacrificing quality. A starter vise with fewer whistles and bells, like Renzetti's Apprentice vise, costs around $150, and basic vises from HRH, Peak, and Griffin cost about $50 more than that. Not only are the prices reasonable, but these basic vises will last for years.

It's also a good idea to get opinions from experienced tyers at fly-club meetings, from instructors at tackle shops, or from tying classes. Check out the websites of quality manufacturers, then visit your local fly shop to see a vise in person and check out how it feels. Is it big or small, high or low, and do the controls work for you? Some fly shops have vises and tying tools for sale at popular winter fly-fishing shows scheduled for New England, New Jersey, Long Island, and the mid-Atlantic areas. Several shops give a discount if you purchase the vise and basic tools at the show, or they might throw in a complimentary tying lesson. They want your business and will often go to considerable lengths to make you a happy customer.

Nothing beats personal tutoring and guidance to build a good foundation of tying skills. For instance, Paul McCain at River Bay Outfitters on Long Island offers in-person tying classes at the shop and unique Zoom online classes where you tie at home, backed up with personal online instruction from Paul himself. River Bay provides a special package of materials that's mailed to you containing



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FLY-TYING CLASSES:

Search online for the following fly clubs and their meeting schedules, along with winter and spring fly-tying sessions. Some are free, some charge a small fee, others have online video fly-tying libraries, though all are entertaining and welcoming to newcomers and experienced tyers.

Connecticut
Connecticut Fly Fisherman's Association

Delaware
Saltwater Fly Anglers of Delaware

Massachusetts
New England Saltwater Fly Rodders, Crossroads Anglers Fly Fishing Club, South Shore Fly Casters

New Jersey
Atlantic Salt Water Flyrodders, Bayshore Saltwater Flyrodders, Coastal Flyrodders, South Jersey Fly Casters

New York
Long Island Flyrodders, Salty Flyrodders of New York

Rhode Island
Rhody Flyrodders

Virginia
Virginia Coastal Fly Rodders

everything required to tie the featured fly.

There are several excellent books that provide step-by-step directions and detailed tying recipes for popular flies—everything from coastal striped bass, weakfish and bluefish, and pond-dwelling panfish and bass. The internet is another valuable source for fly-tying information. While I find a book much handier as a reference, nothing beats a live-action video to show the steps, hand motions, and tying techniques that professional tyers use to create neat, effective flies. Watching how an accomplished tyer wraps the threads to secure the materials, shapes the fly, and shows a step-by-step sequence can significantly benefit both experienced and newbie tyers.

One of the best is Tim Flagler at Tightlines Productions. He's filmed over 700 entertaining and educational videos that include specific fly patterns and close-ups of the fly-tying sequences to make them. Tim covers sweetwater and salty fly patterns, and his library also includes knot-tying tips and techniques.

A winter visit to a local Trout Unlimited chapter meeting or a salty fly club is always rewarding. Most clubs host tying clinics or classes; some have fly-tying speakers with special presentations and many offer in-club swap meets to buy and sell tying equipment and fly tackle. Information about TU chapters is available online. Fly Fishers International is another great source of fly-tying information, with an extensive library of online tying videos and a state-by-state list of their numerous supporting clubs, both fresh and salt, that offer local classes and support.

So, whether you're a new tyer ready to learn the basics or a veteran looking to learn about new patterns you haven't tried yet, there's plenty of hands-on personal instruction available through clubs, fly shops, and friends. Those can be backed up with excellent books, detailed YouTube videos, and other online sources. If you're not yet tying your own flies, this winter is a great time to start. Choose a simple pattern with only a few tying steps. Learning to tie a fly with 68 steps is tedious and not much fun, while an hour at the vise tying a simple fly will melt away quickly. It's creative and fun, relaxing, and distracting. For some tyers, it's about clearing their heads from the day-to-day stress of business, politics, commuting, or lousy weather. Others simply enjoy the fun and relaxation of filling up their fly boxes for the coming season. Catch 'em up!



GOOD READING

These books offer interesting reading along with detailed, sequential photos and text instructions for proven patterns, from old-time tyers to new, innovative patterns of the modern age. They include some history, along with fishing tips and interesting background information about the original tyers. Some are recently published titles and are easy to find at most fly shops or online. Some you'll have to search for on eBay, such as Ken Bay's *Salt Water Flies* from 1973, Joe Bates' 1950 classic *Streamer Fly Tying and Fishing*. All are great references and enjoyable reading. There are dozens more to be found and it's easy to get hooked on collecting fly-tying books. Check out upcoming fly shows for more titles.

The Orvis Guide to Essential American Flies; Tom Rosenbauer, *Universe Publishing.*
Fleye Design: Techniques, Insights, Patterns; Bob Popovics and Jay Nichols, *Stackpole Books.*
Essential Saltwater Flies; Ed Jaworowski, *Stackpole Books.*
Making Better Flies; Lou Tabory, *Stackpole Books.*
Salt Water Flies; Kenneth Bay, *Lippincott Co.*
Streamer Fly Tying and Fishing; Joseph D. Bates, Jr., *The Stackpole Company.*

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LIAM O'NEILL

The Great Plug Bag in the Sky

BY JIMMY FEE

The northeast wind had churned up the surf beautifully. Breakers rolled in, clean of weed and silt, and behind them, stripers fed heartily on the sand eels struggling to hold their position on the wave-battered sandbar. At the end of my leader, I attached my favorite plug for those conditions at that location, a yellow-over-white Afterhours needlefish. Over hundreds of casts, the swinging of the plug's belly hook had worn through the finish and paint, exposing the bare wood. Battles with dozens of stripers had further scarred the plug, and in several places, removed small chunks of Alaskan yellow cedar. There's no faking this type of "seasoning" on a plug, and it should be no surprise that the rattier a plug looks, the better it catches fish.

As I wound up for another cast, I failed to notice the small loop of loose line buried into the spool by a small bit of slack line created between the time the lure landed and the time I began my retrieve. As I released the line on the forward stroke, the loop multiplied in size, grabbing hold of the gathering guide and sharply stopping the cast. The needlefish, however, sailed on into the darkness, out of

sight, out of earshot, and into the great plug bag in the sky.

Losing plugs, like losing fish, is an unavoidable part of each season in the surf. You'll lose lures in many ways that may not even be your fault, such as bluefish, boulders, and boat propellers. You'll also lose them in entirely preventable ways like failing to check your leader for weak spots or forgetting your plug bag on the roof of your truck.

We can take these losses in stride, provided we have a replacement plug ready to go. Fear of losing *the* plug on a night when it seems to be the only lure catching causes us to buy lures in triplicate. This leads to the out-of-control plug collections that we surfcasters tend to have—a striper fisherman's plug inventory always shows more gains than losses on the quarterly statement. Even with more lures than one could reasonably fish in a season (and in some cases, a lifetime), we still manage to lose some of the most difficult to replace lures, often in bone-headed ways.

Once, while waist-deep in an eel grass meadow at the edge of a channel, I fumbled a glidebait made by Tom Bozan. The yellow-painted slab of wood, a big-fish-turning 7 inches long, not including the hookless teaser, swam like a skier carving first tracks in fresh powder. I especially liked the way it tightened up and swam with a thrumming vibration after a quick, upward rip of the rod. It didn't display either of those actions as it slid from my wet hands, fluttered a couple feet, and disappeared into the lush embrace of the eel grass. I spent half an hour probing the bottom, first with the butt of my rod, then with my hand, wincing against the sting of the cold salt water as it cascaded over the top of my waders. I never found it.

I lost another glidebait by ignoring the advice of the lure's builder, Jesse Stanislaw. Jesse's Stride Baits had become one of the most coveted lures on the New Jersey striper scene in 2024. Word of its productivity spread through lineups of surfcasters as the few fishermen who had them routinely pulled stripers out of seemingly striper-less waters. I had what may have been the first of Jesse's baits to hit Massachusetts waters.

When he sent the plug, he recommended tying direct and skipping the lure clip. I said I would, and I did, until one of those nights when the fish (or, more accurately, a lack of them) demanded a lure change every three or four casts. So, I clipped on my Stride and hooked a fish. And then another. The third fish that struck didn't seem much larger than the first two, but it had a lot more attitude. After feeling the hooks, the bass erupted into an enraged spin-cycle, unleashing a typhoon of violence for several seconds before the rod snapped straight. I felt a little sick when I noticed the complete lack of resistance as I picked up the slack. When I discovered the twisted lure clip at the end of my leader, I felt *really* sick. Every so often, the high surf doles out its most important lesson in a painful way: take the extra time to do it right.

Once in a great while, a plug finds its way back to another surfcaster. I always make a point of walking the wrack line on the way back to my truck looking for items of interest, and I usually turn up two or three lost lures a season. These have primarily been plastic swimmers like the Daiwa Salt Pro Minnow or Rapala X-Rap, though I've heard of fishermen finding custom-made and hard-to-get lures on occasion. I know one, Massachusetts surfcaster who found a rare plug that he'd lost months before on a large fish. The most interesting recovery I know of belongs to former OTW general manager, Neal Larsson. He found a wooden needlefish that had been adrift so long that the sun and waves had polished it into a smooth stick of driftwood. The only evidence that it had once been a plug was the intact through-wire and a few streaks of green paint. Neal displayed this relic as a piece of fishing memorabilia in his office, which is probably about the best an old fishing plug can hope for—to be fished hard, lost at sea, and eventually displayed in a place of prominence by a dedicated caster.





Eating Whelks

BY ANDY NABRESKI

Last week, I ventured out into one of the local bays with my looking box in search of bay scallops, which I believe are the tastiest seafood on earth. Unfortunately, my intended target was in short supply; after poking around for over an hour, I found only three. But the venture was not a total bust since I also managed to capture three large channeled whelks.

It had been quite a long time since I had last tackled one of these mighty mollusks. Over 20 years ago, I used to trap lobsters, and I occasionally hauled whelks up in my pots. That was the last time I tried eating them. I remembered them being very tough and chewy, and I have passed on them ever since.

But a friend of mine recently recounted, at great length, about how much he loved eating "conch." He raved about "scungilli" salad, and his favorite preparation, conch fritters, and then went into great detail about his preparation. The secret, he told me, was to pound the living daylights out of the meat to tenderize it before cooking.

And, my father-in-law, a second-generation Italian who grew up in Rhode Island, has been asking me for years to get him some "snails." Snail salad, as he calls it, is one of his all-time favorite culinary memories from his youth.

Many people don't realize that there is a large-scale commercial fishery for whelk (sometimes referred to as conch) in the Northeast. In Massachusetts alone, the northernmost range of both the channeled and knobbed whelk's range, around 3 million pounds are harvested each year. In Delaware, they are the fourth-largest commercial fishery in the state.

The vast majority of the catch is exported. Some ends up in Italy, where it is known as

The author using a looking box (sometimes referred to as a hood) to search for bay scallops.

The shell of a whelk is a thing of beauty. What lurks inside, not so much.

"scungilli," or in France, where it is known as "bulot," but the lion's share ends up in China, where it's considered a delicacy and can fetch upward of $40 a pound.

From the south side of Cape Cod all the way to Chesapeake Bay, many of the "lobster" buoys you see while out fishing are actually marking whelk pots. Unlike their Caribbean relative the conch (which are herbivores), northern whelks are actually predators that feast on clams, mussels, and scallops. The commercial whelk fishery is so large that it actually supports a secondary commercial fishery for horseshoe crabs, the preferred bait of commercial whelk fisherman.

So why is it that I have never seen whelk sold in a fish market, and I have yet to see it served in any local restaurant? I wish I knew the answer. It seems Americans have simply developed an aversion for all types of snails.

After returning home with those three whelks in tow, I turned to the internet to investigate the best way to prepare them. The first step was to get the meat out of the shell, and it turns out there are a number of different ways to achieve this. Most of the recipes I looked at suggested steaming or boiling them for anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes, and then using a fork to pry the meat out. Other chefs recommended smashing the shell with a hammer, which will supposedly release the suction holding the meat inside the shell. I found one source that claimed if you freeze them for 48 hours, the meat could easily be removed by hand. I also read that overcooking them can make them tough and rubbery, and most of the Asian-inspired recipes called for using the meat raw.

So, I decided to do an experiment with the first one. I would try the steaming method, but I wanted to cook the whelk as little as possible. I steamed it in one-minute intervals, attempting to pry the meat out



after each. After steaming it for one minute, I actually bent the fork; the meat wouldn't let go. After the fifth minute, it took some muscle, but I managed to pop it out.

I was then greeted by one of the most unappetizing sights I've ever laid eyes on. The shell of a whelk is a thing of beauty; what lurks inside…not so much. I was staring at a gnarly booger-like mess. I was getting cold feet, but I carried on, because I have seen and eaten worse.

The first step is to remove and discard the spiral-shaped bag of guts. The part you eat is the meat from the whelk's foot. Next, I used a knife to cut off the operculum, the hard, shell-like apparatus. Then, I made an incision down the center of the meat because there are more guts in the middle that also need to be removed. Finally, I used the knife to scrape off the black stuff on the outer edge of the meat, and what remained was the edible part.

Then I decided to try another experiment. The meat of some mollusks, like squid and octopus, actually benefit from being frozen. Freezing causes water to expand, which breaks some of the cell walls, resulting in a more tender final product. I cut the whelk meat in half and placed one piece in the freezer. I then cut a thin slice from the middle of the meat, which was still raw, and popped it into my mouth. I wanted to get the true taste of my newfound treasure. I was pleasantly surprised. It was indeed chewy, but not in a bad way. It had a bit of a snap to it, similar to calamari or cooked shrimp, and the flavor was pretty mild. It reminded me of a steamer clam—there was a hint of sweetness and notes of the briny essence of the sea. I ended up eating about 1/4 of the whelk raw, straight up, with no seasoning. The more I ate it, the more I liked it. I learned that to get the ideal texture, it should be sliced as thin as possible.

The following night I thawed out the piece I had frozen and tried it side by side with the unfrozen piece. It was, indeed, a bit more tender.

My other two whelks were still alive in my refrigerator, so I decided to conduct yet another experiment. I popped them in the freezer whole and waited two days. After thawing them out, the meat was easily pulled out of the shell. After cleaning them, I cut a thin slice and ate it. The lack of cooking and the freezing process resulted in the most tender whelk meat yet.

That night, I decided to prepare a "snail salad" to share with my father-in-law. After consulting with him and reading numerous recipes online, this is what I came up with.

Recreational Whelk Regulations

MASSACHUSETTS
No size limit, 15 per day, subject to town regulations

RHODE ISLAND
Residents only, 1/2 bushel per day, 2 1/4 inches shell height

CONNECTICUT
Minimum size: 4-3/4 inches shell length or 1-15/16 inches shell height. *(Minimum size will increase in future years)*

NEW YORK
Long Island Sound:
5 inches in length OR 2 inches in height *(Minimum size will increase in future years)*

Coastal District:
5 ½ inches shell length OR 2 ¼ inches shell height, 24 per day *(Minimum size will increase in future years)*

NEW JERSEY
Regulations not available online, no response from NJ Fish & Wildlife

SCUNGILLI SALAD

1/2 cup of whelk meat (1 large whelk), sliced as thin as possible
2 tablespoons celery, sliced thin
2 tablespoons red onion, sliced thin and rinsed
4 cherry tomatoes, chopped
1 tablespoon fresh parsley, chopped
Juice from 1/3 lemon
1 tablespoon capers
2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
Pinch of red pepper flakes
Salt and black pepper to taste

Mix together all ingredients, and season with salt and black pepper. Gobble it up as is or serve over a bed of baby greens or atop thin slices of fresh bread.

Caribbean-Style Conch Fritters

Conch fritters are a quintessential part of Caribbean cuisine, especially in the Bahamas. (I vaguely recall eating them while on our honeymoon in Antigua.) I researched about a dozen or so recipes, and the majority I found included bell pepper, onion, celery, and even carrot. Some people puréed the ingredients in a food processor; others diced them. I opted to dice the whelk meat, so I could enjoy its texture.

If you omit the onion, bell pepper, and celery, this recipe is very similar to traditional Rhode Island clam cakes. Use chopped quahogs instead of whelk, omit the salt, and use clam stock instead of milk. I've also made fritters with blue crab meat, lobster, and squid. All were divine!

WHELK FRITTERS

(Makes about 12)
1 cup chopped conch meat (2 large whelks)
1 cup all-purpose flour
2 teaspoons baking powder
2 to 3 dashes of cayenne pepper
1 teaspoon salt
½ cup milk
1 egg, beaten
1 stalks celery, sliced thin
½ onion, diced
½ green bell pepper, diced
1 clove garlic, chopped
1 quart oil for frying

Heat the oil to 350 degrees. (I use an electric deep fryer for this without the basket because the batter can stick to it.)

Cut the whelk into thin strips and tenderize them vigorously with a meat pounder.

Whisk together the dry ingredients in a large bowl, then work in the remaining ingredients with a spatula. Refrigerate for at least 1/2 hour.

Using two spoons, carefully drop about 2 tablespoons of the batter into the fryer at a time. Do not overcrowd them. Working in small batches, deep-fry for about 3 minutes until they brown. Remove to a drying rack and sprinkle with salt.

Serve with a sprinkle of lemon juice and a drop of hot sauce or the following conch fritter dipping sauce popular in the Caribbean.

These things were incredible.

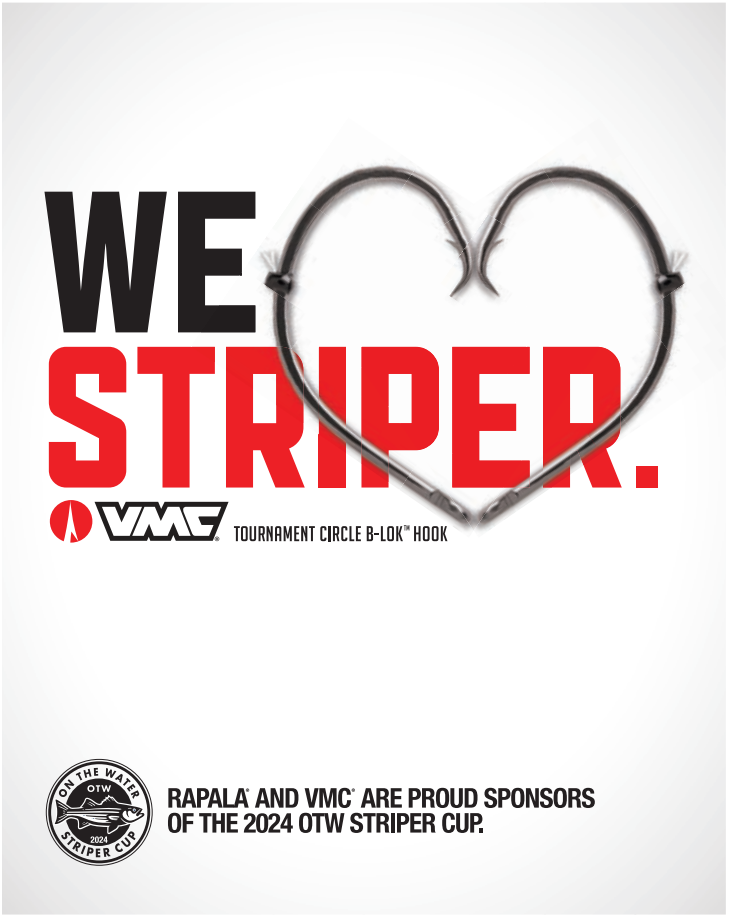
CARIBBEAN CONCH FRITTER DIPPING SAUCE

2 tablespoons ketchup
1 tablespoon lime juice
1 tablespoon mayonnaise
1 teaspoon hot sauce

Mix all ingredients and serve.

This will be my last Living Off The Land & Sea. Starting in March there will be a new cooking column. Thanks to all who have helped me out along the way. -AN

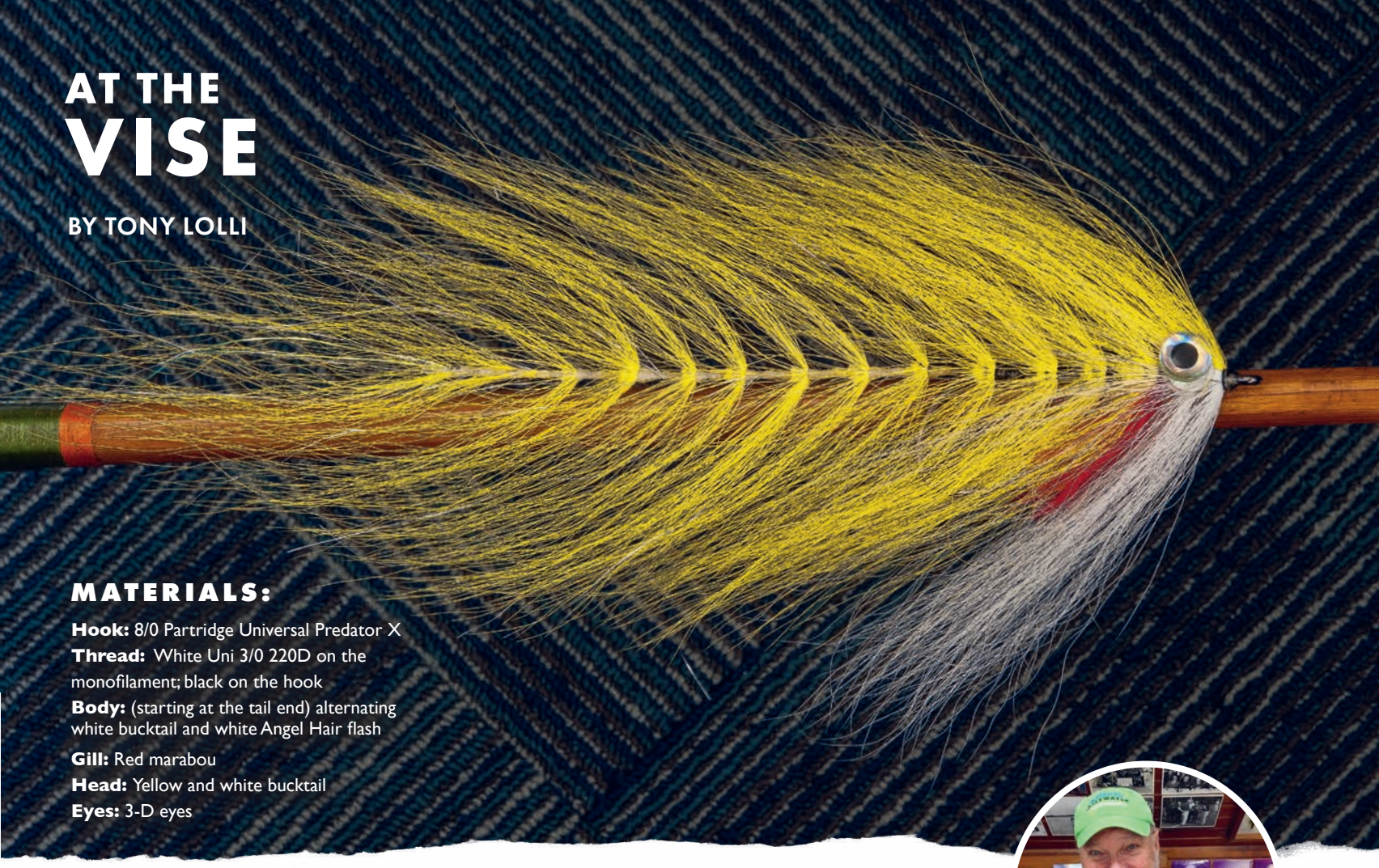
@LivingOffTheLandAndSea





AT THE VISE

BY TONY LOLLI



MATERIALS:

Hook: 8/0 Partridge Universal Predator X
Thread: White Uni 3/0 220D on the monofilament; black on the hook
Body: (starting at the tail end) alternating white bucktail and white Angel Hair flash
Gill: Red marabou
Head: Yellow and white bucktail
Eyes: 3-D eyes



This column, which originally appeared in the October 2018 edition of this magazine, is being republished in tribute to legendary fly-tyer and saltwater fly-fishing pioneer, Bob Popovics, who died on November 1, 2024.

Hollow Beast

I should be embarrassed to admit that some saltwater flies are bigger than the trout I catch. I should be… but I'm not. Why? I have no shame. But, I digress. Brian Phelps, who tied this fly, is a Licensed USCG captain and guide from Long Island, New York. He is also a professional photographer and the owner of Reel Obsession Fishing. Brian fishes Long Island waters including the South Shore and the North Shore harbors and Long Island Sound. Large schools of menhaden (bunker) migrate through these waters and attract striped bass as well as other species.

The Hollow Beast is one of many designed by Bob Popovics, creator of numerous saltwater flies in use today. It's based on his Hollow Fleye, but in a large, economy size. You can watch Popovics tie a Beast at globalflyfisher.com. You can't watch me tie anything, anywhere, anytime…probably a good thing.

The Hollow Beast is tied with bucktail on a heavy monofilament extension using the hollow-tie technique. Keeping each "collar" sparse from the tail to just before the head makes it lightweight and helps it easily shed water. The last few ties on the hook have more bulk to give the tail a natural action when retrieved with a stripping motion.

This fly is intended to imitate a menhaden or bunker and can be 12 inches (or bigger). Its construction yields a width that matches a bunker of the same length so it looks very much like a live bunker, yet it's intended to be easily cast on a fly rod for fish such as striped bass, tuna and marlin.

The Hollow Beast can be fished whenever bunker are present. When the schools are on the surface in the ocean, it is best to present the fly on an intermediate or sinking line. Land it just on the outskirts of the bunker school, which will make it look like a stray bait, and the bass will zero in on it.

Brian said, "My most memorable time with this fly was the first fish I ever caught with it. There are occasions when you have to move from area to area to find fish, which can be very time consuming. But, sometimes you may approach a school and the water looks like a washing machine of white water and bait being tossed four feet in the air! On this day, I was lucky enough to have this scenario right off Gilgo Beach. I grabbed my 10-weight rod loaded with an intermediate sinking line and a big 12-inch Beast. After a few casts into the feeding blitz, I watched a 28-pound bass come up and inhale the fly. My heart skipped many beats while I waited for the take to happen, especially in the middle of big bass splashing and thrashing the ocean surface."

My heart also skips a beat, but my cardiologist says it's nothing to worry about. Easy for him to say. He doesn't have to make up lies for a column every month.



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MATT HAEFNER

Slow-Pitch Jigs

BY JIMMY FEE

One of the newer tactics that anglers have been adding to their arsenals over the last 10 years has been slow-pitch jigging. This style of jigging was developed to entice bites from bottom-dwelling species most often targeted with bait and rigs, like haddock, cod, sea bass, and fluke, but it remains effective on mid-water, predatory species like tuna, stripers, bluefish, and pollock.

Unlike speed jigging, which is meant to imitate a fleeing baitfish and incite faster pelagic species, slow-pitch jigging imitates a wounded or dying baitfish. While a whole system of specialized tackle from rods and reels to gloves and line has been developed around this technique, the most important aspect is the jig.

What makes a jig a "slow-pitch" jig?

The defining characteristic of a slow-pitch jig is the asymmetrical, center-weighted, keeled design. This gives the jig action while in freefall. A dropping slow-pitch jig may glide, quiver, spiral, or dart, imitating an injured and dying baitfish—an easy meal that few fish can pass up. Therefore, a slow-pitch jig is most attractive to the fish as it is falling.

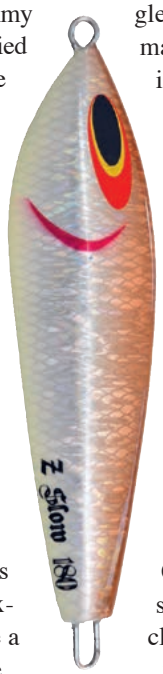
Selecting a Slow- Pitch Jig

The specific action depends on a jig's shape. Longer, slimmer jigs, like the Shimano Shimmerfall (pictured above), have a tight shimmy and shake on the drop, while fatter-bodied jigs, such as the Sea Falcon Z-Slow, have a wider rocking action as they fall.

Jig sizes and styles should be selected based on the water depth and the target species. On inshore waters, for sea bass and fluke, fishermen have had good luck with "micro" slow-pitch jigs weighing 60 grams or less. On deeper bottom-fishing grounds, 90- to 120-gram jigs get the job done, while extreme depths and larger pelagic gamefish may require jigs up to 300 grams or more.

Fishing a Slow-Pitch Jig

To get the best action out of these jigs requires the proper rod, which is extremely lightweight, looking more like a largemouth bass rod than one capable of beating a tuna. A slow-pitch rod has a leisurely, even recoil that lifts and then "pitches" the jig with a just a full turn of the reel handle. The rod, more so than the angler, imparts the action to the jig, which makes slow-pitch jigging far less labor-intensive than speed jigging. Fishermen tend toward lighter braided line while slow-pitch jigging to reduce water resistance and maintain a vertical presentation.



Sea Falcon Z-Slow

A basic approach to slow-pitch jigging is to drop to the bottom, maintaining a bit of tension to keep the lure vertical, so that it sinks more quickly. Once it has touched down, employ sharp turns of the reel handle, while keeping the rod stationary, to "pitch" the jig upward. This creates enough slack in the line to allow a brief freefall that triggers the jig's action. Once the jig has been fished beyond the strike zone, as long as the presentation is close to vertical, drop back down without tension, watching the line for signs that a fish has grabbed it.

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$250; yeti.com



HUK Gear Hawser Corduroy Button-Down

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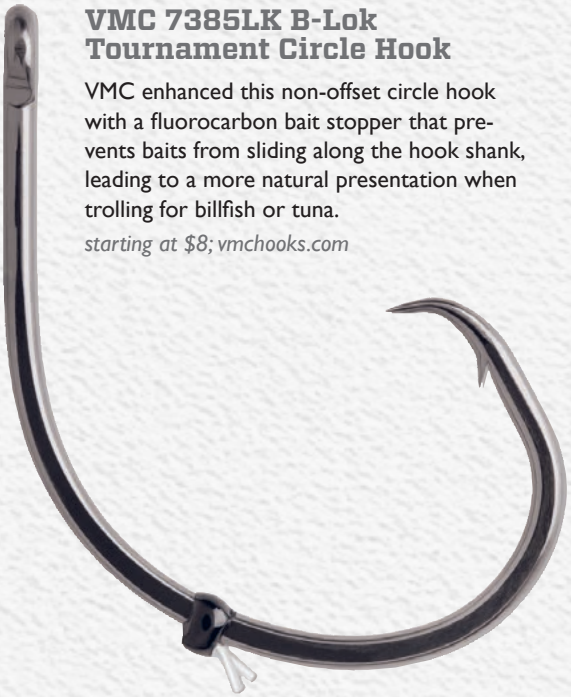
$70; hukgear.com



Columbia PFG Men's Uncharted Full-Zip Fleece Jacket

The shoulders, arms, and chest of this lightweight jacket feature a durable, water-resistant nylon designed to repel moisture and light rain. The interior is lined with soft, breathable recycled fleece, and zippered pockets keep small valuables safe and easily accessible.

$90; columbia.com



VMC 7385LK B-Lok Tournament Circle Hook

VMC enhanced this non-offset circle hook with a fluorocarbon bait stopper that prevents baits from sliding along the hook shank, leading to a more natural presentation when trolling for billfish or tuna.

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Shimano Ocea Jigger 2500 LD

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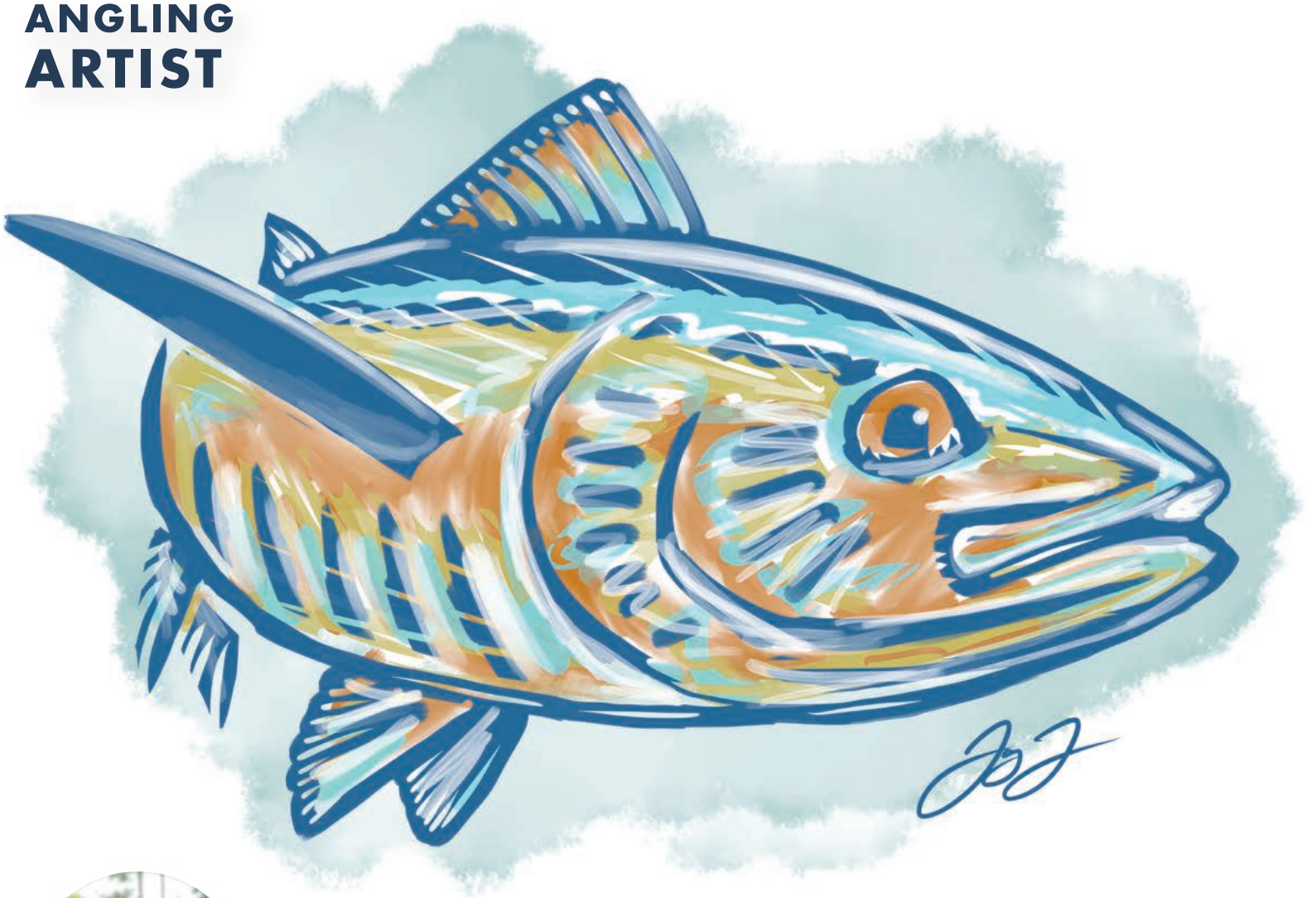
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ANGLING ARTIST





Jay Talbot

www.jaybofishart.com
@jayboart

BY MATT HAEFFNER

"The Dude abides" is an all-time quote from the 1998 cult classic film, *The Big Lebowski*, starring Jeff Bridges as The Dude—a goofy, nonchalant hippie who, even in the face of crisis, only cares to sit back, chill, and go bowling. The famous quote loosely translates to "just relax and enjoy life's simple pleasures," an ideology most fishermen can get behind. Through his illustrations of fish, flies, and doodles of characters like The Dude poling around salt marshes, Jay Talbot effectively captures the lax "toes in the water, tush in the sand" vibe that is shared by anglers, boaters, and bowlers alike.

In 2014, Talbot was working toward graduating from the University of South Carolina, where he decided to major in religious studies after flunking accounting in business school. That same year, during his final undergraduate semester, he began a minor in art studio to acquire enough credits to graduate. Little did he know that the projects he completed in his advanced drawing courses during those few months would shape his career as an artist.

During that final semester at USC, Talbot began posting his illustrations and projects on Instagram. Shortly after graduating, he landed a job at a mortgage company, but it didn't last. Talbot found himself at a desk daydreaming of fishing and the outdoors, so he continued sharing his sketches and drawings on social media, where he was already building a strong following. "Within six months," Talbot said, "I was answering more calls about fish art than mortgages." That's when he decided to make the leap to go full time as an artist. He made his first sale on Etsy and, before long, companies were buying his drawings to use on t-shirts and hats.

For Talbot, art and illustrating were not just a means to an end for college credits. His mother was an art teacher, and he often found himself working as her pro bono assistant at home. His grandfather had a special touch





with the brush, too. Whenever Talbot visited, he wound up drawing and painting alongside Grandpa, who was hard at work on large-scale paintings of animals (like horses and dogs) to be entered into the annual state fair art competition. Because of their sheer size, Talbot says, his grandfather placed heavy emphasis on composition and lighting, which earned him several first-place prizes. Today, those two elements are profoundly evident in Talbot's renditions of oysters, redfish tails, tarpon scales, and boats, but there remains an element of simplicity even in his most detailed creations.

Talbot's art ranges from large portraits of saltwater flies and fish to quirky, comic-like cartoons that are both lighthearted and humorous—kind of like the *Far Side*, but for anglers. He also leans into more complex designs using multi-colored micron pens, which have fine points so he can acutely detail his subjects with shadows and outlines to add dimension. With those same micron pens, he can even capture the iridescent colors and metallic shine of sunlight reflecting off the hulking head of a silver king. And while a good chunk of Talbot's artwork is hand-drawn, some of it is digitally produced using Procreate, a graphics editing app with tools to sketch, paint, and even animate illustrations.

Taking a quick scroll through Talbot's Instagram or Etsy pages, it's obvious that he has a passion for light tackle and fly fishing in the skinny, shallow, backwaters of South Carolina, where red drum, tarpon, and speckled trout thrive. But the landlocked city of Columbia, where Talbot now resides, is a long way from







those saltwater environs. Lucky for him, the nearby Lake Murray boasts a robust population of striped bass, which were introduced between the late 1950s and early 60s. There, Talbot uses light spinning tackle to cast topwater plugs to stripers that typically measure between 24 and 30 inches long. He has yet to catch a striper from the salt, but it's high on his ever-growing to-do list. A friend of his who lives on Nantucket has relayed some jaw-dropping photos and video footage of striped bass feeding frenzies, so a trip to the Northeast is also in order in the near future.

Between the trips to Lake Murray and coastal South Carolina, Talbot plans to continue expanding his portfolio while building up his e-commerce business. Recently, he began offering custom boat line drawings for people to put on private apparel, whether for an offshore tournament team, a charter business, or just a man who loves his boat. But the dream, as Talbot describes it, is for his prints to fly off shelves so he can continue to develop creative artwork for his own hats, t-shirts, and decals.

Over the past 10 years, Talbot has grown Jayboart into a successful business, despite his own admission of figuring it out as he went along. As it turns out, flunking that accounting class in business school put him on the path to success without the need for a business degree. His easygoing attitude and ability to keep a cool head through the uncertainties of self-employment and entrepreneurship are reflected in his artwork, which further enhances his uniquely chill style. Jay Talbot is a humble, self-made, fishy dude—and the dude abides.



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ANATOMY

Scientifically speaking, what makes false albacore so awesome?

By George Baldwin

When the albies roll into town, many peoples' lives are totally upended. Eleven-foot surf rods sit lonely in basement corners, with nobody keeping them company except spiders. Wooden metal-lip and needlefish plugs collect layers of dust in the garage. The grass grows long, and the laundry pile looks like the surf in a November nor'easter. Marriages are strained and sick days are used up. Forget about that Christmas visit to the in-laws in Wisconsin—vacation days evaporate faster than the saltwater puddles on our car mats in the heat of August.

What are the reasons for this obsessive mania? What causes striper addicts to forget about chasing 50-pound autumn cows to go after 7-pound albies?

As a hybrid fisherman-biologist, I enjoy fishing to recalibrate. I like being on the water to avoid work, projects around the house, and those otherwise "responsible" uses of time that can instead be spent fishing. I also enjoy observing and analyzing the conditions while I'm fishing and the fish that I chase. Please excuse my biologese as I explain, from a science guy's point of view, the physical aspects of what is so amazing about false albacore.

Little tunny, as they are also called, don't grow to the size of stripers nor do they carry the culinary reputation of black sea bass; however, they are certainly built for speed. It seems that every characteristic of these finned bullets contributes to a blistering speed known to cause reels to smoke and seize. Let's dissect the incredible *Euthynnus alletteratus* and explore their schematics.

MICHAEL CUOMO



An albie has a "fusiform" shape, like a submarine or jet, that pushes water away from its body, reducing friction that would slow the fish down.

PATRICK HUBAN

A false albacore has a tapered shape described as fusiform: tapered at the front and growing in circumference (thickness) for a bit, then steadily narrowing off toward the tail, much like the fuselage of a jet plane or submarine. This shape pushes water away from much of the fish's body, reducing friction that would also reduce its capacity for speed.

The caudal fin (the tail) is different from most inshore fish that anglers target and is described by ichthyologists as "lunate." Notice the similarity to "lunar," as it looks just like a crescent moon a few days before or after the new moon. This fin creates propulsion for this magnificent beast. The high-aspect ratio, tall and narrow, is for sustained speed over long distances. This contrasts with low-aspect ratio caudal fins of striped bass and fluke that have adapted for ambush feeding. An albie's caudal fin is also stiffer than a heavy-action rod, so it doesn't lose efficiency under the water pressure dealt by high speeds.

An albie's swimming style is called "thunniform," which means tuna-style in that a fish swimming this way has an unflexing body for stability. Its body remains stiff and straight, while only the caudal fin moves side to side and propels the fish forward. This is opposite of anguilliform (eel style), in which the whole body undulates back and forth.



Just in front of the caudal fin, on the caudal peduncle (the narrow "handle" between the fish's body and the tail), are a series of small, triangular finlets. These produce turbulence that directs pressure off the fish's body.

The pectoral fins are just behind the gills, along the horizontal midline of the albie's body. They stabilize the fish horizontally and can change its direction from swimming vertically, allowing it to quickly dart to the surface to grab an anchovy and then zip back down to safety. These appendages also have a long and thin high-aspect ratio that are effective without adding much drag. Each one can be retracted to fit into a narrow depression called a sulcus, allowing the fin to recede, becoming flush to the skin of the rest of the fish's body and further reducing drag when traveling at high speeds.

By now, you should recognize a recurring theme with fins and see the similarity with an albie's dorsal fin at its topmost surface. This fin provides horizontal stability, like the fletching of an arrow. It also has a high-aspect ratio and fits into a sulcus that resembles a slit on the top of the fish. Think of a stiletto-style switchblade knife, with a blade that fits into the handle and can pop out with the push of a button.

If you're an albie addict, you've probably noticed that the fish's gill plates do not open and close like a striped bass when it's held out

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The finlets ahead of an albie's tail produce turbulence that directs water pressure off its body.

MICHAEL CUOMO

of the water (not for too long, I hope!). Albies don't pump water over their gill filaments (those feathery red strands inside the gill covers). Instead, tunny respiration is called ram ventilation. The fish swims with its mouth open, without ever stopping, to force oxygen over its gills. This is different from the way most fish breathe. For example, stripers can sit still in the water without negative effects. For albies, however, the faster they go, more oxygenated water passes over the gill filaments; this way, they can take in that oxygen to burn more fuel. This is why albies should be released differently than stripers. They are best released by aiming them at the water and tossing them straight down into it.

If you have ever harvested an albie for the table, you probably noticed that the meat was dark red, in contrast to the white or pinkish meat of most fish we generally keep. White muscle is for quick bursts of movement rather than sustained ones. Fish composed of white meat are much more sedentary than albies and tire more quickly. An albie's red flesh is due to high amounts of myoglobin in the muscle. This protein, like hemoglobin in the blood, carries oxygen. More myoglobin holds more oxygen in the muscles, which supports aerobic respiration, meaning more energy conversion for constant fast swimming.

This muscle is also highly vascularized, with extra-abundant blood vessels to supply fuel and



An albie's dorsal and pectoral fins can be retracted to fit into a narrow depression, becoming flush to the skin and further reducing drag when the fish travels at high speeds.

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The odds are stacked against the baitfish when albies roll into town.

oxygen. An albie's red muscle has three times the number of capillaries, the smallest blood vessels supplying the cells with oxygen, than in white muscle. The red meat also has more (and larger) mitochondria, the organelles called "the powerhouse of the cell." This structure oxidizes fatty acids for energy, actually a very similar process to the one used by your car or boat to burn fuel. This also helps avoid fatigue and ensure a quick recovery after a long fight, compared to that of predominantly white-muscled fish. That's why albies don't quit. They kick up a plume of water like a Jet Ski while an angler's trying to land it. That cow striper you were bragging about on Facebook would have given up long before.

Albies are also semi-warm blooded (homeothermic). This allows them to keep up their frantic lifestyle at the same pace in warmer or cooler water, and also enables them to zip down to Florida before the first snow. Their arteries are positioned so that they're heated by that red muscle and insulated by a layer of fatty tissue. It's not too different from the heat-exchanger system you may be using for your house.

