

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

June is the month when marine fishing breaks loose in these parts. Most years we'd be talking fluke by now, but that's not the case this year until June 15 in Connecticut waters, when anglers can start trying to catch three fish per day, 19.5 inches. The season has been shortened to August 19, not much to get excited about.

Last year, as has been the case for two decades now, recreational fluke fishermen throughout the region overfished their quotas once again, and this time the feds required that major cuts be made in season length. For this reason, fluking won't be much better in adjacent states. This situation is made worse, we all know, by the fact that no one knows how many smaller, less valuable fluke have been shoveled overboard, dead, by commercial trawlers so they can bring in their also greatly reduced quotas, of prime, jumbo, top-dollar doormats.

Somewhere within the realm of common sense is a ground that would allow recreational anglers to keep a small number of smaller fish and be done, thus reducing their inevitable hook mortality, while the draggers should somehow be forced to keep whatever they take in, fill quotas so that everyone, on both sides of this picket fence, is done before the waste begins to take its toll on the resource.

Last year was similar to this as of this writing as far as temperature regimes are concerned. The region experienced a mild winter that started early and stayed late. The spring was long, rainy and chilly, with a teaser of a warm spell followed by a long stretch of cold rains and fluctuating shallow water temperatures. Extreme fluctuations in water temperature make fishing difficult for us and even more difficult for a fish. Every species of fish in fresh or saltwater has its individual spawning seasons that have evolved over the eons to be closely synchronized with a delicate dance between water temperature and daylight length.

Bait, ranging from sand worms, squid and spawning herring to inshore movement of menhaden, is all influenced by water temperature. That's why, due to the fact that the earth's orbit around the sun is fairly consistent while weather patterns are fickle, anglers can count on certain fisheries shaping up within a week or two either side of the same calendar date every season. During years when there's a cold winter and lingering springtime temps, things are protracted and shape up much closer to summer on the calendar. On the other hand, during warm winters, fisheries start "popping" closer to ice out time than the summer doldrums.

The point is that, despite the fact that pretty much every species of fish, including bluefin tuna, will be passing through the region sometime this month, legally there's not much to fish for during



With most bottom fishing seasons still closed, stripers and blues are about all there will be until fluke season opens June 15. Big stripers will be found wherever there's a school of bunker to snag and use for bait.

June. Fluke doesn't open until the 15th; scup fishing opened in time for the Memorial Day weekend last month and blackfish season is closed until July 1 (through the end of August with a two fish per day limit - unless something changed on the DEP web site since this writing, so check). Bluefish have been in the region since early May, and, of course, the stripers that have supported the brunt of recreational angling for the past decade are going strong.

This year, weather-wise, is shaping up to be a near clone of last, but that doesn't mean anything in the time between the writing and printing of these words. If, in fact, water temps in the ocean don't get into the high 50s until later in June, look for worm spawn events to continue developing and fading rapidly in estuaries and salt ponds along the coast and squid to come in sometime early in June and maybe remain in the area to support some great fishing around the reefs in the eastern end of the Sound until the end of the month. The key to successful fishing during June is locating the bait, the "most important fish in the sea" - adult menhaden.

Since my attention turned towards the ocean for fishing thrills over four decades ago, all the most successful saltwater anglers are guys, often technically illegal pin hookers (rod and reel commercial striper fishermen) who, due to loopholes in Connecticut regulations, still get away with it to this day. All caught a high percentage of their biggest striped bass and bluefish by live lining bunker or casting chunks of fresh bunker to these fish.

My first job out of college was with the Connecticut DEP. In that capacity I met and, for various reasons, got to fish with some of the most accomplished striper fishermen, big bass guys in this state, anglers whose abilities would stack up against anyone anywhere. One of those characters and I struck up a tentative friendship thirty years ago that has come to fruition since he re-

tired from his wayward pursuits.

Highly skilled and active anglers for any species, ranging from bait-sized trout in our streams and rivers to the hard core fishermen who make canyon runs every chance they get, always have the best bait available. Along the coast during June, the best bait to catch a striper, bluefish or to fillet and use as strip baits for fluke when the season opens is menhaden. Their numbers have been increasing over the past five or six years since New Jersey finally came to its senses and booted the commercial bunker fisheries out of their state waters, allowing a body of fish to migrate north to Maine every summer.

The story about the abuse of our menhaden resource is both a very interesting and angering historical account that has been documented in a book called *The Most Important Fish in the Sea*, by angler historian, Bruce Franklin of Island Press. Go on line and order a copy if you want to get really upset yet see a solution to many of the pollution and fisheries management problems that are prevalent today.

This month find a school of bunker and snag or net a few, stick a hook in them and let them swim around the edges of that school and wonderful things will happen. A high percentage of the 50-pound and larger stripers that have graced the pages of regional magazines and have appeared on cell phone bragging rights throughout the Northeast for the past half-decade or more were caught by live lining bunker, either around the schools where the bait was caught or by running a few bunker and three-waying them around deeper offshore reefs.

Whenever I manage to catch a few of these prime bait fish, the dead ones are frozen and cut into strips that are used for fluke fishing. Big fluke love long, 6, 8, even ten-inch long strips of menhaden fished on the bottom as teasers on jigs or solo with tandem hooks and spinners along with a strip or two of squid.

Locating concentrations of menhaden in the rivers and harbors where they spawn is a key factor in catching the huge stripers and blues that chase them endlessly and mercilessly throughout their coastal migrations. Find the bunker and you've found the big predators, a statement that holds true even after the menhadens' offspring begin to head south during the fall as "peanut bunker".

If there are any blue crabs out there from the very few that spawned during 2008, the first of them should be showing themselves in coastal estuaries and tide creeks along the coast this month. The 2008 blue crab run that should have been great was non-existent, so the odds of there being much seed or survival for 2009 did not look very good last fall.