

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

The 2009 fishing season was impacted frequently during both the spring and fall seasons by heavy rains and high winds. Whether or not you are pro or con when it comes to the global warming debate, the fact is that heat in the atmosphere causes larger, more powerful storm systems that pull strong winds behind them, like a truck blasting by on the turnpike.

In-between the hard blows, anglers on the Connecticut side of "the pond" experienced one of the best false albacore seasons in recent memory. Fishing was so good that the charter boats from Montauk were over here instead of the reverse as it normally is during the early to mid-fall albi blitzes. Those who targeted these hard-fighting fish actually did some serious "catching" of these usually frustrating tunoids. The good fishing lasted for about a month in a large triangle from the Race along the south side of Fishers Island to the Rhody Beaches and west to Pine Island, Groton and Niantic Bay. Porgy fishing was excellent this summer, with many anglers targeting this species in lieu of fluke, due to the "short" season and "long" size limits on this popular species.

There seemed to be good numbers of fluke around. One evening off the mouth of the Connecticut River, Pat Abate and I caught eight or ten of them, including two keepers, on weighted Slug-Go's that were intended for striped bass. Because fluke had to be 20-21 inches in length, many were caught, but for most anglers limiting-out took a great deal of time or simply did not happen during most trips. The fluke management is an out-of-control mess that doesn't look like it will be straightened out for the 2010 season. In fact, there are indications that there may be further restrictions imposed on recreational anglers, which would be absolutely ludicrous. I firmly believe the present recreational regulations do more damage than conservation of recreationally harvested fluke.

Despite the warm water temperatures that lingered so long throughout the region, we didn't hear as much about black sea bass as we have in the past.

This could be due to the fact that in the past a large portion of the sea bass reported to local tackle shops were caught incidentally by anglers targeting fluke. Though there is a growing number of black sea bass fans, the feds closed the recreational season for six months back in October.

The Recreational Fishing Alliance (RFA) was suing the government in order to get the recreational fisheries opened back up at some level.

My favorite sea food, blue crabs, showed up late, but in abundance this summer and early fall. In one spot that produces good numbers of average-

sized crabs, we netted three or four bona fide 7- to 7.5-inch finger crushers, a major improvement over 2008, which on paper looked like it should have been a bumper blue crab season but was essentially a bust.

If the crabs that showed up and spawned this fall survive the winter, then the summer of 2010 could be a good year for blue crab fans.

This year there were many big, double-digit weight bluefish caught starting about the end of May, with fish in the low teens still being caught just before Thanksgiving on live bunker in the Thames River. Snapper blues didn't seem to be as universally abundant as they have been in the recent past.

The fall striper run was weird this year. The spring run seemed to be delayed by cool water temps and rain, but on the other end of the season, fall fishing was protracted by the warm water temperatures, which slowed the southern migration of bait and the predators that feed on them. There were large numbers of 20- to 30-pounders caught this season, but we did not see or hear of as many giant, 50-pound-plus fish this year as compared to the previous two or three years.

This is a sign that heavy fishing pressure



This year was a weird one from beginning to end. There were many stripers like this one taken along the New England Coast, but those monster 50 pound plus fish were not as prevalent as they have been over the previous two or three seasons.

and old age are taking their tolls on those dominant year classes that were saved by the ban on commercial striper fishing in Chesapeake Bay back in the late 80s. Those record class 60- to 70-pound behemoths that were caught and speared during 2007 and 2008 can be anywhere from 25 to 30 or more years old. When I was a biologist for the Connecticut DEP, a fisherman sent us a single scale from a 70-pound class striper that was aged by a number of different biologists at somewhere between 27 and 29 years of age!