Albies are also known for their incredible eyesight. Many claim they're the pickiest fish around, able to detect a monofilament fishing line in choppy water and the slightest flaws in that epoxy anchovy fly you spent a half-hour tying. Their large, heated eyes produce excellent vision with great movement detection. As any albie fanatic will tell you, they can spot and lock onto ridiculously small bait (or flies) at quite a distance while swimming at 40 miles per hour and at 30 tail strokes per second.

False albacore are a prime reason that I think evolutionary biology is the most interesting subject that occupies our feeble human brains—it's environmentally-driven engineering. And no fish in our inshore waters is as well engineered to thrill anglers as the albie.

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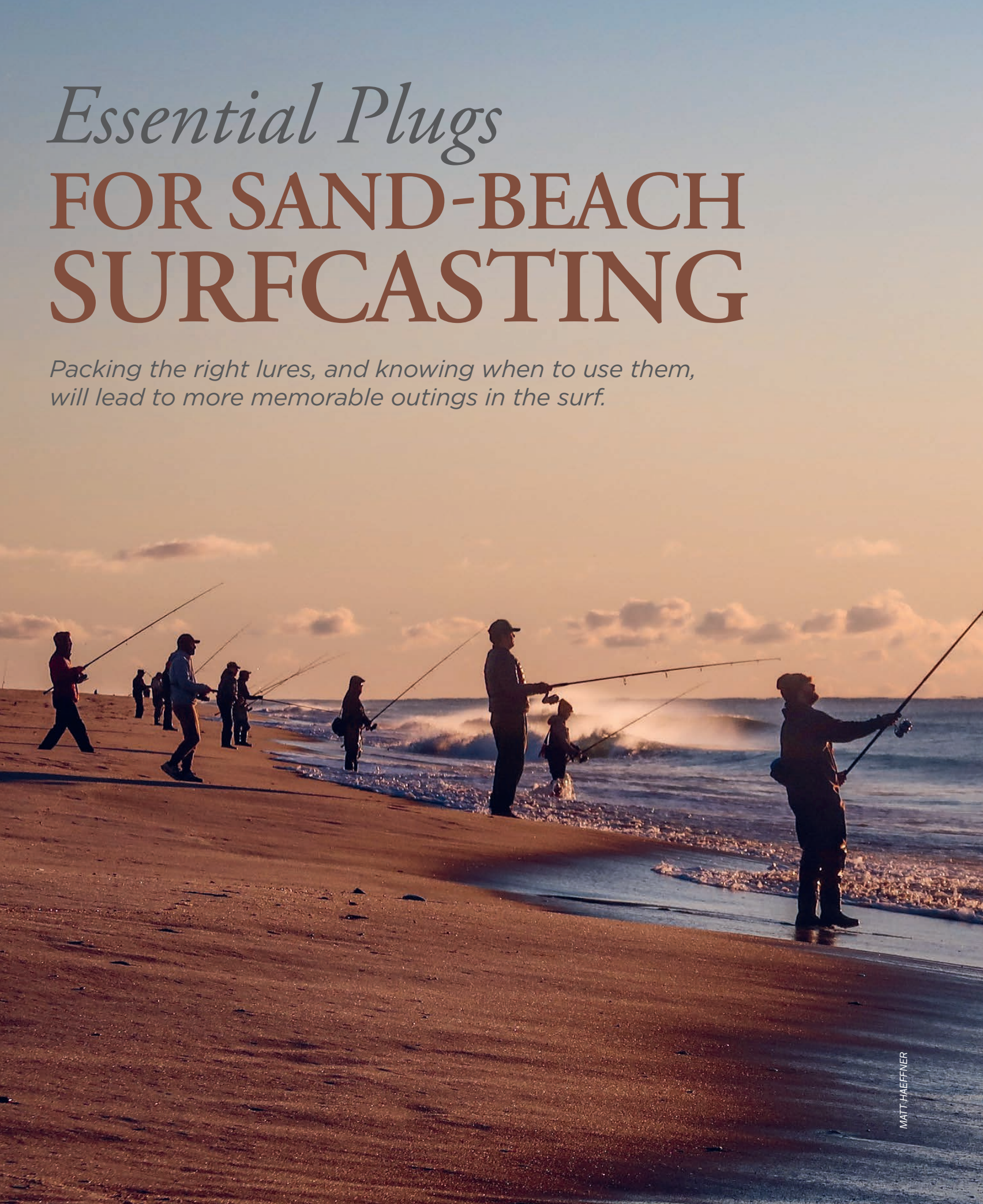
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Essential Plugs FOR SAND-BEACH SURFCASTING

Packing the right lures, and knowing when to use them, will lead to more memorable outings in the surf.



MATT HAEFFNER

BY NOAH LAMPERTI

Boots on the sand. Sets of breaking waves rolling in beneath the dunes. A single rod and a sky full of stars over my shoulder. Sand-beach surfcasting is one of the purest experiences an angler can have. However, selecting lures for this form of fishing can be daunting.

Plug choices for sand beaches vary widely from ubiquitous, mass-produced plastic plugs to hard-to-acquire wooden works of art. Stepping out onto the sand with a well-stocked plug bag is only the first step toward success in the surf. An array of lures is only useful when complemented by an angler's arsenal of knowledge regarding the conditions and structure for deploying them.

Topwater Plugs

My walk-the-dog plug swayed back and forth without a care in the world, oblivious to the school of stripers eyeing it through the fast-moving water. Long stretches of sand beach are typically punctuated by bars, troughs, and current rips. On this morning, all three were visible as the rising sun peeked over the horizon. The strong full-moon tide, and the fish that followed it, had already been on the move for quite some time. It was late April in southeastern Massachusetts, and schools of big striped bass were scouring miles of shoreline for forage after a long trip from southern waters.

Behind my walk-the-dog lure, a boil appeared amid the current and chop. A healthy slot-sized striper proceeded to blow it out of the water, missing two more hits before it was finally hooked solidly enough to be retrieved and revived. After this fish was released, a dozen or more of its friends also succumbed to the same plug. While I had covered miles of good-looking shoreline before this catch, the tantalizing action of the topwater lure I was using found the only active fish on the miles-long stretch of sand beach.

Topwater plugs are ideal tools to find actively feeding fish on the move. Dawn, dusk, or in the middle of the day, no actively feeding striped bass can resist the commotion made by a well-worked pencil popper or walk-the-dog lure. Sure, the fish might take a swipe at





Lures with slim, non-descript profiles, like minnow plugs and needlefish, imitate a number of baitfish that inhabit sand beaches throughout the striper season.

NOAH LAMPERTI



No actively feeding striped bass can resist the commotion made by a pencil popper or walk-the-dog lure.

NOAH LAMPERTI

another presentation, but the ease with which an angler can cover water and find fish with topwater lures is unparalleled. Even if a fish does not fully engulf the lure, it will still reveal its presence with a boil in the water behind the plug. Topwater lures have the added advantage of floating over weedy waters that would otherwise be unworkable with subsurface baits.

A factory-built lure like the Drifter Tackle Doc has a loud knock to call the fish in, while widely available pencil poppers like the Gibbs Pro Series Pencil cast well, even into a strong headwind. As a general rule, pencil poppers work well in rougher water, while the walk-the-dog action of lures like the Doc can call fish up from the depths in calmer conditions. Even if the available forage is relatively small (say, sand-eel- or peanut-bunker-size), giant knocking, splashing plugs can be extremely effective tools for revealing the location of any fish that may be around.

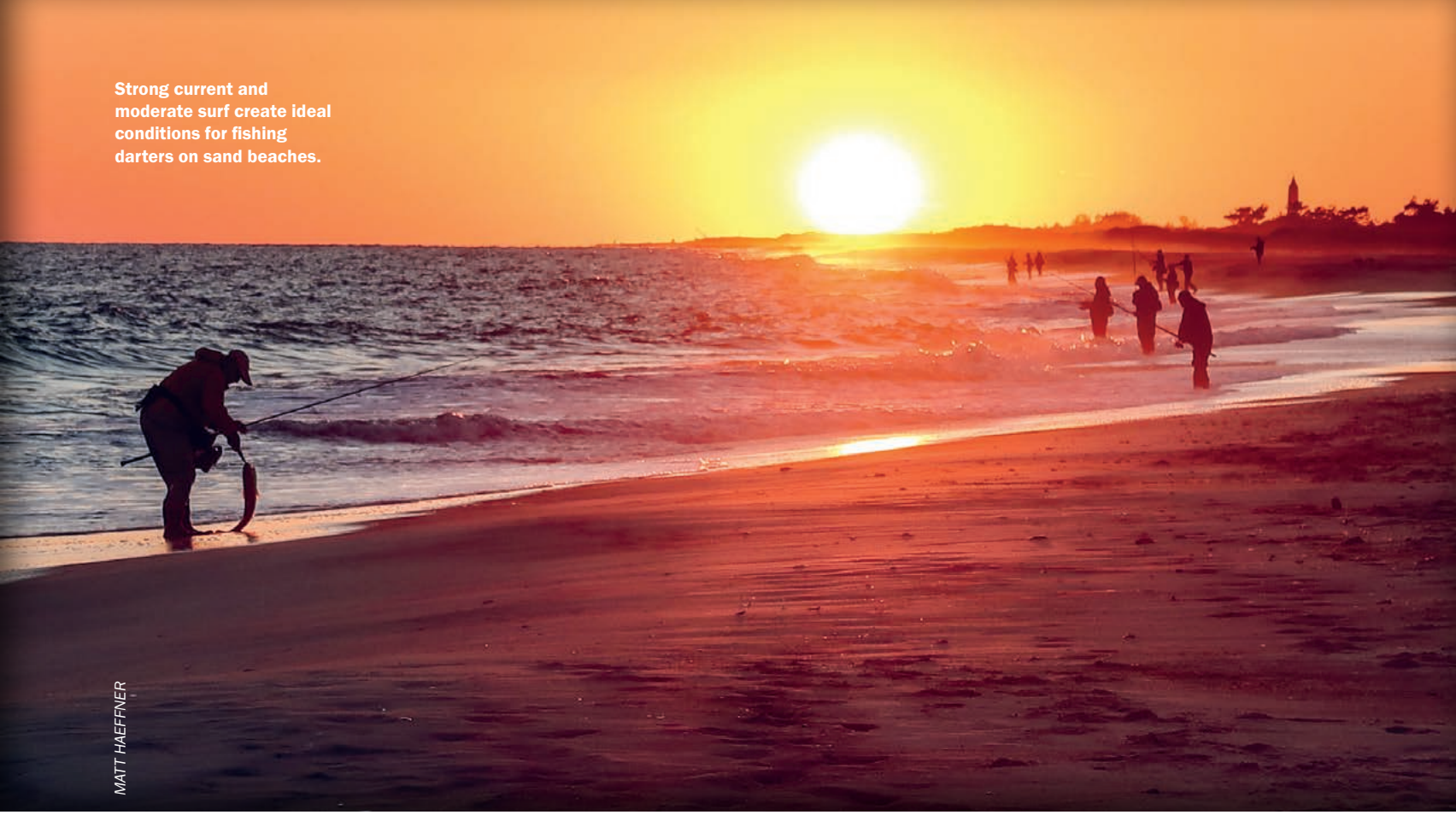
Slim-Profile Soft Plastics and Needlefish

A broad expanse of glass-calm water gently receded past my wading boots as the tide ebbed through a channel cut in the sand flats of Cape Cod Bay. The occasional shimmer of a silverside could be seen in the light of the full moon but, otherwise, the water seemed lifeless. Calmer conditions such as these sometimes make finding the structure—and the fish—more challenging.

The 9-inch soft plastic I threw could have imitated any number of bait species, from the slim underneath silhouette of an Atlantic herring to the slender shape of a sand eel. My cast targeted an area on the opposite side of the channel where the current appeared to move a bit faster. My suspicion was confirmed when the lure was swept hard down-current. A straight, slow retrieve was met with a hard bump and the first fish of the night. Though they did not make a single splash as they stealthily swam through the current, bass to 20



Drifter Tackle Doc



Strong current and moderate surf create ideal conditions for fishing darters on sand beaches.

MATT HAEFFNER

pounds violently thrashed the soft plastic until the tide slowed to a trickle.

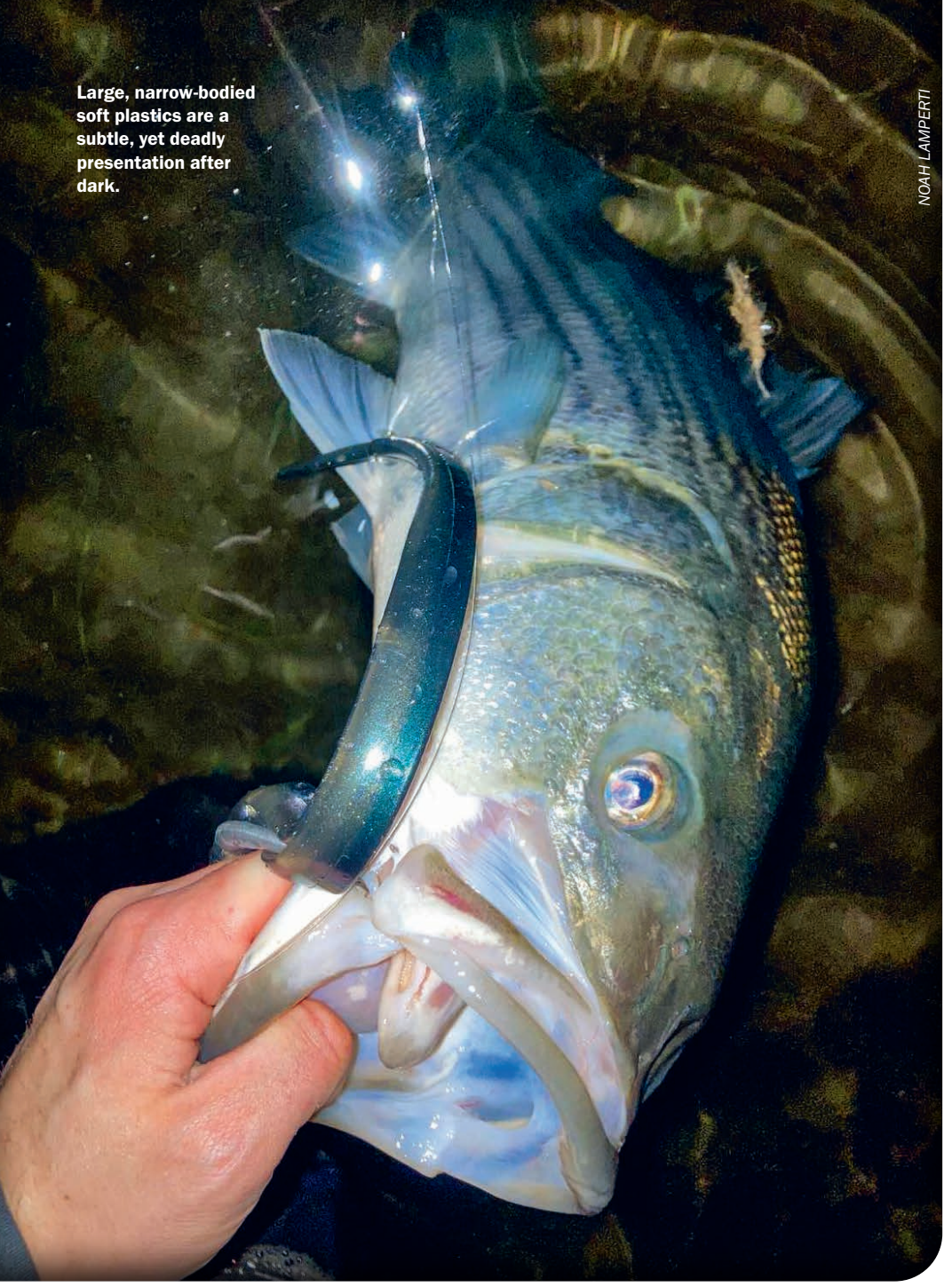
Slim-profile soft plastics and needlefish plugs often fill a similar niche in calm conditions. They are a subtle presentation and can be swung laterally and slowly retrieved against the current. This is a deadly presentation in the dark. Excess commotion appears unnatural to a striper sleuthing through tranquil waters, so a thinner, quieter presentation may work for fish that would reject louder offerings.

Both needles and soft plastics work extraordinarily well for this application. Weightless or lightly weighted soft baits, including the 9-inch Sluggo and GT Eel rigged on a screw-lock hook, are perfect for swinging in slower-moving current. A stout screw-lock hook, an 8/0 to 10/0 BKK Titanrider or Owner Beast, has the strength needed to subdue a striper in current. If a needlefish is your weapon of choice, the Super Strike Super N Fish, a surfcasting staple, comes in a variety of weight options suitable for different current conditions.

Darters

Each cast landed into an onslaught of white water as an offshore storm swell battered the oceanside sand beaches of the Outer Cape. Soft plastics and lighter plugs were merely skimming across the surface, unable to penetrate the strong wave action and reach the fish feeding below. My angling partner, Anthony, clipped on a darter that would dig in against the tall waves.





Large, narrow-bodied soft plastics are a subtle, yet deadly presentation after dark.

NOAH LAMPERTI

His first few casts earned a couple of bumps, and the fish he landed in short order caused me to reach into my plug bag for a facsimile of the same darter he'd thrown. Among the slot-sized bass, a single, drag-screaming fish that threw the hook was the highlight of the night and kept us coming back to resume this dialed-in darter bite on subsequent evenings.

A darter creates the commotion needed to attract big fish in the most arduous conditions. Its sloped front digs deep beneath the rough surf and causes the plug to "dart" side to side so that a striper can hunt it down with ease, even in the pandemonium conditions of a storm swell. To correctly fish a darter in heavy surf, cast it as far as possible into a trough between big waves or a cut between bars. Keep a steady pressure on the lip. The more pressure on the sloped nose, the slower the darter should be worked. Hits often come when the lure is slowly darting back and forth behind a big wave.

A broad array of darters are built to work quite well right out of the package. The Super Strike Zig Zag can be found in almost every plug bag from Maryland to Maine, while other molded plastic options like the Tactical Anglers Sub Darter include an internal rattle to call in fish. Most darters cast fairly well and are easy enough to work and feel on any standard surfcasting rod. For even rougher conditions, bottle plugs dig harder in heavy waves and hard current. It's smart to carry a few of both when faced with storm-swell conditions on open sand beaches.

A Plug Presentation for Every Set of Conditions

As illustrated by the examples above, there is a plug for every set of sand-beach surfcasting situations. From bar and trough-filled shorelines to more subtle channels cut in the sand,

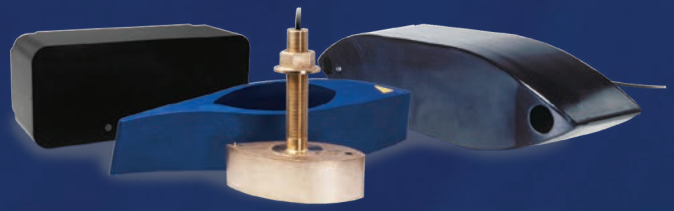




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Topwater plugs are ideal for finding actively feeding fish from the beach.

MATT HAEFFNER

to raging, heavy surf, the successful surfcaster must tailor the presentation to the conditions at hand. Knowledge of the spot you choose to fish and the conditions you will find when you wade into the water is critical. Even more important, however, is the ability to adapt to different conditions.

A plug bag equipped with the essentials described in this article gives the adept surfcaster the tools to tackle the toughest bite. Having the correct tools attached to your surf belt is only one piece of the puzzle that we all assemble each night as we step out into the surf. Knowing how to use each and every lure in your bag is another. The final puzzle piece required for surfcasting success is the knowledge and faith that, at the end of every cast, a trophy-sized striped bass is ready to pounce on your plug.



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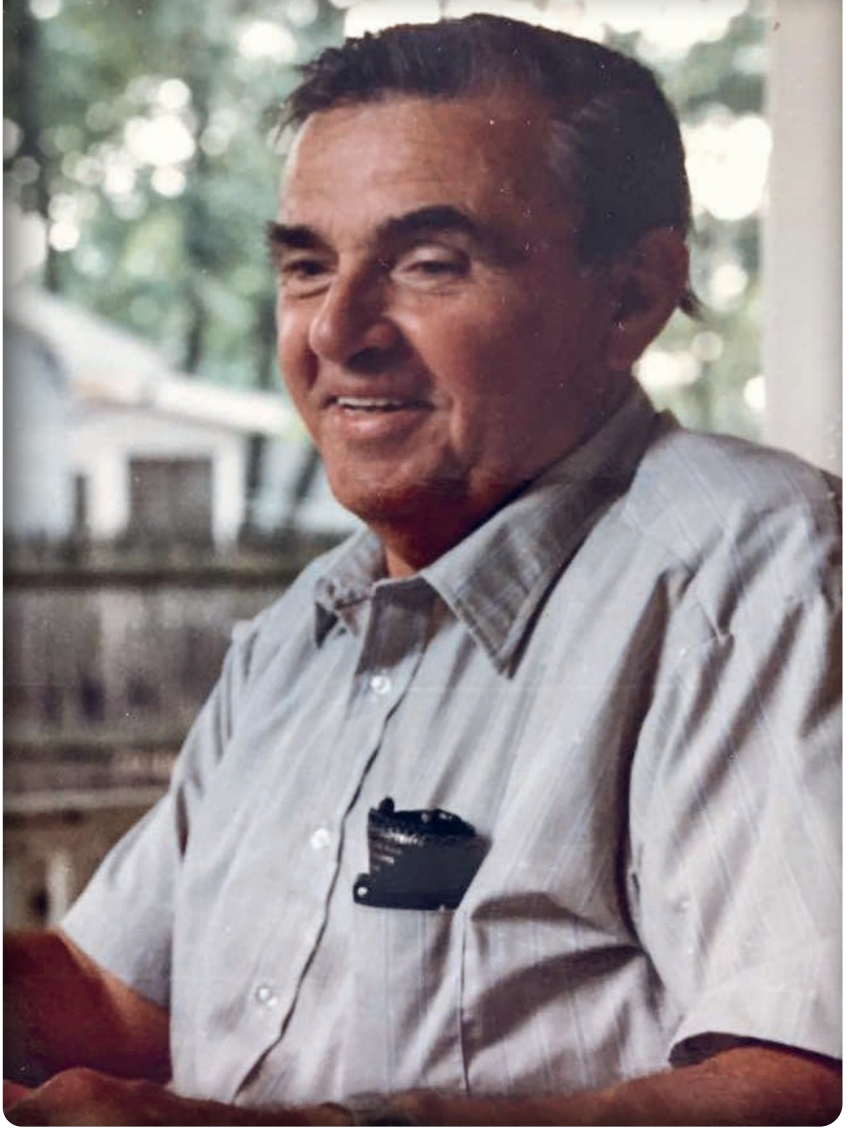
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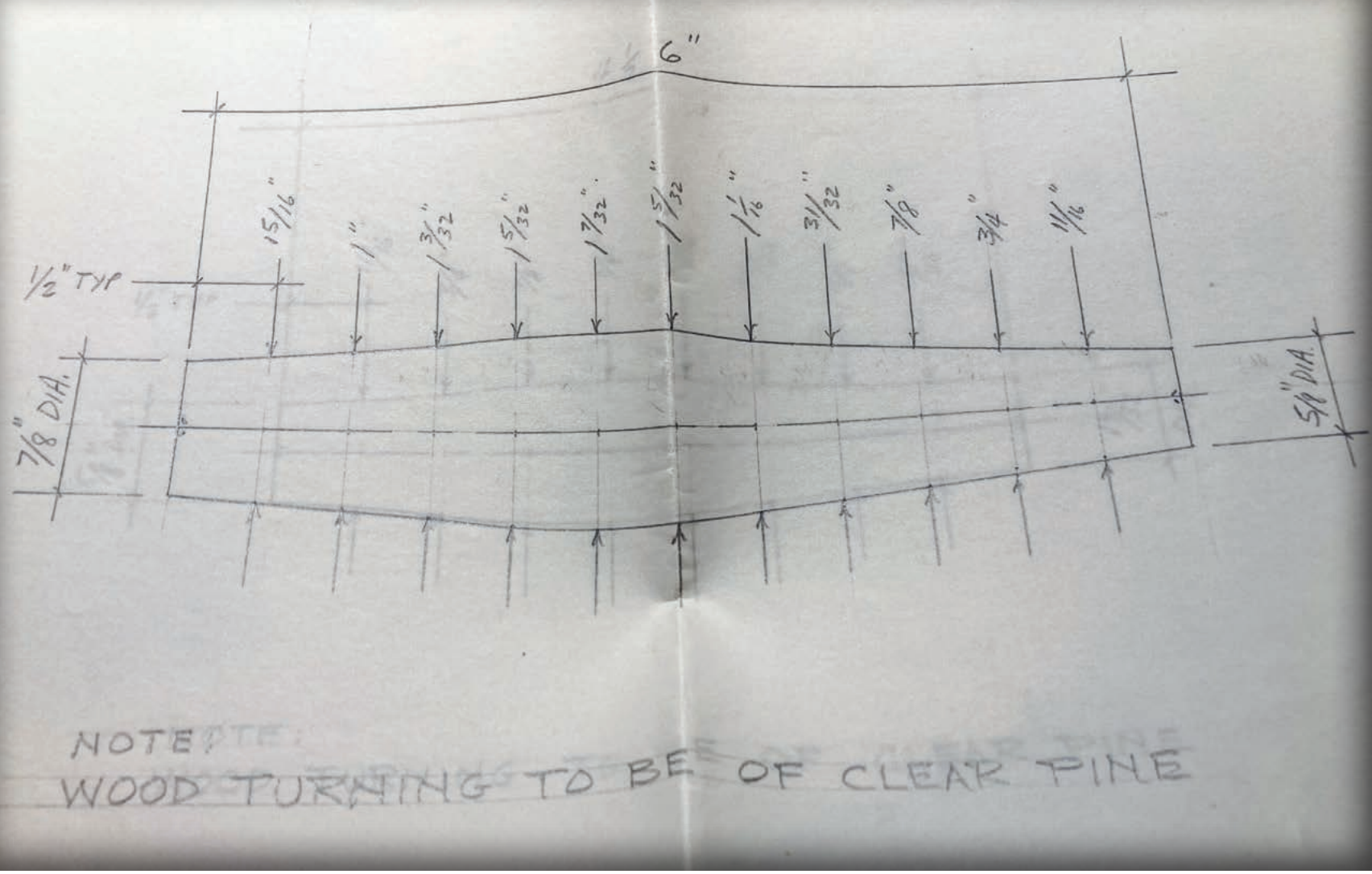
A display case of Danny Pichney's Conrad Juniors.



The Plugs of DANNY PICHNEY

BY FRED THURBER

The year was 1976 and the place was Brenton Reef off Newport, Rhode Island. I was fishing with the fiendishly clever and fanatically secretive striper ace, Fran Sargent, in his stealthy tin beater boat. Never heard of Fran Sargent? That was the way he wanted it; he made the Mad Russian (the furtive winner of four Vineyard Derbies) seem like a socialite. Even if you had heard of Fran, you never saw where he fished and you never, ever saw him land a fish, though at the end of the day, you might have noticed his boat sitting a few inches deeper in the water. If Fran had been sloppy or exhausted, you might have seen a massive square tail poking out of an overstuffed fish box, but in all the years I fished with him, I saw him drop his guard only once. The fish buyers at Spooner's in Westport, Massachusetts, knew the score, but almost no one else knew about his incredible haul of striped bass.



In an era before computerized CAD software, Pichney meticulously documented the precise dimensions of a plug that had the perfect action.

Anyway, the conditions looked promising that day in Newport, with an overcast sky and easy rollers coming in from the southwest; however, the fishing had been dismal and even Fran, the best striper man I ever fished with, could not conjure up a bass. We had been messing around with Atom 40s and similar plugs, but could not get them to swim right. We got a few swirls, but no hookups.

"Well, okay," sighed Fran. "I guess I should try one of these plugs that Charley Soares gave me."

Fran reached into his canvas sea bag and pulled out a large silver-and-blue plug in a clear plastic wrapper. This was the legendary, almost mythical plug turned by the hand of Danny Pichney himself. I had heard rumors of such plugs, but they were basically impossible to obtain in my area. No tackle stores that I knew of in New England carried them back then. Robert Vasta told me that he had to buy his first Danny plugs in the 70s out of the back of Charlie Kay's truck at Breezy Point jetty. Steve Campo noted that there were a few shops in New York City and Long Island that carried Danny plugs, but I assumed they did not last very long on the shelves. In southern New England, Danny Pichney plugs were available only to a few sharpies who had access to Danny himself. Luckily, Charley Soares was one of those sharpies, and he had given us a few of the plugs in the hope that he could curry favor with the notoriously tight-lipped Fran Sargent (all for naught, but that is a different story).

Fran unwrapped the plug, and I gawked in wonder at this original Danny in the "Mullet" color. It was the most beautiful plug I had ever seen as it shimmered in the faint sunlight. It seemed a shame to risk sending such an exquisite creation into harm's way, but Fran brushed off my objection, snapped it onto his line, and made a long cast downwind to a hidden reef, a reef with no white water showing. It betrayed its presence only as a slight watery hump as the seas rolled over it. It did not look very promising or particularly fishy.

None of us were prepared for what happened next. The plug traveled about two feet on the surface of the water and wiggled a few times, leaving a perfect wake. It then disappeared in a cloud of spray and was the last we saw of it. It was barely wet when a striper exploded on it and took off. Fran's Squidder reel whizzed and his heavy, 9-foot blonde Lamiglas rod doubled over. Even with 50-pound Dacron line and the drag screwed down as tight as he dared, Fran could not control the fish; it went to the bottom, ran over some barnacle-covered rocks, then his line went slack. Fran, muttering various unprintable invectives, reeled in his limp line that ended with a frazzled leader of 60-pound monofilament where the plug had once, ever so briefly, been attached.

Both of us were stunned. Here was a plug, fresh out of the package, still smelling of paint and epoxy. Unlike the Atom 40s and other plugs we experimented with, we did not have to fiddle with the eye. This genuine Danny plug swam perfectly right out of the bag, but not for long. I had never encountered a lure with such a short lifespan.

No wonder the original Danny Pichney plugs



Pichney felt that large, jointed plugs were the most difficult and time-consuming to make. Consequently, these are among the rarest and most collectible of the Danny plugs.

had a mystique about them. Not only were they well-nigh impossible to obtain, they were far and away the best surface lures of their era. From that day forward, I had a fascination with these creations. Eventually, I contacted Danny and ordered a few shipments. What he sent me was a grab-bag of various models and colors (some were experimental). Some we used, and some I stored away as collector's items.

Besides the surface swimmers, we also used a Pichney plug called the "Conrad," a large, weighty hardwood subsurface lure that ran deep. When the surf was heavy, we reached for Conrads because they traveled below the white water instead of wiggling around fruitlessly in the suds like a surface swimmer. The Conrad had a slow, seductive rolling action that proved irresistible to huge striped bass. In our experience, Conrads in the blue/pink/white "herring" color were the best fish catchers. The most violent strikes I have ever experienced were on these plugs during pre- and post-hurricane swells off Sakonnet and Newport. It felt like my arms were being wrenched out of their sockets.

After our explosive first experience with the Danny surface swimmer, Fran Sargent and I fished exclusively with original Pichney plugs when we could get them. Once, we even ran into Danny himself, who was fishing with Charley Soares off Cuttyhunk. Danny was using a conventional Penn Squidder with a stiff casting rod. He told us how the fish were on a "wood diet" that day, which we did not doubt.

I fished big Danny surface swimmers and Conrads for a decade or so until I was lucky enough to get in on the legendary striper blitzes on Block Island in the 80s. Although Danny had reluctantly made a few needlefish, it was the Gibbs, Gags, and Super Strike needlefish that dominated Block Island during those glory years. The one exception appeared to be the stubby, single-hook needlefish Danny made for Tim Coleman. The golden age of large wooden swimming plugs had started to wind down. After that, interest in the original Dannys waned, and they faded away, except for lure collectors who prized them above all others, especially the rarest models and colors.

One of the reasons that Pichney lures are so valued by collectors today is that Danny ran a small operation out of his basement and made a limited number of plugs. As he explained in an interview with Tim Coleman, when he first started selling plugs, he tried to keep his operation under wraps so he did not get overwhelmed with orders. It took Frank Keating, a

It took Frank Keating, a fishing writer for the *Long Island Press*, three years to find out who was making these amazingly effective lures. Of course, this secrecy just enhanced their mystique and desirability.



The so-called Bootleg subsurface plug looks like a surface swimmer that has been on a diet.

fishing writer for the *Long Island Press*, three years to find out who was making these amazingly effective lures. Of course, this secrecy just enhanced their mystique and desirability.

Today, there are countless plug builders churning out beautiful Danny-style plugs, and it is easy to forget how it all began. Danny Pichney (1921-1988) was a machinist from Jackson Heights, New York. He worked for Con Edison in Long Island City; in his spare time, he enjoyed fashioning his own fishing lures. Besides, as he explained to Tim Coleman, in the old days he could not afford commercially available plugs. Danny was a resourceful scrounger, collecting old pallets from Con Ed or discarded props from local theaters to use as wood for his lures. If the wood was not thick enough, he glued two slabs together to get something thick enough to turn on his lathe and then carefully position the heaviest wood on the bottom of the plug. According to Steve Campo, Danny bartered for all sorts of materials such as grommets, hooks, bucktails, stainless lip material, and plastic packaging material. As a result, there was some variability in the materials used in his lures. Unlike today's super glossed, airbrushed plugs, Pichney plugs have small diagnostic marks, streaks, and nicks, but the finish is extremely durable and long lasting. No one knows, or is willing to say, what Danny used for his secret paint and epoxy coatings, but it was some sort of volatile organic compound that is probably not legal today..

In 1966, Danny teamed up with another legendary lure builder from that era, Don Musso (who went on to create Super Strike lures). Unfortunately, this collaboration ended acrimoniously in 1973. One issue was a dispute over the 6-inch surface swimmer. According to Musso, Danny sold the design to Lupo Lures without consulting him first. The 6-inch swimmer, a scaled down version of the 7½-inch surface swimmers that Fran Sargent and I used, was supposedly an original design by Musso. He realized that by tapering both ends of the lure (in the shape of a tuna, as he explained), he could make it travel with a better wiggle and a smaller swim plate than the Atom 40 or other similar lures; thus, a legend was born. Unfortunately for Musso, from then on,

No one knows, or is willing to say, what Danny used for his secret paint and epoxy coatings, but it was some sort of volatile compound that is probably not legal today.

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this lure was named the Danny when maybe it should have been called the Donny.

By all accounts, Danny Pichney was a generous and very personable lure builder and fishing companion. I found him very engaging in the long phone conversations I had with him, and others who knew him better felt the same way. Robert Vasta said this: "He would make any plug you wanted. He would always work with you. Actually, he looked for input from fishermen all the time." Steve Campo knew Danny very well and called him an "awesome" person.

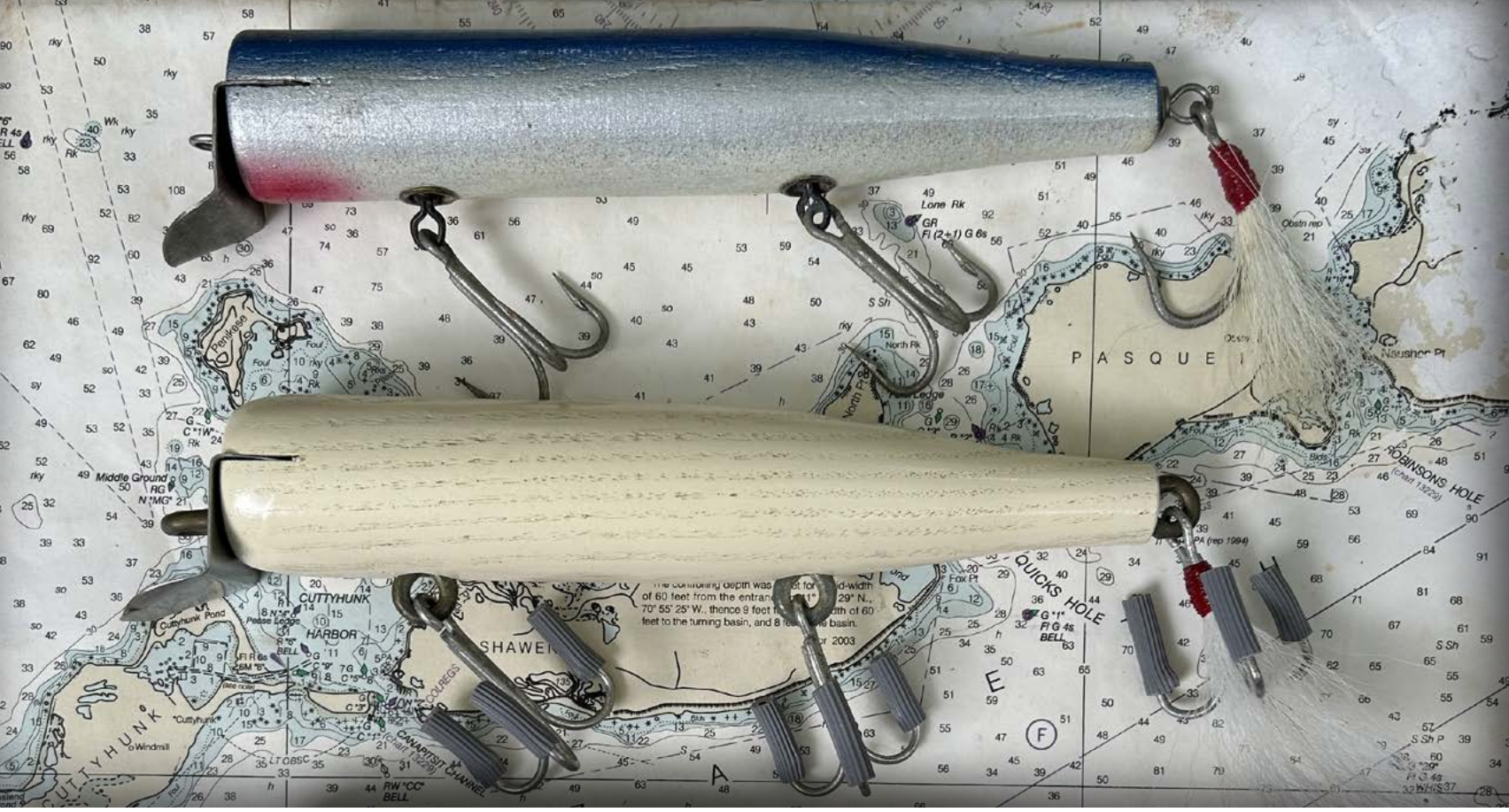
The Pichney Conrad plug had a different genesis. It was named after Conrad Malicoat (1936–2014), a skilled artisan from Provincetown, Massachusetts, who was famous for his art and elaborate brickwork. Malicoat was a resourceful craftsman; he built one of the historic dune shacks at P-Town from scrap lumber and driftwood. He also loved to fish the Backside Beach and Race Point, sometimes with the crew from the Striper Surf Club in Brooklyn. Conrad needed a lure that would run deep in the rips off the Cape, so he created a huge oak plug for his own use. According to a surfcaster from the club named Timmy "Tuna" Lendino, in about 1972, Joe Caparetta, a fellow club member, found one of these lures on the beach one night at Race Point. It was a breezy evening and Joe needed a heavy plug that could cut through the wind, so he snapped on the Conrad. He caught a huge bass (at least 50 pounds, according to Lendino) on his first cast. Joe brought the lure home, showed it to Danny, and asked him to make something comparable. After a number of improvements by Danny and Don, another legendary plug was born. By all accounts, Malicoat had jealously guarded his lure, refusing to show it to anyone, including his fishing buddies in the Striper Surf Club. According to his niece, Orin Dunigan, Conrad had a "hot Irish temper," and when he found out that a commercial version of his plug was being made, he was furious. He gave up striper fishing forever, snapped all his fishing poles in half, and never talked to his friends at the club again.

Steve Sylver, a highly skilled cabinetmaker and lure builder from Cape Cod, made a few reproductions of the original Malicoat Conrad for some friends. These replicas bear little resemblance to the Danny Conrad. The Malicoat plugs are huge, tough, beastly affairs of oak with massive brass screw eyes to hold the hooks instead of the more elegant thru-wire construction that Danny and Don used for the



The finish on all of Pichney's plugs is extremely durable and long-lasting.





The "Conrad" is a large, weighty hardwood subsurface lure that runs deep. It is ideal in heavy surf because it travels below the white water instead of wiggling around fruitlessly in the suds like a surface swimmer.

Pichney Conrad.

There is a mythology about the materials that went into Pichney Conrads. Everyone assumes that they were all made of rock maple, but Steve Sylver told me that Danny used whatever hardwood he could scrounge, not just maple, but oak and, especially, ash. The first handful of Pichney Conrads were thicker than the later ones. The rumor is that Danny made them from axe or sledgehammer handles, which means that these early models were made of hickory. In any case, the Malicoat and Danny Conrads share the same name and same deep-diving ability, but the construction seems quite different to me.

Another bit of Pichney mythology involves the single tail hooks on the swimmers. During the heyday of big plug fishing, the story was that Danny had invented the use of a single hook on the tail to enhance the lure's action. Steve Campo has a more prosaic explanation: Danny never used a vice to tie the bucktails to his tail hooks, but used his hand to hold the hooks instead. Campo said Danny found it much easier to tie them onto a single hook instead of a treble. Steve Sylver noted that this "innnovation" can be used to date Pichney lures since the earliest Danny plugs have treble tail hooks while the standard later plugs have single tail hooks.

Besides the surface swimmers and Conrad plugs, Danny made a wide variety of other lures such as darters, trolling plugs, and needlefish in various shapes and colors. He made over 20 models and over 90 model/paint combinations, many of which are quite rare. The most common Danny plug is probably his 6-inch surface swimmer or the 5½-inch Conrad. The rarest and most collectible Pichneys are his needlefish, sandeel, reverse squid, pencil and regular poppers, and jointed plugs. There are many different models between these extremes.

Danny made many metal-lipped swimmers. The surface swimmer came in at least three standard sizes: 7½-inch, 6-inch, and the cute little 4½-inch swimmer. Steve McKenna also has a 5-inch version that Danny called the Small.

The Conrad also came in various sizes: 7½-inch, 5½-inch, a small size at 4¾ inches, and the Peanut at 4¼ inches. The Conrad Peanut was a thin, heavy plug and usually had a groove around the head for an eel skin. This was a favorite plug of the Narragansett crowd. Occasionally, Danny cut a sharp angle on the face of the 5½-inch Conrad, lures called Slopeheads that are fairly rare.

The so-called Bootleg subsurface plug looks like a surface swimmer that has been on a diet. Bootlegs are not common, but Danny made even rarer, thinner plugs called the Sandeel and Jointed Sandeel that were his answer to the Rebel and Redfin plugs popular in the 70s with the Cape Cod crowd.

A more common family of lures from Danny is his Trollers, which he made in many colors and three sizes, the largest of which is a whopping 8 inches long. A Troller has a long, gradually sloping head and Pat Abate provided some background on it: "The troller was influenced by Ronny Lepper, a New York firefighter and charter captain. The boat sharpies in the New York Bight were modifying Creek Chub Giant Pikies by planing or sawing sloped heads on them and repainting them. Ron went to Danny and asked him to come up with a better version. He did."

Just to complicate things even more, Danny also made a swimmer with a rounded head that was sort of a wooden analogue of the Atom plug. There were at least four sizes ranging from 7¼ to 4¾ inches. The length of the mid-sized Junior version appears to have some variability, like so many other Pichney lures.

Danny also made darters in various colors


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Pichney also made darters in various colors and sizes, including a 7¼-inch darter with three hooks and a smaller one with two hooks.



Pichney was not too keen on needlefish, so there are not a lot of them out there. The ones in colors aside from his solid white or black are like hen's teeth these days and highly prized by collectors.

and sizes, including a 7¼-inch darter with three hooks and a smaller one with two hooks.

Danny's needlefish are hard to come by but were made with 1, 2, and 3 hooks. Danny called the single-hook version he made for Tim Coleman the Shorty Feathertail, but it was nicknamed the Pocket Rocket by the Block Island crowd. Tim also called it his wooden Hopkins. Danny was not too keen on needlefish, so there are not a lot of them out there. The ones in colors beside his solid white or black are like hen's teeth these days and highly prized by collectors.

In my conversations with Danny, he told me that the lures he really did not want to make—because they were so difficult—were large, jointed plugs. Consequently, these, such as his giant jointed pikie, are among the rarest and most collectible of the Danny plugs. He did make a number of smaller jointed plugs called eelies. One model is the Sloped Headed Eely and another, rarer lure, is known as the Flat-nose Eely, which was one of the deadliest plugs in my surf bag.

The color schemes that Danny chose to use on his plugs greatly affects their value and collectability. The white or Mullet pattern (royal blue back, silvery sides, and a white belly) is the most common. The rarest and most desirable finishes for a collector is the Cape Cod sandeel color (burnt orange over white), the light-green-over-silver color, and the mackerel or fish-scale pattern.

