

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

August is the month for fluke, bluefish, and blue crabs, respectively, the most sought after, the hardest fighting, and most ill tempered inshore species in the ocean. Fluke fishing has been surprisingly good to this writing, despite large length limits that are surely killing more fluke than they are conserving. Regardless of this fact, at least through late June, anglers throughout the region were not complaining about their catches. Early fluking trips were producing a ratio that ranged from one to three, to one to five or six, keepers for every short released, as opposed to ridiculous ratios, that last summer, averaged any where from ten, to even twenty to one.

As usual, the best fluking available to Connecticut residents will be found in the eastern third of the state, along the Rhode Island Beaches, to Newport, around the perimeter of Block Island, and the south side of Fishers Island, New York.

My last trip was typical, perhaps a tad worse than the reports that have been coming in from all fronts. A friend and I started out off Misquamicut Beach, Rhode Island and ended up off Isabella Beach, Fishers Island.

As all fluke meisters know, drift is everything when it comes to catching these summer time flatfish. Too slow and you feed the skate and crabs, too fast and its difficult to keep baits in the strike zone for these aggressive bottom dwellers.

We started out with a much too slow drift with perpendicular winds, which made things difficult at early on. The fish were there but not turned on like they would be had the winds and tides been lined up as they were supposed to be, according to the original plan.

Back trolling with the tide produced something like two twenty inch keepers, out of eleven fish. With the winds picking up and making the drift progressively less fish able, we ran across to the south side of Fishers Island where the waters were more protected and the drift much more favorable.

The switch of locations was made a bit too late to make a mediocre day into a good one, but a single good hour of drifting produced three more keepers out of a half dozen additional fish, with two of these New York fish in the four to five pound range.

Bear in mind, as the season progresses, two things take place. Fluke are a fast growing species, so some of those "shorts" that had to be released earlier in the season will literally grow to keeper size by the end of the summer. But on the other hand a heavy pounding by commercial draggers, that are relentless and a constant pick from commercial pin hookers and legitimate recreational anglers will thin out the keepers over time, so those decent keeper to short ratios fluke fishermen experienced earlier in the season, will increase by the end of the summer and early fall, when the seasons close in most states. New York has no closed season, however Rhode Island runs till September 16, while Connecticut only runs through September 5.

Bluefishing started off as usual with large numbers of "cocktail" blues moving in early. However, right from the beginning of the season tackle shops from

Narragansett Bay to Captain Morgan's, in Madison began reporting catches, numerous catches of big chopper bluefish that ranged from fifteen to as much as eighteen pounds. Pat Abate of River's End Tackle, Saybrook weighed in an eighteen plus pound chopper during the middle of June.



Braces of quality fluke have been a common sight in all three states this summer, with the Rhody Beaches, Block Island, the south side of Fishers Island, and the eastern third of Long Island Sound producing the majority of quality fish throughout the summer. I hold up a portion of the keepers we landed during a typical trip earlier in the summer.

That's a huge early summer bluefish! The way this species chows down during the summer, and based on the higher than average number of blues weighing in the teens that were caught during the late spring and summer, it will probably take a twenty pounder to win the Worlds Greatest Bluefish Contest, which is held during the end of August every summer in Long Island Sound.

Another interesting factor that has come into play all season long and one reason there were so many huge bluefish and an equally number of jumbo stripers caught along the coast this summer has been the presence of menhaden along the entire Connecticut coast on up into Narragansett Bay, Rhode Island and to the north, since May.

The bunker are no where near their historic levels of the late 60's when I first began using them for bait in the Thames River for bass, blues and weakfish, but there has been a smattering of them around in most coastal estuaries for the summer and it's safe to assume that in all probability those numbers have improved as the summer progressed and more menhaden have moved through Long Island Sound from their source in New Jersey and the New York City end of Long Island Sound.

Want to win the big bucks in that bluefish tournament, find some menhaden, catch a few and live linen or chunk them around a reef near you.

Crabs have also been a pleasant surprise this season. Early on, based on the fact that while fishing for stripers in the Thames River, during mid

May I personally saw a couple of poker chip-sized blue crabs floating. At the time, I couldn't tell if they were dead crabs that were bloated or shed shells from a growth cycle, since the one within reach sank from a boat wake, as I tried to grab it.

Around that same time other reports of "floaters" came into the Fish Connection, the primary shop for fishing activities on the Thames River, on Route 12 just south of Norwich. For this reason it looked for all practical purposes that there had been yet another severe winter die off of our local crab population.

Water temperatures were warm enough by late May whereby people could see at least a few crabs, had there been a good survival rate. Evidently, temps weren't quite warm enough to draw them into the shallows where they would be noticed by local crabbers.

Late in June, Joe Balint of the Fish Connection on the Thames and Pat Abate of River's End Tackle, Old Saybrook both reported that customers had begun catching some keeper sized crabs and seeing good numbers of shorts.

Pat Abate said the lower Connecticut River and the near by Oyster River were providing the best early season crabbing he's witnessed in years, with a few really jumbo finger crushers being reported. This is great news for blue crab fans like myself.

Last year there were few if any crabs around until the end of August or early September, when historically the region gets a boost from crabs migrating northward during the summer.

The crabs that I saw settle into the Thames River at that time produced huge numbers of spawn. The last trip I made to a favorite crabbing spot, there were thousands of dime and quarter sized little blue crabs swimming around along with a fair number of keepers. Based on sheer abundance, even if there was a significant die off, my thought was that these local "seed crabs" probably did not all die off this winter and that crucial period during early spring.

The crabs that people were seeing and catching in June are apparently those survivors. By now crabbing should be pretty good based on those early signs of a significant local crab population in the area. Blue crabs are fast growing so the three inchers will be legal by the end of the summer. Plus the local crabbing will improve drastically whenever that slug of migrants from the south reaches our waters some time late this month.

I am both a hard-core fisherman and hunter, who over the years has passed up more kill shots on deer than I have taken, released countless keeper stripers up to about 44 pounds, keeper fluke to six pounds, dozens of northern pike to 21 pounds, and muskellunge to 29 pounds. In my entire life I have never released a single legal sized blue crab because they are my absolute number one favorite eating critter in the world.

It always astounds me how blue crabs, that are such nasty, aggressive and ill tempered crustaceans, can taste so sweet!