There didn't seem to be as many schoolies around either last spring or during the summer and fall as we've seen in the past, but the warm water temps, odd rain patterns and warm late summer temps may have had an influence on their migrational and feeding patterns, which might have skewed things from our perspective here in southern New England. Stripers were slow in entering the Thames River this fall to date, but have been building in abundance since mid-November. As of early December there were still some very large stripers chasing adult menhaden around in the upper river and Norwich Harbor. One angler caught a 49-inch, near 50-pound monster on a live bunker over the Thanksgiving holiday weekend. A couple of other 20- to 30-pounders were also landed by local anglers fishing in around Norwich Harbor during a ten-day period after "turkey day".

Captain Eric Covino of Playing Hookie Charters (860-889-8686), who fishes the Thames River all winter, said two scouting trips during the last week



Blue crabs showed up in good numbers beginning in late August through September - better late than never. This season we caught a few monsters like this 7 incher. If these adults and their spawn survive the winter crabbing could be one of the few bright spots on the marine spectrum. Everything else is being regulated nearly out of existence.

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in November produced 30 fish one day, but only two the next, as a cold Canadian high pressure blew into the region with 25 mph-plus winds. He noted that they were fishing over only two or three small schools of bass during those trips, but it looked like numbers were building rapidly at that time.

There were still some stripers being caught in Rhode Island waters around that time, so apparently, due to the warm fall water temps throughout the region, stripers were still migrating southward as of December. Typically, regardless of water temperatures, the Thames starts filling up with school stripers by Thanksgiving and reaches a peak of winter fishing action right around the Christmas Holiday season.

Eric Covino and I have experienced some of our most productive fishing trips ever between Christmas and a week or so after New Years.

With bass on the move, as they usually are during early December, anglers from the Thames River to the Norwalk Islands will experience pulses of good striper fishing as the last of the mi-

grants push towards their wintering and spawning grounds in the Hudson River, eating river herring and any remaining bunker as they move.

Of all the winter striper fishing options, which include large slow-flowing rivers, deep protected coves on major rivers and warm water power plant outflows from Boston to New York, there is no fishery like the one that is created every winter as tens of thousands of stripers pack into the upper Thames River.

The best action is right about now and will taper off as the winter progresses towards that fickle period of early spring.

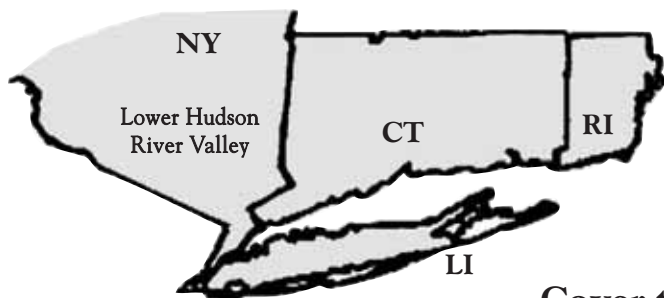
The key to catching these wintering bass is first finding the schools, then trolling small spreader rigs, deep-diving plugs (5 inches or less in length) or by vertical jigging with 3.5- to 5-inch Fin-S fish or Zoom Flukes with light tackle in the giant, densely-packed schools of stripers that can be found moving up and down river with the tides between Norwich Harbor and the Mohegan Pequot Bridge. It's pretty much all catch and release fishing on school stripers that average 16 to 26 inches. When the temps are mild

and the fish are biting, it can be nonstop action for as long as your body can stand the cold. So there's something to look forward to besides the Super Bowl. Be sure to have a license in hand before taking a cast. Go on line at www.ct.gov/dep/fishing with a credit or debit card in hand to become legal on line.

This has not been a good year for marine recreational anglers here in Connecticut. The state legislature voted to double all license fees as of October 1, which added to the confusion around the marine recreational fishing licensing issue that has had all the New England states in a tizzy since last winter.

With recreational fluke quotas once again exceeded, black sea bass closed by the feds, a possibility scup regs may have to be tightened again and endless controversy and confusion within and among adjacent states over the marine licensing issue, my guess is that all the stupidity we've witnessed and lived through in the past is going to look intelligent compared to what's in store for marine recreational fishermen during 2010.

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