Of all the old saltwater plugs, I consider Pichneys to be the most collectible for various reasons. First, consider the price. Most of today's collectors are hardcore surfcasters from the 70s and 80s, and we are fading out these days (alas), so the number of collectors is getting smaller and the prices have dropped. Another reason is that the lures age so well. Unlike old Atom plugs that have a muddy color from faded varnish, the Pichneys today look as fresh and sparkling as they did when first made. When I take one out of its plastic wrapper, it looks exactly the same as when I first saw one some 50 years ago with Fran Sargent. I guess the biggest reason that I am intrigued by these lures is that they are just so beautiful to look at and bring back memories of a bygone era of striper fishing.

The price of original Danny plugs is currently very reasonable. You can probably buy a pristine original surface swimmer or Conrad in its wrapper, untouched since Danny himself packaged it, for about $50 to $80; slightly used versions sell for less. The rarest Pichneys cost over $100 if you can find them, but they do come up for sale now and then.

There is a small, tight-knit community of Pichney collectors who communicate online. Most of the buying, selling, and trading of these lures is done through the "Buy/Sell/Trade" forum on the StripersOnline message board. Pichney plugs occasionally show up on eBay, at estate sales, or in "divorce" sales, when a disgruntled spouse sells off a collection for pennies on the dollar in a yard sale. A fishing friend of mine lost all his Pichney and old wooden Atom plugs in just such a fire sale.

So, what happened to Danny Pichney's jigs, designs, and equipment? They went to Bobby Glauda, who apprenticed with Danny as a teenager, making plugs and learning his techniques. The lures that Bobby makes are known as Beachmaster lures, and are similar to Danny plugs but with a more polished appearance. And like the original Pichneys, Beachmasters are hard to find. They occasionally show up in tackle stores, but are quickly gobbled up. The arrival of Beachmaster lures in the 1990s may have sparked the current resurgence in high-quality, hand-crafted wooden plugs.

About Pichney Plugs

If you have questions about Pichney plugs, the best place to start is with the StripersOnline plug collector's forum. Russ "Bassdozer" Comeau created a comprehensive list of the various Pichney and early Musso models and colors at bassdozer.com. Another resource is the Saltwater Lure Collectors Club. They hold an annual show at White's of Westport in Westport, Massachusetts. Here, you have a chance to see or buy some original Pichney lures.

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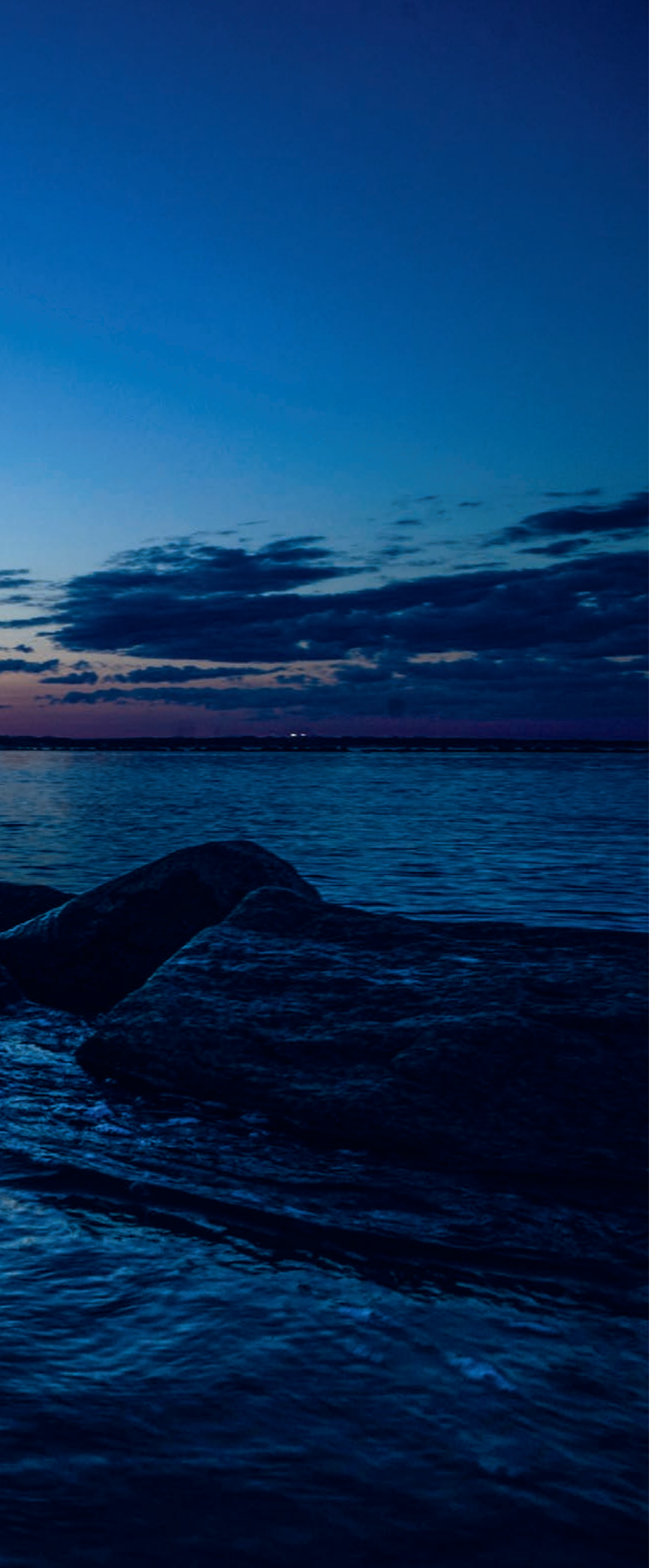
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At Night in the Surf

STORY BY JESSE L. ROBBINS
PHOTOS BY JOE KLEMENTOVICH

I follow the figure in front of me down the beach, a silhouette barely darker than the horizon. I can't see him well, but I sense his proximity and maintain a close but consistent distance away, which prepares me for the steps that require additional care. Though we both wear headlamps, neither are in use and, in the absence of a clear visual of the beach, my hearing distinguishes the type of ground we're walking on. I hear his boots softly squish over sand, then crunch and grind on small stones, and then slide and squeak on top of large, seaweed-covered ledges. Then, a new sound: boots entering water. I stop, look up, and realize that we've reached our destination. This is where I will fish. At least for now.

I was raised a daytime angler. As a boy, I was taught by my father that when it comes to fishing, one goes to bed early so he can then get up early and catch the morning bite. Staying up for a bite was also in play but concluded promptly at dark for the previously mentioned reason. As I grew older and my fishing gained independence, "early" and "late" stretched into "earlier" and "later" but I still conducted the business part of my angling during daylight. Then I befriended an angler whose approach fell far from my own; an approach based more on feel than feedback, more intuition than imitation, more consciousness than coincidence—an angling approach with higher stakes than simple recreation: night fishing.



"Remember the map I drew?" my friend asks. "This is the shallow boulder garden in the northeast corner."

Earlier in the day, he'd sketched a 10-or-so-acre section of shoreline with no fewer than 20 landmarks and areas to fish. I tried to recall the specifics of this particular waypoint and looked into the dark for clues but was given none in return. The task was much more straightforward on paper.

"Let me see your fly," he says, and I show him. "That's fine. The tide just turned, so the current is going to pick up soon. Swing your fly through all these currents and seams. As the water drops, wade further out so you can fish more of the boulder garden."

"Got it," I say, confidence imperceptible.

"I'll be over there." He points into the night. "Yell if you need me."

He walks away, the sounds of his steps eventually overtaken by the soft crashes of waves and the ocean flowing over the rocks I am about to fish. I take a hesitant step into the water, and another, my feet sliding over the bottom to make sure it doesn't fall out from underneath me. A few more steps and my right foot bumps into a boulder. I trace its outline with my boot and keep moving. Now knee-deep, I unhook my fly from a rod guide and flip it into the water. It disappears.

We'd decided that I would fly fish, even though he was positive that it was a less-productive method for this area. Our reasoning was that I'd be better off fishing a spot I didn't know with a technique I *did* know, as opposed to not knowing either. In any case, there's no debating that my angling companion and I are compromised. Nevertheless, I begin. At first it feels like everything is inverted, like the world has turned upside down, and I'm fishing in a reflected ocean—as if I'm a mirror-image of myself, casting and fishing with my off-hand. Thankfully, the rod in my hand is not a new tool. I start short and am soon sending 60 feet of line comfortably into the unknown and unseen. What the fly does when it gets there is much less clear to me.

To a degree, all fishing during the day is sight fishing in that you can see your fly, plug, or bait. You can see what it looks like in the water, see where it lands, and sometimes see when a fish follows it. At night, however, sight is replaced by feel and the learning curve that charts challenges and rewards is much steeper, and reaches greater magnitudes. Without the benefit of sight, I'm required to visualize my fly in the water, not just what it looks like but how it's moving and where. It's difficult at first because it's new, but soon I'm no longer thinking about doing it, I'm just doing it. With no visual cues to tell me when a fish is near, I'm forced to fish each cast as if it is being followed. In my mind, I see and believe in each and every presentation.

As for my friend, he's doing what he knows best—surfcasting at this specific spot, and after a while, I hear him call my name. I turn and yell in the direction he'd pointed, and he responds from somewhere else.

"Doin' good?" he asks.

My response is swallowed by the night, but I acknowledge that I am indeed doing just fine.

Whereas fishing during the day sometimes makes time feel fleeting, at night, time not only slows, it seems to get lost. Instead of running a

It's said that the brighter the light, the more darkness you can see. In my case, the inverse has become true: the dark has illuminated what I do not know.


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losing race against the rising sun, we are drafting off the moon's soft glow, riding the night's camouflage and its intoxicating, comforting, and liberating effect on the fish. I know they're happy out there and I'm faithful that if my fly swings in front of one, it will annihilate it. Why wouldn't it? Anticipation may hold at night, but it never wanes. Senses are in overdrive and even slight changes in current or wind are cause for concern and curiosity. A sudden inconsistency in the white noise of the wash raises an eyebrow and the hairs on the back of my neck.

"Let's move," I hear from behind me. I reel in, and while doing so, consider that I have no idea how long he's been standing there.

By now my steps are surer and my eyes have fully adjusted to the color spectrum that spreads before us. Blues, purples, grays, and pitch black are the palette of this evening's painter, and our silhouettes slide in and among them as we make our way to another spot. I imagine us traversing my friend's hand-drawn map and I'm now able to match his descriptions and depictions to what's actually out here—a visual translation made possible only after having been submerged in the scene.

We arrive at our next spot and drop our gear on a rocky beach. I know things have changed since we started fishing—the tide, moonlight, etc.—but why we're here, now, I understand only in concept, not by any evidence. An alignment of conditions is critical, as always, but instead of waiting for a certain tide or particular wind to coincide with daybreak or dusk, my friend has charted these variables' intersection with the dead of night. He begins fishing while I try to take in the new surroundings.

Intentionally, I haven't checked the time. I thought it would be amusing to lose track of it, but now that I'm out here and have also lost track of place, I'm not sure how it would help me, really. I do know that I'm tired. No surprise, as I haven't been awake at this hour since I don't know when. Fishing at night is habitual in the sense that it doesn't come easy at first and requires the breaking of a competing habit to even engage in—sleeping, namely. Or, sleeping during normal hours. But, like going to the gym or learning an instrument, at some point along the way, the activity loses its novelty and becomes even more than a routine, it becomes a practice. Going night fishing just once is harsh on the body and the mind; that's where I'm at now. But the more frequently it's repeated, the easier it gets and the harder it is to stop, until it's just what you do; that's where my friend is.

I decide to take a break and see what I can learn by watching him. Reclining against a smooth rock, legs crossed and hands behind my head, I watch him fish. Each cast is precise, a foot this way or that, and his retrieves alternate between reeling, back-reeling, and letting his lure rise and swing in the current. It is clear that he is doing something much different than what I was doing with my fly, controlling his presentation in a way that I wasn't and likely can't. I recognize that this is a function of both his equipment and his understanding of this place. It's said that the brighter the light, the more darkness you can see. In my case, the inverse has become true: the dark has illuminated what I do not know.

Suddenly, I perceive a change in his posture, and he sets the hook with his entire body. The rod arches into the night sky, line pointing into the abyss. Somewhere out there, a striped bass has been hooked. My friend takes off down the beach in pursuit and I'm following him once again, keeping my distance as before, now so as not to interfere. I watch the fight with no idea where the fish is until my friend kneels to land it.

"Wanna see what they look like?"

The blues, purples, grays, and pitch black of the night swirl yet again, as if slowly stirred together in a paint bucket. And in the middle of it all is me, my friend, and his fish.



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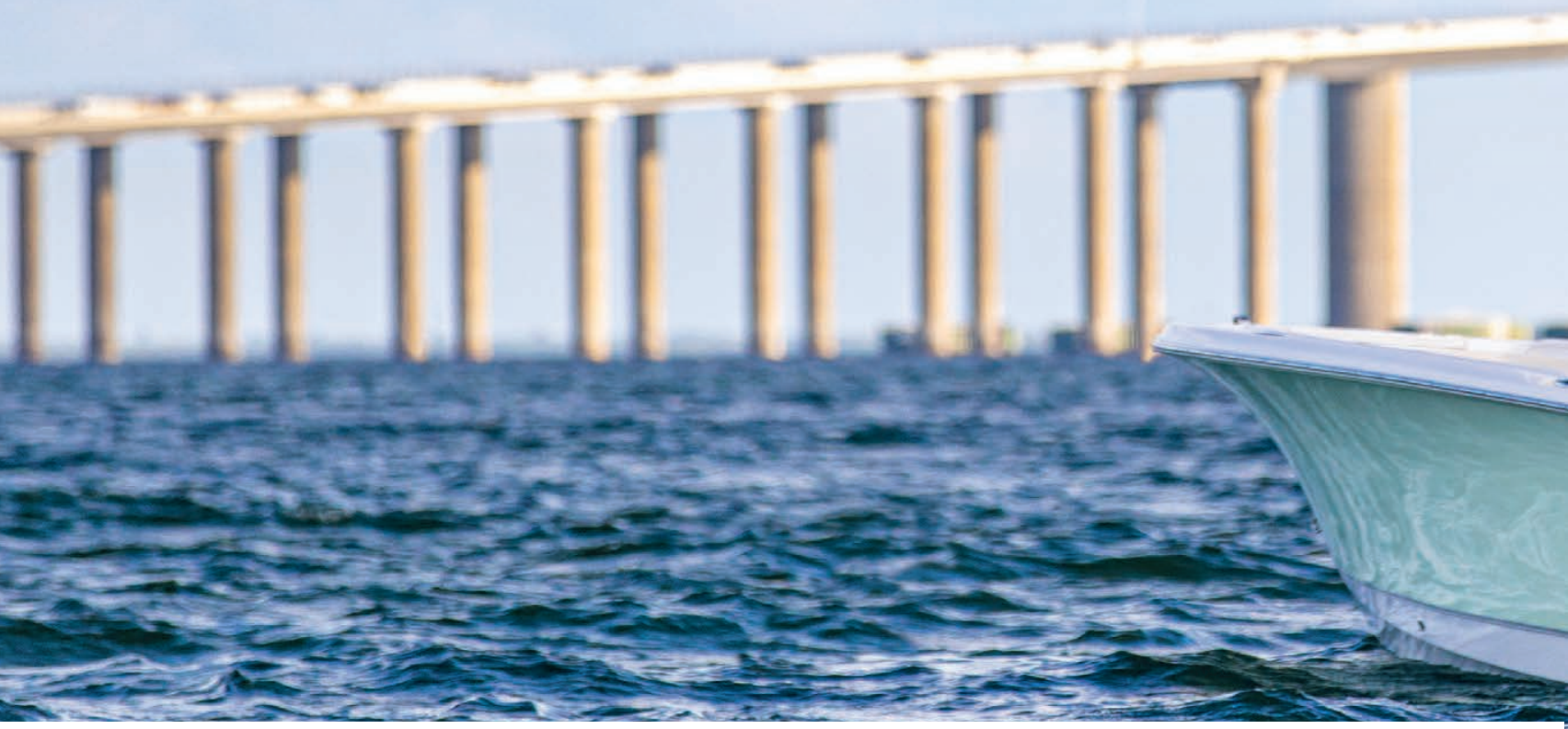
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Dispatches

FROM MONTAUK



Recalling past fall runs at The End

STORY & PHOTOS BY CAPTAIN JOHN W. PAPCIAK

Each year in Montauk is different, but a selection of journal entries over the last couple of years helps provide color to the fall-run days we remember the most.

The Bowl

A boulder field left over from the last ice age forms a cove. A rising tide and a southeast swell dump white water and small bait into the bowl. My fishing buddy, Paul, has been doing a much better job of keeping it honest through mid-September. He tells me the bass are now coming in on the flood.

The only question is whether to wear waders or a wetsuit, and that depends on how aggressive we are to push out. The rest of the outfit was decided about 25 years ago: a '99 vintage Van Staal 200, a Lamiglas 9-foot light-action blank, 30-pound braid, and a few white bucktails between ¾ and 1½ ounces. Anything more in a surf bag is overkill, assuming I'm willing to carry it.

We pull into the lot to see a couple of familiar trucks, though we almost never see their owners. Today, they are either asleep—waiting for the night tide—or out on an ambitious walk across the coconut-sized boulders along the south side.

This will be easy fishing, with one exception: we must have good cleats for getting through the kelp-covered tidal pools and a proven way of securing them to our boots. I have a nice collection of odd Korkers I found in The Bowl—lefts and rights, in several sizes—proof that many surfcasters rush through the important lacing-up step.

We climb over the boulders and kelp, and by the time the white water is just over my knees, I see the first dorsal fin. I wave to Paul and point. He laughs. "I know, I know. It's been like this the last few days. Just wait, it gets better!"

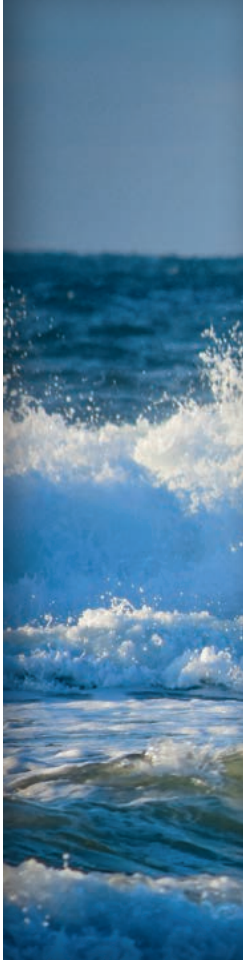
Most surfcasters tend to arrive and launch their first casts out as far as they can. However, in the bowl, it's usually better to keep casts short lest you risk hanging up on a large rock on the outside. I make my first cast and fear I've made exactly that mistake, then I realize the resistance is a feisty schoolie.

I look left to see Frank already hooked up as well. Paul holds off on casting for the moment, happy to see this session going off as advertised.

The bass come and go in waves as the flooding tide brings ever larger walls of white water. My 3-millimeter wetsuit seems a bit much for an early fall afternoon. Each time I feel warm, I kneel down, hold my breath, and let a wave wash over my head. I stay under a little longer, and for a few seconds I forget that I am even fishing. It's pure therapy … the rush of seawater and the bubbles.

By the time the tide tops out, we have retreated at least 100 feet. We finally use a lull in the action as an excuse to call it a day, but as I turn toward shore, I see another dorsal fin. There were fish feeding behind us the whole time.



















Tumbleweed Tuesday

Labor Day Monday, as usual, ends with a traffic jam of sedans and high-end SUVs heading west. Montauk locals look forward to the day after Labor Day—historically known as Tumbleweed Tuesday. Some years, the community even celebrates by hiring a band to play on the green in the center of town.

This year, the fall run follows the calendar. Two days after Labor Day, false albacore intercept early waves of bay anchovies emptying from Gardiner's Bay, just inside Montauk Point. Everything feels on schedule—a couple of weeks behind Cape Cod and Martha's Vineyard.

Early albies are uncharacteristically aggressive and every bit as willing to take a full range of flies, epoxy jigs, even poppers. They raid shallow water as well, and a few fly-casting locals can be seen running along the beach in bare feet, hooking up as they go.

The "mosquito fleet"—a Montauk dragger captain's description of the swarm of fly and light-tackle vessels chasing birds off Montauk Point each fall—will not be in full force for another three weeks. Until then, it's long drifts, multiple hook-ups, and little worry that circling outboards will put feeding fish down.

However, with Tumbleweed Tuesday comes the other harsh reality of the season. My news feed from NOAA points out weather disturbances west of Cape Verde. Next are estimates of formations into something more tropical. Each developed system is followed with endless model runs, as ridges and troughs are expected to steer the strengthening systems west, and then north. I obsess about it a bit too much, but experiencing Sandy head-on scarred my memory.

Few tropical cyclones pose a significant threat here, but almost everything directed into the North Atlantic will have at least some impact. It might be a few days of a large swell, it could be a week of brutal Northeast winds, or it might be something more direct and significant.

I add a second set of lines to the cleats at the dock. I recheck the trailer, bearings, axles, and tires, just in case I need to pull the boat on short notice.







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The Cold Front

The dog days of summer, and all that humidity, are a distant memory. It's 52 degrees as I stumble down the dock in the dark. September is coming to a close, and a T shirt isn't going to cut it today. I struggle to find the arms of my heavy fleece top.

I climb aboard the Contender and reach into the console to flip on the battery, holding my breath, hoping the engine turns over. The Yamaha shudders and comes to life, the exhaust trailing off into the cool morning air.

"Damn, if only this wind would let up just a little, I could at least get around the point. I'll worry about wind against tide for the ride home."

That never works. Just try riding past screeching birds, with the sight of false albacore ripping across the surface—the best of it in the nastiest sections of the chop.

Putting 60 feet of fly line into the air with a 20-knot crosswind means hooking your captain, your friends, or the outboard—probably all the above. A risk worth taking.

The white water from the top of a wave gets blown at us, and plenty of it comes over the bow as we reposition for the next drift. Absolutely nothing left above deck will remain dry this morning.

It's delightful chaos. Not a thought for anything else going on in my life—nothing matters now except holding on and getting off a good cast as soon as some heads or tails show.

The wind dies down and swings southwest by late afternoon. The albies are still eating but are much less aggressive now. My crew is fading too. We beat ourselves up, along with our gear, and snapped off a few good jigs and flies in the process.

What's left are stories of fishing victories at sea, and albies crisscrossing in the face of the waves. I'm having a beer now at the marina restaurant. My lips burn with the taste of sea salt and sunblock. I can still feel the boat rocking.



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Running The Sand

There are approximately 22 miles of fishable ocean beach from Montauk Point to the town line with Southampton, about 17 of which can be driven these days. The days of doing the whole thing in one go are far behind me. I've driven every foot of it over the last 30 years: three vehicles, two clutches, and two new transmissions. If I've gotten any wiser, I know that predetermined stops, and letting the binoculars do the work, is a much more practical way to cover larger distances of sand.

A fellow surfcaster once joked: "There are highway miles and city miles … and, well, then there are beach miles."

It's rare to run the sand in the fall without seeing something positive. It's the second week of October, and today will be no different. Driving west, I immediately spy terns picking away at bay anchovies from a sand point on the eastern boundary of Hither Hills. Two sets of surfcasters are way ahead of me, driving toward the action. I'm quite content to nurse an oversized mug of coffee from the overlook lot.

A second, larger group of birds begins circling about a quarter mile out. Very promising, but not as helpful to a surfcaster. I text a friend, Montauk Captain Tim O'Rourke, just in case he is heading out by boat into a north wind that is blowing harder than forecasted.

The next stop is near the 4x4 access path on Napeague, a narrow sand isthmus connecting Amagansett with Montauk. A large concentration of birds and trucks are visible through my binoculars. A massive flock of birds are spread out over a very wide area, but are at least 4 to 5 casts out.

Another 2-mile run further west, to another 4x4 access point, confirms that the main activity is confined to the Napeague State Park section. Nothing more to see, so I commit and release 15 psi from the tires of my Jeep Wrangler.

I drive along the 4x4 path through dunes lined with pitch pines. I've run it hundreds of times, but it gets harder when I think back to what it once was. It takes only the slightest cue: the smell of honeysuckle, the sight of early winterberries, or the rays of sun breaking through the blue clouds over the dunes during a fall rain squall. I want to go back to a time and a place when a surfcaster's world seemed perfect. I'm overcome with emotion. So many fall runs here, so many epic days chasing fish down the sand with so many good friends who have departed.

The urgency of intercepting fish suddenly becomes less important, so I take my time. The points, bars, and troughs of a sand beach come into focus. Even a wild and undeveloped beach like this one follows a process. The waves come over the bar and water channels parallel to the beach until it retreats through a cut. Striped bass come over the bar when there is enough water, and sometimes even when there is not. The contour of a wild sand beach changes week to week, but certain bars and cuts remain prominent year after year.

I stop to cast bucktails at each point and remember specific trips with special people. I slowly work my way east toward the main action.









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A Late Push of Bass

The main body of fish from a couple weeks ago have moved on. A frost warning has been issued for agricultural interests on the East End as the month of October ends. It's a morning for a knit cap and heavy fleece top. The wind swings wildly each day, from northeast to northwest, then southwest, then all the way around again. Every day, there's a new small-craft advisory. I won't bother taking the boat out in that chop unless there is a really good reason. Nothing seen or heard lately suggests it's worth it.

It's a "date trip," which means bringing my wife in the Jeep. We pick up spiced coffee and donuts decorated with pumpkins from the bake shop, and drive around like a couple of yokels with rods on the front bumper. If we don't find any fish, that's perfectly fine—we'll end with a late afternoon stop for local ale and steamers at the Chowder House.

After a quick loop around the Montauk Lighthouse lot, and then through the 4x4 access path to the north side, I'm reminded of why I should never make fishing predictions. I'm totally unprepared for this.

Fish are rolling in the wash, everywhere. Better yet, it's late October and it's been so slow that nobody is here. I try to behave like a normal person. I sip my coffee and hand my wife a donut. She knows me better.

"Are those fish right there? Yes? Oh my god, look at all of them! Aren't you going to get out and catch some?"

If I needed permission to get out and fish, this was more than I could hope for.

I open the tailgate to grab my waders, only to realize that I left them hanging in the back of the house by the hose. Great, no Korkers either. Nothing, just my new leather flip-flops.

At least I have a plug bag, but I open it to see it's still loaded for a recent night tide, basically needlefish and darters. There's still a 2-ounce Ava-style jig on one of the rods. It will have to do.

I walk down to the waterline, trying to steer clear of the slime-covered rocks. I send off a cast, and within a few cranks, I'm into a bass. I pull the 9-pound schoolie over the kelp-covered rocks. So far so good, but now I have to release it. I kick off my flip-flops and throw them a few feet above the waterline. I roll up my pants and step over the rocks and kelp in my bare feet, but the next wave soaks me to my backside. The bass is successfully released, but now my arms are soaked up to my elbows.

The water is cold, but the fish continue to blitz. I make another cast with the Ava jig, and I immediately hook up, then again, and again. I must look like a spectacle out there, standing barefoot in a tidal pool in street clothes, getting drenched by a wave every so often. A couple of tourists visiting the lighthouse stop to take pictures of me fighting a fish.

An unknown number of hours later, my feet are numb from the cold water. The air temperature is dropping quickly as the late October sun sets. We will start losing light by 6 p.m.

The fish keep coming, but I've had enough. Somehow, I had at least enough sense to pack a towel and dry sweatshirt in the Jeep. I put the rod back in the holder and grab a camera to capture a few shots of some very lucky surfcasters who ignored the no-fish-here reports and drove to Montauk anyway.

We rush back home so I can get a hot shower. There is just enough time to go for those steamers after all.


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Veteran's Day

It's now the 11th week of the fall run. I've used up almost all the hall passes and brownie points from my wife. There's a certain crankiness in my demeanor that I blame on so many blown-out trips, being a day late and a dollar short on others, and a general lack of consistency in the local fall runs over the last couple of years.

This is a "What have I got to lose?" kind of trip. The boat is still in the water, there's a light wind and, most importantly, I've got some gas in the tank, thanks to those previously canceled trips. It's just me today.

I clear the inlet to immediately find flocks of birds working bait in multiple places. I'm the proverbial kid in a candy store, as one blitz looks better than the next. All of them feature bass and blues on the surface, even a few albies. I finally set my sights on a tremendous mess of birds and breaking fish just east of Washington Shoal, a rocky hump between inner and outer Shagwong reefs. It's simply impossible to lower a jig or fly into the water and get it back without a fish. When I tire from the bass, I try my luck flipping epoxy jigs for albies. This is pointless because a large bluefish intercepts them every time.

After a siesta and as the tide turns, the blitzing continues, but now it's even more intense and widespread. At times, I'm driving through good schools of breaking fish to get to even thicker schools of breaking fish. This is a definite no-no as far as fishing etiquette is concerned, but on a day like today, it doesn't matter.

The light-tackle fleet consists of one or two diehards and me, depending on how and when you do the counting. Everybody else is either out of the water, fishing back west, or off to more exotic places.

I finally put the rod down and pop open a Diet Coke. I dig around the cockpit for that bag of stale pretzels I remember seeing 2 weeks ago. There is no reason to catch another fish, but it's too early to head home.

I'm happy to just let the boat take me where the wind and tide pleases. The soda washes down the barely-edible pretzels as I watch the Garmin sonar screen lit up from all the fish below.

I wonder if the fall run is getting later now. I wonder where all the fish under the boat began their journey. Maine? Cape Cod? I wonder how many more fishable days on the water I will get before the dockmaster tells me that's it, that I absolutely, positively, must pull the boat.



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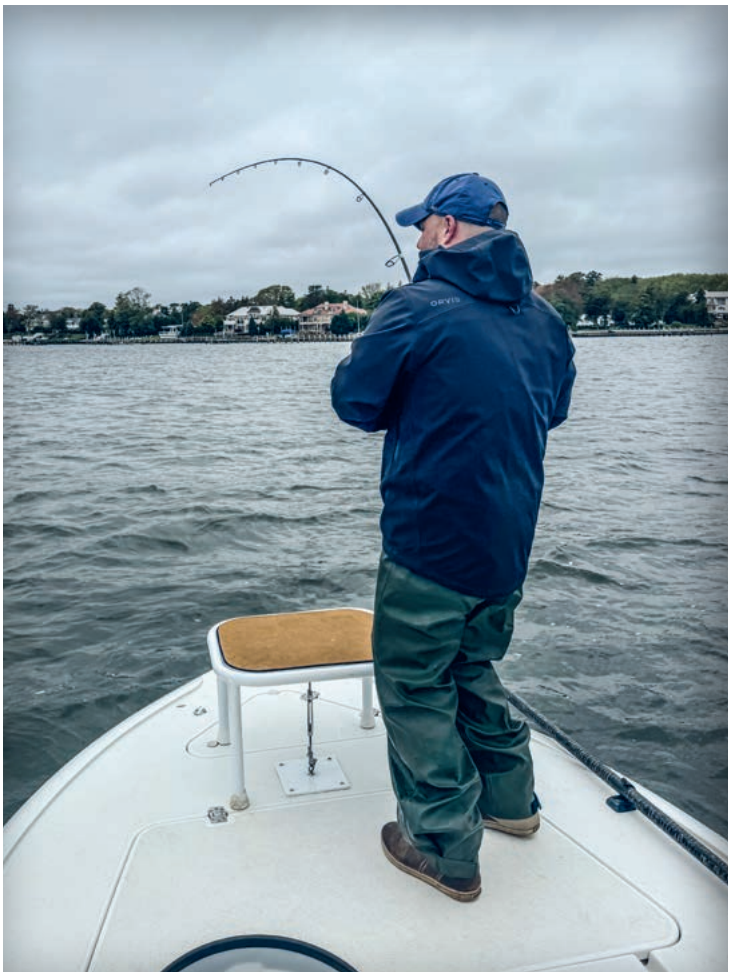
Baking bread, catching bluefish, and the value of trial and error.

STORY & PHOTOS BY MICHAEL CARR

Fishing rumors are the best. Texts and calls interrupt workdays throughout the season with tales of epic glory if only you were there. Anglers invented FOMO. I don't like the acronym any more than I like the platforms on which it's popular, but if you've ever been interested in fishing or even fish-curious, you understand the fear of missing out.

In my ninth-grade English classes, I have a little box at the front of the room where each student is expected to deposit his or her cellphone. Throughout our time together, the phones repeatedly buzz, and I can only imagine what this generation of kids must be feeling as their lives whizz by at the speed of a text, snap, or post.





Who doesn't love a good bluefish session?

Anglers love a scoop. We love to be in the know. And, like my students, if we've developed a network of fellow travelers, we get the goods on where it's going off at any particular moment. Life, responsibilities be damned, *get here now*.

On Friday, I texted Zach because I had heard a rumor via text from an acquaintance. The rumor was that if I could get there early enough and avoid the idiocy of a New Jersey canal, I might have a shot at some monster bluefish that had set up residency around an island in the channel. It was hearsay. I asked for photos and got none. I asked for numbers and was scoffed at. I think this particular tidbit was just one of those texts designed to torture me while I was grading papers.

But, to my surprise, Zach responded with the same information. He had pictures, and it turned out, a client who didn't like to fish in the rain. The weekend forecast was quite soggy, so a plan began to form.

I went through the motions of Friday. Then Saturday came and we celebrated my son's birthday with a movie and dinner with his buddies. It was a fun day all around. I hadn't heard from Zach and hadn't really thought about the gators swimming in the river all day. Then Zach texted, *QuickChek. 4am. I got numbers*. And just like that, my Sunday got a little more exciting.

"The Blue House. He said to find the blue house, and that's where they'll be," Zach said giddily as we pulled out of the QuickChek lot with coffees and supplies for the morning. His friend Jack had found the fish the day before, and unlike my stingy network of sadistic allies, Jack had shared the numbers and the strategy.

"They're really picky. Apparently, they were roaming in ones and twos and if you didn't hit them right on the head, they wouldn't eat," Zach said. I sat with sleepy interest, wondering what the rest of the day might hold.

We both had fly rods, but Zach had packed a full arsenal of spinning gear as well. We wanted to catch the fish our way, but it was his only day off in the height of guide season, so if they weren't eating flies, we were certainly going to feed them something. Rods would be bent on the boat today.

On the drive south, we caught up about the doings of life, and he again worked on convincing me that a trip to Block Island was long overdue. I certainly agreed, though I had no idea when I was going to find the time to add that to the growing list of family commitments. Somewhere in between helping my oldest with his catcher's crouch and helping my youngest with a new Marvel Lego while working full-time trying to help other people's kids be their best selves, I wasn't sure a jaunt out to Block Island was in the cards. However, I've learned to never say no until I absolutely have to. If I give in to the swirling anxieties of life, it might just pass me by. So, yes, Zach, Block Island someday.

We made it south of Asbury but north of Atlantic City and found a



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deserted boat ramp. The Jet Skiers were hibernating, and conditions seemed perfect on this particular piece of water because it was just cold enough to keep the casual angler away. And, the breeze and overcast weather was just right.

Twenty minutes later, Zach slowly idled the skiff toward the location that was supposed to hold bluefish. The water temperature was 55 degrees. Bluefish in 55-degree water? Surely someone was deep-faking us—it had to be the work of AI. We were both convinced that there were no bluefish in water this cold, but we went ahead and cast anyway.

I love striped bass. They're my favorite fish to catch with a rod and reel. I will always have a deep affinity for the nobility of a striper fight—head shakes and runs, tail whacks and thrown hooks, chaos near the boat. For me, they're everything but, man, do I love a good bluefish session.

Bluefish are scrappers, brawlers, biters, and nasty yellow-eyed predators. Their teeth are razor-sharp, and they flail and jump like electric eels. Once boatside, they tend to try everything in their power to become unhooked. They're spastic and acrobatic, and such fun on conventional gear. They're exhilarating on a fly rod.

Zach cast a jumpin minnow as an opening salvo while I threw a jerkbait. Within five casts, my submerged bait was eaten, and I was hooked up to a hard-running bluefish that pulled drag and would not quit until it was exhausted. It was a good way to wake up, and it wasn't even fully light yet.

We changed both rods to submerged swimbaits and proceeded to catch three more angry blues before putting down the spin gear and picking up the fly rods. By then, Zach had Facetimed his buddy, Jack.

"You in front of the blue house?" Jack asked.

Zach turned the camera and showed him the blue roof a few hundred yards away. Everything was setting up exactly right and there were no other boats around. We had the honey hole all to ourselves.

Fly fishing in salt water, when not sight-fishing, is usually not too difficult once you've mastered the cast. The leaders tend to be short and the rods tend to be fast. The lines are often heavy, and the flies bulky. Many times, I'm lobbing more than casting because fish are either breaking or feeding right below me.

After spending the better part of an hour watching big bluefish explode on plastic baits, the expectations for a fly to get eaten tend to be very high. If I can get the fly in front of them, they're probably going to eat it. The water was relatively clear and shallow. I threw an intermediate line with the same white-profile fly as the plastic bait that had just worked. After a while, I changed retrieves; so did Zach. Then we changed flies. We changed flies again. We moved the boat. We tried poppers, then threw giant Beast Fleyes. Zach picked up the spin rod, took two casts, and caught another fish. Suffice it to say, we were both flummoxed.

Striped bass are picky. Bonito are nearly impossible. False albacore eat only what's right in front of them, but bluefish? Bluefish are voracious feeders. If they miss a bait, they come back and bite it again. They see something, they eat it. So, what were these bluefish doing?

We stayed locked on the flat in front of the blue house. There were some kayak anglers around, but none seemed completely dialed in. There were no other boats. We worried that if we moved from our spot, somebody would sneak in and be in the catbird seat. So, we stayed













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Bread-making, like fishing, takes some trial and error, and patience to spare, but eventually, it all comes together.

and tried flies again, and again, and again. I finally put down the fly rod, picked up the spin rod, and caught another fish. Now, we were just irritated. Why wouldn't they eat our flies?

Years ago, I found myself on Horseshoe Shoal between Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard. I was a green angler, not a great caster, and I was with a patient captain who'd agreed to take me after what he called "Crawcs" in his thick Massachusetts brogue, because crocodiles grow larger than alligators.

We set up on a rip near the shoal and it was there I first learned the bait-and-switch game with a fly rod. One angler casts a hookless plug and the other waits for the toilet flush on the lure to cast the fly. It's one of the most fun things you can do with a fly rod, but if you don't know what you're doing, it's really hard.

Phil, the captain, cast the jumpin minnow out, and I held my cast until it was within range. Then, a sea monster destroyed the plug, and I heard him shout, "Drop your fly!" I did as instructed while he yanked the plug away. "Strip! Strip!" he shouted, and I pulled quickly—too quickly, actually. I ripped the fly right out of the water and away from the angry bluefish's jaws. However, the cast was good and Phil made sure to point that out.

Throughout the day, I got better and better. I began to catch fish. He helped me with the mechanics of the cast. That was the day I really became intrigued by all the things I could learn, both on the water and off, when I'm patient enough to take a few minutes and be embarrassed. It was the same way I learned to bake bread.

If you want to become a good fly-caster, you have to practice. If you want to bake bread well (particularly sourdough bread), you have to mess up a lot and be embarrassed at family gatherings. In my younger years, I would have bailed on bread, and I did let my casting lapse, but age and child-rearing has instilled the satisfaction of patience. If you really want to learn how to do something, learn it for *yourself*, not because someone else is forcing you. Phil let me learn how to catch bluefish with a gentle guiding hand. With bread, it was YouTube, and trial and error. I killed a lot of sourdough starter and made some bad loaves, but one day, like a fly cast, everything worked. The bread came out like it was supposed to, and it tasted like it was supposed to. For me, there is no end to learning. I thought about that while Zach and I were idling over that bluefish flat.

I had two loaves proofing at home for baking that afternoon. I love to have fresh bread in the house. And, no, this wasn't a COVID hobby. It appeared afterward, and I haven't looked back. I thought of what we learned that day on the flat. The fish seemed to want to eat only when they were charged up and chasing, so I opened Zach's tackle box. Sure enough, he had a hookless plug.

"We're going to get one on the teaser. It's going to happen," I said, full of confidence.

Zach, always positive himself, replied, "Let's go!"

He set up on the front of the boat with his fly rod at the ready. I cast the hookless teaser from the back. Three, four casts, but no love. Then, on the fifth cast, there was a follow and a blue smacked the teaser high up in the air. Zach placed a perfect cast at the boil and stripped in, but the fish didn't cooperate. We were on to something. I set up again this time, firing the plug as far as I could cast toward shore and the blue house. I walked that minnow slowly, making sure that the wake and the rattle were enticing. Fifty feet from the boat, a bluefish annihilated the plug, and Zach placed a perfect cast. Two strips later, the bluefish was on. We had done it.

There is no picture of Zach's triumph that day. There are none of us smiling with our fly rods in grip-and-grin euphoria. The ones you see are only spin shots. Fine, but not what we wanted to do that day. We were thankful, but like eating a plate of Brussel sprouts instead of buffalo wings, we weren't fully satisfied.

Zach's fish broke off shortly after he hooked up. It swam down to the briny flat with a Hollow Fleye in its jaw. The hook will eventually rust out, but he can show his angry buddies what a piercing looks like. We tried and failed a few more times to tease up a fly-rod fish, but to no avail. We eventually ran out of time and high-tailed it back to the ramp. We learned a lot that day and Zach has since brought clients to the Blue House Flat, as we have dubbed it.

We said our goodbyes later that day in the QuickChek lot and I promised Zach a loaf of bread in the future. It started to rain—the same rain that had driven his client back to bed the night before.

As the fishing season wears on, I appreciate the misty days of frustration and learning almost as much as I appreciate Chamber of Commerce days. It's the allure of the sport. It's why when we get the texts, hear the rumors, or chase the phantom bites. We're always rewarded in one way or another.

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Sharks, Science, & Fishermen

The Atlantic Shark Institute's collaborative work in shark research is shedding new light on the apex predators of our Northeast salt waters.

STORY & PHOTOS BY TOMAS KOECK

For centuries, sharks have inspired a mixture of awe, fear, and respect. Their sleek bodies cutting through oceans with prehistoric elegance, along with their size and predatory nature, demand respect from folks living on the New England coastline. Every summer, shark-themed decorations can be seen throughout coastal towns, networks share shark-related stories, and you'll find many ocean lovers going "shark crazy". For anglers, though, the relationship with sharks can be very different. For some, the presence of sharks in open water adds an extra challenge to successfully landing a fish; for others, it is fascinating to see these large ocean predators up close.

Despite appearing widespread at times, many shark species in New England are declining in population and face numerous threats. The shortfin mako shark population, for example, has declined as much as 80% since 1970, according to estimates. Recognizing this issue, Jon Dodd, a lifelong angler and marine biologist, founded the Atlantic Shark Institute (ASI) to build a bridge between commercial fishing and shark researchers. This partnership aims to improve scientific understanding and better management of sharks in the Atlantic Ocean.



Fishermen often encounter sharks as bycatch, and by training them to identify, handle, tag, and release sharks, ASI receives a more consistent flow of data from remote waters.

Founding the Atlantic Shark Institute: A Collaboration Between Fishermen and Scientists

Dodd is a proud Rhode Islander, conservationist, and outdoorsman. He graduated from the University of Rhode Island in marine biology, and has been fascinated with the ocean since he was a child. His affinity for sharks began when he and a friend found a large blue shark swimming off Connecticut.

Dodd realized that the vast experience of anglers could be harnessed for shark research. Many sharks caught in fishing gear are considered "bycatch," non-target species that are inadvertently caught and released back into the ocean. Instead of viewing these interactions solely as problematic, Dodd saw an opportunity. He proposed that commercial fishermen and biologists work together to tag and study these accidentally-caught sharks, creating a collaboration between two often-opposing groups: the fishing industry and scientists/biologists.

A visit to a commercial fisherman friend began the process of creating partnerships with commercial anglers in the Rhode Island and greater New England area. Jon slowly created relationships with boat captains, one by one, until he had a network of fishermen aiding in shark research.

"It is invaluable to have eyes and ears on the water in a collaborative way," Dodd says. ASI benefits the fishermen by producing good data. Good reporting leads to good decision-making that makes the resource safe and sustainable for everyone on the water.

Thus, ASI was born, with a mission to conduct cutting-edge shark research while forging partnerships between commercial fishermen and marine biologists. The heart of this initiative is ASI's Shark Tagging Program that partners commercial fishing vessels with satellite and acoustic tags. When fishermen accidentally catch sharks, they can tag and release them, providing valuable data on their migration, behavior, and population health.

Bringing Fishermen and Scientists Together for Shark Research

The key to ASI's success lies in its simple yet innovative model: integrating commercial fishermen into shark research. Fishermen, who have years of experience navigating the Atlantic and often encounter sharks as bycatch, are ideal partners. By training them to properly identify, handle, tag, and release sharks, ASI turns what might have been a lost opportunity into an invaluable scientific contribution.

Fishermen are uniquely positioned to help with shark research. They are out at sea for days, sometimes weeks at a time, traversing waters that are difficult for scientists to access regularly. By partnering with fishermen, ASI gains access to these remote areas and ensures a consistent data flow. Each tagged shark provides scientists with crucial insights into species diversity, density, fine-scale movements, broad-scale movements, and the risks different species face.

"We're in the same ocean," Dodd explains, "and both scientists and fishermen care about its health. By working together, we can better understand sharks and the role they play in maintaining that balance."

