



NEW JERSEY FISHING REPORT

by Nick Honachefsky

Blame it on global warming, or just a tropical trend, but with wild weather temps reaching the 70's in early January and water temps still in the 48 to 53 degree range, we've got ourselves an extended striped bass season. Through the end of December and into January, boat owners that had the ability to venture out were all over packs of striped bass, especially around the Sandy Hook area and off of Romer Shoal. More on that in a second. In the ongoing fluke battle in Jersey legislation, the NMFS lowered the fluke quota to 17.11 million pounds, (better than the season-killing 12.98 million pounds as predicted) but it's still not good, meaning that flukers will get a cut on the bag limit or see an increase in minimum length on an already ridiculously regulated species for 2007. The rumor mill is talking of a four fish limit at 17.5 inches, but that is just hearsay, and hopefully not a viable option. And remember toggers, it's a four fish limit now, and for striped bass anglers, you may fish the ocean for stripers, but not the back bays or estuaries, which is in effect until March 31st.

NORTHERN JERSEY

Raritan Bay itself went out with a bang, though it wasn't one of a colossal nature. Stripers continued to provide plenty of action inside the bay, especially in Sandy Hook Bay, the Raritan Reach, and Romer Shoal, with most bass running the 20 to 26 inch class, with very few keepers mixed in during the month of December and into early January. The big news, which is still taking place as of press time, is that a large biomass of sea herring has infiltrated the area. I actually heard somewhere that this biomass was the largest bait concentration on the planet at the time. It was the size of Manhattan, and stuck off the Long Island and northern Jersey shores. What did that mean? Well, striped bass. A lot of them. Bass from twinkie size of 14 inches to keeper size of 36 inches were all over the area Between the Channels and off of Romer Shoal, and you could very well have a catch of over 50 bass on a good day out trolling or jigging. Stretch 25's and 4 ounce Crippled Herrings jigged off the bottom were great offerings which the bass ready pounced upon. It really is amazing that such a mass of bass is still inundating our waters and it looks like they are still here to stay as of January 8th.

The tautog scene pretty much exploded off this section. Bottom bouncers hitting the Sandy Hook Reef, Shrewsbury Rocks, Elberon rockpiles and other assorted small wrecks within 3 miles of the beach were all over tenacious tautog of 3 to 10 pounds. Limit catches were not too hard to find, with a ton of throwback blackfish keeping anglers busy. Green crabs took the larger tog, but when the tog were finicky, cut pieces of fresh clam seemed to entice them to the hook. Party boats heading out to the Mud Hole

were rewarded with an abundance of ling again on the wrecks and along the ledges of the hole in about 120 to 180 feet of water. High hooks were able to put up 40 to 50 ling on a good day, and there was a smattering of keepable sea bass, blackfish, and porgies also in the mix. The Mud also held a few cod and pollock, most in the 5 to 10 pound class, but a few reaching 15 to 20 pounds which inhaled the clam baits intended for ling. Large cod and pollock will be found in



Capt. Honachefsky raises two hefty pollack for the camera.

greater numbers through February, be sure to bring some heavy metal jigs to drop down on those Mud Hole trips. Interesting catches of nuclear sized conger eels up to 5 feet long, along with a battalion of ocean pout put some bends in anglers rods as well on the bottomfishing trips. Be sure to use fresh clam bits or even bergall fillets to get the largest ling.

CENTRAL JERSEY

Surf anglers were in their glory here as the beaches from Bay Head, through Mantoloking, Lavallette and Seaside were the battleground for bass on a daily basis. It didn't seem to matter too much on time of day; morning, afternoon and night saw stripers of 16 to 28 inches running hard through the waters, chasing the abundance of sea herring, spearing and peanut bunkers in the wash. There was plenty of blitzing and birdplay as gannets, terns and gulls all dove on the bait schools, exposing where the fish were feeding. Bass were splashing around right at anglers feet, and two days I recall catching 16 and 18 stripers in only two hours time each day that hit on Storm shads and silver and black Bomber A-Salt plugs with 3/0 white bucktail teasers on the rig. Surfsters would be delighted to see this action stay strong through the end of January and into February and its not too much to believe as water climates continue to stick in the lower 50's. Boat anglers wee scoring tons of stripers off of Seaside Heights and the Casino Pier from a half mile to 2 miles off the beach, and a shot of mi-

gratory bass passed through that put over 40 fish on the hook for some anglers. The boat bass were actively pursuing big 4 to 6 ounce Kroc jigs or Ava 47 to 67 size jigs dropped to the bottom and then jigged up from 3 to 5 feet off the bottom. Some larger bass up to 25 pounds were taken with this method. The Garden State South Reef accumulated a mass of blackfish on the tank units and reef balls, with limits caught on green crabs. The North jetty of Barnegat Inlet also held the bulldogs close into the rocks, where crabs or clam slices enticed them to bite. If the blackies seem to be finicky on the bite, try using the orange part of the clam with the ribbons as sometimes the color and texture of this part seems to ignite a strike from a wary tog.

OFFSHORE

The offshore wreck fishing season has officially kicked off now, and boy, are they slamming some serious humpback sea bass! The 50 to 80 mile wrecks outside Barnegat and Manasquan Inlets are holding sea bass the caliber of which we may just see the state record of 8 pounds 4 ounces get trumped. Party boats are continually putting up pool winners that best the 7-pound mark, and filling coolers with 2 to 5 pounders consistently. When targeting the sea bass, get three 3/0 size baitholder hooks down on your rig, and try to affix a white or chartreuse teaser to at least one hook to see if the humpies dial in the bucktail flash. I'm telling ya, offshore sea bassing is not only tons of action with constant bent rods, but you can fill a cooler with your limit of 25 fairly easily, check out the Jamaica in Brielle at 732-528-5014, the Gambler in Point Pleasant at 732-295-7569, or the Doris Mae IV in Barnegat Light at 609-494-1692.. C'mon, join the winter party!

On a side note, as unusually tepid water and air temps continue to enter our winter season, one must realize that there is a ton of fishing activity going on. When you think of January, usually you think of a cold, biting outside, and don't want to have anything to do with holding a rod in your hands. Being graced with these warmer temps, a new season is developing, one that puts striper action well into January, and possibly February. Not only that, but blackfish are staying longer and closer inshore now, ling are on an all-time tear, and even bluefish have stayed stalwart and refuse to leave some areas. Its almost like the winter doldrums are getting erased, and for all fishing purposes, this is great! Do yourself a favor and jump on your local party boat, who will still be running to get you into some intense action. Take advantage of the extended season, and before you know it spring will have sprung!