Shark Species Studied by the Atlantic Shark Institute

ASI focuses on a variety of shark species, each with its own unique ecological role and conservation status. Some of the species regularly studied include the great white shark, mako, thresher, blue, porbeagle, and sand tiger.



Dodd and his team at ASI believe collaboration between anglers who catch sharks, and scientists who study them, is essential to maintaining healthy, balanced shark populations.

Great White Shark

(*Carcharodon carcharias*)

Perhaps the most iconic shark species, the great white shark is a top predator in the Atlantic Ocean. Growing up to 20 feet in length, they have been known to migrate long distances, from the coastlines of North America to the waters of the mid-Atlantic. Despite their fearsome reputation, great white sharks are vulnerable to human activity, especially bycatch and habitat loss. Through tagging programs, ASI tracks their migration routes and studies how they interact with their environment, helping ensure the future health and sustainability of the species as well as reducing potential conflicts between humans and sharks.

Mako Shark

(*Isurus oxyrinchus*)

A shark that Jon dubs "the Porsche of the sea," the shortfin mako is the fastest and perhaps most agile shark in the world, capable of reaching speeds of up to 45 miles per hour. Their speed makes them formidable hunters, often preying on fish such as tuna and swordfish. However, their status as a prized gamefish has put them under significant pressure from both recreational and commercial fishing. ASI's research on mako sharks focuses on understanding their migration patterns and population dynamics, which is crucial for developing effective conservation strategies.

Thresher Shark

(*Alopias vulpinus*)

Easily identifiable by its long, whip-like tail, a thresher shark is a solitary hunter that uses its tail to stun prey. While they are less frequently encountered than some other shark species, they are still susceptible to being caught in fishing gear. ASI's work with thresher sharks involves studying their unique hunting behaviors and migration patterns, as well as assessing their vulnerability to fishing pressures.

Blue Shark

(*Prionace glauca*)

The blue shark is known for its strikingly slender body and vibrant blue coloration. Their swimming behavior greatly differs from other pelagic species, appearing almost rubbery in the water. They are highly migratory and are found in temperate and tropical waters around the world, including the Atlantic. While their population is relatively healthy, they are frequently caught as bycatch due to their wide-ranging habitat and curious nature. ASI's tagging program provides data on blue sharks' movement, which can help minimize bycatch by educating fishermen on avoiding areas where they are most commonly encountered.

Sand Tiger Shark

(*Carcharhinus plumbeus*)

The sand tiger shark prefers shallow water and is occasionally encountered by commercial and recreational fishermen. They are slow to reproduce, making them especially vulnerable to population decline. ASI's work with sand tiger sharks aims to protect critical habitat, assess population status, and review their accidental capture in fishing gear.

Porbeagle Shark

(*Lamna nasus*)

A species of mackerel shark, the porbeagle is occasionally dubbed as a "miniature white shark" because it has a similar shape but is much smaller (growing to a length of 10 feet). Their range extends up into the northern Atlantic ocean and they tend to favor cooler waters. Porbeagles feed on bony fish and squid species, and like almost all of the sharks that ASI studies, their population is in decline.



The ASI's Shark Tagging Program provides commercial fishermen with satellite and acoustic tags, which reveal valuable data on shark migration, behavior, and population health.

The Importance of Shark Research for Ocean Health

Sharks are referred to as the "apex predators" of the ocean, meaning they are often at the top of the food chain. As such, they can play a crucial role in maintaining the balance of marine ecosystems. By controlling the populations of other species, they help prevent habitat degradation, habitat destruction, overgrazing of seagrass beds and coral reefs, and help maintain species diversity and density, which are critical.

Unfortunately, sharks are among the most threatened species in the ocean. Overfishing, bycatch, and habitat loss have all contributed to the decline of many shark populations. The work of organizations like ASI is vital to understand how to reverse these trends.

Through its partnerships with commercial fishermen and innovative research techniques, ASI is helping ensure that sharks can continue to fulfill their essential role in the ocean for generations to come. Each shark researched by ASI and its partners provides valuable data, bringing scientists closer to understanding how to protect these magnificent creatures.

As Dodd and his team at ASI continue their work, one thing is clear: collaboration between those who fish the waters and those who study them is key to the future of shark conservation. To Dodd, his message to anglers who want to be involved can't be any simpler: "We need you, we want you, and the more people we involve, the better our research will be." Collaborating with fishermen can considerably cut the amount of time for a field season and is critical for ASI to decrease the number of wasted days. "To consistently have good days, you need to have a consistent resource," Dodd says, "Sustainability is all of our responsibility."





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The Bluefin CALENDAR

Three captains break down the nearly nine-month bluefin tuna season in the Northeast.

BY MATT HAEFFNER

Over the course of a season, Northeast captains catch bluefin from the edge of the continental shelf 70-plus miles offshore to just off the beach, in clear view of surfcasters. They catch them by trolling, jigging, casting topwaters, and drifting live bait. By the time the last captain washes down the boat after his final trip of the year, nine months will have passed since the first captain broke the inlet on an initial exploratory tuna trip.

The tuna season is a long one between Maine and New Jersey, with the best approaches constantly evolving as the year progresses. To help break it down, I spoke to some of the most tuna-obsessed captains in the game to see how they stay on the fish from beginning to end.





Jim Kuhl (left) and Billy Hayes with a New Jersey bluefin.

CAPTAIN BILLY HAYES



When live bait isn't readily available, trolling ballyhoo is a productive approach to hooking the first bluefin of the season.

ANDY NABRESKI



Billy Hayes caught this giant bluefin around bunker schools off New Jersey on April 22, 2024.

April & May: Finding the First One

For Captain Billy Hayes, self-proclaimed "tuna junkie" from New Jersey, April is less about striped bass and more about the race to be the first angler in the state to wrangle a bluefin.

"During late April and early May, most of our fish are feeding pretty close to the beach and they're all giants, so a big bait is important," said Hayes.

According to Hayes, bluefin eat just about anything they can find this time of year, whether it's adult bunker, bluefish, or even large striped bass in the early stages of their own spring migration.

"Last year, we got our first fish on April 22 while fishing around the bunker pods," said Hayes. "It's the earliest I have ever caught one."

If live bunker isn't available, trolling ballyhoo is a productive approach to hooking the first bluefin of the season off New Jersey and western Long Island.

Like bunker, mackerel can also be a part of the early season forage base off New Jersey, but they won't be pressed up along the beaches like bunker. "If you can find enough mackerel to use for bait, that's like gold around here," Hayes added. "We catch them on the wrecks and fill up the livewell." That tends to happen around mid-May but, by then, he has his sights set on the soon-to-be developing jig bite.

As Hayes is dropping his first jigs to tuna off New Jersey, Captain Kevin Albohn of Blue Line Charters is chomping at the bit to catch his first bluefin of the year. Albohn keeps his finger on the pulse of the bluefin scene between Rhode Island and New York City as the end of April approaches. His season usually kicks off around the second week of May, when bluefin tuna make their first appearances on



Kevin Albohn starts his tuna season by trolling, looking for wolf packs of larger tuna in the waters south of Montauk.



This fall giant was landed on heavy-duty spinning gear designed for the job. It measured 115 inches and was safely released after being revived using an LT Marine swim hook.

the inshore and midshore grounds off Long Island and Block Island.

"It's 'ghost hunting,' mainly," said Albohn, "but we're out there looking because we all want to catch the first fish of the year in our respective regions."

Ghost hunting south of Block Island consists of much more than just scanning the open ocean for a rogue bluefin. Albohn notes that a ghost hunt requires a tight-knit and trustworthy network of anglers, a fishing log, and a comprehensive understanding of fish movement relating to wind direction and water temperatures.

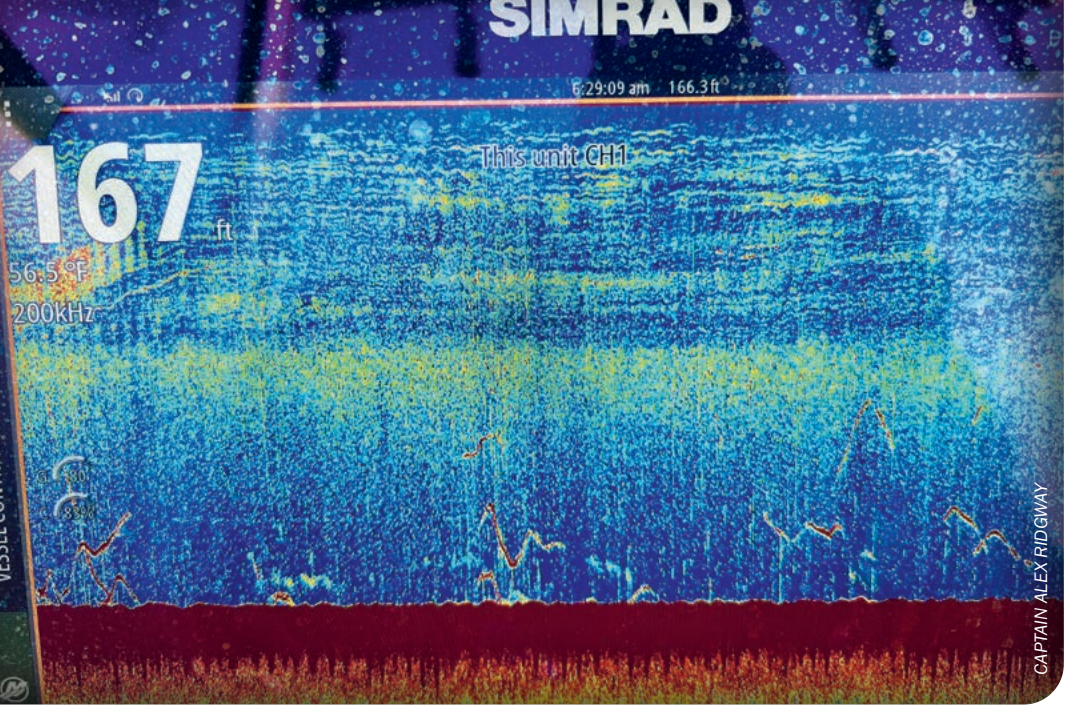
Tagging efforts by scientists like Dr. Jeff Kneebone of the Anderson Cabot Center for Marine Life indicate that giant bluefin show up off Block Island as early as mid- to late April. Albohn still aims for May 15 to start his tuna season, but he has come across bluefin even earlier.

"Last year, we hooked a giant on May 7 while we were fluke fishing near Block," he said. "It's fun to find tuna out there so early but, generally, I prefer to let them set up and establish themselves before we start to actively target them."

Every spring is different, so Albohn recommends referencing fishing logs from years past because they will help develop patterns and provide insight into areas where bluefin may show. For example, one of his log entries from May 17, 2019, referenced a hot jig bite; so, on May 20, 2024, he ran south of Montauk toward the 35-fathom line and was greeted by nearly 100 whales—always a positive sign of bait and tuna in the area. While he didn't catch a fish that day, he marked plenty. When Albohn returned to the grounds south of Montauk three days later, after letting the fish "set up," his crew landed 14 bluefin tuna in a range of sizes.

"By May 26, we had consistent fish on the troll off Montauk and Rhode Island," he said, "but there weren't a ton of them. We were generally trolling over 150- to 180-foot depths, hoping to find a wolfpack of two to five 70-inch-class tuna, so it was hard to track them. That's why we keep a log and stay in constant communication with our network."

Albohn insists that water temperatures are also a primary factor during the first few weeks of the bluefin season in southern New England. "If we see warm water between 60



When tuna are hanging deep, eating sand eels in summer, it's tough to beat a metal jig or RonZ dropped right to the bottom.

and 62 degrees off New Jersey or coming out of the Hudson Canyon, we'll give it a shot," he said. However, the skipper maintains that a healthy forage base is of utmost importance.

In May, when water temperatures reach the low 60s, those giant bluefin tend to cruise around on top pursuing mackerel, squid, sand eels, bunker, bluefish, and even striped bass. Much like the giant bluefin of late fall, these fish feed on just about anything they can inhale.

As water temperatures continue to climb throughout May, Albohn recommends paying close attention to the movements of the commercial fishing fleet. This is where having a good network of captains and fellow recreational anglers comes into play. "We'll set up a trolling plan with a few other boats to cover large swaths of water and head out toward the temperature breaks, making huge loops while keeping an eye on the commercial boats," he noted. Giant bluefin are clever enough to follow the draggers for easy meals, and by covering a vast area with a system of buddy boats, Albohn can better pinpoint where those bluefin are likely to feed.

Around this time in Massachusetts, Captain Alex Ridgway of Cape Cod Offshore is starting to get the tuna itch. By the end of May, Ridgway's tuna season is underway. Like Albohn, he starts by exploring south of the islands and, depending on the year, east of Cape Cod, in search of bait. "Usually, the bait we find out east is sand eels, and when there are whales with them, we spend some time looking around," said Ridgway. "We might mark one big fish or see a few giants break the surface in the distance, which, along with the presence of marine mammals, indicates that



a bite could be forming."

In New Jersey, smaller fish begin to head to the midshore grounds from the edge in May; according to Hayes, they are usually feeding on piles of sand eels. Last year, he began to venture further from shore around May 10 and, sure enough, whales and bait were there, with the tuna lagging not far behind. By early June, he and fellow New Jersey "tuna junkies" Jim and James Kuhl were catching midsize tuna on the midshore grounds on jigs, and occasionally on poppers.

June: Spread Out but Settling In

In early June, Albohn begins making runs to the canyons in search of a smaller class of fish. From Rhode Island to Montauk, squid make a strong showing each spring, so he makes it a point to stop and jig some up for the livewell before heading offshore. By the third week of June, bluefin under 50 inches move within a more reasonable range. "Those smaller bluefin are the last ones to come inshore, and when they do, we start to see a mixed range of sizes settle in close to home."

It's a similar story off Cape Cod. Come mid-June, with warmer water and an established forage base, Ridgway said bluefin of all sizes start piling in to feed, but the challenge is locating those feeding grounds.

"Every year we see different classes of bluefin early on," he said. "A few years back, it was all 40-inch-class fish off the Cape and now it's all 60s."

It's possible that those are the same fish that have since matured and grown, but according to Ridgway, 40-inchers east of Cape has been a rarer occurrence in recent seasons. "South of the islands, we see some of those smaller, sub-40-inch fish, but we almost never run into them east or northeast of the Cape."

When the sand eels settle in east of Cape Cod in June, they don't move around much. The feeds can be incredible because the fish stay on the surface. When that happens, Ridgway cruises toward the melee at just over 5 knots. Keeping a low RPM allows his crew to get off



At some point in June, Ridgway says the tuna will pile into Cape Cod waters to feed heavily, but where that happens can vary greatly from year to year.

CAPTAIN ALEX RIDGWAY





Throughout the season, whenever tuna are feeding on top, stickbaits are a go-to presentation for Ridgway on Cape Cod.

JIMMY FEE

a few good casts without spooking the fish.

He has at least six spinning rods rigged and ready with a variety of offerings to decipher what those sandeel-gorging tuna are most likely to respond to. Some of his most productive lures are olive-colored, tuna-grade epoxy-style jigs, natural-colored Hogy Pro Tails, slider-style stickbaits, and the Siren Antidote 130 in the sand-eel pattern. If the fish are staying up, as they tend to do when feeding on sand eels, Ridgway says they'll cast poppers, too, but only if they've already caught at least one fish. When surface feeds subside, he arms his crews with jigging rods rigged with RonZs.

Around late June, Ridgway's search for Cape Cod bluefin expands. The fish, which are still migrating through the end of the month, spread out as more forage, like large schools of Atlantic mackerel, become available.

Off Rhode Island, Albohn focuses more on the troll than on jigging and popping in the early part of June. "Once the little fish settle in and surface temperatures warm up, they sit at the thermocline and we can get them more reliably," he said. "We'll be marking them high enough that you can raise them by trolling, and sometimes with poppers because they're within 50 to 100 feet of the surface." However, Albohn likes to let the June full moon pass before whipping out the jigs and poppers. "There's a lot of fish movement around the June full moon; after that, bluefin tend to come in closer to Block and that's when the jig bite will begin," he said.

Down in Jersey, once the June full moon passes, Billy Hayes starts to find yellowfin tuna mixing in with bluefin and porpoises. By then, he can reliably jig and pop from the inshore to midshore grounds through July and August, and even into September. There are exceptions to the jig-and-pop bite, though. In recent years, bluefin have been coming inshore to places like Monster Ledge to fuel up on squid before they begin migrating back toward the canyons in search of favorable water conditions and, of course, more food.

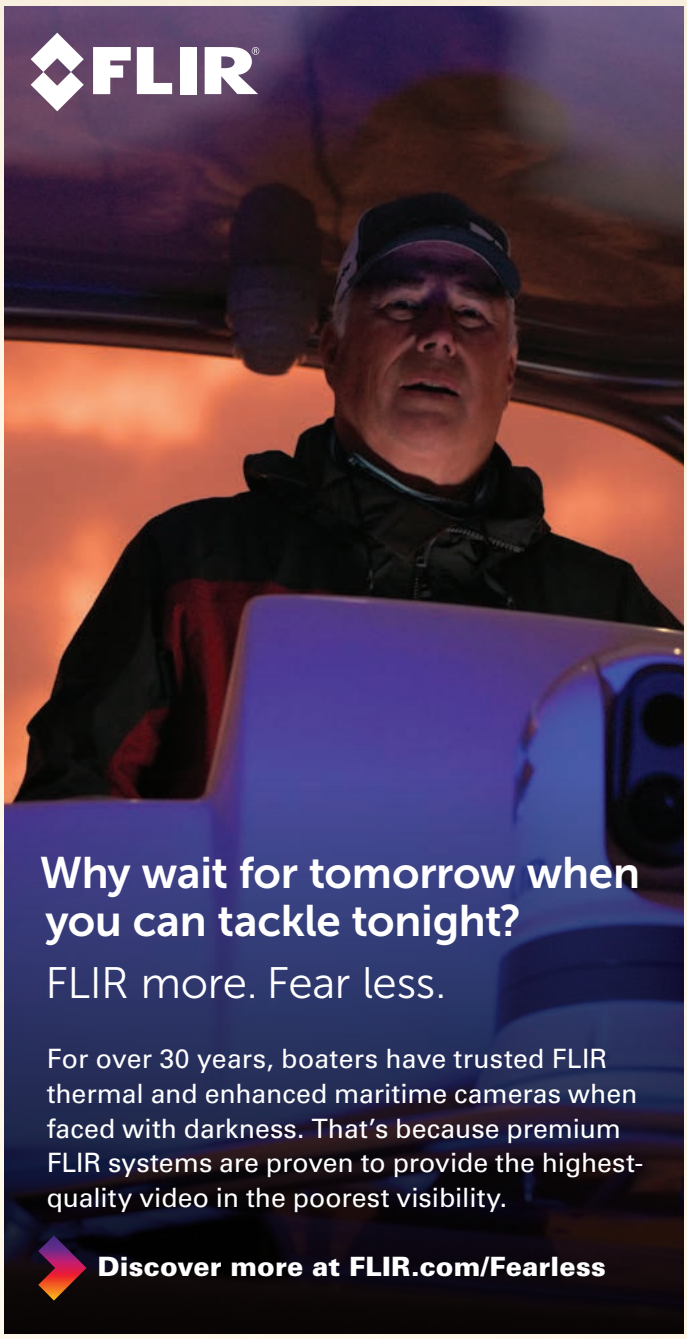
July: Watching the Wind for Summer Patterns

With summer comes warmer weather, settled seas, and a vast expansion of the areas and depths where bluefin may be feeding. To pinpoint the most probable productive areas, Ridgway recommends doing daily research. "We're constantly looking at temperature and chlorophyll charts in an effort to judge where the fish might be," he said. "Maybe they'll line up on the temperature breaks or they might be where there's clean water and an abundance of bait."

Last year, Ridgway found bluefin feeding on schools of mackerel northeast of Cape Cod in the summer, while during the same week in 2023, the fish were on sand eels south and east of Nantucket. The tuna are constantly moving,

"There's a lot of fish movement around the June full moon; after that, bluefin tend to come in closer to Block and that's when the jig bite will begin."


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In mid-summer, when small and large bluefin mix together, Albohn finds that a RonZ jigged slowly along the bottom tempts the 60-inch-class bluefin.

but by July and August, he is usually able to develop week-to-week patterns—as long as sea and weather conditions remain relatively stable. A few days of sustained onshore winds out of the east or southeast can choke up the water with seaweed, sending smaller, recreational-class tuna packing.

By early July, the jig-and-pop bite is on in Rhode Island, and larger, more concentrated schools become easier to locate. "At that point, we're seeing fish in the mid-30- to 65-inch class," Albohn said. "We approach the bigger fish by 'fluke jigging,' slowly working something like a RonZ near the bottom." At the same time, he noted that smaller fish in the mid-30- to 40-inch class can be caught speed jigging.

August: Adjusting to Fishing Pressure

In August, clean water and a rich forage base are of utmost importance if the bluefin are to stick around. "We don't really see bluefin leave the area from Montauk to Block Island; instead, they become mixed in with the yellowfin," said Albohn. Unlike yellowfin tuna, bluefin have a higher tolerance for dirty or cool water. If there is a food source, they will stick around, and that holds true for the late season bite off New York City as well. "Come late August, when there are a lot of yellows in warm water, the bluefin thin out and head toward Cape Cod, as far east as Chatham, then they make their way back toward the Dump. One strong northeast blow is all it takes to bring them back."

During late August and early September, fishing pressure is at its peak, so continuing to produce results requires some creativity. Albohn recommends using a clear popper



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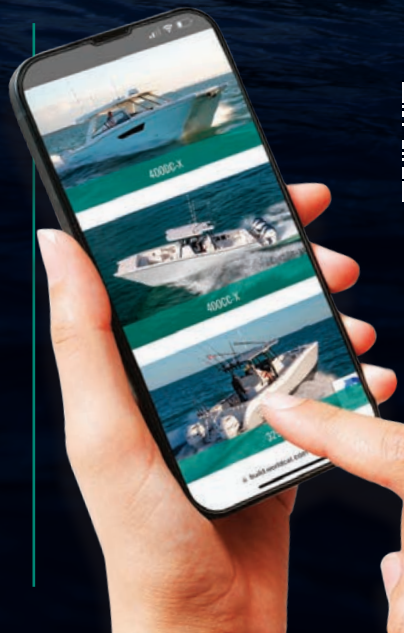
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While the fishing for recreational tuna on Cape Cod winds down in late October, giants are around into December. Here, Ed Acton battles a mid-November 100-incher off Chatham.

or stickbait to give the illusion of a school of small baitfish. He says it works wonders when even the yellowfin grow finicky. "You can pull a 60-inch-plus bluefin from beneath those yellows," he said. "Getting the bite requires using a 20-foot length of 60- to 80-pound-test leader. In my opinion, it's better to go long and heavy than light and short." Albohn suggests using electronics to see what the fish are doing, what they are or are not responding to, then making an educated guess as to what they're going to eat.

September and October: Baitfish Buffet

Albohn insists that September is the best month to be a bluefin tuna fisherman and a guide. Bluefin can be caught on chunks, jigs, poppers and, best of all, September usually brings good sea and weather conditions to Rhode Island. "September is great. Giants start showing up again in decent numbers so we don't have to troll anymore. I'd rather be jigging, especially with clients, because anyone can do it. I can mark a few tuna, tell a new tuna fisherman to drop a jig to 90 feet and, boom, he's on. For me, as a captain, there's nothing better."

Early fall on Cape Cod tends to be an extension of the summer bluefin patterns. There are almost always sand eels, but in late September, as more and different baitfish arrive, the bite will change.

Ridgway referred to fall 2024 as the year of the halfbeak (Atlantic saury), while two years earlier, it was a butterfish bonanza. "This past season, we had halfbeaks everywhere. From late September into early October, we found them south of the islands by the windmills. They were spread up and down the back side of the Cape to the south end of Stellwagen Bank and into lower Cape Cod Bay, and as far west as the Cape Cod Canal, where tuna were feeding in as little as 50 to 60 feet of water," he said. "There were almost too many halfbeaks to keep the tuna in one area, so it was difficult to develop a pattern from day to day."

Halfbeaks are fast-moving fish, but they are tuna candy. "We can mark clouds of sand eels and the tuna will still be up on top chasing a smaller school of 'beaks," Ridgway said. While halfbeak surface feeds are a spectacle to behold, properly presenting a lure to saury-slaying tunas can be a challenge. "You need to gauge which direction they're being chased and get ahead of the school, which is difficult to do at a low RPM. The most important part of fishing around halfbeaks is to have your lure going in the same direction they are moving and to fish the edges of the school." Ideally, your lure will stand out as a straggler—a vulnerable fish that lost its way in the mayhem of the chase, and that's when the strike will come.

In the fall, Ridgway keeps an array of lures on board that closely resemble the color and profile of sauries. The Siren Sorry Charlie or Deep Seductress 155 and 4-ounce, 6-inch tuna-grade epoxy jigs in blue, silver, and purple are mainstays on halfbeak years, but that changes when butterfish are the predominant baitfish.

A steady northeast wind in September usually pushes butterfish in from offshore. "They come in with the weeds, so it's a blessing and a curse," Ridgway chuckled. When butterfish show up in Albohn's home waters during the fall, it can ignite the chunk bite, but Ridgway maintains an artificial approach on the Cape. "When the butters are in, we reach for small stickbaits, 5½-inch Hogy Pro Tails, larger JoeBaggs Peanut Resin jigs, and the Hogy Slider." Unlike sauries, butterfish are deep-bodied and slow-moving, so it's easier to stay on the bite for a few days, assuming conditions remain stable and shifting winds don't push them out.

November: Butterballs in New York Bight

The Cape Cod tuna season starts to wind down by late October/early November, although giants hang around well into December. Typically, the smaller, recreational-class fish have mainly moved on when the calendar hits

November.

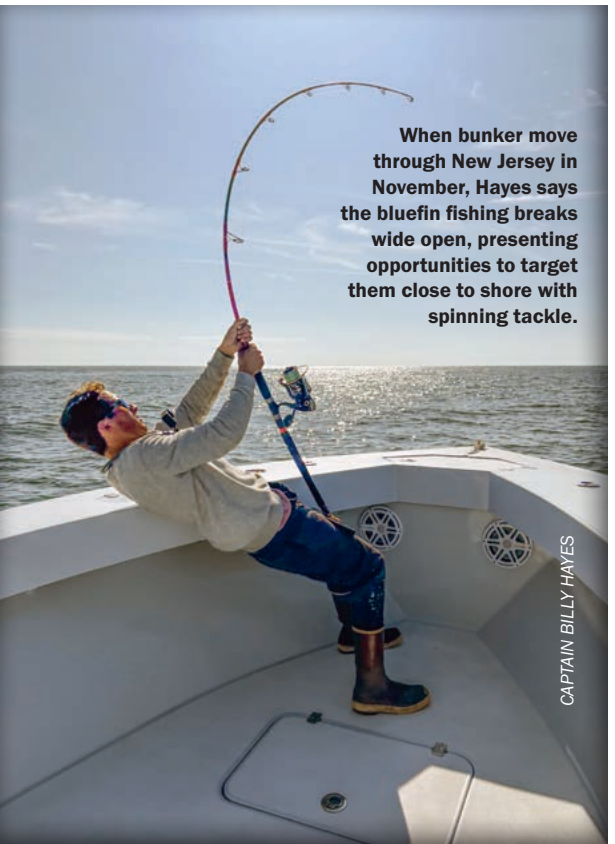
"In 2023, there was a good pogy/bunker bite with mixed-size classes of tuna south of Martha's Vineyard in late October, and after that, we were done," Ridgway noted. "Yet, the year before, we had bluefin feeding on butterfish through Thanksgiving. You never really know when it's going to end, so we just use the information we gather through research and our network of five or six buddy boats."

As bluefin depart New England waters, anglers in Long Island and New Jersey still have what's become the best bite of the year to look forward to.

"The tail end of our tuna season starts in November when the bunker are moving through, so the fishing is just insane," said Hayes. It's his favorite time to be a bluefin tuna fisherman.

"Fish are everywhere you look, and in multiple sizes," Hayes continued. "We'll be casting into feeds full of 60-inch-class fish, only to have giants pop up a second later." Hayes, who relishes the opportunity to tangle with a giant bluefin on spinning gear, enjoys the game of bluefin roulette.

Trolling ballyhoo is still an option, as is fishing with live bunker, but Hayes' preferred approach doesn't waver from the spring. "We strictly cast lures, like 8-inch straight tails from No Live Bait Needed, into active feeds." The larger profile is a good match for the mature bunker the bluefin are feeding on,



When bunker move through New Jersey in November, Hayes says the bluefin fishing breaks wide open, presenting opportunities to target them close to shore with spinning tackle.

CAPTAIN BILLY HAYES





After beginning the New York and New Jersey tuna seasons in April and early May, Hayes and Albohn keep hunting bluefin until almost Christmas.

CAPTAIN BILLY HAYES

and it's not far off from the slender profile of adult sand eels, which tend to appear around the same time as the menhaden. Hayes focuses on making well-timed, accurate casts with a lure large enough that it won't go unnoticed when presented properly.

December: Final Crew Calls

By mid-November, the fish are feeding in shallow water within sight of sand and will continue to do so into December. Recreational-sized fish will continue their journey, following the bunker pods down the New Jersey coast, and Hayes will follow them as far south as the Atlantic City Reef until mid-December. "If the fish are sticking around, we'll stay in the water until just before Christmas to catch the tail end of the biomass," Hayes said.

Albohn, who shifts his home port to western Long Island in the late fall, does the same—as long as he has a willing crew. "Even if the fish are there, the hardest part about tuna fishing in December is getting enough guys to go," he said. A few years back, he caught tuna the day before Christmas Eve just outside New York City. "It was cold as hell and snowed three inches, but we had tuna feeds all day."

And so ends the May-December relationship with bluefin tuna in the Northeast. After that, captains have four months to service tackle, respool reels, restock lures, and prep for another year of bluefin tuna fishing.

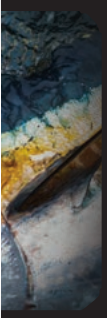


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Joe Diorio (right) and the author with a big Block Island striper caught in July 2024.

Soft-Plastic Replacements FOR LIVE BAIT

Fine-tuned soft-plastic tactics are deadly alternatives to bunker and eels.

BY CHRIS MEGAN

I pull back the throttles briefly to admire the early-summer sun rising over Monomoy before motoring the Skeeter SX2550 toward the building rips extending off the tip of the island. Once upon a time, I would have never made this trip without a bucket of eels tucked into a stern corner but, today, no eels will be harmed in the making of this episode of *On The Water's Angling Adventures*. Instead, the rods are rigged with a variety of soft plastics, baits designed to fish everywhere from the surface to the bottom.

I've gained a new appreciation for soft plastics over the last few seasons, especially while fishing with some of the striper coast's sharpest captains and seeing how they make the most of these versatile striper lures.



LIAM O'NEILL

Brian Coombs chooses lures designed to get down and get a striper's attention quickly, before the school moves out of range.



Running and Gunning with Paddletails

Bait Replaced: *Live Bunker*
Lures: *Al Gag's Whip-It Fish, Z-Man DieZel Minnow*

Boston's best big-striper fishing is fueled by an abundance of Atlantic menhaden. I've had many memorable trips in that "dirty water," and almost all of them began with making bait. That was not so on my first time fishing with Captain Brian Coombs of Get Tight Sportfishing Charters. We set out past the harbor islands, with Brian locked on his electronics, looking for schools of what he calls "pelagic stripers." These groups of big fish roam through the middle of the water column, hunting bait over water as deep as 100 feet. They move quickly, and getting on them requires coordination between the captain at the helm and the angler on the bow.

His preferred bait is the Al Gags Whip-It fish, a deep-bodied soft-plastic paddletail rigged on a jighead. To add action and bulk to the lure, Coombs adds a silicone skirt to the jighead.

I was surprised at the jighead's weight, considering the bass could be within 10 feet of the surface. The reason Brian



LIAM O'NEILL

Joe Diorio fishes long, slender stickbaits with a slow, finesse presentation that's made them an equal, if not superior, alternative to live eels.

opts for 2- and 3-ounce heads is for casting distance and so that the lure sinks quickly to get in front of fast-moving fish before they are gone.

Once an accurate cast has been made, the retrieve is aggressive. Brian wants the paddletail to look like a panicked bunker fleeing from the striper school. He adjusts the retrieve speed based on how the fish react, but a moderate-fast retrieve often gets the bite. When a 30-pound bass hits one of those quick-moving paddletails, it nearly wrenches the rod out of my hands.

In a morning of running and gunning with the heavy paddletails, Brian and I caught fish to 40 pounds, and I began thinking of all the other places where this approach would work. Anywhere schools of stripers cruise through open water in search of bunker, such as Cape Cod Bay, Narragansett Bay, the South Shore of Long Island, and off New Jersey, the combination of side-scanning sonar and fast-sinking soft-plastic paddletails means an exciting day of fishing.

Deep Drifting with Long, Slender Stickbaits

Bait Replaced: *Live Eels*
Lures: *JoeBaggs Block Island Eel, JoeBaggs Block Island Patriot Fish, Gravity Tackle GT Eel*

I'd never been to the legendary big-striper grounds off Block Island without eels until last summer with my good friend Captain Joe Diorio. Years before, Joe and I had fished Block Island from the middle of the night to late morning, during which we caught bass to 48 pounds while drifting eels over fish-holding structure. For last summer's trip, Joe left the eels at the dock to show me the tactic he's been developing the past few seasons that uses 11- to 14-inch-straight or paddletail plastics instead of live bait.

As with Brian in Boston Harbor, Joe leans on his electronics to find the fish, but that's where the similarities end. While the Boston Harbor fish chased bunker through the middle of the water column, at Block Island, they were hugging the bottom. Rather than run and gun, Joe motored ahead of the bass and drifted down on them, using long casts to keep the lure in the strike zone longer.

The retrieves were subtle and slow, with the occasional twitch. Joe didn't bounce or drag the bait along the bottom, but hovered it, dangling it in front of the bass long enough to trigger a strike. The long soft plastic, a JoeBaggs Block Island Patriot Fish on a 1-ounce jighead, undulated and kicked on the slow retrieve, and the stripers couldn't resist. While it took me a few drifts to adjust to this finesse approach, once I got the hang of it, I joined Joe in hooking stripers to 40-plus-pounds.

The ability to control where the plastics are in the water column and what they are doing can often make them even more effective than live eels. The key is finding the right size jighead for the drift speed, which usually ends up being between 3/4 and 2 ounces.

The same tactics Joe showed me at Block Island have potential in Long Island Sound,

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Diorio uses between a 3/4- and 2-ounce jighead depending on the current, depth, and speed of the drift.

at Race Point, around Raritan Bay, and anywhere that stripers set up over structure in 10 to 50 feet of water.

Back to that morning at Monomoy, I pull up to the rip and keep the boat barely in gear, holding its position so I can cast out a 7-inch fluke-style plastic on a ½-ounce jighead behind the boat. With one hand on the wheel and another holding the rod, I twitch the bait in place, just ahead of the curl of the rip. Within seconds, a 32-inch pot-bellied striper strikes, the force of the attack sending the fish halfway out of the water. The rod bends and I release the throttle, allowing the boat to drift back as I fight the fish, marveling at the versatility of these lures. While I don't think I'll ever totally give up my eels or live bunker, I'll certainly use them less often, replacing them with a growing arsenal of soft-plastic tactics for big striped bass.

Watch new episodes of On The Water's Angling Adventures *on OTW's YouTube Channel starting in February.*




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Circle Hooks for Eels



Captain Joe Diorio recommends using a 7/0 hook for small eels and 8/0 for large ones.

LIAM O'NEILL



We're five years into the mandatory circle hook regulations for striped bass, and some fishermen are still working out their favorites for certain baits.

If you spent all your striper-fishing years before 2020 using J-hooks and swinging for the fences when a striper ate your eel, the last few seasons have been an adjustment. Some anglers have abandoned eels altogether due to circle hook frustration and eel price inflation that has the slimy baits costing as much as $3.50 apiece at some shops. However, eels are too effective not to use, so we polled some of the striper coast's dedicated eel fishermen on their go-to hooks for this essential striped bass bait.

For offering up eels to the heavyweight bass of Block Island on three-way rigs or weightless, **Captain Joe Diorio** ties on the **BKK Heavy Circle-SS**, opting for 7/0 for small eels and 8/0 for large.

Between his home waters off northern New Jersey and the winter big bass haven near Chesapeake Bay, big bass guru **Chuck Many** puts up hall-of-fame numbers aboard his boat the *Tyman* thanks to eels. His go-to hook hasn't changed since he was already using a compliant, inline circle hook before the regulations went into effect. His hook is an 8/0 **Gamakatsu Red Inline**. Chuck says he likes a lighter hook so that the eel swims better while slow-trolling or drifting.

Surfcaster, podcaster, and editor in chief of *Fishing Tackle Retailer* and The Fishing Wire, **Toby Lapinski** has two go-to circles, depending on whether or not the eel he's throwing has a pulse. For dead eels, Toby goes with a 10/0 **Mustad 39944-bn**—the same hook he uses for chunking bunker. For live eels, he likes a smaller 6/0 or 7/0 **Gamakatsu Inline Octopus Circle**.

Along the Elizabeth Islands of Massachusetts, OTW Publisher **Chris Megan** has been casting eels to skinny-water stripers since the mid-1990s. Since 2020, he's been using the **VMC 8386 Tournament Circle Hook 3X** in the 5/0 size.

Regardless of which circle hook you choose, it's essential to ensure a bass turns away with the bait before coming tight and that you've reeled up all the slack from the line before lifting the rod. A good technique is to keep reeling until the drag begins to slip.



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Craziest Catches of 2024

You never know what might bite when you wet a line in the Northeast.



AJ ROTONDELLA/APEX ANGLERS

New Jersey Thresher Shark from Shore

For over 10 years, AJ Rotondella, a New Jersey land-based shark-fishing guide for Apex Anglers, has been setting out big baits along the Garden State's sand beaches. He and his clients have hooked and landed sand tigers, sandbars (brown sharks), and even bull sharks, but an adult thresher shark had eluded him. On June 3, Rotondella hooked, landed, and released a thresher with an estimated length of 12 feet (from snout to tip of the tail).

The catch defied everything Rontondella thought he knew about threshers, which tend to feed on or near the surface on schools of bunker. The massive fish devoured a 10-pound bluefish off the bottom just 45 minutes after he used his drone to drop the bait. (Check your state's drone fishing regulations.)

"That's why you've got to go and just put your time in, because you never know when something amazing might happen," said Rotondella.

Tiger Shark from Shore on Cape Cod

When Brendan Ryder set out his eels on a Cape Cod beach one early August night, he was hoping to catch a brown shark, but ended up spending four hours catching and releasing dogfish. Finally, at 11:30 p.m., a much larger fish took one of the eels, and after a 15-minute fight and a few aggressive runs against a locked-down drag, Ryder and his friends found themselves in the wash with a tiger shark.

The trio kept the shark at water's edge, snapped a few pictures, removed the hook, and released it in short order. "The first four trips of the year were slow," said Ryder, who makes a 2-hour, 30-minute drive to spend long nights shark fishing on the beach. "This one catch made all those slower outings worth it."

Tarpon in the Rhode Island Surf

In June while casting live eels from the rocky Rhode Island shoreline, Thomas Czernik hooked into a fish that fought different than

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Craziest Catches of 2024



Thomas Czernik caught this tarpon on a live eel in Rhode Island in June.



Rich Mann (left) and his Martha's Vineyard tarpon.



Camden Stride caught this red drum at Cape Cod's Monomoy Rips.



Brendan Ryder (middle) and his surf-caught Cape Cod tiger shark.

a large striper. Armed with a 10-foot surf rod and a reel spooled with 30-pound-test braid, Czernik worked to tire the fish, which he estimated took 30 minutes. When he finally got it close enough to land, he was staring at a tarpon that measured 70 inches.

Red Drum in the Rips on Cape Cod

To salvage a slow day of tuna fishing, Captain Sam Crafts of Take a Chance Charters pivoted to trolling through the rips off Monomoy Island. They found a rip with some life in it, and Camden Stride, on his first saltwater fishing trip, picked up the first rod that got a bite. Crafts, fully expecting to see a striper at the end of the line, was baffled when a red drum surfaced near the boat with the white Rapala X-Rap Deep Diver in its mouth.

"It was his first time fishing salt water, so Camden had no idea why I was freaking out at that moment," Crafts chuckled.

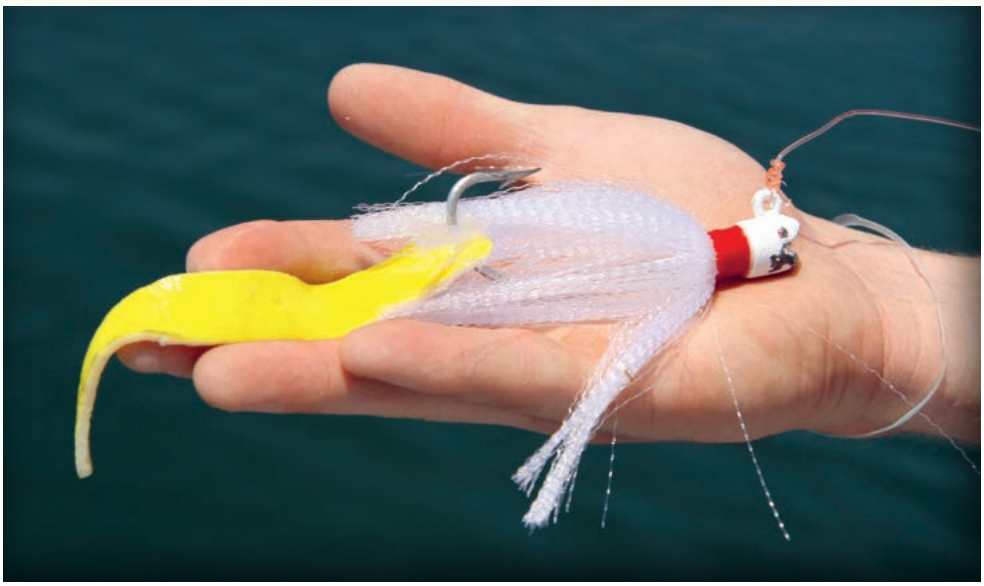
Stride kept his catch, as red drum are prized table fare and there are no recreational regulations for them in Massachusetts waters. The drum taped out at 34 inches and weighed 12.65 pounds.

Tarpon on Martha's Vineyard

On Sunday, September 15, the first night of the Martha's Vineyard Derby, Rich Mann, Tony Dagostino, and Jared Strobie were fishing fresh bait for bluefish and ended up catching a 72-inch tarpon instead. That made it the third surf-caught tarpon in New England since August 2023.


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Bucktail Trailers



A bucktail jig is like a hamburger. On its own, it can be perfectly fine, but some magic happens when you add the fixin's. Adding a trailer to a bucktail enhances the lure's action, slows its sink rate, and adds a splash of color while increasing the profile. Here are some of the best options available to anglers today.

Pork Rind

A piece of cured pork skin, dyed a fish-attracting color and cut into a long strip, was the original trailer. It was first brought to market by Allen Jones and Urban Schreiner, developers of the original Uncle Josh Pork Rinds. Fishermen now have several options in the Northeast following a brief period in the 2010s when Uncle Josh ceased production.

PROS

- *The most natural, fluid action of any trailer*
- *Durable enough to withstand dozens of stripers and even bluefish*
- *Reusable if properly stored*

CONS

- *Requires specialized storage*
- *Dries out if left on the hook between trips*
- *Limited color options*



Uncle Josh Sea Strip



Buff's Baits Tapered Pork Rind Trailers

Synthetic Pork Rind

Cut into similar shapes as natural pork rinds, synthetic trailers first gained popularity with tube-and-worm trollers before catching on with bucktail casters. While many are made in the same shape as the Uncle Josh Sea Strip, some are curled to give them additional action as the jig moves. These are added to bucktails the same way as natural pork rind, by pushing the hook through the tip of the trailer and allowing the bait to dangle off the bend of the hook.

PROS

- *Wide range of colors and shapes*
- *Durable*
- *Will not dry out between trips*

CONS

- *Less action than natural materials*



Captain Bruce's Otter Tails

Fat Cow Jig Strips

Hackle Feathers

Tying several hackle feathers to the hook shank of a bucktail creates a permanent trailer. It has the fluid movements of a natural material, but it won't dry out like pork rind.

PROS
- *Natural action*

CONS
- *Less durable than other materials*
- *Permanently attached to the jig*
- *Must switch jig to switch trailer*



S&S Jigs Pro Rockhopper Bucktail

Soft-Plastic Curly Tail

The classic curly tail threaded onto a bucktail jig hook adds both bulk and action. More bulk means a slower sink rate, so anglers should take that into account when choosing a curly tail.

PROS
- *Easily transported*
- *Inexpensive*
- *Widely available at tackle shops*
- *Large variety of colors and sizes*

CONS
- *Can be pulled down the hook by short-striking fish*
- *Less action than natural materials*
- *Less durable*



Z-Man DoormatadorZ



Kalin's Magumbo Grub



Berkley PowerBait Saltwater Grub

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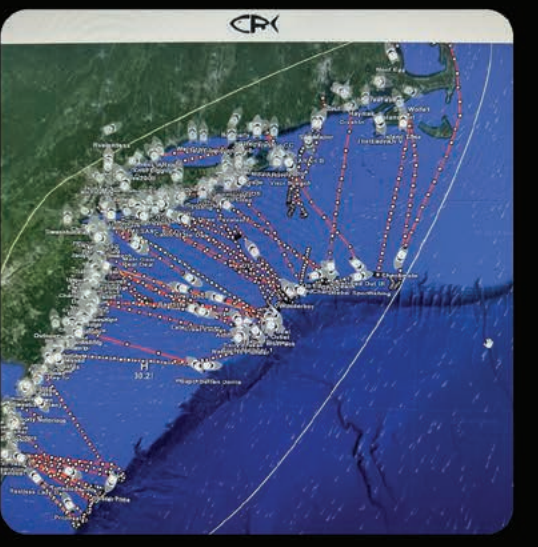
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Hot Lures of 2025

Every season, a few lures rise to the top as must-have baits. Sometimes, the demand is so great that tackle shops can't keep up, leaving anglers with the nagging feeling that they should have shopped smarter before the season started. To help, we're anticipating the lures you won't want to be without when the fishing season ramps up.



Shimano Bomb Dip

Tuna Poppers

The last few seasons have seen lots of surface-crashing tuna, one of the ultimate thrills in our Northeast fishery. When making an offshore run this season, make sure to have a few tuna poppers. When smaller yellowfin and bluefin are eating tinier bait, a short but sturdy popper like the 5-inch **Rapala Magnum Xplode** will generate big bites. When the tuna and the baits they're eating are bigger, a larger popper like the 6 2/3-inch **Shimano Bomb Dip** will set off surface explosions.



Rapala Magnum Xplode

Soft Stickbaits

In 2024, surfcasters rediscovered the effectiveness of a straight-tailed, soft-plastic stickbait, proving the lure *du jour*, like fashion, is often cyclical. Expecting this trend to continue, if you fish the surf, stock up on thicker, soft-plastic stickbaits like the **Slug-Go** and **Super Snax** this winter.

For boat fishermen, a combination of rising eel prices and circle-hook regulations sent them seeking alternatives to live bait like the **Gravity Tackle GT Eel** and **JoeBaggs Block Island Eel**. Every year, more anglers are discovering they can catch plenty of big bass on these baits without getting their hands slimy.



Slug-Go



Super Snax



JoeBaggs Block Island Eel



Gravity Tackle GT Eel

Mullet Matcher

A strong return of the mullet run from New Jersey all the way to Cape Cod had fishermen searching for a close match to these cigar-sized baitfish in 2024. They found it with the **Z-Man Mulletron**, a mirror image of a live mullet fitted with a thumping tail that fishes well on slow and high-speed retrieves. Since we expect the trend of improving mullet runs to continue, this is a necessity for 2025.





Spro Power Bucktail

Bucktail Jigs

The bucktail jig has been a must-have lure since its invention many decades ago, but a new wrinkle in 2025 has fishermen looking for alternatives to long-held favorites. A shortage of quality deer tails forced a switchover to synthetic materials for the iconic **Andrus Jetty Caster** in late 2023. Another local favorite, the **Tinman Tackle Bullet Head Bucktail**, paused offering bucktails over 1 ounce because the tails needed to tie the dense, bushy jigs that make the lures popular among surfcasters have also been difficult to obtain. Still available is the **Spro Power Bucktail**, which was designed with a forward line tie for a cast-and-retrieve presentation and extra-dense bucktail hair for a slower sink rate.

Fast-Sinking Paddletails

The kicking, rollicking action of a soft-plastic paddletail makes it a tough bait for stripers to pass up. They've been go-to baits in the Cape Cod Canal since the introduction of the pre-rigged Swim Shad. In recent years, Canal anglers have favored deeper-bodied mackerel imitations, like the 3.5- and 5.5-ounce **Fish Lab Mack Attack Soft Swimbait**, over slender sand-eel swimbaits that were popular a few years ago. A bounce-back in Canal bluefish in recent seasons led some anglers to fish more durable plastic paddletails, such as the **Z-Man Diezel Minnow** paired with a 3-ounce or heavier jighead like the **Z-Man Diezel Eye**.

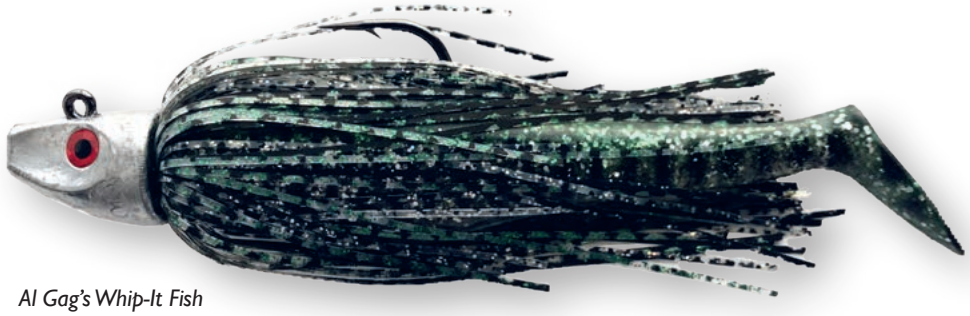
Boat fishermen have also favored fast-sinking paddletails when running and gunning after schools of stripers in open water, locating suspended schools with side-scanning sonar and getting baits in front of the fish before they move on. Favorites for this approach are the 2- and 3-ounce **Z-Man Diezel Eye** jighead and **Diezel Minnow** combo as well as the 2- and 3-ounce **Al Gags Skirted Whip-It Fish**.



Fish Lab Mack Attack



Z-Man Diezel Minnow



Al Gag's Whip-It Fish

Hot Lures of 2025



Rapala X-Rap Saltwater



Berkley Saltwater Juke

Fast-Moving Minnows

While the 2024 albie run left a bit to be desired in the Northeast, the bonito run was an all-time great. They were being caught from surf and boat beginning in June, with the last few fish caught as late as mid-November. That gave fishermen a chance to refine their techniques, and one of the top baits for bonito was a minnow plug that held its action through moderate to high-speed retrieves, like the **Rapala X-Rap** and **Berkley Saltwater Juke**. If the bonito return in similar numbers, expect to see anglers reaching for minnow plugs over epoxy jigs, at least until the albies show up.



Berkley PowerBait Power Switch



Rapala Crush City Freeloader



Berkley Finisher



Jackall Driftfry

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Bass fishermen couldn't escape discussion over the use of forward-facing sonar last season. No matter how you feel about it on the professional tournament trails, there's no denying its effectiveness. Lure companies, recognizing the trend, designed lures optimized for use with this groundbreaking technology. Most of them are soft plastics like the **Berkley PowerBait Power Switch** and **Rapala Crush City Freeloader**, but there are some hard baits like the northern-style glidebait **Berkley Finisher**, as well as a category-defying bait like the **Jackall Drift Fry**, a lipped soft plastic capable of being rigged a variety of ways.

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JIMMY FEE

Originally designed to catch muskie, The Doc has become the favorite topwater offering for thousands of striped bass anglers.

Rigging the Doc

By Alex Staikos

On a scorching hot afternoon in early June, Matt and I pulled up beside a large school of bunker on our way in from a successful day of striper fishing. We were tired and sunburnt, but still stopped at every bunker school we saw because it's what any angler would do. At the last school, we noticed a nice mark toward the bottom of our graph, so we eagerly grabbed our rods rigged with Docs to see if we could draw up the fish.



When replacing treble hooks with inline single hooks, choose one that matches the gap size of the existing treble hook.

After a few casts along the outskirts of the bunker school, my Doc got hammered. This wasn't your typical topwater blowup. The bass hit the plug multiple times, even knocking it clear out of the water before committing. When fishing a Doc, just a hit brings an unmatched thrill. That fish ended up being my personal best at 44 inches. It reminded me of how special this topwater can be when rigged and fished correctly.

The Doc is an oversized, walk-the-dog topwater lure, part of a large family of topwaters known as spooks named after the original walking bait, the Heddon Spook. My good friend and creator of Albie Snax, Alex Peru, described a spook as a lure that "gives you endless ways to fish." You can work it slow or fast, twitch or

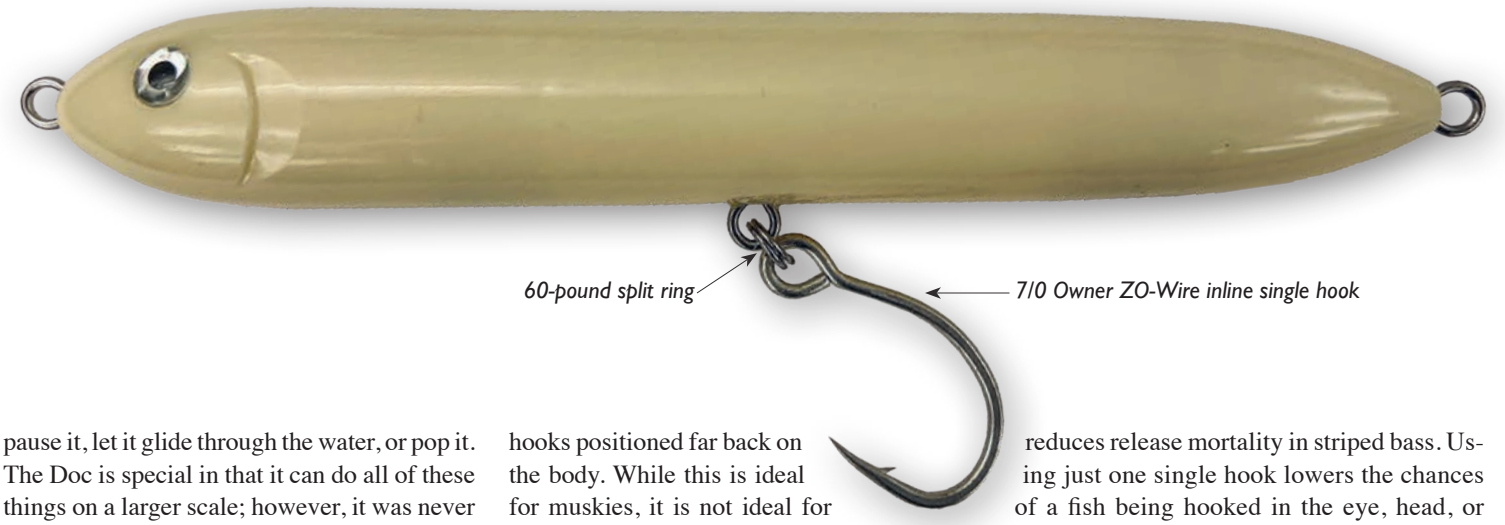
Working the Doc for Big Bites over Deep Water

On more aggressive retrieves, the Doc will pop under the water when it turns—giving your presentation the attention-getting sound of a popping plug while maintaining the zigzag pattern of a distressed baitfish. This splash consistently draws fish up from deep water.

I keep my rod tip pointed down while aggressively twitching it with my wrists to achieve a walk-the-dog pattern. The retrieve is extremely slow, but the twitching must be intense to achieve the splash. Alex Peru explained, "You know you are working the Doc properly if the people you're fishing with turn their heads as if a fish has eaten your lure."

Alex also explained that the angler's job is to make the Doc "sound like a popper, but swim like a spook." This combination makes it simply irresistible.





pause it, let it glide through the water, or pop it. The Doc is special in that it can do all of these things on a larger scale; however, it was never designed for saltwater purposes.

The Drifter Tackle Doc originated as a topwater bait to target muskellunge. Over the past few years, saltwater anglers in the Northeast got hold of this spook and made it a staple when fishing for striped bass. While the company has acknowledged the plug's popularity in salt water by introducing popular striper colors like bunker, green mackerel, and all-yellow, the terminal tackle still leaves a bit to be desired by saltwater anglers. A Doc comes standard with weak split rings and two large treble hooks positioned far back on the body. While this is ideal for muskies, it is not ideal for targeting large stripers.

Whenever I purchase a Doc, I immediately remove the split rings and treble hooks from both the belly and tail. I rig the belly hook with a 60-pound split ring and a 7/0 Owner ZO-Wire single replacement hook, leaving the plug without a tail hook. A general rule when replacing treble hooks with inline single hooks is to ensure that the gap of the single hook is equal to the entire treble.

This rigging style has numerous benefits. First, adding an inline single hook to the belly reduces release mortality in striped bass. Using just one single hook lowers the chances of a fish being hooked in the eye, head, or throat by the tail hook. Second, it prevents fish from gaining leverage to bend out the hook and escape. Also, it leads to a more secure hookset due to that larger hook gap. This is crucial when after a big bass with a lower lip that's twice the thickness of the trebles that come standard on the Doc.

Replacing the terminal with one inline single hook can also enhance the Doc's action. Removing the tail hook reduces drag, so the Doc glides through the water more easily, giving it a wider side-to-side action.





When Will the Stripers Return?


REX MESSING

In the Northeast fishing community, no event is as highly anticipated as the spring striped bass migration. Fishermen who bid farewell to these fish in the late fall or early winter eagerly await their return to our coast, watching the weather and fishing reports beginning in March to see when the bass will come back.

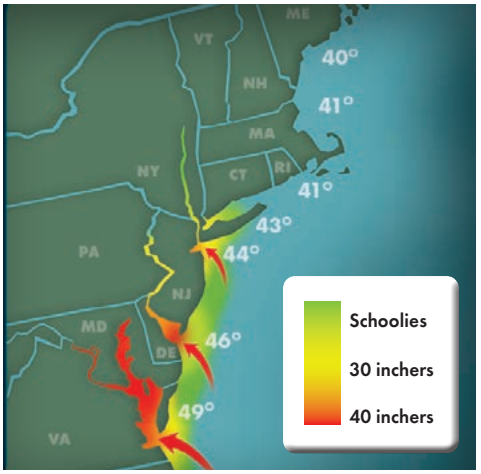
Recent History: The Spring Migration

2021: Big bunker schools returned to the Northeast in the late spring, but a lack of large bass with them left anglers worried about the future status of striped bass numbers. A noticeable shift in the presence of trophy stripers around popular summering grounds like Block Island and Montauk left anglers questioning what the 2022 spring migration would bring.

2022: Schoolie and slot-size stripers made a strong showing from Delaware Bay to eastern Long Island in the early spring. The large bunker schools that had congregated around Long Island and southern New England in years past were concentrated around Boston and the south shore of Massachusetts; trophy stripers gorged on them throughout the summer.

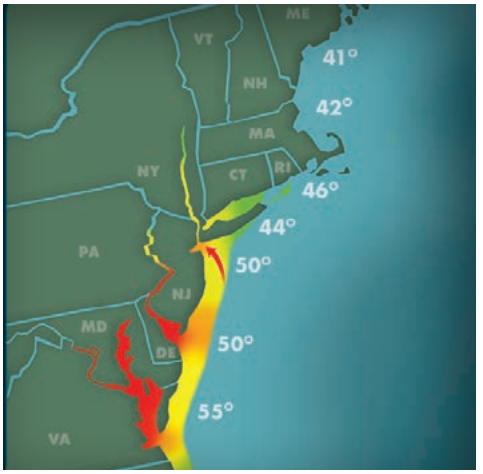
2023: The spring run was ahead of schedule, especially with large, post-spawn stripers from the Chesapeake. Fish as large as 50 inches reached New Jersey in the first week of May and Massachusetts by the second week of May. By the third week of May, there were even reports of 40-inch stripers in the rivers of Maine.

The 2024 Striper Migration



March 29

It's a lukewarm start to the striper migration, with torrential rains dampening (literally and figuratively) fishing efforts. Fishermen later blamed the rains for keeping bunker out of Raritan Bay, which made spring striper fishing there a little slower than in the previous few seasons. Still, sizable stripers are seen staging outside spawning tributaries in the Chesapeake, with reports of decent numbers of schoolie bass in backwaters and estuaries from Delaware Bay to Long Island.



April 12

Cooler-than-average temperatures slows down spawning in the Chesapeake, but as the weather stabilizes, the spawning intensifies. Waves of larger fish hit both the Delaware and Raritan bays. Migratory stripers reach Connecticut and, within a week, fishermen in Rhode Island and Massachusetts report the first fresh schoolies of the season.



May 3

Raritan, Narragansett, and Buzzards bays are hotbeds of striper activity, with fish to 40 inches blasting baitfish on the surface. Fish to 50 inches are reported in New Jersey, and post-spawn bass are exiting the Chesapeake and heading north.



May 10

Bunker continues to be in short supply throughout the Northeast, but stripers find plenty of fuel for the migration in herring, squid, cinder worms, and rain bait. Stripers that left the Chesapeake are showing up along coastal beaches in Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and Long Island. Migratory fish to 30 inches reach Boston.



May 24

The May full moon kicks the migration into higher gear as 40-pound stripers are reported all the way up to Massachusetts. Big schools of very large bass are staging off the Western South Shore of Long Island and Northern New Jersey, and Montauk is inundated with schoolie and slot-size stripers. Post-spawn fish from the Hudson continue populating Long Island Sound.



June 7

The June new moon brings big bass into surf-casting range from New Jersey to Maine. The action continues to be widespread, but in parts of southern New Jersey, the fishing begins to wane as warming water temperatures send the fish north.

The 2024 Striper Migration



June 14

Warming waters push any lingering stripers in southern New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland north and offshore. Large stripers are reported chasing bunker in Massachusetts from Cape Cod Bay to Boston, while big schools of large bass continue to move east along the South Shore of Long Island.



June 21

The reefs of Long Island Sound load up with big bass as Hudson and Chesapeake fish converge on the sound. The fishing gets spotty in New Jersey as warming temperatures push the bass north. Fishing at Block Island, Boston Harbor, and Montauk ramp up as the fish settle in, while some stripers continue to swim toward Maine, where anglers at the northern edge of the striper's migratory route experience another great summer of fishing.

Check out all the 2024 Striper Migration Reports Reports here!



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Craft (Fishing) Beers of the Northeast

By Matt Haeffner

Every Friday, between 4 and 5 pm—and, if I'm being honest, sometimes as early as half past 3—the clock strikes Beer:30 at the On The Water office. Our work-fridge options typically include a range of IPAs, lagers, pilsners, and pale ales. Nary a light beer will be found in our fridge because we lean toward flavorful, stronger-than-average brews with enough ABV (alcohol by volume) to help the last hour or so of the work week breeze by.

Whenever possible, we opt for fishing-themed beers (there are more than you might think) produced somewhere along the striper coast. These are a few of our recent favorites.



Deep Seductress New Zealand IPA

By Forty Second Brew Co. & Siren Lures

Location: Kingston, MA

Flavor: Crisp notes of citrus with a bitter, yet smooth finish

ABV: 6.8%

Best Enjoyed: With tired arms and a bluefin on ice.



Sabiki New England IPA

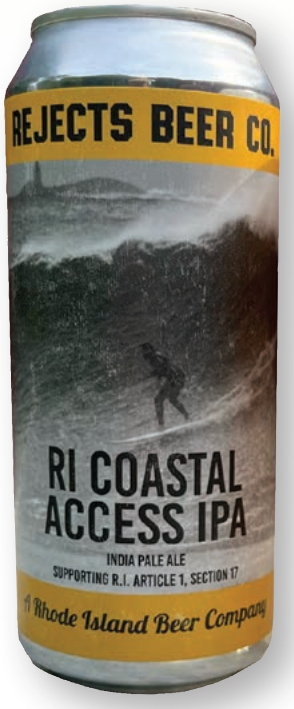
By Stellwagen Beer Co.

Location: Marshfield, MA

Flavor: Hoppy taste with notes of mango and melon accented by a bright, citrusy finish

ABV: 7.2%

Best Enjoyed: With a blacked-out livewell.



Coastal Access IPA

By Rejects Beer Co.

Location: Middletown, RI

Flavor: Smooth and hoppy, with a fruity aroma to complement flavors of lime, passionfruit, melon and peach

ABV: 7.1%

Best Enjoyed: While plotting a surf-fishing trip.



Fish Story Hazy IPA

By Untold Brewing

Location: Scituate, MA

Flavor: Fruity, floral aroma with notes of berry and pine. Made with "Anchovy" hops from Segal Ranch Hop Farm in Washington

ABV: 6.6%

Best Enjoyed: During "fish story" time around the fire pit



The Surf Beer

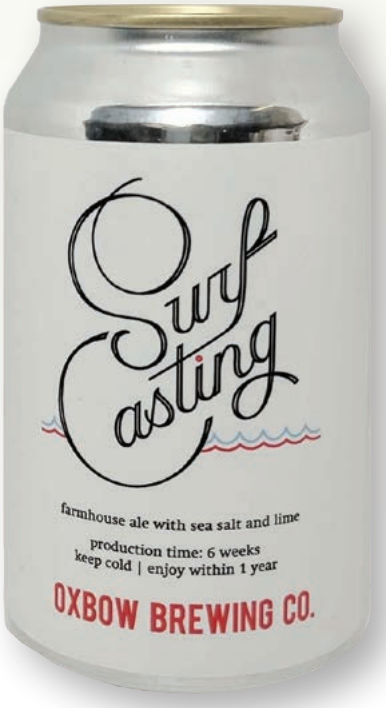
By Montauk Brewing Co.

Location: Montauk, NY

Flavor: Light and sweet with a slightly malty aroma and a mildly hoppy finish

ABV: 4.5%

Best Enjoyed: While chunking on the beach during a hot summer day



Surf Casting

By Oxbow Brewing Co.

Location: Newcastle, ME

Flavor: Light, wheaty, and slightly salty with a hint of sour lime

ABV: 4.5%

Best Enjoyed: After a night of rock-hopping in the surf



Fish Beer Friday Review: Otherside IPA, Reef Donkey American Pale Ale and Head Boat Helles Lager

Scan the QR Code to read our Fish Beer Friday Reviews.

Note: Some beers may be only seasonally available. Please inquire at each brewery.



End Of The Season Reel Maintenance

By Bill Kipp



Before putting away all your equipment for the winter, consider this:

Opening season is a few days away. You pull your equipment out of the basement, turn the handle of your favorite reel ... and its frozen. What now?

Well, you can try to disassemble, clean, and lube it. You may get lucky, and everything comes apart freely, or maybe not. If you're not so lucky, you can contact the local bait and tackle shop, but they are probably swamped.

Help me help you. It's simple. Wash your reels! Every time! As soon as you pull back to the dock or get home from the surf, get the freshwater hose out and wash down your equipment. Get all that salt and sand out because it will quickly destroy your equipment. Salt speeds up the corrosion process tremendously, especially between dissimilar metals like aluminum and stainless steel. Sand is a natural abrasive (think sandblasting). Now, put that sand in the gearbox. It's not good. Do you ever hear your line screaming as it comes off the reel? All it takes is one grain of sand in the line roller to cause havoc.



Good stuff

There's no need to use any special product, such as Salt Away. Water works just fine. Never use any water displacement product, either, like WD-40. It will actually break down the grease in the reel and cause it to seep out. You can use CorrosionX to spray your reels because it has waterproof oils in it, though it's needed only if your reels are stored in a salty environment, such as a boat or shed by the water.

If your equipment was stored properly, the season is approaching, and your reel isn't due for service, some simple maintenance can help keep the reel going all season. Pick up some reel oil and put a few drops at the base of the handle knob, on the line roller (if equipped), on the level-wind worm drive (if equipped), and any other moving parts such as the star drag, bail lever, etc. Then, add oil periodically throughout the season.

Some reels come with oil ports. If the reel was serviced within a proper timeframe, it's not necessary to put oil in the ports. The marine-grade grease inside the reel is just fine.

Another consideration is storage. Try to store your equipment indoors and in the driest location possible. Avoid storing your stuff on the boat, in a damp shed or basement, and definitely not out in the weather. If you live in a damp or salty environment, consider using a dehumidifier.

Also, break down your rig, separating the rod and reel. Another spot where salt likes to hide is under the reel seat. In fact, when it's time to put the outfit back together, place a small piece of electrical tape under the reel seat. This will create a moisture barrier between the reel and the rod, which will help keep the dissimilar metals from corroding.

This next suggestion might sound extreme, but it makes sense when you think about it. De-spool all your reels at the end of the season. Mono, braid, flouro, all of it. Any friction tape or backing that's not epoxied down, remove that, too. What happens is the line holds the salt, sand, and moisture right up against your spool with no escape, so it won't take long before it starts to corrode. That corrosion breaks down the spool, leaving behind rough, sharp edges that like to cut into your line.

It's as simple as that—a freshwater washdown and dry storage. Follow these steps and your reels should last a lifetime.


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Highlights of the Northeast Offshore Season



Big Jim (left) and Jimmy Fee with a summer bluefin jigged up off Block Island with Newport Sportfishing Charters.

Last year, OTW's Anthony DeiCicchi and Jimmy Fee, along with Adam LaRosa and Deane Lambros of Canyon Runner, released weekly dispatches on offshore fishing in the Northeast. Over five months, we tracked great fishing, from giant tuna just off the beaches to best-in-a-decade billfish action out in the canyons. Here are some of the hottest bites from the 2024 season.

June: Overs on Jigs off Cape Cod

Over the last few seasons, there's been a good late-June run of bluefin east and north of Cape Cod, where fishermen found them smashing through schools of sand eels on the surface. In 2024, an onslaught of 60- to 70-inch tuna arrived in mid-June and couldn't resist heavy metal.

As the saying goes, "The flame that burns twice as bright burns half as long," and so it was with this bite. After a week of captains tallying double-digit hook-ups on large recreational-size bluefin, the fish disappeared for parts unknown, and the light-tackle bite east of the Cape became a grind for the remainder of the season.

July to September: School Bluefin Bonanza

In 2023, fishermen enjoyed great action on yellowfin and bluefin at the Dump for most of the summer. In 2024, the Dump was mostly quiet and midshore yellowfin were few and far between. But with big numbers of fun-size bluefin set up just off Block Island and Montauk, no one was complaining. The fish settled in around mid-July, and by August, hooking 10, 20, or even 40 bluefin in a day was not unheard of. Most fell into a tight range of 32 to 36 inches, though there were larger fish in the mix, and anglers sticking it out could usually count on at least one encounter with a 50-inch or better bluefin. Slender metal sand-eel jigs were the top choice for light-tackle anglers, though there were times when poppers worked as well, if not better.

September: Marlin Mania in the Mid-Atlantic

Boats out of Ocean City, Maryland, experienced white-hot fishing for white marlin at the begin-



ning of what ended up being a stormy September. Boats trolling marlin spreads in the Norfolk, Washington, Baltimore, and Wilmington canyons found that double-digit billfish days were the norm rather than the exception. Some boats reported catching as many as 40 white marlin in a single trip. Overall, it was a great year for marlin from Cape Cod, Massachusetts, down to the Outer Banks of North Carolina, but none of it compared to the crazy early-September bite out of the mid-Atlantic ports.

July and August: Incredible New England Canyon Fishing

While closer New England canyons like Atlantis and Veatch had a slower summer, boats with the range and fuel budgets to reach distant canyons like Munson found downright epic fishing. At times, yellowfin were so abundant that they were a nuisance to crews targeting 200-pound bigeye that were also around in great numbers. Good water sat over those far canyons for a big chunk of the summer before it finally moved west in September, bringing the fishing with it to Veatch and Atlantis for a short window in the fall.

Late August and September: Yellowfin Night Bite

Yellowfin fishing varied for much of the summer, but one of the hot stretches was in late summer when the fish loaded into Hudson Canyon, giving anglers a crack at catching them on chunks and jigs both during the day and at night. September storms disrupted the bite, but by mid-October, it was ramping up again, with headboats reporting full limits into November.

October: Not-So-Ghostly Tuna in New Jersey

Years ago, fishermen called the fall bluefin off New Jersey "ghosts" for their tendency to appear and quickly disappear. In 2024, that wasn't the case. Bluefin from 40-inchers to giants stacked up on structure from just off the beach to far offshore. Soft plastics, metal jigs, and occasionally stickbaits got the fish to bite, giving New Jersey fishermen a second lights-out fall bluefin bite in a row.

Check out all the Northeast Offshore Fishing Reports here!


Kyle Tangen of Fishermen's Supply in New Jersey with a fall yellowfin that fell to a stickbait.

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Three Lesser-Known Baits for Fluke



At some point in history, our fluke-fishing forefathers came together and declared that a strip of squid topped with an expired Atlantic silverside (more commonly called a spearing) was to be the standard bait for our favorite flatfish. They found that the stark white of the squid pennant practically glows in the depths where fluke hunt, while its boneless undulations give the impression of a mortally wounded baitfish. The spearing adds the touch of deal-sealing realism, and while the fragile bait may not survive a botched hookset, the squid usually does, giving an angler a second chance to succeed.

This potent pairing will catch fluke just about anywhere you can find them, but in some cases, there are better, lesser-known options that anglers can use that might just edge out this old standard.

Sand Eels

Just a couple decades ago, tackle shops across the Northeast reliably stocked bags of fresh and frozen sand eels. Some of them were bought and used for striped bass in the surf, but many were transported to sandy shoals where fishermen baited them on simple rigs to match the hatch for fluke. Today, you may need to procure your own sand eels in order to get a consistent supply, but it's often worth the effort.

How to Fish:

The simpler the better with sand eels, as these are often the same bait that fluke are eating over sandy bottoms, but you must get them in front of the fish. Use them on three-way rigs adorned with no more than a sparsely riveted bucktail teaser and, if you must, a single spinning blade. In shallow water, there's no need to pair the sand eels with squid, but if you want a little more bulk, fish two at a time—if your bait supply allows it. Hook each as you would a spearing, either through the eyes or down through the top of the skull. To hook a fluke, only a short drop-back is needed, as they usually fully engulf the bait in one shot.

Dogfish

At times, smooth or spiny dogfish can present a major hindrance to fluke fishermen, chowing through bait supplies, tangling rigs, and wasting valuable time on the fishing grounds. One silver lining when catching dogfish is that they make a great fluke bait.

A strip from the belly of a dogfish has an enticing flutter, an eye-catching snow-white color, fish-attracting scent, and skin so tough it's nearly impossible for bait-stealers to take it off the hook.

If you have reservations about taking a dogfish for bait, keep in mind that the meat, when breaded and fried, is downright delicious. Don't believe it? Ask any of the famous fish n' chips spots across the Atlantic, where spiny dogfish has been the go-to ingredient for generations of seafood-loving Brits. So, take the bellies for bait, the rest for your cooler, and get down to the business of catching big fluke.

How to Fish:

Pair with spearing on popcorn rigs, gaudily dressed three-way rigs, and pretty much any rig you'd otherwise use with a strip of squid.



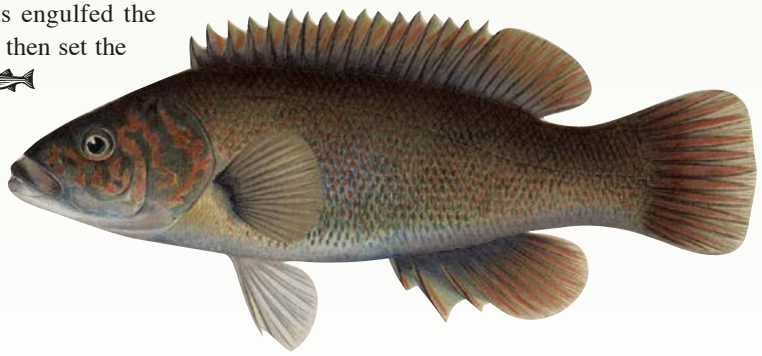
Bergalls

While killies are an effective and easily attainable live bait for fluke, their small size makes them a poor choice for anglers hoping to score a doormat. Fishermen who want to offer fluke a larger live bait usually opt for snapper blues, but with the current bluefish bag limit (3) and inconsistent availability during much of the fluke season, snappers aren't as reliable a bait as they once were.

Bergalls, however, fill that slot nicely. With piers and jetties from New Jersey to Massachusetts full of these 3- to 5-inch wrasse, fishermen using small hooks and bits of clam or squid can usually catch enough for a day of fluking with just an hour or so of effort. Like their close relative the tautog, a bergall is hardy, easily surviving the ride in the livewell and swimming a long time with a hook through the nose.

How to fish:

Send to the bottom on a three-way rig with an undressed 4/0 to 6/0 octopus-style hook (depending on the size of the bait) hooked through the bergall's nostrils. Drop back to any biting fluke to ensure it has engulfed the entire bait, and then set the hook hard.





Bass By The Season

By Robbie Tartaglia



There's nothing more rewarding than catching a big bass during colder months of the year.

The ever-changing weather and water conditions in the Northeast create a special breed of bass fishermen. To be successful, anglers must follow changing patterns and always be prepared to adapt and adjust on the fly. The first step is understanding the phases of each season and the transition periods that connect them.

Ice Out/Cold Water

Whether a water body fully ices over or not, when the season starts and there is open water to fish, that water is going to be cold. The depth of a water body plays an outsized role in tactics and timing. In shallow lakes and ponds, which heat up faster than deeper ones, target areas that have slight depth changes in proximity to some combination of hard structure, grass, and hard bottom. In areas with isolated grass, reach for a jerkbait. Around wood or rock, try a bottom bait like a jig. In deeper lakes, search for humps, high spots, and points in 15 to 30 feet of water. Bass hold in these areas throughout the winter, so you will often find fish, especially smallmouth, set up and willing to feed. In deeper water, a small bottom bait such as a Ned rig should produce. Take note of the forage present and do your best to match it.

Pre-Spawn

The transition from ice-out to pre-spawn is a favorite time of the year for many bass anglers. Depending on location and the body of water, it could begin as early as the end of February or as late as April. Pay attention to weather trends. A stretch of warm days is great, but warmer nights are even better when it comes to raising water temperatures and getting big fish moving. Look for drop-offs and points that lead directly from deep water to shallow water, as these are routes bigger fish take to move up the water column.

Eventually, flats, grass, points, and coves with abundant cover will attract fish that are moving shallow to feed and eventually spawn. A favorite bait at this time is the jig, as bass forage on crawfish coming out of their winter burrows. Jerkbaits, chatterbaits, and even big swimbaits are all effective. Match your patterns to the prevalent big bait, which might be yellow perch, herring, or golden shiners.

Spawn

The spawn usually begins in late April or May on most Northeast waters. If you target spawning fish, be sure to handle them with care and release them right back to their beds. Bass spawn on large flats, points, and around all kinds of structure. Largemouth tend to spawn in shallower coves and further up creeks, while smallmouth prefer slightly deeper water



Use your electronics to find changes in contour.



Jigs are a wise choice for fishing hard structure.



The author weaves through tackle to make adjustments on the fly.

around points and main lake shorelines. Often, when you find a smallmouth on a bed, there are others nearby. Not all bass are oriented to spawning areas, though, and it can be very rewarding to catch quality bass that are not on beds. Target these fish by looking for baitfish in deeper water. Try minnow presentations, like a jighead with a 2- to 3-inch swimmer, or even a topwater when you know you're casting over bait.

Post-Spawn

Post-spawn summer patterns are a favorite for many Northeast anglers. You can catch bass with almost any presentation or bait you prefer. This time of year offers a ton of fun on topwater, especially during low-light hours. When it gets hot midsummer, fish deep. Lakes with deeper rock piles and grass can produce excellent offshore fishing for both smallmouth and largemouth. Use electronics or lake mapping to find humps and high spots in main lake areas. It's hard to beat a jig or dropshot in these situations, and going heavier will keep you connected to the bottom. Focus on natural colors in the summer, like green pumpkin or black and blue.

Fall Transition

After the stability of summer, major changes come with the transition to fall. Shifting weather patterns and dropping water temperatures reward versatile anglers who pay attention to fish behavior. Bass of all sizes move to new areas to feed before settling into winter holding areas. Find areas with abundant forage and the bass will be nearby. Blustery days can concentrate forage and spark feeding activity on windblown points and shorelines. Bottom baits, moving baits, and topwaters all have potential, so be prepared to experiment and change tactics. In early fall, a string of colder nights push big fish to feed. By late fall and early winter, it's often a string of warmer days that cause bass to become more active.



Post-spawn summer patterns are a favorite for many anglers in the Northeast.



2025 Boat Show Season

Boat show season is better than ever, with more boats, bigger shows, and innovative new models and updates. Whether you're in the market for an upgrade or just dreaming, visit a boat show this year and make sure to step aboard these new and improved models.

2025 Northeast Boat Show Schedule

New England Boat Show
Boston Convention and Exhibition Center
January 8-12, 2025

Chesapeake Bay Boat Show
Maryland State Fairgrounds
January 10-12, 2025

New York Boat Show
The Javits Center
January 22-26, 2025

New Jersey Boat Sale and Expo
NJ Convention and Expo Center
February 13-16, 2025

Atlantic City Boat Show
Atlantic City Convention Center
February 26 - March 2, 2025

Bay Bridge Boat Show
Safe Harbor Narrows Point, Annapolis, MD
April 11-13, 2025

Newport International Boat Show
Newport Yachting Center Marina, RI
September 11-14, 2025

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Cobia 285 Open

Appreciate an open-space layout? The Cobia 285 Open offers an angling-friendly layout with full walk-up access to the bow and stern, along with two additional cockpit insulated fish boxes.







contenderboats.com

Contender 29Bay

Are you a bay-boat fan who loves to go long? Contender's all-new 29BAY comes standard with a Seakeeper Ride and a 400-mile range, putting all adventures, from inshore bays to offshore tuna grounds, on the table.



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Eastern 248 Tournament

Don't want to be held back by the weather? Featuring a legendary Downeast-style hull, the 248 Tournament performs well with a single 150-hp outboard and keeps your crew comfortable, safe, and happy on every excursion.



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Grady-White Freedom 345

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Maritime 2090 Skiff

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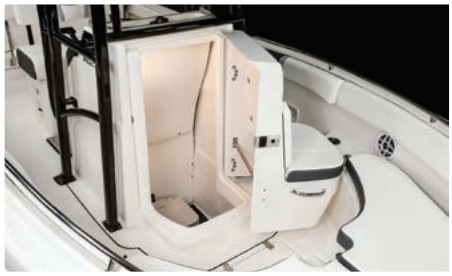
Pursuit OS 325

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MUST-SEE BOATS



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Robalo R222

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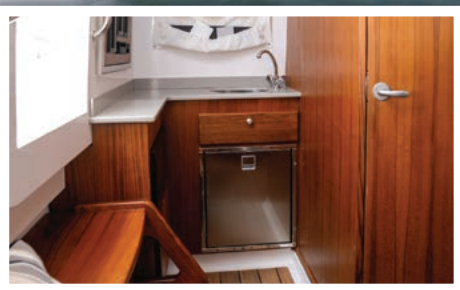
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Skeeter SX2550 Family

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Record-Breaking Fish Tales of 2024







One of the greatest attractions to fishing is the element of chance—the chance that, on any given day, one may encounter a fish of epic proportions. Whether it's a 50-pound striped bass in the surf, a double-digit trout through a hole in the ice, or a jumbo mahi-mahi in the canyons, intriguing stories of man versus fish entice us to persist in our pursuit of a trophy, hoping that one day, we will cross paths with a fish of record-breaking caliber.

Rhode Island State Record Tautog

For Captain Rob Taylor of Newport Sportfishing Charters, the hunt for extra-large tautog is much more than a game of chance. Based on conditions, location, and the time of the season, Taylor adjusts both his tackle and approach to put his charters in the best position for success. It's this sort of meticulous preparation, coupled with a knowledgeable captain's experience, that helped Vinny Simms, Jr. land a record-breaking tautog on October 21, 2024.



Elliot Sudal and Stone Fornes with the new junior world-record white marlin.

Simms, at the time, hadn't wrangled a tautog larger than 6 pounds, but if there's one place to shatter a personal-best blackfish, it's along the craggy coast of Rhode Island. Taylor maneuvered his boat, the *Reel E-Z*, over a piece of structure that he discovered while cast-netting menhaden in the spring. The first few drops yielded some pesky black sea bass, followed by a much larger fish that forced Simms to lock the drag on his spinning reel. With Taylor walking him through how to play the fish, they managed to net it, even after the monster tog, being winched to the surface, took a drag-searing run back to the bottom.

On board the *Reel E-Z*, the fish measured 34 inches, with an unofficial weight that surpassed 20 pounds on Taylor's Boga Grip. Back on land, the certified scale at Quaker Lane Bait and Tackle read 22 pounds, 5.28 ounces, besting the previous state record by 12 ounces in weight and 2 inches in length.

The tale of this record-breaking tautog is a testament to an angler's willingness to learn from the captain, who took a chance on a new piece of bottom structure and coached his customer toward a hard-to-beat personal-best blackfish. It's the kind of experience that keeps hopeful anglers returning to the water in search of a trophy of their own.

Junior World-Record White Marlin

On August 16, 2024, Nantucket-based surf-fishing guide Elliot Sudal guided 12-year-old Stone Fornes to the new junior world-record white marlin—a 118.5-pound fish that surpassed the previous record, set in 2011 by Matthew Sheehan of Martha's Vineyard, by nearly 17 pounds.

Maryland State-Record Blueline Tilefish

On August 24, 2024, while fishing in Poorman's Canyon with Captain Chris Little of Talkin' Trash Sportfishing Charters in Ocean City, London J. Anthony set the new Maryland state record for blueline tilefish on a chunk of ballyhoo. The 20.6-pound, 37.25-inch tilefish beat the previous record, caught by Robert Purcell in September 2012, by a mere 6 ounces.

Rhode Island State-Record Mahi-Mahi

In late August, Karl Mohr of New York was fishing with father/son duo Captain Andy Dangelo and AJ Dangelo of Maridee Charters when they hooked into a double-header of mahi-mahi while trolling a Sterling Tackle Lumos tracker bar.

Although Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management does not recognize mahi as being eligible for state-record contention, they do list dolphin fish under "Notable Catches" on the agency's website. If recognized, Mohr's 37.56-pound, 59-inch mahi will topple the previous "record", which has stood since 1995, by 5 pounds and 1 inch.

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Maryland State-Record Yellowedge Grouper

While fishing in Poorman's Canyon with Captain Chase Eberle of Chasin' Tides Charters, Jian Feng Li brought a massive yellowedge grouper to the boat after it ate a strip of false albacore. The catch was taken to Sunset Marina in Ocean City, where a Maryland Department of Natural Resources biologist confirmed the species. There, the 43-inch fish weighed in right at 38 pounds, just about 11 pounds short of the 48.6-pound world record.

Rhode Island State-Record Rainbow Trout

While ice fishing on Peck Pond on January 18, 2024, Zachary Taylor of Burrillville, RI, caught a 15-pound, 12-ounce rainbow trout through a six-inch hole in the ice, shattering the previous state record—which was set in 2020—of 12 pounds, 9 ounces.

Maryland State-Record Rainbow Trout

While fishing in Antietam Creek on February 10, 2024, Jean-Philippe Lartigue of Bethesda, MD, set the new state record for rainbow trout. His whopping 17.44-pound fish toppled the longstanding record of 14.2 pounds set by Dave Schroyer in October 1987.

New York State-Record Largemouth Bass

On July 11, 2024, during tournament practice on Cayuga Lake, Jim Britenbaugh of Gettysburg, PA, caught and released the new state-record largemouth bass after it was certified by New York State Department of Environmental Conservation officials at the boat launch. The 12-pound, 6-ounce bass dethroned John Higbie's 11-pound, 4-ounce record that was caught in September 1987.

New York State-Record Smallmouth Bass

On September 22, 2024, Dante Piraino of Baldwinsville, NY, caught and released a 9-pound, 23.12-inch smallmouth bass on the St. Lawrence River. Piraino's catch bested the previous state-record smallmouth, caught in Cayuga Lake in 2022, by just 8 ounces, stealing the record-breaking bass crown from Cayuga.

Massachusetts State-Record Lake Trout

On April 9, John Stamas caught and released the new Massachusetts state-record lake trout while fishing from the bank of Wachusett Reservoir. Stamas, who was fishing for smallmouth bass at the time, hooked the fish on a football jig. After a brief battle, Stamas landed the fish without a net. On shore, a quick weight and measurement revealed the laker to be 39 inches long and all of 20 pounds, besting the short-lived catch-and-release record that had been set just 72 hours prior on opening day at the reservoir.


RI DEM


JIM BRITENBAUGH


MARYLAND DNR

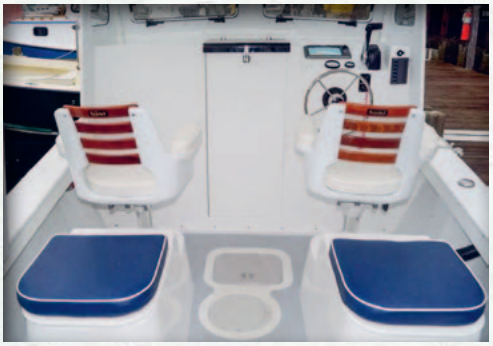
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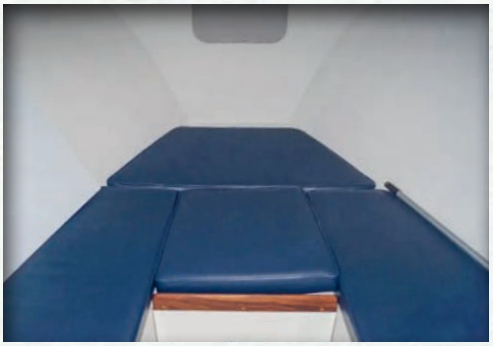
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The author's "treasurechest," a large plastic bin filled with two 1-gallon buckets, each inside of a larger 5-gallon bucket. Collectively hanging from these buckets are roughly 250 artificial baits in a variety of sizes and colors.

Use Your Noodle

By Bill Marcus

Since the late 1980s, foam noodles have been ubiquitous accessories around swimming pools. They come in a variety of colors and diameters, and are also used in many ways, such as swimming aids or safety devices (the latter despite manufacturer's label warnings to the contrary). When paired, they facilitate floppy sword play, and when quadrupled, they provide limbs for anyone looking to be Dr. Otto Gunther Octavius on Halloween.

The genesis of the first pool noodle is up for debate. A common theme in most origin stories is that someone familiar with foam tubing in an engineering setting had an epiphany about its potential elsewhere. The most-often cited is that the owner of a family business specializing in fabricating extruded polyethylene foam backer rods and pipe insulation often brought factory samples and prototypes home. Eventually, some gray 9-foot rods found their way into his swimming pool and inspired his eureka moment. Pastel colors replaced drab industrial gray, and kids replaced a target audience of contractors, builders, and plumbers. Another often-cited story involves a swim coach exploring redesigning a pull buoy, a device that creates additional resistance to strengthen swimmers' arm, shoulder, and back muscles. Historically, these were constructed from commercial-grade polyethylene tubes. The coach had his "Aha!" moment one day while watching kids play with the cylinders of a pull-buoy prototype he was working on. The coach wrapped tubes in colored tape to transform them from dull training devices to colorful swimming pool toys.

Pool noodles have no patent protections and are produced by many manufacturers, marketed with names such as "pool noodles," "swim noodles," and "water woggles." They also have properties that are perfect for fishing related do-it-yourself projects: buoyancy, shock-absorbency, flexibility, plus they can withstand repeated hook-point insertions and removals, and are quite inexpensive.

For my DIY noodle hacks, I typically purchase 4½-foot long, 2-inch diameter noodles for a buck each at a local dollar store. Often in conjunction with nylon cable ties, duct tape, electrical tape and/or Velcro tape, I can transform a noodle into an ingenious contrivance that improves some aspect of my overall fishing experience. While I devised many hacks on my own, I'm sure others have come up with the same or very similar ones. For this article, I will



Strips of pool noodle will help prevent mayhem when inserted inside a plug bag.



An 8-inch section of pool noodle combined with an elastic band is perfet for holding a variety of pre-tied teaser rigs.

discuss my top three hacks that may inspire you to come up with other uses on your own.

Teaser Rig Holders

There are many options for adding teasers to enhance the presentation of traditional plugs and lures. Some anglers attach the eye of the teaser's hook directly to a dropper loop placed in the leader roughly 16 to 22 inches up from the plug. The benefit of this arrangement is that it minimizes the chances of a teaser fouling the leader or mainline. It also requires no additional hardware. However, if you are concerned with weakness that a knot in the leader may create (particularly when targeting bigger fish), a separate and shorter line for the teaser can be tied directly to the leader side of a barrel swivel or to the third eye of a combo or three-way swivel.

This approach also minimizes the likelihood of a toothy fish cutting through the leader line and separating an angler from an expensive plug. The increased breaking strength and better isolation between lure and teaser comes at the expense of increased terminal tackle and potential of the primary and secondary leaders tangling and disrupting the lure presentation. I prefer yet a third approach, a middle ground between the two techniques. I cut roughly a 7-inch piece of leader material and attach a teaser at one end and a perfection loop at the other. I use a loop-to-loop connection to attach the pre-tied teaser rig to a dropper loop placed roughly 20 inches up my leader from the plug. I carry a bunch of pre-tied rigs with an assortment of teaser types, such as bucktail, feather, and soft plastic. The loop-to-loop connection means I can quickly swap out one teaser type for another as I experiment to determine the most effective one for the moment. In addition, this arrangement allows for some of the benefits of the second approach without the need for a swivel.

"Thanks for the advice on teaser options, Bill, but what does this have to do with pool noodles?" you might ask. This is a valid question, so let me explain. Many of my surfcasting outings are done on foot in search of fish actively chasing bait and spots conducive to stirring up or aggregating fish forage. On most of these excursions, I like to travel light. In addition to my rod and reel, I have a small three-tube surf bag with a side compartment for a pair of pliers with cutting edges and a front pocket for holding a few bucktails, a small spool of leader, and a re-purposed prescription vial containing some power clips and miscellaneous tackle. Attached with electrical tape to the outer edge of one of the tubes is one half of a 5-inch piece of pool



The author's watertight enclosure for his kayak's battery. The box's size is larger than the battery itself, so pieces of pool noodle were used to keep the battery from shifting inside the box.

noodle cut along its diagonal. I embed the hook points—past their barbs—of several prepared teaser rigs into the foam, creating safe and easy access to the pre-tied teasers. Before I added this modification to my surf bag, I would drop a few teaser rigs directly into the tubes or in the front pocket. It was hard to retrieve a rig from a tube, particularly when standing out on an isolated rock in the water. Often, this maneuver resulted in the contents of my surf bag falling and becoming lost in the Atlantic Ocean. Even on the occasions when I managed not to empty my bag into the sea, the teasers in the pocket often drew blood when I reached inside.

For long treks covering miles, in addition to my plug bag, I wear a sling pack or backpack to carry essentials such as sunscreen, bottled water, and snacks. The pack also allows me to carry additional gear and tackle, among which is an 8-inch section of pool noodle for holding a variety of pre-tied teaser rigs. The hook points are embedded into the cross-sectional face of the noodle cylinder. The leader material runs down the outer curved surface where I use an elastic band to hold all the line in place.

Equipment & Tackle Organizers

Most of us don't have the luxury of walking out our front door directly to our favorite fishing locales. It is much more common to travel a considerable distance from one's residence to where the fish are. Weather forecasts and reports are sometimes misleading, or conditions change while one is en route. As such, it is advisable to bring a wide range of equipment and tackle along for the ride, allowing you to pick and choose according to the conditions.

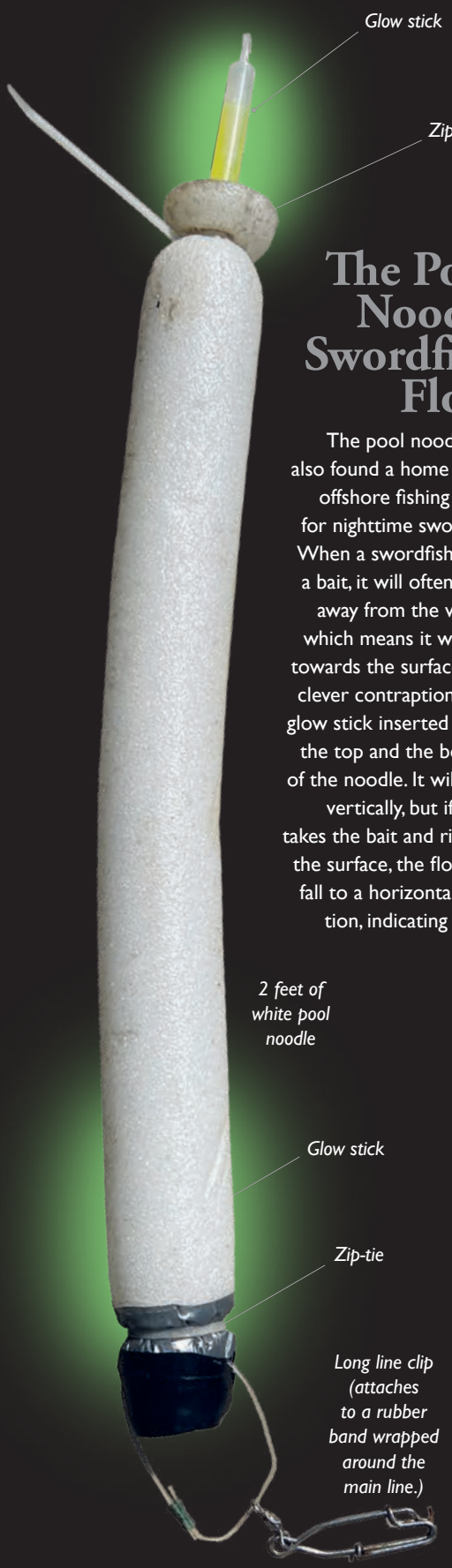
I travel with what I call my tackle "Treasure Chest," a large plastic bin filled with two 1-gallon buckets, each inside of a larger 5-gallon bucket. Collectively hanging from these buckets are roughly 250 artificial baits of hard plastic, soft plastic, metal, and wood in a variety of sizes and colors. The outer buckets are held in place by cut strips of pool noodle wedged between them and the lower portions of the bin's sides. Each inner bucket is held in place by nylon screw assemblies through the bottom center. At the top of one long side of the bin is a strip of pool noodle, attached with double-sided Velcro tape, for embedding hooks, teasers, and some soft plastics that can't simply hang from a bucket rim. Lengths of poodle noodles are sliced along their curved surface through to their hollow inner cores and fitted to the rim of each of the 5-gallon buckets, then 14-inch nylon zip ties are used to hold the noodle material in place. This arrangement effectively extends the depth of the larger buckets to accommodate longer plugs as well as preventing the lures from shifting and clumping up when the bin is moved. I also keep a telescoping magnetic pickup tool on hand to easily access lures that occasionally fall between the inner and outer buckets. With my treasure chest in tow, I am prepared for surf casting in just about any weather situation.

Shims, Wedges, and Holds

A pool noodle can be bent at extreme angles as well as compressed, all while maintaining a high degree of rigidity. A foldable sheetrock knife blade is long enough to slice through polyethylene cylinders up to 5 inches in diameter like butter, and a utility knife is perfect for whittling the resulting foam pieces to any desired shape. These physical attributes make it ideal to fashion contraptions to cradle things safely in place, as its application on my sit-on-top kayak illustrates. My kayak is rigged with CHIRP, SideScan, DownScan and charting electronics powered by a sealed lead acid rechargeable battery in its body. To protect the battery from moisture that often builds up inside the kayak or, worse still, gets in while I am storing or retrieving something through one of its many hatches, I've constructed a watertight enclosure using a polycarbonate O-ring-sealed box, waterproof cable glands, and weather-resistant wire connectors. The box's size is larger than the battery itself, so I used pieces of pool noodle left over from another project to keep the battery from shifting inside the box. In addition, I cut a pool noodle in half along its cylindrical surface to create something resembling a speed bump. Inside the body of my kayak, accessible via its centrally located hatch, I adhered four pieces of the "speed bump" into a rectangular shape slightly smaller than the dimensions of the battery box. This makes a simple yet effective pressure-fitting mount for the watertight enclosure, keeping it from jostling inside the hull of the boat while I'm paddling, pedaling, exploring, and fishing.

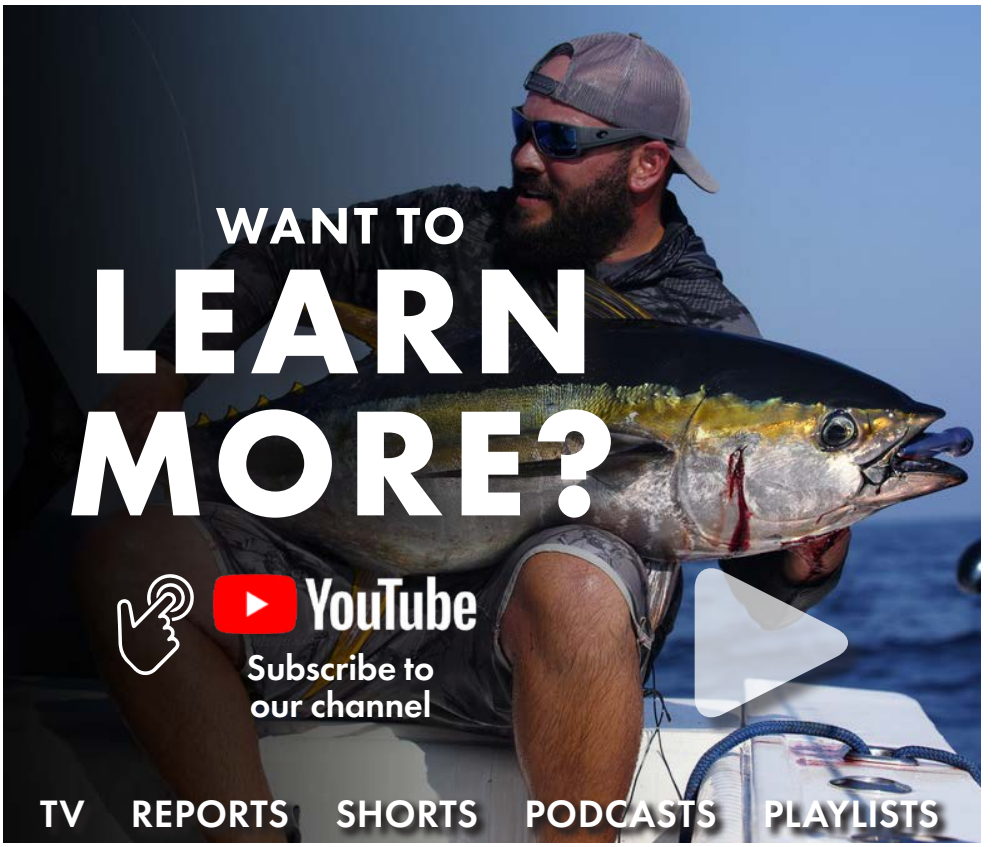
Honorable Mentions

The noodle-related DIYs mentioned above are currently my favorites. There are countless other hacks using noodles as rod racks, rod-tip protectors, ice-fishing transducer levelers, fly-tying material holders, fishing-net floats, bobbers, and fillet-knife sheaths, to name a few. What we fishermen can do with pool noodles is only limited by the capabilities of the gray-matter noodles embedded in our heads.



The Pool Noodle Swordfish Float

The pool noodle has also found a home in the offshore fishing scene for nighttime swordfish. When a swordfish takes a bait, it will often swim away from the weight, which means it will rise towards the surface. This clever contraption has a glow stick inserted inside the top and the bottom of the noodle. It will float vertically, but if a fish takes the bait and rises to the surface, the float will fall to a horizontal position, indicating a bite.



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Live-Lining From Shore

By Michael Brangwynne


MATT HAEFFNER

Watching a striper tail-slap a live mackerel is a sight that never gets old.

I imagine that my presence on the rocky ledge was a minor annoyance to the swarm of photographers who had arrived just before first light in an attempt to capture a perfect sunrise photo of the lighthouse over my shoulder. As they set up their tripods and adjusted their apertures, I frantically jigged my rod in long sweeps. A second rod and an orange Home Depot bucket filled with salt water and adorned with a "You Suck at Striper Fishing" sticker rested nearby, also likely interfering with their shots. If any of the photographers were also fishermen, they probably wondered what the heck I was doing. I would have had the same question before I learned about live-lining baitfish for striped bass from shore.

Like many new fishing techniques, I first heard about this strategy from my long-time fishing partner and slightly longer-time brother. While we were on vacation in a popular New England beach town, he'd heard from a local salty dog that one could in fact jig up mackerel from certain locations and then deploy the mackerel from those same locations to catch striped bass.

Of course, we had both experienced the thrill of live-lining baitfish from a boat for hefty bass. Fooling cows during the daylight hours can prove a difficult endeavor, however. It is no secret that a circle-hooked mackerel, bunker, or harbor pollock can be the key to getting a trophy to bite while the sun is shining. I had never thought it might be possible to use this same strategy from dry land. I won't lie to you. There are many more things that can go wrong with this technique than if you were simply casting out a chunk, but when it all comes together, it can be an extremely fun and rewarding way to pursue striped bass.

Live-Lining Shore Spots

The first step in a successful shore live-lining trip is finding a location from which you can catch both mackerel and striped bass from shore. Think ledges and rocky outcroppings along the northern range of the striped bass migration, with a drop-off into deeper, faster-moving water. If you do not have access to a loose-lipped salty dog, I suggest bringing a bait rod with you to promising locations. Spend some time trying to jig up mackerel as discussed below, and if you are unsuccessful in obtaining bait, you can fall back on the plug bag.

Once you have found a spot with bait within casting distance of shore, you will need a rod for jigging, a bucket or small portable livewell for keeping your bait alive, and a surf rod to send out the bait for stripers.

The Bait Rod

Your bait rod should be set up with braid connected to a Sabiki rig with a pyramid sinker attached to the snap swivel at the end of the rig. For those of you unfamiliar with a Sabiki rig, it is a prepackaged leader tied with six tiny hooks on dropper lines wrapped with brightly colored material. They excel at catching mackerel, but they also tend to flail sticky-sharp hooks in every direction. For that reason, I use a hollow Sabiki rod that allows me to reel the rig into the rod's body, avoiding tangles and snags.

Don't overthink the reel on your bait rod. You just need something capable of launching a 1- to 2-ounce pyramid sinker and retrieving one to six mackerel at a time, so any cheap reel will do. I prefer a pyramid sinker for weighting the Sabiki rather than a diamond jig, as one might do when jigging mackerel from a boat. A diamond jig has a higher likelihood of getting snagged when casting from shore.

The Bucket

The technique for keeping your bait alive can be as simple as placing the macks in a five-gallon bucket filled with fresh seawater. If you want to step up your game, you can purchase a portable livewell or special-purpose bait bucket with an aerator to keep the water oxygenated.

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If you don't have an aerator, you will need to regularly freshen up the seawater in your bucket to keep the mackerel alive and feisty.

One general note on handling any baitfish: The less time you spend with the bait locked in an MMA submission hold while wrenching hooks from its jaw, the longer it will live to seduce bovine linesiders. Hanging the hooked baitfish above your bucket and giving the butt of your rod a quick jolt against the ground will often cause the Sabiki hook to pop loose and the bait to fall into the bucket. If that does not work, use a pair of hemostats, pliers, or a small hook remover to pop the hook out over the bucket without ever touching the bait, but be careful not to break the fragile Sabiki hooks.



A six-hook sabiki rig allows you to load up on bait quickly when mackerel come within range.

The Surf Rod

For your main rod, you can use a favorite surf rod that's capable of handling sizeable striped bass. I don't cast my macks any great distance from shore, but even so, it helps to have a rod with a moderate action to absorb some of the force when sending a bait out. A softer rod will help to reduce castoffs.

For the reel, I use a Shimano Baitrunner in the 6000 size. These reels have a dual drag system that allows the angler to seamlessly transition between a very light bait-running drag and a standard fish-fighting drag. It is extremely satisfying to hear the sporadic stripping of the lighter drag by a spooked baitfish followed by the steady peel of line once a bass picks up the bait and heads for open water.

I spool my surf rod with 40-pound braid attached to a 30- or 40-pound fluorocarbon leader. As with any live-bait presentation for striped bass, use an inline circle hook. I prefer a 7/0 with an "up eye" angled away from the shank. This configuration is great for tying a Snell knot, which naturally engages the circle hook and swings the point home into the corner of a striper's mouth. I hook the mack through the nostrils or just behind the dorsal fin.

The Technique

Live-lining from shore is best pursued during periods of low light that occur around a high tide. The higher tide stages make it more likely that you can get your Sabiki rig out to the deeper water that the mackerel prefer. Fan-cast the Sabiki as far as you can throw it, allow the sinker to bring the rig down toward the bottom, and then retrieve with long sweeps of your rod. You can experiment with different depths and retrieve speeds until you hit paydirt. Mackerel move in schools, so if you feel one hit your rig, slow down or pause your retrieve for a few seconds while keeping the line tight and see if you can double-, triple-, or quadruple-up.

The trickiest part of this technique can be finding a school of bait, so resist the urge to immediately send out the first mackerel you catch. Try to get at least a few backups in your bucket before switching to the surf rod. Once you have a supply of bait, send out the mack, keeping in mind that the most productive water is often at your feet. The frothy edges of rocky promontories and ledges attract bass looking to pin bait close to shore. Make it easy for them.

I start by sending out a mack *au naturel* on the lighter bait-running drag setting. If you do not have a bait runner, simply open the bail and gently let the bait take line through your fingers as needed. You will know when the action transitions from the frantic tugs of a nervous mackerel to the steady pull of a hearty striper. Give the bass a few seconds to swim off with the bait, then engage your main drag on the bait runner (or flip your bail on a standard reel), let the rod load up, and start fighting the fish.

If your bait is getting fouled in rocks or bubble weed, you can use a balloon, bait float, or even a large bobber to keep the mack away from it. Although this makes for a slightly less natural presentation and creates more resistance when the bass takes your bait, there is a certain nostalgia to patiently waiting for a bobber to disappear.

I wish that I could tell you that I put on a show for those photographers … that I hooked a whale just as the sun crested the horizon and was surrounded by cheering strangers slapping me on the back, snapping pictures, and shouting "hip, hip, hooray!" Alas, the macks were uncooperative that morning. It was long after the sun had risen and the photographers had packed up and left that I managed a low-slot bass on my one baitfish before switching to Old Reliable, also known as a white Slug-Go. Such complications should be expected when live-lining from shore, and the stars do not align on every outing. Nevertheless, there is something rewarding about catching fish with fresh bait that you have procured through your own efforts. I highly recommend you give it a go.



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CORAZON
FISHING CHARTERS



Deepwater FLUKE FISHING

Short drifts over deep structure are the key to catch big fluke at easily missed hot spots.

BY JIMMY FEE

Every August, Captain Doug Toback devotes his days to running farther to find the largest fluke of the season as they begin their offshore migration through the New York Bight. The seas were lumpy as we broke the inlet, the product of a week's worth of strong south winds, but Toback's 35-foot Duffy, the *Corazon*, handled them without issue.

The *Corazon* had a rich fishing history before finding its way to Doug in September 2020. For years, it worked the waters of Montauk as the *Westlake*, and while it had, as Doug puts it, "good karma and a great layout," it needed some love. Over the next 9 months, Doug and DJ, partnering with Baldwin Harbor Marine replaced "basically, everything."

The upgraded vessel has a spacious, climate-controlled cabin, a large cockpit with plenty of fishing room, and a stable, fast ride that allows Doug to fish everything from



Toback watches his electronics closely to find subtle strutcures that other captains overlook.



The *Corazon*, a 35-foot Duffy, allows Toback and his crew to fish everything from big stripers just off the beach to overnighters in the Canyons.

stripers just off the beach to overnighters in the canyons.

The New York City skyline, visible through most of our steam south, was lost behind the curvature of the earth, when Toback pulled back the throttles at one of his big fluke numbers. During the ride, DJ, Toback's college-aged son and first mate, rigged the rods with gaudily dressed high low rigs, while cutting squid into strips and thawing packs of frozen spearing in a bucket of seawater. As he determined our drift speed and direct, Toback explained his fluke fishing strategy.

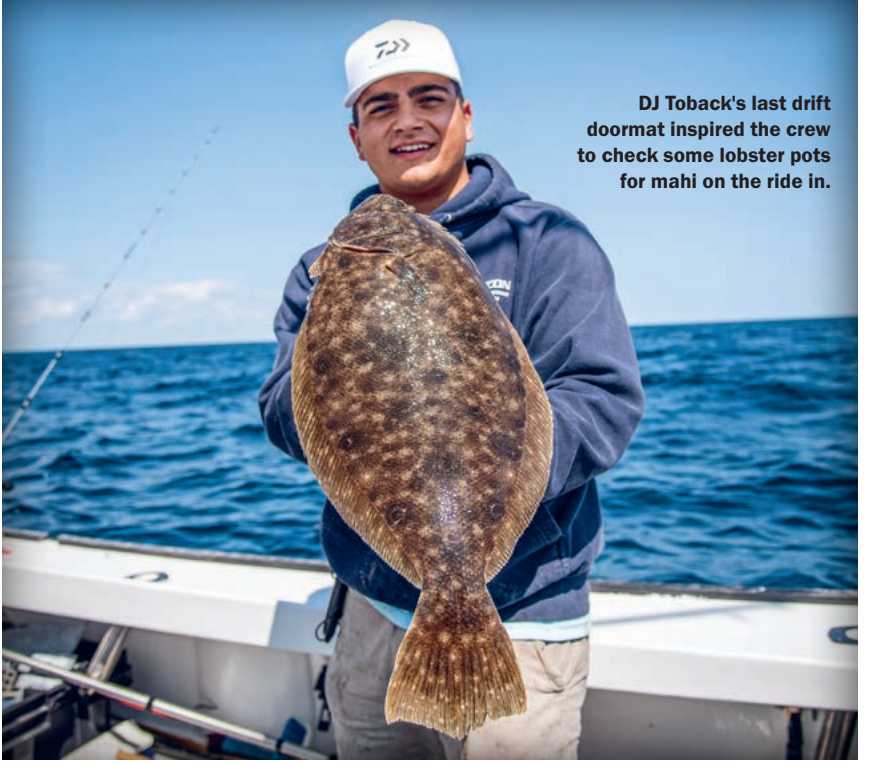
The strategy involves short drifts over small pieces of structure. As he sets up each drift, Doug remains at the wheel, eyes on his fishfinder, working together with his crew, instructing them when to drop. Anyone still fiddling with their rig, checking their phone, or otherwise day-dreaming risks dropping their rig too late and having their baits land behind the structure, where undersized sea bass greedily attack the squid and spearing combos.

Doug's go-to fluke rig is a high-low rig fitted with floating jigheads, made by M3 Tackle. He supplies his crew with the standard spearing and squid pennants, but breaks the mold when it comes to scented artificials, opting for FishBites over Berkley Gulp. I've used my share of FishBites over the years, baiting my surf kingfish rigs with the company's imitation bloodworms, but I had never fished them for fluke. The bait is made of a scented paste molded around a mesh strip that holds it onto the hook. In the water, the bait slowly dissolves, sending out a scent trail and attracting the fish. They act as an insurance policy against bait-stealing species, keeping anglers from "fishing on credit" when coming through the sweet spot.

We dropped the FishBites E-Z Squid, a white segmented ribbon that Toback cut into roughly 5-inch lengths. The synthetic bait, paired with the colorful skirted hooks and



An homage to the Corazon's previous life as the West Lake in Montauk decorates the cabin.



DJ Toback's last drift doormat inspired the crew to check some lobster pots for mahi on the ride in.

natural baits, made a robust offering to the fluke below, with the goal of enticing the fish that met New York's strict, 19.5-inch minimum size. In my old fishing photo albums, there are plenty of pictures of me grinning widely while holding fluke that, today, would not even be New York keepers.

Meeting those high minimum sizes, along with having a shot at a doormat, is what drives captains like Toback farther offshore for fluke. It's a common theme throughout the Northeast, with fishermen making similar and longer runs to fluke grounds beyond Block Island or Nantucket, where fishing water as deep as 100 feet is common.

To effectively fish these depths, and keep the fishing fun, fishermen scale down their braided line to the ultra-thin 20-pound test. This cuts down on water resistance, and therefore, the amount of lead needed to hold bottom, which allows anglers to fish lighter, more



Nick Cancelliere with one of the ling that were feeding on the soft bottom just beyond the fluke-holding structure.





On the run further offshore, DJ served the crew chicken rice, a Toback house favorite.



For Toback, zeroing in on fluke spots comes down to data analysis, which is why he makes a new waypoint whenever a fluke is hooked.

fun tackle. On the *Corazon*, Toback outfits his crews with Daiwa Harrier slow-pitch jigging rods and Daiwa Lexa baitcasting reels that sit comfortably in the palm, making it easy to impart action to the rig below.

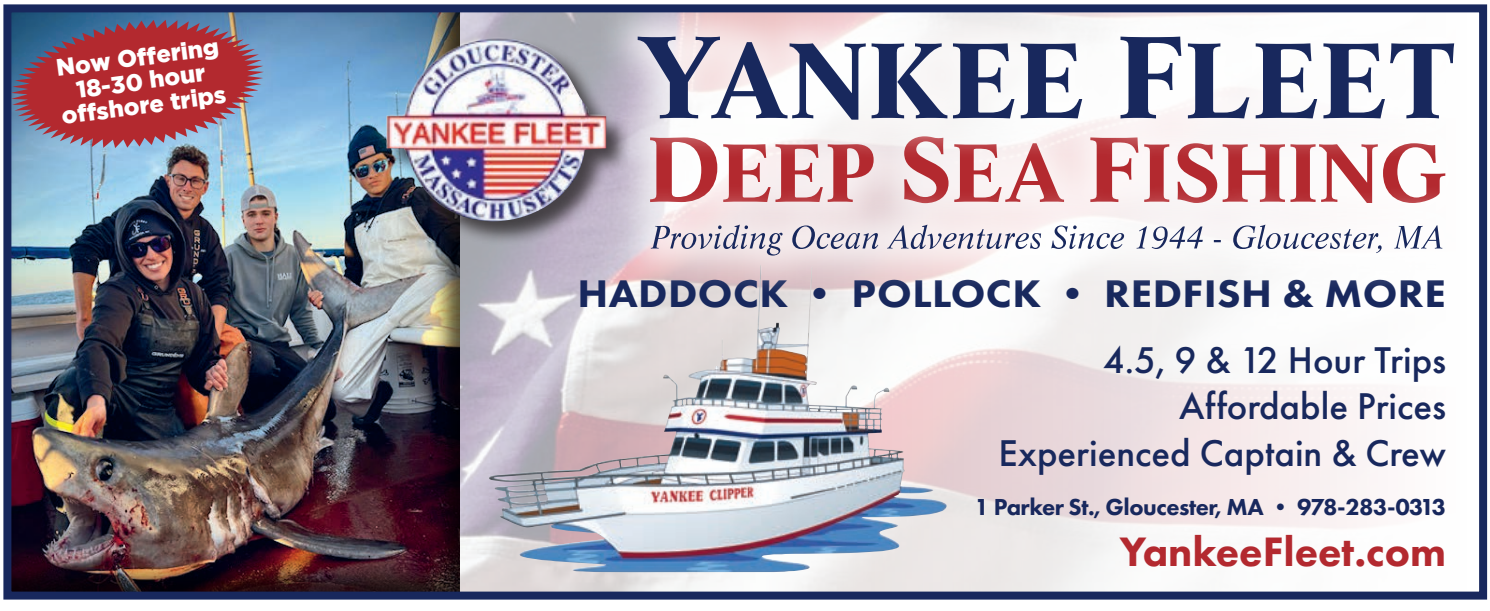
Over the years, I always found it remarkable that the most abundant fluke size manages to be just an inch under whatever the minimum length happened to be. And so it was aboard the *Corazon*. We caught 17- and 18-inchers aplenty, and the first drift yielded a 21-incher that Toback deftly netted for me.

Though I'd been warned, I was still surprised by the shortness of Toback's drifts. They were downright surgical as he focused on structure that the substantial fleet of fluke-obsessed New Yorkers easily overlook.

Toback locates these spots by marking a waypoint every time he sees rubble, bait on the bottom, or a lump. Even while drifting reefs, he makes a new waypoint whenever a fish is hooked. Over time, this has created areas of clustered waypoints at different depths on his chart plotter, and he's able to find the patterns among all that data to help him locate the fish. It's familiar territory for Toback, whose previous career was technology and data analysis on Wall Street.

On the soft bottom beyond the structure, in addition to the short sea bass, we caught plenty of ling. It had been years since I'd caught more than one or two ling on a trip, so it was great to see this small member of the cod family coming up two or three at a time on a few consecutive drifts.

Bug-eyed, slug-shaped, and equipped with long, tentacle-like fins, ling—officially known as red hake—are one of the uglier bottom-dwellers of the New York Bight. Despite their homeliness, small size, and general lack of spirit on the end of a line, in decades past, ling kept headboats full and



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Toback's go-to fluke rig is high-low fitted with floating jigheads, made by M3 Tackle, and tipped with FishBites.

sailing right through the winter months. Their abundance and firm, white meat drew crowds of anglers seeking both a cure for cabin fever and fresh fillets. We added the ling to a cooler and continued our drifts in search of fluke.

It's a rarity that a fishing trip saves the best for last. Most often, the peak comes sometime in the middle, with a tapering off of both the fishing action and angler enthusiasm until everyone agrees that it's time to head for the barn. My trip aboard the *Corazon* followed that trajectory as the undersized fluke became more infrequent, and only one more keeper hit the deck during more than a dozen drifts.

Toback declared the final drift over another of his favorite fluke numbers, and as soon as he declared "Drop them," three fluke rigs headed for the bottom. I was staring down the barrel of my rod, willing a fluke to bite when, in my peripheral vision, I saw DJ swing.

The rod bucked wildly and bent to the fore-grip, its soft action dampening the ferocity of the fluke's headshakes and keeping the hook from tearing free. DJ worked the fish to the surface and Doug stabbed out with the net, and the father-son duo closed the deal on the New York Doormat.

Enthusiasm reignited, Toback took the long way home, seeing if any of the lobster pot buoys would offer up a mahi to add one last splash of color to the cooler. We found the mahi, but they were deep and sulking, showing no interest in our baits, perhaps already having been targeted by another boat heading in from the tuna grounds.

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YAMAHA

In Pursuit of LANDLOCKEDS *on Grand Lake Stream*



ZACH MARTIN



RYAN LILLY

BY RYAN LILLY

As I headed east on Route 9 from Brewer, or what Mainers refer to as the "Airline," I set my truck on cruise control and settled into the 111-mile drive from my home in Hampden to Grand Lake Stream for an annual guys' trip that I look forward to each year. The Airline is windy and unpopulated, weaving through dense forests, along blueberry barrens, and over crystal-clear streams. Because it's spring, new leaf growth pops against the dark contrast of evergreens.

With each passing mile, it is as though I've gone a year back in time before arriving at Grand Lake Stream Plantation in the year 1913. If change is inevitable, Grand Lake Stream (or GLS) didn't get the memo.



RYAN LILLY


ZACH MARTIN


ZACH MARTIN



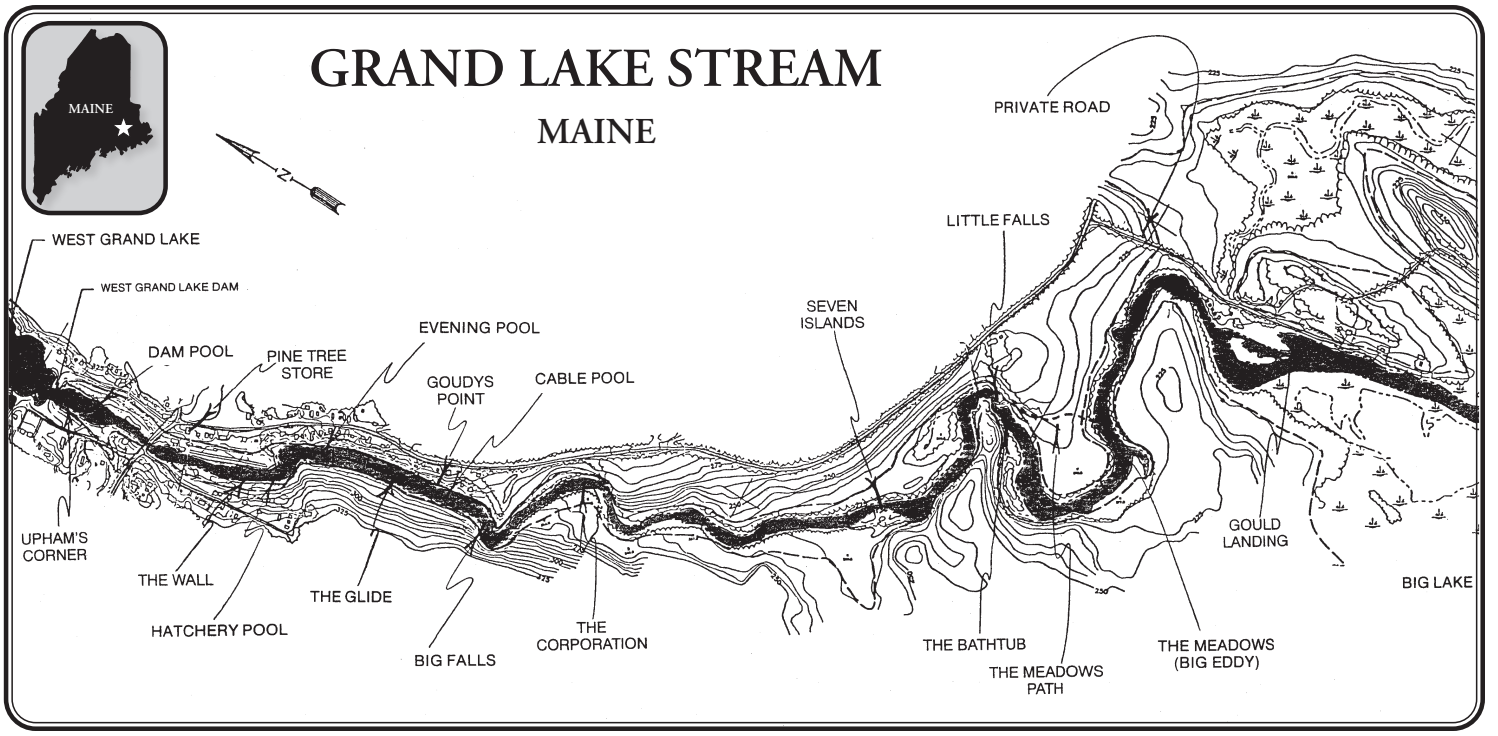
ZACH MARTIN

ABOVE: **The author with a healthy Grand Lake Stream landlocked salmon.**
LEFT: **The Pine Tree Store sells everything you need and is a good source of local knowledge.**

Situated in Downeast Maine, 16 miles as the crow flies from New Brunswick, Canada, the tiny hamlet of Grand Lake Stream is a sportsman's paradise of yore. Nestled between West Grand Lake and Big Lake, a deep mixed-growth forest surrounds a picturesque village on the gin-clear shorelines. The main street has well-kept sporting camps, signs advertising live bait, and long canoe-like square-stern boats—a design originating from this place known as Grand Lakers. White-tailed deer peacefully graze on front lawns, and wader-clad anglers with fly rods stroll the roads' shoulders as trucks hauling boats on trailers cruise slowly through town. It's beautiful.

In the center of town lies the Pine Tree Store, a regal-looking establishment selling beer, tackle, gas, and all other essentials. As the hub of the GLS wheel, the store doubles as the community center where locals swap stories over a hot breakfast and those "from away" stock up on supplies and seek out the latest fishing reports from the establishment's friendly staff.

Grand Lake Stream's importance to Maine's sporting culture is undeniable, and the sense that it has an incredible, storied history is palpable. Founded as a logging village and once home to the world's largest tannery, GLS became a sportsman's hub in the late 1800s fol-



lowing the tannery's bankruptcy. Its closure forced the residents to find a new way to scratch out a living. Many converted their homes to boardinghouses and sporting camps, centering the community's focus on appealing to "sports" seeking fishing and hunting adventures in the wilds of Maine.

Today, GLS thrives on those pursuing a remote experience. Several full-service lodges and inns offer guided experiences along with food and lodging. From fishing to big game or upland hunts, GLS has something for everyone. Day trips are possible, but given the remote locale, staying over enhances the experience, immersing visitors into the all-important local culture.

Shortly after moving to Hampden, I met several people who shared a love of fly fishing and an affinity for Maine's cold-water heritage species: brook trout and landlocked salmon. The pursuit of Maine's heritage fish is fraternal and obsessive, steeped in legacy and pride.

Before long—and only after passing the '*does this guy even fish*' sniff test —my good friend, Jeremy, invited me to join him on an annual salmon fly-fishing trip with a multigenerational group of guys known as "Wooly Buggers" led by Bob Leeman, 93, an OG of the Maine fly-fishing scene. Though its reputation and fame were familiar, before that first trip in 2018, I had never been to GLS and looked forward to learning from a group of like-minded Mainers, one of whom, Bob, had "written the book" on fly fishing in Maine—*literally*. The group warmly welcomed me, and their annual tradition immediately became mine.

Although the lakes offer excellent fish-



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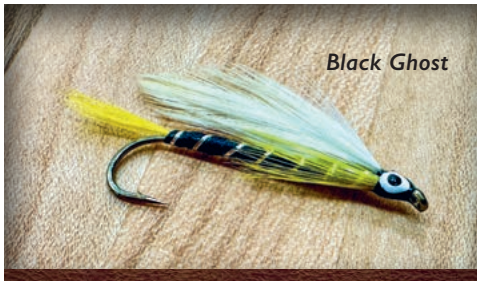
ing—whether you troll for salmon, lake trout, brookies, or chase smallmouth bass—the crown jewel is the stream, which stretches roughly three miles between West Grand and Big Lake. Starting at the dam on West Grand, the cold, clear water varies in depth and flow rates throughout the year. It acts as a mega-highway for landlocked salmon that use the passage to feed in the spring and spawn in the fall before returning to the lakes to overwinter.

During this year's Wooly Bugger trip, I became acquainted with fellow "Bugger," Greg Burr, who is the Regional Fisheries Biologist for the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife. It was serendipitous, given that this year's trip doubled as research for this article. I wasted no time in asking questions about the species, region, and conservation work behind the famed fishery.

Greg commands a room—not in an obnoxious, self-centered way—but like a wise sage who possesses deep knowledge from years of experience and applied passion. Wearing glasses and a ballcap, I imagine Greg is in his late 50s or early 60s and speaks in a Maine dialect obtained from living his entire life in Downeast Maine.

"Landlocks are Atlantic salmon. Thousands of years ago, Atlantic salmon became isolated in four Maine waterbodies, reproducing and thriving with suitable rearing habitat and forage to keep the cycle going," explains Burr. "They live between two and six years, with the two-and-a-half-year-olds considered mature. Landlocks average one to two pounds, with the occasional three-pounder," Burr adds. When I asked him about the biggest, he mentioned seeing a 6-pounder caught.

Burr, who will retire later this year, has also spent the entirety of his career in the Downeast region. I asked about the history of the GLS fishery and ongoing efforts to maintain it. "Before the 1970s, guiding in the area centered around targeting salmon in the [West Grand] Lake. Fly fishing wasn't as popular then. The salmon were small, and the state stocked around 40,000 annually, compared to the 10,000 stocked annually today. Over time, as we've stocked less, salmon have



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Wooly Bugger

increased in size."

I knew from experience that Grand Lake produced salmon in good numbers, but when talking with Greg, I had yet to learn how much. "West Grand Lake is the 'salmon engine' for the region. We can reproduce enough fish to supply the region with ample stock and even provide other northeast regions with landlocks for their stocking initiatives and goals." He added, "Until the 80s, the dam on West Grand had screens to keep salmon in the lake for the guides who offered trolling. When the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife removed the screens, it allowed the fish to naturally move into the stream, propelling the fly-fishing scene."

And a scene it did create. Similar to how I imagine the fly-fishing scene in places like Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming, fly anglers flock to GLS throughout the summer. I asked Greg why that was. "It's a beautiful crystal-clear steam with all the elements anglers love. And when you sprinkle in brook trout, that makes it even more diverse and exciting."

A true telltale sign of a bona fide fly scene is a legit fly shop. Although the Pine Tree Store has a great selection of flies and fishing gear, Weatherby's, a gorgeous sporting camp in the center of town, is an authorized full-service Orvis fly shop, selling everything from waders to flies.

The stream is designated as fly fishing only and attracts fly anglers from near and far between April and October. Most of the stream is wadable (depending on flow rate), and several named pools exist between the



RYAN LILLY




ZACH MARTIN

"Dam Pool" below the dam and "Meadows" toward Big Lake. Well-beaten trails along the stream on both sides, parking lots, and pull-offs provide anglers easy access to the well-known, productive spots along the flowage.

It's not abnormal to fish shoulder to shoulder in choice spots over a weekend, but there's enough space to explore. Generally, anglers are friendly and helpful, sharing insight and information. You may run into the occasional "fly snob," but in this part of the world, it's the exception, not the rule.

Aside from Grand Lake Stream, several places throughout the state share the same *fly fishing-only* (FFO) designation. I've always been curious about this and wondered if it is used merely as a fisheries management tactic to lessen the catch burden on trout

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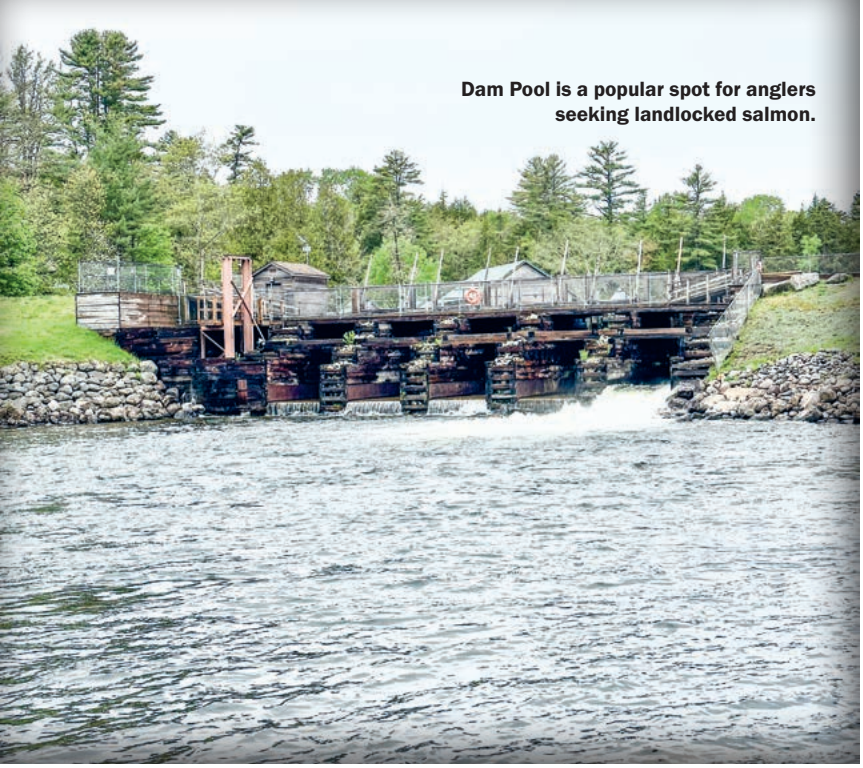
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Dam Pool is a popular spot for anglers seeking landlocked salmon.

RYAN LILLY



A selection of time-tested fly patterns at the Pine Tree Store.

and salmon. Having the chance to ask Greg about this, he explained that "FFO has less to do with the biology of the species and more about the protection and management of the fishery, along with maintaining quaint social optics for a special place like GLS."

Between ice-out and mid-May, salmon follow smelt into the river, excellent opportunities for anglers using streamers, such as Gray Ghosts or Golden Retrievers, to target feeding salmon. Streamer fishing is fun, interactive, and requires less skill or precision than dry flies or nymphing. Our annual outing falls within this timeframe, and we typically do very well dragging streamers up and down the stream.

As the water and air temperatures warm, insects begin hatching, emerging from the




RYAN LILLY

During the summer, dry flies and nymphs work well on resident fish.

stream bottom before eventually hatching at the surface. Hatches provide new forage for salmon, requiring a change in tactics. Dry flies and nymphs become productive as salmon migrate upriver to West Grand in search of deeper, colder water for the summer.

As fall approaches, the salmon return to the river from the lakes to spawn, providing anglers with one final act before the season closes in mid-October, when salmon don their spawning colors. Although I've yet to experience autumn fishing at GLS, it is Greg's favorite time to fish the flowage. "It is hard to compete with fishing salmon in the stream in the fall. They take colorful streamers, like Montreal Whores and Barnes Specials. It can still get busy, but most folks move on to hunting, which means you get your pick of the choice spots and have them all to yourself."

Grand Lake Stream is hard on my body. Each time I wade in, I get so caught up in seeing fish around my feet and the stunning scenery that I forget to eat, drink, and even sleep. I rise before the sun and fish well after dark, only exiting the river when my kidneys start aching because I haven't relieved myself in hours.

Few fishing destinations captivate me quite like Grand Lake Stream. It may be because of my affinity for salmon, brook trout, and cold-water fish. Or, it could be because it's a step back in time to a more spartan sporting culture. Either way, it's an annual tradition I'll hold for the rest of my life—or at least until my kidneys give out.

If you'd like to experience the exceptional landlocked salmon fishing of Grand Lake Stream, consider hiring a registered Maine fishing guide or staying at a local Grand Lake Stream outfitter. Many guides and outfitters offer one-day or multi-day fishing experiences and packages and will provide a tailor-made adventure you'll never forget.

Ryan Lilly (@ryanslilly) is a registered Maine fishing and hunting guide who works for Old Town Watercraft. He's a multi-species angler residing in Hampden, Maine.





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The crew weaves through a maze of lobster pots as the tuna makes a long run.

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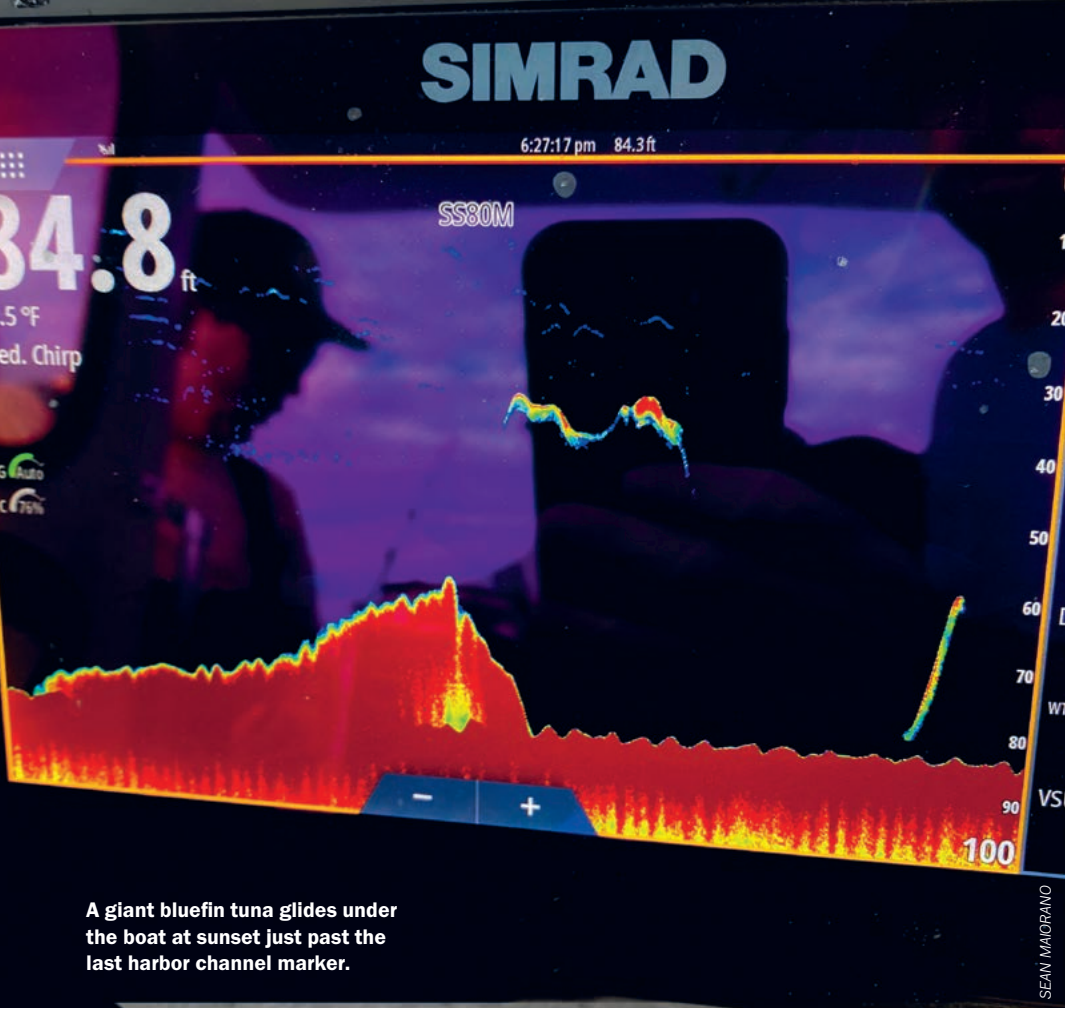
Boston Ghosts

Throughout the summer of 2024, giant bluefin tuna haunted anglers in Boston Harbor.

BY CAPTAIN JACK MURPHY

When the commercial bluefin tuna quota opened on June 1, the *Lucky Jacks* crew set out from Cohasset Harbor on a course pointing toward Middle Bank on Stellwagen for a shot at our first giant of the season. It was a slow day, slow enough that we were convinced we should head back west to enjoy the amazing striped bass fishing that was occurring off Massachusetts' South Shore.





A giant bluefin tuna glides under the boat at sunset just past the last harbor channel marker.

SEAN MAIORANO

It was a glassy day, and as we came to the end of our 22-mile return, we saw many humpback whales that seemed to be feeding on pogies within five miles of Cohasset. Without any targeted fish on deck so far, I thought it was a good idea for our group to see some excitement during an otherwise slow day, so we hung around for 20 to 30 minutes. We'd marked only two fish during our time on the bank that morning, but the tuna had to be somewhere, and with the amount of life around the pogies, I thought they might be nearby. I looked away from the whales, scanning for any signs of bluefin tuna in the offshore pogie schools, and there they were—a school of giants slowly pushing water outside the madness.

For the next 2 to 3 hours, we tried live bait, jigs, squid bars, and stickbaits without enticing any of them to bite. We tried the same thing the following day, also without any luck. These fish were haunting us. We landed casts into five feeds and had blitzing fish come through our three-rod live-bait spread without any hook-ups. These fish were proving why they are nicknamed "ghosts." Without our videos, no one would have believed the amount of life we saw those two days.

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With the harpoon ready, the crew prepares to land the fish in the dark.

SEAN MAIORANO

From then on, it seemed like these inshore giants went wherever the pogies went. On any given day, they were five miles north or south of the day before. By July, the pogie schools started to make their way into Boston Harbor, drawing both humpbacks and bluefin tuna very close to the beaches and waterways surrounding the city. There were daily accounts of striped bass fisherman being spooled. One of our crew members even had a giant tuna attack his striped bass 10 feet away from the boat, while another hit a Nomad trolling lure intended for striped bass. Both ended the same way: burning line, a quick panic, and a loud *snap!* that ended the excitement. Every encounter we heard or saw seemed to reinforce the legend of these inshore giants as seemingly uncatchable ghosts.

Our crew had had enough of talking about these tormenters, so we put a team together and set a plan to target these giants in seemingly stupid territory so close to Boston Harbor.

Sean Maiorano and I began the trip by leaving Cohasset Harbor at 4 p.m. on Wednesday August 7. We headed toward Boston to pick up Reese Froio and Sean Lawton after they finished work. With everyone on board, the



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A night to remember was capped off by offloading 600-pound tuna.

SEAN MAIORANO

next step was to procure bait inside the harbor where the pogies were the densest. It was light work, and we headed out of the Boston North Channel by 5:30 p.m. and had lines in the water around 6.

We picked an area just outside the last channel marker in 60 to 70 feet of water and had a perfect Northeast drift set up for the evening. With slack at 7:30 p.m., and three live pogies out (one rigged up on a kite), we felt we had done all we could to prepare for the night ahead.

For the first 15 minutes, the screen was dark, with no bait or marks; however, with the outgoing tide, we knew that the schools of pogies stuck inside the harbor would be on their way out into the channels. Within 20 minutes, we began marking insane numbers of pogies, even causing our depthfinder to read false bottom at times. We were in the right area, though the schools did not seem to be in any sort of distress. Slack was close, within 30 minutes, and the wind died, dropping our kite bait and forcing us to adjust our spread. Almost on cue, at slack we started to see the pogies on the screen again, though this time they were pushing hard against the bottom. Once that school passed, there was our first mark.

While most of the stories we'd heard over the weeks were bluefin harassing striped bass fisherman by feeding on the surface, it didn't seem to be the case that night. Reacting to that mark and a few others that followed, we dropped our kite bait straight to the bottom. No more than 10 minutes later, after marking a few more fish, the rubber band hooked to the guide of the down rod stretched and finally snapped. We hooked up at 7:30 p.m.

The boys were buzzing, rods were cleared, a harpoon was rigged, gaffs were ready, and we began battle with one of the ghosts we had been following since June. We knew we only had about an hour of sunlight left and prepared to fight the fish in the dark. This one, similar to others hooked and lost in the area, stayed on the surface for most of the fight. We created a plan of slowly working our way closer while it was swimming on the surface and getting side by side in order to make the harpoon shot.

By 8:30 p.m., the sun had gone down and we knew the endgame on this fish in the dark was going to be a challenge. By 8:45, we had executed most of our plan, inching up on the fish as it swam through lobster buoys on the surface. We maneuvered the boat into position and I was backlit by a handheld flashlight. I ran to the bow, grabbed the harpoon, and took the shot. We all saw the telltale sign of a hit from a slight blood trail as the fish ripped away again, though we were unsure as to how well it had been hit. We endured another 15 to 20 minutes of fighting on the main and harpoon lines until we were able to get another shot with our gaffs to secure the fish. The harpoon had hit the cutaneous veins and artery along the lateral line, which greatly reduced the fight length. With two tail ropes secured, the celebrations began. It then settled in how cool it was to have a fish hanging off the midship cleat with the city lights behind us. We managed to get the fish onboard, and had it offloaded by 9:30 p.m. in the Seaport. The final measurements were 110 inches and 600 pounds even.

It was a night to remember and something we hope to replicate again in the future. The *Lucky Jacks* crew reacted perfectly every step of the way and made the trip a success.









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2025 SEASON PLANNER

WESTERN CONNECTICUT

CHRIS ELSER



In late August, big spanish mackerel moved into the Western Sound.

In order to give a projection of the upcoming 2025 Western Sound season, let's look back on some notable fishing experiences and observations during the 2024 season, which certainly deviated from the norm.

Spring Sand Eels and Seals

I begin my trips by late May. Last year, we had a phenomenal start for striped bass of all sizes feeding on sand eels, which made a major comeback and continued to increase in volume. The areas around Stratford Shoal and Bridgeport had a decent amount of stripers from 18 to 38 inches that led to some great fly and light-tackle action using epoxy sand-eel patterns and Game On Lures Exo Jigs. It felt like the good old days for a while, fishing the flats and beaches for several weeks, then the bass just disappeared. The culprits were several seals that arrived on the flats to join in on the daily feeding frenzies that went on for several weeks. Oddly, the bait remained intact and thicker than ever.

Deep Summer Stripers and Light-Tackle Blues

In June, we located several schools of bass in deeper water chasing small Atlantic herring on the surface, but they were only on the outgoing tide and in two specific areas. If you arrived on the incoming tide, you would have thought there were no fish or baitfish at all. We even hooked 12- to 13-inch herring casting Exo Jigs off the beaches in Bridgeport during June. It reminded me of the 60s and 70s.

In summer, the water reached a high of 73 to 75 degrees and the fish settled into a night feeding pattern. However, trolling tube-and-worm rigs was successful in hooking big bass sulking in huge schools during daylight hours.

By the middle of August, there were 8- to 15-pound bluefish in the same areas. They were a little more eager to hit topwater lures at daybreak, so we were able to enjoy some midsummer light-tackle action.

Hardtail Trio at the End of Summer

As the end of August approached, Spanish mackerel arrived, but only for a few weeks, I had never seen Spanish macks as large as the ones we were landing in the 25- to 27-inch range. They were primarily on the North Shore of Long Island up against the beaches, but there was a three-day period when they were stacked up near West Haven off the sandbar.

Plentiful schools of bonito moved in to Western Sound waters by the end of August. In the first week of September, the albies arrived as well. This was the first time in many years that bonito outnumbered albies. Bones could be found in over 100 feet of water as well as up against the beaches. The albies became more difficult as we headed into October, but the bonito stuck around until the first week of November, which is more typical for albies.

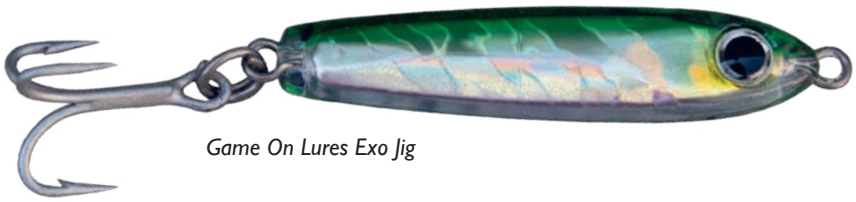
Missing Blitzes at the End of the Season

As the season ended in late November, there was something missing: blitzing schools of bass. Yes, there were bass around that occasionally blitzed in a few harbors, but I didn't see the traditional mid-Sound blitzes that we consistently experienced the last several years. Peanut bunker were present in many areas, but with no fish on them out in deeper water.

The Season of Wind

2024 was a season of extreme weather changes, so I called it "season of wind." At one point, we had 3 straight weeks of strong east winds making fishing almost impossible in open water. Then, the Housatonic River valley was hit with one of the largest floods in over 100 years. Fifteen inches of rain came down in less than 8 hours and the plume of dirty water exiting the Housatonic could be seen as far south as Middleground and parts of Long Island for weeks. The entire Western Sound was drastically impacted by the extreme flood of fresh water.

The wind never stopped for more that a few days right through November. My theory is that the east-blowing wind caused constant turbulence and change in surface currents for weeks, then it started to blow from the west. It really was a challenge, at times. I think this drastically decreased our chances at the traditional late-fall striper run in our local waters, though areas to



Game On Lures Exo Jig

the south experienced some of the best fall striper fishing on record.

Fishing Forecast for 2025

In 2025, I think we will have a great May fishery due to the annual increase in the sand-eel population. Last year's summer fishery was very strong for big bass and blues, especially for anglers fishing bait at night and those trolling tubes and worms as well as umbrella rigs. Adult menhaden populations were very low in the Western Sound, so that is a concern for this season.

What I am extremely excited to predict is another strong showing of Atlantic bonito. These fish saved the fall fishery while false albacore were not nearly as dominant as they had been the past several years. This is similar to about 20 years ago, when albies were more difficult to find than bonito, so the cycle rolls on. I am hopeful that we will get albies back in decent numbers since last season was an anomaly compared to the last five.

I don't fish for fluke and black sea bass on my charters, but when I'm out with my family, I always take a shot at some great table fare. The early fluke bite was promising, but it faded as the sand eels moved on. We did not have a good year for keeper sea bass in the Western Sound. Let's hope the continued influx of sand eels improves both fisheries this season.



2024 was the first time in years that bonito outnumbered albies in Long Island Sound.

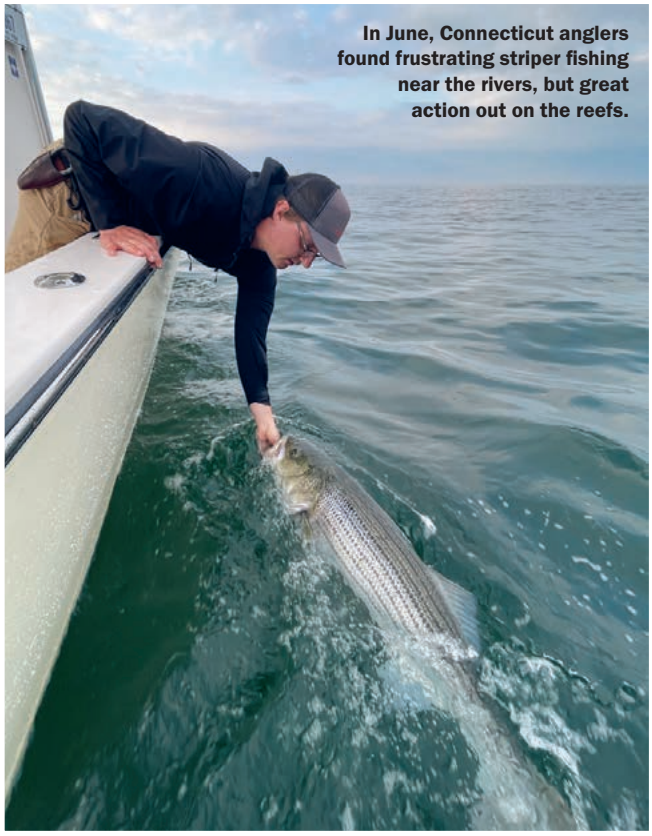
I am concerned about the fall striper run, but as long as we have a calmer wind and wave pattern, I am confident that the bass in the Western Sound will hang around through November. Of course, there is no way to forecast what the weather will be this far out, but I hope Mother Nature got the excessive wind and weather fronts out of her system last year.



2025 SEASON PLANNER

EASTERN CONNECTICUT

JOSH RAYNER



In June, Connecticut anglers found frustrating striper fishing near the rivers, but great action out on the reefs.

MATT BUTCKA

Adapt to Stay on the Changing Fisheries in the Eastern Sound

Anglers look at every upcoming season with a glimmer of hope, no matter how novice or experienced, and have their own preconceived ideas of how things should take shape and what they hope to accomplish. These variables include an angler's geographical location, how he fishes, techniques used, vessel type (or lack thereof), knowledge and experience level, and the time spent fishing. Last year was one of the weirdest, most challenging years of fishing in the Northeast, and no matter what your outlook is for the start of the 2025 season and your plans for upcoming fishing trips, one thing is for certain in the months ahead: adaptation.

If I learned one thing last year, it was to be more adaptable. Making snap decisions on the water, changing locations with the tides, and knowing when the writing was on the wall helped me stay consistent and less frustrated. Some previously "reliable" bites never developed or failed to develop in the way they normally do, with areas that were seemingly void of target species and/or bait. It is obvious at this point that striped bass are in trouble, made apparent by not only the data put forth, but locally in the shoulder seasons, with far fewer schoolie and slot-sized bass around than I have ever seen.

Exploring Paid Off for Spring-Run Stripers

My season starts well before migratory bass arrive, when I primarily target freshwater bass, panfish, pike, with an occasional hold-over striper trip mixed in. By mid-April, I'm laser-focused on finding some of those early, eager bass. Stripers are normally found in the same general areas every season, but numbers, sizes, and timing can fluctuate dramatically. The Connecticut River mouth is a mainstay for many local striper anglers, but until mid- to late June when bunker finally decided to show up, many anglers struggled to catch them. Some days, it seemed as if there were very few fish on the flats or in the channels; other days, there were an incredible number of fish present on the flats, but they would only follow a lure with no intention of hitting it. I recall frustrating days with over 100 follows and maybe one or two half-hearted rolls or hits, and every angler in the area told the same story. Obviously, fish that are being spooked by an endless parade of boats and see the same dozen lures go whizzing by will eventually develop lockjaw, but I never recall having that much difficulty piecing something together with that many fish around. With that "bite" not really producing consistently, I decided on some westward expansion to try some "new to me" water and try to collide head-on with migrating bass.

After studying charts and being certain I had





Game On DuraTech Eel

the appropriate weather and tides, I decided to go check out a few smaller mid-Sound reefs in my kayak, a different habitat than I normally frequent in the spring. I knew there was a better bait source out there, and to my surprise, the bass were stacked up as well, moving between two specific reefs on the tides or with the bait. Best of all, they were willing to hit a variety of presentations.

Being new to the spot, perhaps I was showing them presentations they weren't used to seeing, and it seemed like everything I threw was good for at least a couple fish. Out there, a few miles from shore, I was one of only a few kayak anglers fishing the area. Most of the boats were implementing boat-specific techniques like trolling tube-and-worm rigs, umbrella rigs, and mojos. In the kayak, aside from the tube, I prefer casting presentations. While some of the boats in the area tossed topwater plugs if the fish were pushing the bait to the surface, most of the action was down low. On my best day out there, I was using ¾-ounce snap jigs that I had I tied specifically to imitate the many juvenile butterfish that were present. Topwaters, large soft plastics on jigheads, and flutter spoons produced when a school of bunker passed through. I was excited to figure out a new area. It got me out of the same old routine and might be another option for years to come.

Weakfish

Weakfish have become a primary target for some anglers in the earlier part of the season, as they have seemed to bounce back within the past several years; however, 2024 seemed to be an "off" year. In the same estuary where I caught dozens of weakfish in 2023, last year I caught only several smaller fish that didn't get the memo. I'm certain they will be in better numbers in most of their springtime haunts this year, and I plan to tag some of the larger ones with the hope of contributing to the spotty database surrounding these fish.

Shark Woes While Striper Fishing

As stripers shifted into their summer patterns last year, brown sharks also filtered into some of the same areas by the beginning of August. They were even more problematic than they were in 2023. Again, anglers needed to adapt.

I had several nights with clients when we were certain sharks were around simply by how the bass were positioned. They would not set up an advantageous hunting position in a rip or near structure, but instead were right on the bottom. They weren't found in boulder fields: instead, we found big schools hugging flat, sandy bottom adjacent to boulder fields. Unless our presentations were dragged along the bottom or within a foot of it, the bass would not rise to them. Game-On DuraTech Eels, Gravity Tackle GT Eels, and Joe Baggs Patriot Fish on 3/8- to 3/4-ounce jig heads were some top producers for artificials, as were live eels, but eels were regularly eaten by sharks. I had two clients hook into sharks while bass fishing at night.

There was also a noteworthy daytime incident when a 5- or 6-foot brown shark followed a topwater plug back to my client's kayak and proceeded to circle us for about 15 minutes. I put a whole squid on a circle hook, handed the rod to the client, and told him to wait until he saw the shark in front of him. When the opportunity presented itself, he flipped the squid in front of the shark, and it immediately took the offering. The client's excitement got the better of him, though, and he whiffed by swinging for the fences instead of letting the circle hook do the work. This year, I will be more than ready with the appropriate gear for sharks since they aren't going anywhere.

Albie Absence

Albies ghosted us in the eastern Sound this past fall, which is yet another reliable bite anglers look forward to every year. Some slipped through the cracks and were seen mixed with bonito in the western Sound, but they were not in any kind of numbers. With albies being somewhat enigmatic in nature, it's unclear why this happened. Some theorize that bay anchovies weren't present or didn't make their way into Rhode Island waters, leaving Cape Cod and offshore anglers to have all the fun. As unpredictable as false albacore can be, I expect a better showing of them throughout the Sound this coming fall.

Fishing Forecast for 2025

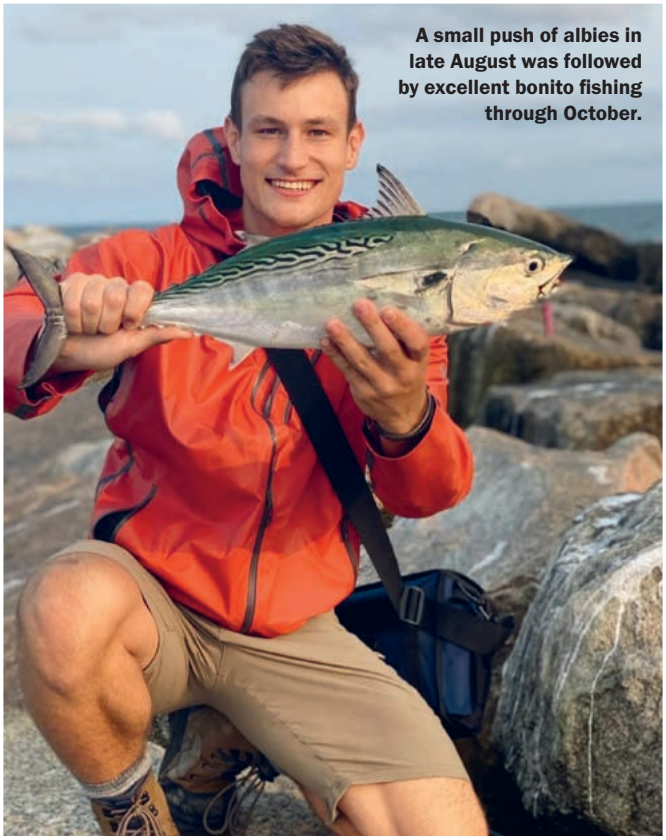
It is difficult to predict exactly what will happen in 2025, especially when it comes to striped bass. Sadly, I expect to see fewer fish in the shoulder seasons, with the summer months being the most productive. These fish have the full support of conservation-minded recreational anglers and associations that advocate for them, but there continue to be hurdles to the species' recovery. My guide service will continue to be exclusively catch and release when it comes to striped bass in 2025. Anglers must do their part in limiting post-release mortality. Crush the barbs on trebles, remove rear hooks on plugs (or replace trebles with singles), don't roll the fish in sand or hold it vertically by the gill plate, and release it promptly after landing.



2025 SEASON PLANNER

RHODE ISLAND

DEVIN DONAHUE



A small push of albies in late August was followed by excellent bonito fishing through October.

The short, cold days of winter gives anglers much time to reflect. Last season was almost universally regarded as a strange year for many reasons. Obviously, no two years are identical, but a number of factors came into play that made last season feel like an outlier. Nature has a way of humbling efforts at understanding her ways and reminding us of the infinite variables that we can't control or even understand.

Thinking of better times on the water helps us get through the off-season until our minds invariably wander toward the future. Predicting the upcoming season is difficult, but it sure is fun. Every trade show and club meeting this winter surely involves heated discussions over the season to come. So, I figured I would get in on the fun and make some predictions and specific areas of emphasis for this season.

Pre-Season Considerations

Many of the factors that shape our season, especially for shore-bound anglers, are determined well before the bass even arrive. Last winter, a series of powerful storms slammed our coastal areas, bringing swells from 10 to 15 feet that inundated the coast. This completely rearranged some areas of the South County shoreline and exacerbated the already growing problem of coastal erosion. It's a problem that is likely to continue, but the extent is anyone's guess.

Keeping an eye out for such events is key to staying in touch with our favorite pieces of structure as they begin to take shape. Getting out to spots in late winter to look at what has changed is where we can begin to develop predictions and is always key to being successful once the productive tides have arrived.

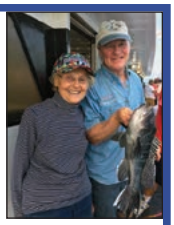
When April comes around, we are all drawn to the warming estuary and backwater areas. Here, we will be confronted with one of the largest variables this year, which is the health of the estuary outflows. Some are becoming choked with sand, limiting the volume of water that passes with each tide. This lack of tidal flush creates stagnant backwater areas that become oxygen-deprived dead zones, something that does not bode well for stripers and other fish that use these areas for feeding and reproduction. Fortunately, dredging projects are in the works and will have a significant effect on these systems. Be sure to pay attention to these projects, as they will significantly change the dynamics of productive areas.

Bonito Early and Often, Albies Few and Far Between

Perhaps the biggest question on every Rhode Island angler's mind is how this fall will compare to the strange fall of 2024. Most anglers experienced solid bass fishing throughout the fall run from both shore and boat. However, last



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year's hardtail season was flat-out weird. Many years, we find that the bonito begin to show in August as a precursor to the albies that follow behind. Last year, the bonito came early and in droves. Excitement began to mount over the albies that were sure to follow.

A small push of albies in late August quickly died out and we were left with piles of marauding bonito through late October. Many tried to explain this strange outcome, some saying that the sheer number of bonito discouraged the albies from setting up in our local waters.

Data from the Albie Project, a tagging initiative seeking to learn more about false albacore numbers and migration, should give us a better idea of what happened and will continue to shed some light on the migratory behavior of these "funny" fish. Let's hope for a rebound of albies in our local waters this fall, though predicting their movement and behavior is always a fool's errand. However, if waves of bonito begin to show early, as they did last year, there will be some warranted concern that the 2025 albie season will again fall short of expectations.

Striped Bass

Undoubtedly, the largest elephant in the room this season is the state of our striped bass fishery. Multiple years of abysmal spawning numbers in the mid-Atlantic are heightening concerns over the species' future. Despite varying opinions, the data is clear. Even if we have a banner year for stripers this season, their future is uncertain. Limiting release mortality is the minimum we need to do as anglers. Regardless of how this season turns out, practicing better fish handling and using catch-and-release-friendly tackle (single hooks over multiple trebles) should be on everyone's agenda as we try to preserve the population of growing fish.

The complexity and depth of the East Coast fishery is really something to behold. Understanding it and the last few seasons gives us our best shot at predicting what may be to come. Although it is always a challenge to predict the coming months, the standby saying, "you don't know if you don't go" reminds us that the only way to know what is going on is by getting out on the water. We should focus on what we can control to better our chances of success. Refill your quiver with plugs and flies, service your gear, and refine your tactics so that when the time comes, you can get out there and put your predictions to the test.



2025 SEASON PLANNER

SOUTH COAST & BUZZARDS BAY

CAPTAIN CASEY ALLEN

If there's one thing I've come to realize over the years, it's that I can't accurately predict the course of events in a given angling season any more than I can predict the weather. Just like foretelling that summer will be warm and winter cold, the best I can hope to do is paint a general picture of what to expect on the water. As such, I've always focused on providing tips and techniques anglers can use to bring more fish to hand, so I plan to do just that throughout this article, and maybe, just maybe, some of my prophecies will come true.

Freshwater Bass and Trout

My angling season almost always begins in fresh water, targeting either bass or trout. In the absence of ice, I hit kettle ponds straight through the winter months in pursuit of holdover trout on the fly rod. I either fish a full-sink line with booby flies and sliders or a floating line with aquatic insect or small baitfish patterns. If I see fish at the surface, I ply the upper water column, reading the fish activity to determine which flies might work best. If the pond appears dead, I bust out the sinking line and floating flies.

These tactics let me work the fly as slowly as I want while keeping it in the strike zone—something spin anglers accomplish with suspending jerkbaits. Lengthening or shortening the leader allows me to adjust how high off the bottom the fly will sit. Retrieve speed can be very important when searching for trout in cold water. If you're struggling to get hits, try a quick, erratic retrieve with frequent pauses, using a hand-over- hand strip. I usually make three, four, or even five quick rips and abruptly pause the fly. It often gets nailed as it slowly floats up from the bottom.

As the weather warms, I make the switch to bass, visiting shallow bog ponds that warm quickly. I use soft-plastic swimbaits and floating or suspending jerkbaits, but my all-time spring favorite is the spinnerbait, specifically one armed with a single Colorado blade. The hard thump the blade produces can be felt through the rod, which helps me determine the lure's speed and depth, important when targeting bass over the tops of weeds or just off the bottom.



Finicky albies reappeared in late October after a fleeting run in September.

Spring-Run Stripers

My efforts in the salt don't begin until mid- to late April, which is when the first migratory striped bass visit our waters. During the early weeks of the month, fish estuaries, rivers, and shallow backwaters. By the second half of the month, we should begin to see fish in oceanfront areas. You may even come across blitzing fish under birds around the last week of the month, but be prepared for them to be fussy. Early season surface feeds are usually fueled by larval or juvenile sea herring, which are very similar in size and appearance to bay anchovies. You'll likely find bass most cooperative during hours of low light; as the sun climbs, you could be playing an increasingly frustrating game of match the hatch.

By May, we can expect to encounter slot-sized fish, but by the second or third week of the month, it shouldn't be too uncommon to find fish pushing the 20-pound mark. Although the rivers and harbors should be chock-full of schoolies, scouring the waters just outside these areas will likely produce better-quality fish.

This time of year, bass are often found in very shallow water where they can be seen and cast to with lures or flies. Small, unweighted soft plastics seem to be the most productive since they land quietly, sink slowly, and can be easily manipulated to impart as much or little action as needed. Flies don't need to be particularly fancy—just small to medium baitfish profiles in basic color schemes with little to no flash.

June is my favorite month for bass in Buzzards Bay since it brings the greatest population of big fish, and they can be successfully targeted

during all hours. If you're looking to pull a new personal-best on light tackle or fly, your odds will be no better than in June. It means the opportunity to throw a huge surface plug like a Doc to a school of 30- and 40-pound linesiders, heart pounding as one pursues, building a huge wake and eventually exploding on the plug. After the hookup, the fish thrashes and flails at the surface in an attempt to throw the hook. If it stays buttoned, it will proceed to use that broom tail to rush to the bottom where it scrapes the lure along the weeds and rocks to gain freedom. If at this point you're still on, there's a good chance of landing the beast, provided your line or leader hasn't been compromised by an errant barnacle, shell, or the fish's gill plate. If the bass comes to hand, it's an exhilarating accomplishment, but when you lose one, it's a sobering reminder that these fish don't grow large by accident.

Hardtail Season

July and August should feature plenty of light-tackle action for bass, blues, and bottom fish, but what we're all waiting for is the arrival of hardtails to our waters. Bonito are the first to show, but the numbers vary greatly each season. It's going to be difficult to top the hordes we saw in 2024.

The bones showed in Buzzards Bay by late July and, in August, they were absolutely everywhere. Initially, they fed recklessly on peanut bunker and silversides, but by the middle of the month, they became pickier as smaller baits became prevalent.

We should start hearing reports of albies by mid- to late August. I'm hoping for better numbers as we enter September because last season started out strong, then it quickly tapered off and effectively ended for many anglers. By October, albies made a resurgence in my area, but were darn near impossible to hook, so I wrote them off as I shifted gears to tautog.

Speaking of tautog, if things in the light-tackle arena fail to materialize, they will be a sure bet as we enter October and November.

Back to Fresh Water

Once things in the salt begin to slow down, it may be time to head back to the ponds and lakes for trusty bass, pickerel, and trout using many of the same techniques as in spring. Most of my fishing in fresh water is done in waders, so one thing I prefer during late fall is the still-warm water temperature, which means I can spend more time out there without feeling my feet slowly going numb.



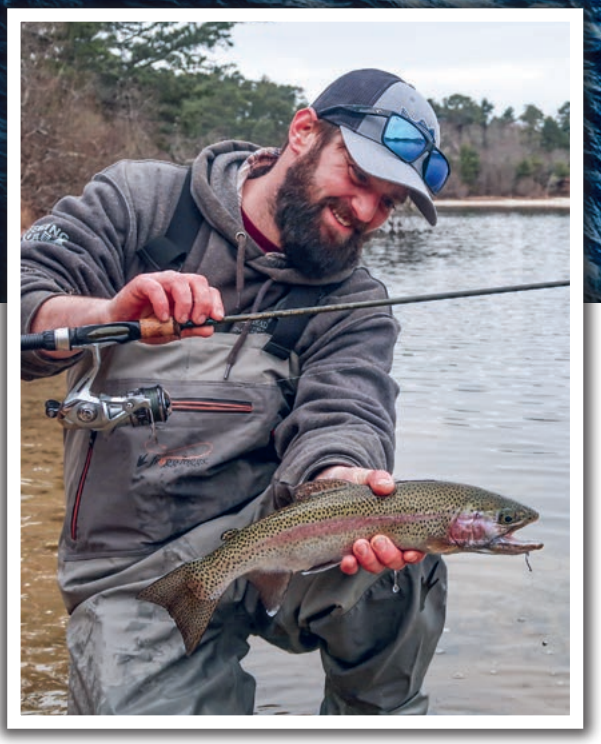
Year-round anglers start and end their fishing seasons with bass and trout on the freshwater ponds.



2025 SEASON PLANNER

CAPE COD

MATT HAEFFNER



The Cape Cod fishing season kicks off with stocked trout in the kettle ponds.

It was pitch-black outside, but the starry night sky provided just enough light that I could make out the white froth of the wave break. With each cast, my minnow plug soared into the unknown, assisted by a stiff southwest wind that swept over the dunes. For over an hour, my lures came back untouched. I was beginning to lose hope when a gentle tap came on a Shimano Current Sniper jerkbait after a few cranks of the reel handle. "There we go," I said aloud as the hook finally took purchase in the lip of a 20-something-inch striped bass. As the fish approached the wash, a big black head peeked out from behind a cresting wave. "Please, don't do it," I begged, as the large grey seal dipped beneath the surface. The June new moon had just passed, and we were both hoping for our first Outer Cape striper of the young season.

Surf fishing on the outer beaches takes off in June as stripers, assisted by southwest winds, round Monomoy Island to continue their northward migration. For the next 4 or 5 months, striper fishing here ebbs and flows with the presence (or lack thereof) of baitfish like mackerel, menhaden, and sand eels. However, there are fish to be caught in this neighborhood well before the arrival of striped bass on the Atlantic-facing beaches.

Kettle Pond Kickoff

For some, including me, the fishing season begins in kettle ponds where stocked trout, bass, and even panfish like white and yellow perch help us limp through January and February. The crystal-clear waters of Flax Pond and Cliff Pond in Nickerson State Park attract fly fishermen, spin fishermen, and bait-and-wait anglers in search of something, anything, to put a bend in the rod. Rainbow trout cruise the edges of drop-offs and shallow, sandy shorelines, while brown trout hang just a bit deeper, prowling around patches of vegetation to pick off young-of-the-year bluegills and yellow perch.

When the sun is high in the sky, shore anglers cast lures like inline spinners, spoons, hair jigs, small jerkbaits, and 2-inch soft plastics, hoping for a roving rainbow trout to intercept their offering. Other anglers come out at night with battery-powered, light-up bobbers, live shiners, and jointed Rapalas, hoping to connect with one of the larger brown trout that hold over in ponds like these. The first week of March, the state begins their spring trout-stocking program, and previously empty shorelines see upticks in activity from anglers itching for a cure to cabin fever.

In the weeks that follow the trout stocking, as the hatchery-raised fish adjust to their new home, they explore the ponds in packs, bringing consistent action for wading fishermen and kayak anglers. After a few mild nights, air temperatures rise, insects begin to hatch, and fly fishers can find fast action with dry flies in calm, windless corners of kettle lakes. Meanwhile, in shallow, grassy ponds, largemouth bass and chain pickerel become active. Suspending jerkbaits, fished slowly with long pauses, produce subtle bites from wary bass and pickerel. By the end of March, when peepers are chirping as dusk falls, largemouth and smallmouth bass feed more recklessly, hitting large swimbaits and wakebaits crept over patches of submerged vegetation and downed timber. This bite lasts well into late spring as schools of river herring swim upstream from salt water and flood the ponds to spawn. However, by the first few weeks of April, most anglers turn their attention toward the budding saltwater fishing season.



Saltwater Awakenings

In early April, resident stripers that spent the winter on Cape Cod grow increasingly active in salt marshes and creeks, and anglers can pick off a few as the bass chow down on small baitfish taking refuge in warm, muddy backwaters. Small soft plastics, spoons, and even topwater plugs catch the first stripers of the year as spring ushers in warmer weather. But, while some anglers wade the marshes and salt ponds looking for striped bass on top, others have their sights set on bottom fish like tautog and winter flounder.

Tautog become available around mid-April, migrating from points offshore when water temperatures surpass 50 degrees. At this time, they can be caught from shore in less than 10 feet of water. A single-hook rig baited with sea worms or halved green crabs, weighed down by a 2-ounce bank sinker, is a simple and effective method to catch tautog when they move in shallow. Jetties and bulkheads are great places to begin the search, and while tog are not as plentiful in Cape Cod Bay or Nantucket Sound as they are in Vineyard Sound or Buzzards Bay, they are an accessible and worthy target for anglers yearning for a fresh fish dinner.

By the end of the month, winter flounder fishing picks up steam, and they too can be caught from shore for a few weeks before the bite shifts to deeper water. Inlets and harbors that open into Cape Cod Bay, like Rock Harbor, Pamet Harbor, and Sesuit Harbor, are good places to look. A high-low rig consisting of two long-shank beak hooks dressed with brightly colored curly-tail grubs and sea worms, with a 2-ounce bank sinker on bottom, is a top producer when flounder are shallow enough to be caught from the same jetties and bulkheads as tautog.

By early May, flounder congregate deeper, and a few local charter boats like Bad Dog Sport Fishing and Little Sister Charters are out in the bay daily reeling in blackbacks. It's around this time that the first migratory stripers of the spring hit the backwaters where our small winter holdover populations began feeding a month earlier.

As schoolie stripers pile into places like Pleasant Bay and Stage Harbor, many of the same lures used to catch holdovers continue to produce. At night, jigging a 4- to 5-inch paddletail on a ½-ounce jighead through choke points and deep holes is a smart strategy to land your first migratory bass of the year. Generally, the outgoing tide is more productive because warmer water flushes baitfish, grass shrimp, and crabs out of the marshes. However, it is also worth fishing cooler water on the incoming tide when stripers follow schools of silversides and river herring into the salt ponds and estuaries.

In 2024, herring arrived in astounding numbers as early as late March, but generally continue to arrive in waves through May and, sometimes, into early June. When herring are plentiful, it can be especially challenging to trick stripers into taking an artificial lure. Glidebaits seem to work better than minnow plugs or surface-swimming metal lips when stripers are feeding on herring, but large paddletails with deeper profiles also work well.

Early May also brings the cinder worm "hatch." Stripers gorge on these little surface-swimming worms during periods of low light, and the event may last anywhere from three days to two weeks. To cash in on this bite, find a shallow, muddy backwater that receives good sunlight during the day, and hit it for an hour or two before dusk with pink soft plastics, small topwater walkers, and flies.



Stripers stayed on the Outer Cape until late November in 2024.

June Stripers

Come June, with the worm hatch in the rear view, stripers stack up in the shallow rips off Monomoy Island to pick off struggling squid in heavy currents. Walk-the-dog-style topwater plugs excel here, as do soft plastics when rigged weedless on a wide-gap hook. Eventually, the







By mid-August, bonito schools were all around Cape Cod, and they remained in good numbers into November.

squid bite wanes and stripers that had staged in the Monomoy rips continue to press north along the outer beaches.

By mid- to late June, surfcasting on our sand beaches is fairly steady, though it varies year to year. In 2023, from the last week of June to mid-July, the outer Cape was packed with stripers ranging from schoolie size to well over 40 inches. On several night-shift outings, I came across mackerel washed up on dry sand and thought I had surely missed an epic sunset bite, only to find after a few casts that the fish were still there. They crushed minnow plugs, paddletails, darters, and bucktails for weeks that summer. However, in 2024, that bite never really developed to the same level; there were fish to be caught on the beaches, as there are every summer, but larger bass were tougher to come by and much more difficult to pattern.

Bonito Bonanza

Fast-forward to late July 2024 when, from eastern Nantucket Sound to western Buzzards Bay, bonito showed up en masse. It began with a few fish popping up in Nantucket Harbor, which is typical of mid-summer bonito. Within a week, a handful were caught from shore in Buzzards Bay and then in Vineyard Sound; before long, bonito of all sizes enveloped Cape Cod and the Islands. It seemed like anywhere anglers went, they were apt to run into bonito or, rather, the fish ran into them.

Long-lasting surface feeds became the norm and, most of the time, they fed indiscriminately. Epoxy jigs, metals, soft plastics, topwater plugs, and flies were all fair game regardless of the baitfish present. By the time late August rolled around, many had already caught their share of bonito for the season and were ready to chase larger, faster hardtails—false albacore. Unfortunately for most of us, the albies never quite made themselves available. They popped up sporadically off Chatham for a few weeks during September and early October before disappearing almost completely, and when they did appear, they were very finicky and showed a preference for tiny, ½-inch bay anchovies.

Bonito carried us through the summer months and stuck around well into November on the Upper Cape. Here's hoping albies will stage a stronger run this year and that bonito continue to invade our inshore waters as they did in 2024.

Fall-Run Fizzle

The 2024 fall run of stripers on the outer beaches was like the spring run in that it was difficult to pattern when and where the fish would move in to feed. My fall log entries from the past couple of years were as good as trash—that is, until sand eels made a showing in the late-September surf. Throughout October, surfcasters picked away at waves of southbound fish during the early mornings and evenings using assorted metals, needlefish, minnow plugs, and bucktails.

By the first week of November, as a dwindling striper bite caused participation to wane, the few anglers still plying the beaches were picking off only a fish or two for a few hours of effort. By then, hickory shad had arrived to feed on the remaining sand eels and silversides that were being knocked around in the wash, putting a cap on the Outer Cape surf-fishing season after 5 months of very hit-or-miss striper fishing.

Once the last of the stripers and hickory shad left, we were right back where we started in January—wader-clad and knee-deep in a kettle pond, toes numb, hoping for a grab from a lowly hatchery trout to carry us through another New England winter.





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2025 SEASON PLANNER

MASSACHUSETTS SOUTH SHORE

BILLY MITCHELL



South shore striper fishing started off strong in 2024, but grew tougher as the summer wore on.

The state of fishing in our local water remained eerily similar from 2023 to 2024. If this sounds pessimistic, reader, you have a keen ability to read between the lines.

Strong Spring, Tough Summer

The South Shore has become a May to early-June striper hot spot. In the early part of May, slot fish and larger invaded the flats, fresh off their northward migration, chasing down juvenile squid and other small bait. The bite, although sometimes frustrating, was extraordinarily consistent. Each morning, I could count on topwater striper action throughout the Three Bays; that is, until it wasn't. The stripers moved out to areas north, leaving our inshore locations barren.

This was a similar story to the larger fish in deep water. In mid-May, massive schools of migrating stripers, some up to 50 inches, schooled up in 100 feet of water, feeding deep on mackerel and herring. Early in the a.m., these fish would surface and readily eat big topwater plugs and flies. Standing on the bow one morning watching the fish glide by just under the surface, my 4-year-old daughter made the claim that there were "a billion of them!" I think she overestimated slightly in her biomass survey, but the sentiment was true. These fish eventually meandered north to parts unknown.

Bunker blitz action improved from 2023 to 2024, but it never reached the madness of the 2022 season. The pogie bite on the South Shore, while a steady source of action throughout the middle of the striper months, remained erratic from day to day. Stripers were on the schools one tide and gone the next. The challenging part of this reality was that if there were pogies out front, there were limited fish on the inshore structure on smaller bait.

The prediction for this year on the pogie front is the same as it's always been—if there are schools of pogies around, the bass will be close by. They may not always be eating, but they will be there. Some days, the bites will come easily; others, you'll need to wait them out. Early morning bunker spotting can be a great opportunity to get big fish on topwater plugs, especially around times of fast-moving water.

The silver lining was a return to form of our most beloved livewell-filler, the Atlantic mackerel. Can I wax poetic about the modest mackerel for a moment? When I think of early summer striper trips, my mind immediately goes to the *tap-tap-tap* of a school of mackerel jumping onto a six-hook Sabiki rig. Mackerel stayed with us all season, providing a consistent backup plan to those who prefer to throw lures and flies to stripers.

This isn't meant to read as all doom-and-gloom. We did have sporadic fish moving into the Three Bays and up to Scituate throughout the summer. I think the most striking missing piece was the lack of pre-fall and fall-run blitz activity and, as a corollary, the presence of schoolies in the late season. This is not a "new" phenomenon, as the past three years have trended downward in fall blitz action, but this season was a stark reminder that the times, they-are-a-changin'.

Tuna Wishing

This brings us to tuna. Like stripers, they gave us a very similar showing for the past two year (aside from two key deck shuffles, both of which worked in our favor). The early season, in the last week of June, was excellent for recreational fish off the backside of the Cape and south into Chatham. In fact, it was so good that I almost tricked myself into believing we were going to have another world-class month of July, one like we saw in 2022.

By late June, the "fun-size" 60-inch fish had crashed our shorelines, blasting through schools of pelagic sand eels and blitzing stripers. But of course, they disappeared as quickly as they arrived, leaving fleets of boats jigging on the whale life for entire tides, with nothing to show for it except the occasional lost jig to a thresher shark and the early signs of elbow tendinitis (yes, this is anecdotal). The positive change here, however, is that these fish did make a return throughout the summer and early fall. They were targetable on the jig, but more easily caught by those willing to stare at balloons bobbing in the current over a live bait.

This is where I'm most hopeful. There was an unprecedented run of football-sized bluefins south of the Islands and the entire 30-fathom line. Could it be that these fish will move a bit north to feast on the plethora of bait off the Cape in 2025? Who knows, but I hope so.

Do you consider yourself a masochist? Well, you probably loved the short-lived giant bite in July.

"There are giants blowing up pogie schools all over the bay right now."

This was the gist of three text messages I received in short order while I had my feet in the sand watching my kids splash around in a creek in Chatham, exactly on the opposite side of the Cape. This type of message puts me into a certain headspace. "When can I get out there? Is it going to last? Is it really *all over the bay?*" And most importantly, "Can I round up the kids in under ten minutes and convince my wife to take a leisurely boat cruise around the Cape (yes, there will be whales to view) to see what's going in Cape Cod Bay? Yeah, might as well bring the

big tuna rods." The answer to that last question was, of course, no.

However, I was able to venture out to the Bay the next morning and found the report to be true. Pogie schools scattered from Plymouth to Sandwich to Race Point were being hounded by giant bluefin, sometimes casually swimming through schools, sometimes blasting unlucky pogies 10 feet into the air. We did what any tuna masochist would do and began throwing Siren Stickbaits on 20k-sized spinning reels around the outside of the schools, and soon discovered what people meant when they say: "Some fish just aren't meant for spin tackle." One fish came up lazily through the middle of the school—the length from sickle to tail made it look like it belonged to two separate fish. This was the fish that decided to tow us around Cape Cod Bay for an hour.

It was a fun week, not so much from a fishing perspective, but more from a nature documentary perspective. It was incredible to see these giants swim so casually through the fleets of boats and pick off straggling pogies left dazed by their unexpected flights.

This action seems like a one-time event, considering the sheer number of fish on so many separate schools of bait. But if the pogies remain scattered next season, expect to find at least a couple of tuna shadowing the schools.



Mackerel were abundant throughout the season, providing a reliable live bait option for targeting stripers in the absence of pogies.

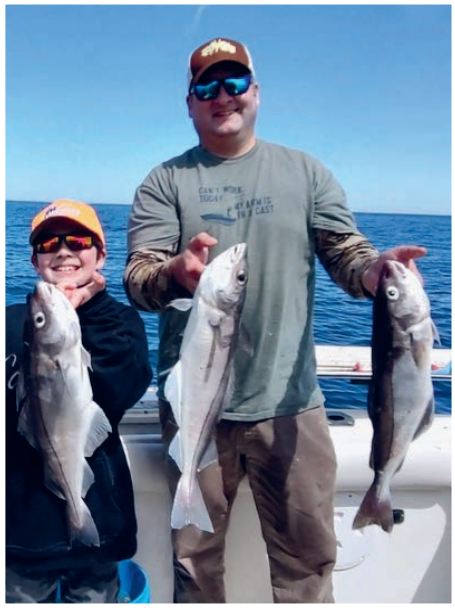
Here's my headline-worthy prediction for 2025: Striper fishing will be *fine,* especially in the early part of the season. And my gut tells me this will be our new normal for years to come unless something radically changes. Recreational tuna fishing will continue to improve for those of us who can't stomach the thought of drowning bait for giants. Will we see another month-long blitz of 60-inch fish off the Cape? My answer is an unequivocal and resounding *maybe* (but I really hope so).



2025 SEASON PLANNER

GREATER BOSTON

RON POWERS



Last year, haddock provided an offshore alternative to striped bass.

School Reunion

Due to their innate need to balance calorie intake with calorie expenditure, big bass migrate only as far north as necessary to find ample prey and ideal water temperatures. In recent years, all those requirements have been met in Greater Boston.

Last year, beachgoers in Boston were probably bemoaning the chilly surf for most of the year, but for big bass enthusiasts, the conditions were perfect. A sustained west wind blew warm surface water offshore, leaving the harbors and bay temperatures stuck between the upper 50s and lower 60s. Not the greatest for boogie boarders, but if you had fins and seven stripes, you would have been very comfortable.

Water temperatures aside, the other determining factor is forage, and in the case of the cows we crave, that quotient is best filled with pogies. From Hull through Nahant Bay, the trend has been an almost bottomless pit of this most prized baitfish. The later-in-the-season addition of their progeny—peanut bunker—hasn't hurt, either. All this has added up to a winning combination, meaning that Greater Boston has had one of the largest concentrations of big striped bass in the Bay State.

For most, finding the prodigious pogy schools was the ticket to a tight line, while some eschewed the mob scene and found plenty of fish without a couple of hundred new friends. If your luck ran contrary to the high times of others, maybe a recheck is in order. Sometimes, it's a case of finding the "right" pogy school, not necessarily the one in the middle of an angling armada. Open-water pods of pogies are more likely to attract all-around attention from pelagic predators such as tuna, whales and, increasingly, a certain ominous shark species. That's all good if you're properly permitted and adequately geared for tuna; however, for most, that situation leads to little more than the need for respooled reels. Instead, look for pogies in areas where stripers can more efficiently dispatch their prey, such as ledges, channel edges, and the hodgepodge of harbor islands that make our area so unique.

A bridled pogy sporting a sharp Gamakatsu or Trokar circle hook will catch fish either by live-lining the bait or trolling by the structure side of the pogy schools. Mackerel is more than an adequate substitute for pogies and should be plentiful off Martin's Ledge, the B Buoy, and maybe as close as Flipp Rock and Nahant's 2 Can. Some anglers do well by tossing a mackerel in the midst of a pogy school, theorizing that the frantic movements of the mack snack





incites neutral stripers into striking.

And then there's the night shift, when surf anglers, kayakers, and stealthy boaters target fish that move inshore after dark. Deep inside Wollaston Beach, East Boston, Crystal Cove, Deer Island Rip, Faun Bar, and Seal Harbor are places where big stripers stage and feed.

A trigger that often brings even better inshore fishing is a low-pressure front. High-pressure fronts tend to stage bass in deeper water with a bit of lockjaw. If I'm privy to approaching inclement weather, I clear the schedule to spend as much time fishing at night for striped bass as I can.

Eels are a slam-dunk after dark, but there are plenty of lures that will also do the trick. The senses of striped bass are heightened at night because they are on alert for any signs of prey. A big rolling, wobbling metal-lip plug will call out to the bass. Large soft-plastic stickbaits are another calling card of the after-dark brigade and can be more user-friendly than plugs. This is especially so when rigged weedless while east winds are blowing in mung.

As for colors, if I had to pick one, I'd go with brown, with olive a runner-up. If you were expecting the more common choices of white, yellow, and black, my opinion is based on years of observing Captain Russ Burgess. If numbers of 50-pounders matter, he could be Boston's best large bass fisherman.

Due to the volume of peanut bunker, which were still somewhat present in Mass Bay as late as mid-November, I fully expect pogies to be plentiful again this year. As for the other players in our slice of the sea, cooler water temperatures resulted in unpredictable fishing for blues, poor fishing for fluke, and solid fishing for haddock well into the summer. It would have been nice if chillier conditions resulted in a prolonged winter flounder season, but that fishery remains a May-through-June option only.


Come nightfall, stripers that fed under offshore bunker schools all day stage within easy reach of kayak and shore anglers.

Anglers who most often connected with bluefish trolled plugs such as Nomad DTs, Rapala CD18s, and X-Raps at a quick clip outside of Hull, Boston Light, Graves Light, the BG Buoy, the NC Buoy, and randomly in open water from the Harbor Humps out to the B Buoy; however, it was more consistent on the North Shore from Cape Ann through Ipswich Bay. I think that relatively chilly water temperatures kept the bluefish on the move, making the deep water/open ocean up north the ideal environment for packs of blues to chase down mackerel and sea herring. Provided we have more seasonal water temperatures next year and retain the plentiful pogies, we should have more reliable bluefish fishing. I hope that the same can be said for fluke, which are especially sensitive to cool water temperatures.

Especially impressive was the haddock fishing, with unusually large specimens aggregating between southern Jeffrey's Ledge and Tillies Ledge during the spring and early summer. Haddock also continued a trend of moving onto Stone Ledge in the peak of summer. This South Shore ledge is only a few miles offshore and also holds cod. When harvested, those groundfish were full of krill, making pink Berkley Gulp products deadly.

Last year was exhibit A on how swings in water temperature can affect our fisheries. While these fluctuations are impossible to predict, it's far easier to expect the return of three solid year-classes of striped bass along with some very happy anglers.





2025 SEASON PLANNER

NORTH SHORE & SEACOAST

STEVE GALLANT

As we anticipate the new season here on the North Shore, it's important to first look back on how last year played out before developing your 2025 fishing plans. If you regularly fish for striped bass, then you've probably felt the impacts of overfishing and poor spawning returns on the fishery. We have been seeing the effects of this over the past few years, but it was brought into sharp relief this past season.



Besides a brief bite around Plum Island, bluefish were scarce on the North Shore in 2024.

Watching the Weather for Early Stripers

The 2024 season kicked off right on schedule. I was able to log linesiders during the first week of May in one of my usual early-season estuary spots. I followed my typical spring routines, fishing choke points and structures while targeting different tide phases to determine when fish were coming and going. The bass primarily kept to their typical routines, so playing the water temperatures and tides produced the best results. When water is still on the colder side, fishing the outgoing tide after a warm, sunny afternoon will definitely tip the odds in your favor. If we have an abnormally cold and rainy spring, that can have an effect on how early good fishing develops in our area.

River levels affect herring numbers on the North Shore. I did not see as many in the rivers last spring as I had the year before. Two years ago, we had an early push of over-slot bass that showed up abnormally early to munch on these anadromous baitfish. That didn't happen last year, but I will be keeping an eye out for it again this season.

Overall, the timing and patterns of the spring were similar to most seasons, though the most notable change was the low number of bass caught—and not for lack of trying. There were fish to be caught (and some quality ones at that), but the nights and days of nonstop, widespread action never materialized. The biomass of striped bass seems to be much more concentrated than it used to be. Schools that were once widely distributed have consolidated into just a few. If you aren't lucky enough to be in the vicinity of a schools, it can feel like you are fishing in an empty ocean. On the flip side, if you do find yourself in the midst of one of these remaining pockets of bass biomass, the fishing can be awesome. This means you may have to venture outside your typical go-to spots if they aren't producing.

Summer Pogies

Large schools of pogies showed up all across the North Shore in June and July, so I expect we will see them again in 2025. These can be found in a variety of spots from year to year. Salem and Beverly harbors are usually home to a large school or two. Cape Ann and Ipswich Bay typically see pockets of pogies, but the hot spots year in and year out are the long stretches of sandy beaches that compose Plum Island and into the Merrimack.

These schools also push up inside the rivers at times. This happened in July 2024 along the North Shore and locally here on Cape Ann. There was a sharp water temperature drop along the oceanfront after a few days of persistent westerly wind. This in turn caused a local upwelling event and brought some large schools of bass and pogies deep into the estuaries, later than we would typically be fishing back there most years. This was the highlight of the season for me and a few friends I surfcast with.

Bluefish Chase Away the Doldrums

The midsummer doldrums were particularly rough this year. We did not have a large influx of bluefish that we were fortunate to get the past few years. Plum Island did have a few weeks in late summer toward the southern end of the island where there was a decent, sporadic bite for blues. Let's hope we are on their migratory route for 2025.

Finicky Fall Run

The 2024 fall run was extremely hit or miss. Small concentrations of bait meant you really needed to cover a lot of ground and put in some miles to find what you were looking for—schools of peanut bunker with birds working overhead. There were a few easterly blows that shook up the surf and produced better fishing at times, but it also made it tougher to find the bait.

I found this year's schools of peanut-chasing stripers to be some of the most finicky I have ever encountered. Spot-on imitations in terms of size, profile and, sometimes, color were needed to even get a tap, let alone a committed strike on some days. So, make sure your fall-run bag is packed accordingly.

The 2025 season may require a little creative thinking, a willingness to break away from go-to spots to cover some ground, and perhaps most importantly…a little luck.

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2025 SEASON PLANNER

NEW HAMPSHIRE & VERMONT

GABE GRIES

The outlook is bright for bass, trout, and panfishing in Northern New England for 2025.

I love seeing emails from On the Water editor Jimmy Fee in my inbox. He's such a nice guy and always to the point. Our brief exchange: *Jimmy: Hey Gabe. Heard about the halibut. That's awesome. Can you write up your column for our 2025 Angler's Almanac in 800-1000 words?*

Me: Thanks. I'd love to. What is the deadline?

Jimmy: Before the end of next week?

My mind went into high gear. So many species and great opportunities to convey in so few words for two states. Organize by state, species, time of year? No time to decide, so I pulled out my phone and angling diary, then started typing to see what would transpire, figuring I could organize later.

I was lucky to have contacts for several angling experts from whom I could delve pertinent 2025 information to bolster my own perceptions. Don Miller is the former Large Lakes Biologist for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. Tim Dube is a Bassmaster Elite Series Pro from New Hampshire. Tim Moore runs New Hampshire's only year-round fishing-guide service and has fished the state for over 40 years. Roy Gangloff lives in southern Vermont and has been chasing multiple species for four decades. Jimmy Kennedy is an accomplished bass tournament angler and chef who lives in Vermont.



JAMIE KENNEDY

In New Hampshire, warm spring water temperatures found big smallmouth bass spawning two weeks earlier than usual.

Trout and Salmon

New Hampshire's trout and salmon forecast for 2025 looks quite good. Miller's pick for landlocked salmon is Big Squam Lake, which he said has numerous age-classes and lots of rainbow smelt as forage. He relayed smelt in Winnipesaukee were also doing well. From Moore, "The 2024 population of landlocked salmon in Lake Winnipesaukee was as robust when the season ended in September as the spring. Come April and ice-out, they will be plentiful, bigger, and joined by a new population of 2-year-old fish. I expect excellent trolling for the 2025 season."



TIM MOORE

Newfound Lake and Lake Winnipesaukee are just two of the many water bodies known to give up 3- to 5-pound rainbow trout.

Both Moore and Miller were excited about rainbow trout prospects in 2025. According to Moore, there is an abundance of big rainbow trout throughout the state's lakes and Winnipesaukee is no exception. Miller agreed. "Winni continues to turn out some nice 3- to 5-pound rainbow trout—beautiful fish that anglers are targeting more each year. Newfound Lake is growing some nice ones, too," he told me.

For lake trout, Miller said Winnipesaukee and Lake Winnisquam currently have very healthy populations. "Vertical jigging for lakers is really popular right now, with catches of ten to twenty fish per day not uncommon," he continued. While Moore found that 2024's unprecedented June temperatures impacted laker fishing, he is hoping for a more typical season in 2025 and bolstered Miller's claims about Winni's exceptional lake trout population.

Moore also shared that trout and salmon fishing in the Connecticut Lakes region was above average in 2024. "The North Country fared better during the warmer months last year, leaving little doubt that the 2025 outlook is very promising," Moore said.

Good trout and landlocked salmon fishing in Vermont will continue in 2025. Gangloff told

me the state's trophy trout-stocking program recently added some southern waters. There will be plenty of good-sized 2-year-old trout to catch, he said, and he received reports of some big browns in low-lying rivers and lots of wild brook trout in higher-elevation brooks being caught in 2024.

Lake Champlain has been in the news for lake trout as of late and in a good way. While this water body has had impressive fishing for landlocked salmon and lake trout for at least the past decade, these fisheries were maintained by stocking hatchery fish. However, increasing natural lake trout reproduction in recent years has resulted in lowered stocking levels. Stocking this species in Champlain will end in 2025. This is an incredible success story for a species native to Champlain that were extirpated in the 1800s, with modern-day restoration efforts beginning in the 1970s.


It seems like there is never a bad year of fishing for panfish like bluegills.

Walleye

Walleye fishing in both Vermont and New Hampshire will continue to be exceptional in 2025. While the Connecticut River is the best bet for waters managed by New Hampshire (though parts of the Merrimack River and its tributaries also contain fishable numbers), Vermont has many opportunities and a robust stocking program. Lake Carmi, Island Pond, Chittenden Reservoir, Salem Lake, and Lake Champlain all offer great walleye fishing. However, don't forget about Champlain's tributaries during spring—the Missisquoi, Lamoille, Winooski, and Otter Creek.

Panfish

One of the nice things about panfish is it seems as if there is never a bad fishing year for them and 2025 will be no different. Prolific waters for crappie, yellow and white perch, bluegill, and pumpkinseed in both states are too numerous to list and most standing waters contain one or several of these species. According to Moore, "Fall crappie fishing pressure in New Hampshire was lighter than usual in 2024 and I expect great fishing in 2025."

From a bobber and worm to more advanced techniques, it is easy to "do no wrong" when targeting these delicious fish. A challenge for 2025 is to try a new panfish technique. Mine will be trolling in 8 to 20 feet of water during summer. I already have my lures picked out, including The Gnat, a 1.5 inch crankbait from Bill Lewis Lures, and the Hal-Fly and Linder Panfish Special from Big Bite Baits. Based on my research, the latter two are well-designed light jigs that I think are going to be fantastic when slowly trolled.

Bass

Bass fishing in Vermont and New Hampshire continues to impress. From numerous professional tournament results on Lake Champlain to big bags in the Granite State, there are quality smallmouth and largemouth around every rock, patch of vegetation, and drop-off in many waters.

Let's start with New Hampshire. Moore said bass fared well with 2024's warmer spring temperatures and the smallie spawn was two weeks early. "The past two years have shown larger than normal smallmouth on Winnipesaukee and I'm expecting better than average smallmouth fishing in 2025," he reported.

Dube was very excited about 2025, saying, "Bass fishing has been on an uphill swing the last couple years due to milder winters." Suddenly, we have many larger fish being caught, especially in Winni, Squam and Winnisquam. Waters are exploding with great numbers of smallies as well as some 8- to 9-pound largies. I expect we will see a new state record largemouth caught in the next couple years."

When asked about other good waters besides the Lakes Region, Dube replied, "The Connecticut River in spring can result in some of best fishing if water levels are fishable and the Nashua River by Stellos Stadium has been putting out good largemouth. Great East Lake has been fishing well for both species and typically tends to be less pressured. If you don't have a bigger boat or don't want to fish the big lakes on a weekend, Province Lake is a great choice for both species."

Dube's last tip was to watch the winter. "If this winter is mild, everything is going to start faster in 2025, meaning the best fishing might be in April instead of May," he advised.

Kennedy was no less enthusiastic about 2025 Vermont bass fishing. "The sky is the limit. I can't believe how it has changed for the better over the past 30 years. Every year I see larger fish across the state—more and more 5- to 6-pound smallmouth in Champlain when it used to be just 4-pounders. Anybody who gets the opportunity to bass fish here should jump at the chance," he exclaimed.

I asked about Bomoseen, Vermont's largest lake that lies entirely with the state's borders, which was on fire in 2023 and 2024. There were two bass tournaments where the winning 5-fish largemouth limits were over 28 pounds. Kennedy predicted, "We will see over-30-pound bags of largies there and some big smallmouths as well."

While Kennedy goes to Champlain as much as he can for the size of fish and habitat diversity, he rightly recognizes that many other Vermont waters produce quality bass. "Magog has a great fishery and there are some nice smallmouths in Seymour Lake, which is also a great spot to learn how to sight-fish. Both Lake Morey and Fairlee can be fished in a day since they are right next to one another and, of course, the Connecticut River is just fantastic. Dunmore is one that gets overlooked, and don't forget about smaller waters, especially State Park ponds," he recommended.

Gabe Gries is a fish biologist and member of the New England Outdoor Writers Association. Please email him at fishnh@hotmail.com with questions or suggestions for articles.

2025 SEASON PLANNER

COASTAL NEW HAMPSHIRE & MAINE

CAPTAIN LUIS TIRADO



Stripers well over schoolie size arrived in Maine by mid-May to feed on abundant river herring.

I think the mark of a dedicated captain and guide is how many hours he or she puts into the craft. Hours on the water, hours at the workbench, and countless mental hours going over scenarios, past trips, the good and the bad, along with what may come with the next tide, the next trip and, ultimately, the next season. I do not consider myself any different or special when it comes to the captains and guides I run with. We all are consumed with every minute detail, and for every hundred texts we share, I can guarantee there were 10 times that number in internal conversations with ourselves. Like most, I rely on log books, trip reports, social media, and text threads to get an accurate picture of how the season went. By doing so, it allows me to put together a hypothesis for next year.

Running Ahead of Schedule

Here is what I learned from this past season. May acted like June, June was like July, and July seemed like August. What do I mean by that? Rather than chasing schoolies in the marshes in May, I was chasing blitzes of bass up to 40 pounds that were harassing alewives and herring. In June, the fish had pushed out of the rivers, for the most part, and were staging on beaches and ledges. In July, the fish were hanging deep and offshore. August was the one consistent month—fish at night and do all right. Bass were stacked up on beachfronts from York to Cape Elizabeth, and they were relatively easy to catch with the use of electronics. September was a good month, but it was inconsistent, and October fishing lasted only a few weeks. Overall, it was a decent season. I consistently caught fish—many really nice fish—but the numbers were down, even though trips were up.

So, what does that mean for next season? I expect much of the same. I think the herring runs will be active earlier than usual. I will have gear prepped and ready by the second week of May for larger fish, rather than just being ready with a 7-weight fly rod and a light spinning rod. Honestly, I expect to see fewer fish again because that seems to be the way the fishery is trending right now, yet those fish are going to be impressive in size. I also expect to see more of a deep-water offshore bite.

Offshore Stripers

This season and last had some interesting moments when I encountered schools of big bass offshore out to three miles. These fish were cruising the surface and happy to eat anything thrown at them. A few years ago, I remember fishermen on Cape Cod were on a good bite like that, then it seemed to move up toward Boston Harbor. Two years ago, it was going off on the North Shore and Isle of Shoals. This year, we saw bass from Kittery to Portland acting the same way.

I am looking forward to next season. I am excited to hone new tactics and techniques, and to push the timeframe in both directions. My bold prediction for Maine anglers is that many fishermen are going to connect with their biggest fish to date, but they will have to work for them. The anglers who get creative and are not afraid to spend the hours needed will be quite happy. Either way, it is going to be a great season with countless memories made and lessons learned. Until next year!

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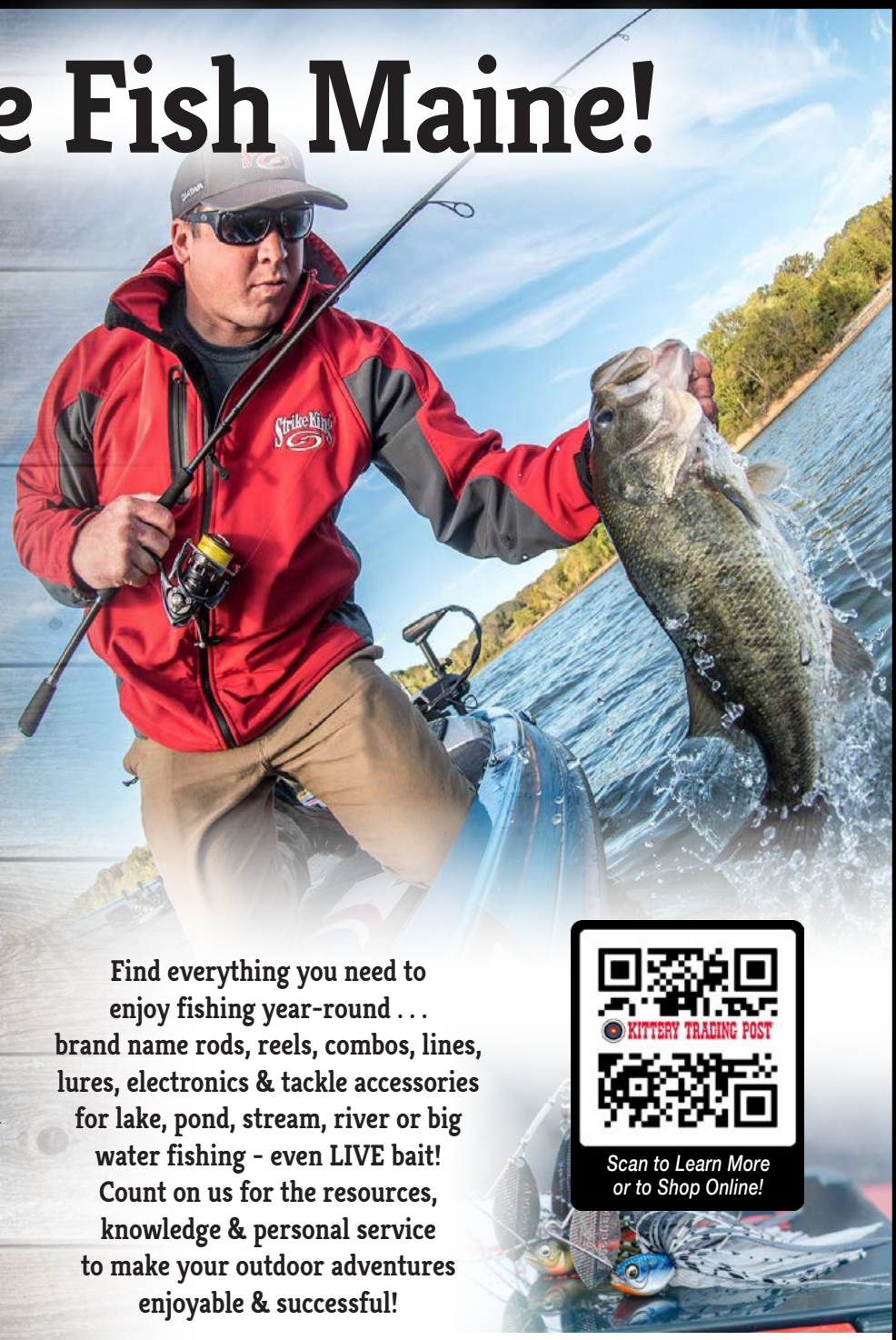


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In The Wake continued from page 230

uniforms except for the prevailing ragged bellbottom trouser cuffs, faded denim shirts, and a few of the discolored white swabbie caps reminiscent of World War II seamen.

At the club, there was an unspoken regimen for non-boat owners and guests. No one ever invited you to go fishing with them unless you had something to offer. When I became a slender but strong hand at rowing and was able to turn over the soil on the cobble beaches to extract clams and sea worms, my stock among the members rose. The fact that I could take a lunch or breakfast order, then run to the Bridge Diner and return before the coffee and food had cooled, further enhanced my status.

By the time I earned my place aboard a few of the flat-bottom work skiffs of the day, there were several things I was made aware of. The club's caretaker took me aside and enlightened me on the protocol of shipping aboard. One of those rules was that the captain/owner was always right, even when I was certain he wasn't. He then went through a litany of conventional practices, along with a warning that some of those old codgers would take advantage of me at every opportunity. He said that I should be aware of this but handle any grievances in a respectful manner. All that information was taken as gospel and filed in my memory bank for future reference.

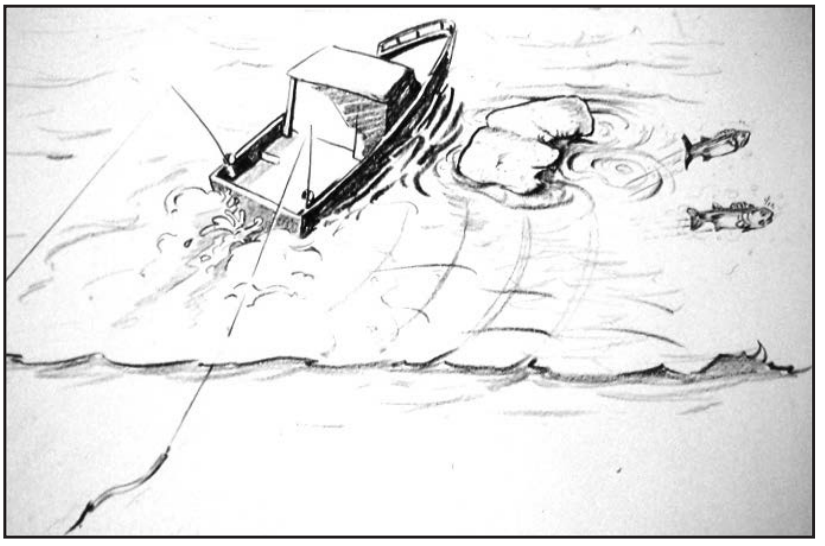
I shipped aboard with a few real cheapskates as well as one malicious scallywag, but Captain George had a good heart and was a man of his word. If he promised me a dollar for clams, worms, or blueshell crabs, he was always right there with the money. He loved fishing but could never lay claim to being a successful angler and needed all the help he could get. As the caretaker put it, "If George comes back to the dock with a striper or two, it's for certain the fish were committing suicide." That is how I came to be a mate aboard the craft of this hapless wannabe angler.

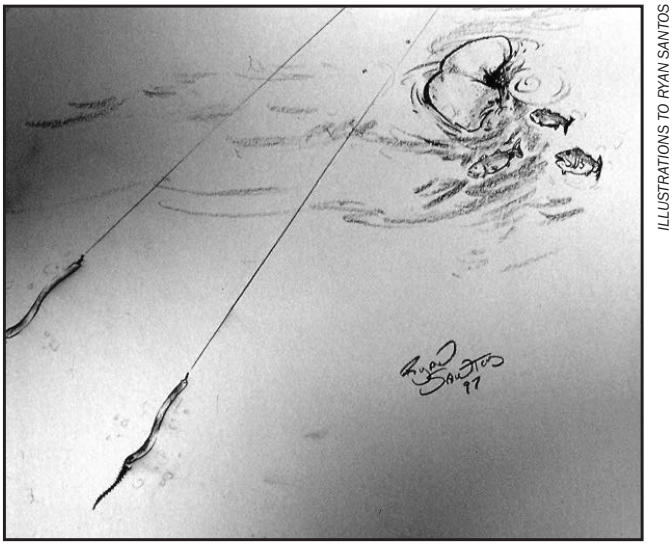
He owned a 14-foot wooden skiff that was in very good condition and an Elgin outboard of questionable reliability. Once primed and started with the choke pulled out just a notch, that engine would run smoothly for about a half hour, but as soon as he attempted to slow it down to trolling speed, it began to cough, belch, and falter until it finally stalled. In all fairness, most of those old outboards ran well at cruising speed, but their idling routine was extremely problematic. I was told by one savvy outboard mechanic that the engines were metered to feed about the same amount of fuel running at higher speeds as they did when trolling, so when they were throttled down, they flooded due to excessive and inaccurate fuel metering. Whatever the reason, I was thankful for those engines' foibles as they kept my rowing services in high demand.

George was an elderly man who wore a shabby pair of taped spectacles. He claimed he only needed them to read, but we all knew better. He could see the bridge and the piers, but when it came to reading warning signs for the high-tension wires or the ranges at the towers on the shoreline, George squinted and asked me to decipher them for him. The caretaker and other more perceptive club members claimed he was as blind as a bat. The problem was that George did not have a very good sense of just how close his boat was to the shoreline and the rocks, so he was constantly hitting bottom and breaking shear pins. (The shear pins fit in the drive-shaft slot of the propellers so that when the blades struck a rock, the sacrificial pins broke and saved the more expensive propellers.)

The trouble with George was that he was almost always in the rocks. Someone surmised that he must have once caught a fish at the same time he bumped a rock, so he associated that with success. This was not the case, but George was stubborn, and that is where "the captain is always right" rule came into play. As an obedient boy, I followed orders except when they were certain to get me (or my charges) injured or in trouble. On quite a few occasions when fishing with George, he would insist that we were not close enough to shore when I knew we were already much too close to the rocks for comfort.

Whenever I pleaded my case, he would take the oars (or the tiller if the outboard was running) and bring us nearly against the rocks. I was not afraid of drowning, but even





ILLUSTRATIONS TO RYAN SANTOS

Stripers love rocky habitat and prefer feeding along rugged coastal structure; that is, until you run the shadow and noise of your engine over their heads. If you make a pass, go around the structure and then turn the boat in a way to present the lures over that habitat and your score will improve tremendously.

at that tender age, I was concerned about my reputation. I thanked God that the man who built George's boat had the foresight to run three thick oak strakes fore and aft along the bottom to protect the planking when the boat was hauled up onto rocky beaches. Those strakes and a thick keel prevented the old-timer from stoving in the bottom planks of his heavy skiff.

On a warm, late-July evening, George had driven us up on the rocks at the point midway between the power lines and the Somerset Shipyard when a suicidal striper swallowed his sinking Cape Cod spinner and took off for deep water. I was hanging on for dear life as the boat rocked and pivoted on the boulder, but George paid me no mind as that fish was more important to him than a bent prop, broken shear pin, or drowned oarsman. I finally stuck the gaff in the striper's open maw and needed help sliding it over the rail just as the wind and an incoming tide floated us off our hazardous perch. I rowed the skiff onto the beach, where George removed the prop nut, then knocked in one of the homemade 10-penny nails he had cut to size to use in place of the shear pins.

Despite the distorted potato-chip prop, we caught four more fish that night and George rewarded me with a fish and more money than his customary compensation. I thanked him and ran all the way home because it was far after my curfew and my mom had already sent the posse of older boys out to search for me. When the caretaker was informed of the events of that day, he told George that my mother forbade me from fishing with him again.

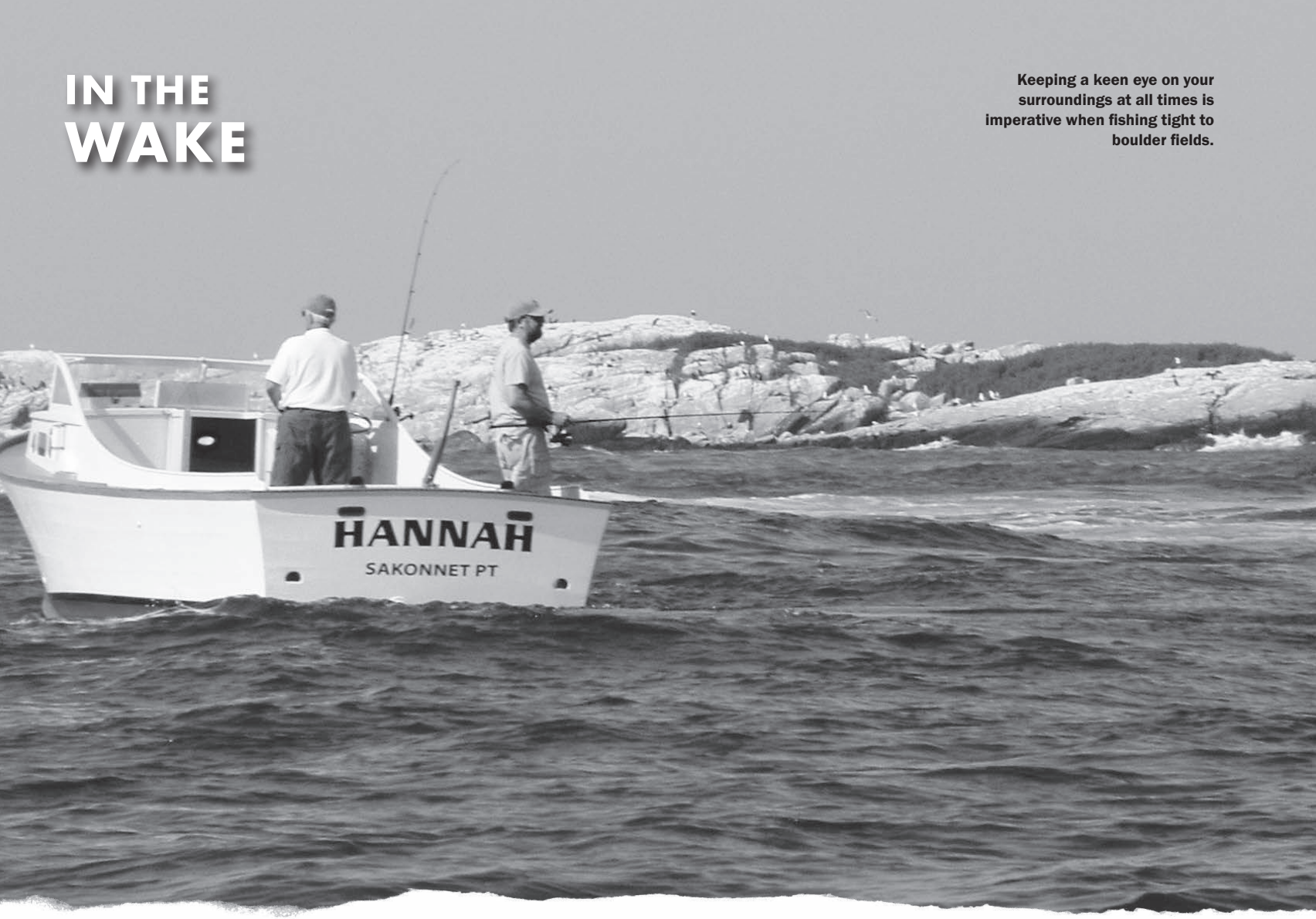
Because of his affinity for flirting with the rocks, George had already terrified every other potential mate and passenger, but he was reluctant to sail alone because of his vision problems. He finally talked me into an afternoon trip and, true to his word, he allowed me to run the boat and didn't pressure me into getting "just a little bit closer." We caught a few schoolies that day, and after the trip, he tipped me and then sat down with the veterans for a celebratory beer. At that stage of my life, I had developed numerous emotional attachments to the old-timers, including George; however, I began seeing less of him over the next two months. When I finally asked where he was, one crank crudely informed me that "He kicked the bucket," while another of his pals explained that "He took a heart attack." I found it hard to believe that anyone would *take* a heart attack. Why not pneumonia or a lesser disorder rather than something so permanently fatal? Because I was a youngster, they didn't understand that I had feelings for that man, although I never dared to articulate them. A few weeks later when I arrived at the club, there were two younger men helping the caretaker clean out George's locker. That was the sequence of the lives of many of those old salts. One day, they were laughing, fishing, and drinking with their friends, and the next day they were gone.

Of all the men I met and learned from, Captain Larson was the man I admired the most and chose to emulate. He was a legendary skipper who delivered boats from Maine to Florida, and most of those voyages were single-handed ventures. He called me Charley unless I had just taken a member or guest fishing, then he referred to me as Captain. Whenever we went fishing, he would have me captain the boat. One perturbed old wharf rat asked him why he called me captain. He glared at the man with those steely green eyes and referenced the Coast Guard radio operators or Chief Petty officers who might come aboard to assist or inspect your boat. "The Coasties never refer to you by your first or last name. You are the captain, and customs and regulations provide that you are referred to as such." That explanation absolutely resolved the issue.

By and large, those crusty sea captains and battle-scarred veterans were the last of the greatest generation. Even though they weren't always right, I learned to respect and admire them for their service to our country and contributions to their communities once they returned home.

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Keeping a keen eye on your surroundings at all times is imperative when fishing tight to boulder fields.

Aye-Aye, Sir!

BY CHARLEY SOARES

The large, gleaming brass plate was deliberately attached to the face of the companionway's bright mahogany cap, there for all to see. It read, "THE CAPTAIN'S WORD IS LAW." I usually outran the elders whenever that yacht, one of the few that didn't overstate its ranking as a legitimate yacht, headed toward our fuel dock.

On that day, they were returning from dinner and a visit to the trendy shops of Newport. The captain and first mate, both dressed in starched cotton suntans, moved briskly and efficiently. They communicated in subdued tones, with deference to the owner, his wife, and two guests who sipped their cocktails and continued their conversation as though they were completely alone under the bright white sunshade.

That skipper was a good tipper, particularly after I began washing the dry salt water that had accumulated on the yacht's bright mahogany foredeck and gunwales. I decided, right then and there, that I would one day make a fishing trip to Newport and then dine in one of those fancy waterfront restaurants.

That summer, I also became aware that the captain's word was law, unless he was a 13-year boy at the wheel, the tiller, or pulling on the oars. If you thought peacetime Navy life was difficult, you never served as a swamper, deckhand, or third mate at the Weetamoe Yacht Club. There were no

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