

It's February already. It seems like time is moving faster each year. Hopefully, all things being equal, the cold snap in December has set the stage once again for the baitfish to move down from New England and the codfish to follow.

Codfish is once again the winter king. Since the past couple of years have been so productive, it looks like around 20 party boats from Montauk, Orient Point, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, and a host of charter and private boats, will be available for codfishing south of Block and Coxes Ledge. Add to that some long-range trips from the west end and New Jersey and everyone will have a shot. The angler interest was so great last year that you needed to reserve space well beforehand and the boats began running two trips a day. The fish swung from a day bite to a night bite, so be ready for both.

The fish stack up on tight spots and the fleet is a parking lot. It will be both bait and jig fishing, depending on the natural feed. In cold winters, like this one, the finger whiting, herring and sand eels move down the coast and it will be jig fishing. Get some 6-to 8-ounce hammered diamond jigs and 10- to 14-ounce Viking jigs and cod teasers. Currents can demand heavier jigs, but I would stick with these until you really get into jigging. When the bait moves and the cod start scratching around for a meal, expect to be baiting with clams. Bycatch will be some good-sized ling and cunners (jumbo bergals). Cunner is better eating than blackfish if you can nail some over two pounds. They also make excellent fish soup and chowder dishes like Zuppa di Pesce.

The codfish jigging technique is squidging on the bottom. That means cast, let it settle, then take 10 cranks slowly, drop it down and repeat. Speed can be variable depending on the bite. Normally, the hit is on the drop, so



Teasers run from flies to squids, tubes and jelly worms Courtesy FishingUnited.com.

when you see the line go slack too quickly, lift. Cod teasers are flies, rubber worms, twister tails and surgical tubing just like umbrella tubes. Colors are blue, the best, followed by every other color. Teaser fly materials are hair, feathers or Mylar. Bait rigs are the standard 5/0 hooks of your choice tied single or hi-lo with half a clam on each hook. On any given trip, codfish will want any one of the above...or they may be on a night bite and nothing will work. That's why it's called fishing, not catch-

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by William P. Sullivan



ing.

A very good and unexpected run of large sandeels hit the South Shore and NY Bight in late fall, actually bringing bluefin tuna to 300 pounds into the Ambrose area. This may be an indicator of good codfishing close to home for the west end, too. Lately, the AB Reef, Iberia and local wrecks have had shots of codfish that last a week or so before they move on. Watch the western South Shore and Sheepshead Bay Internet reports closely and when you see a partyboat catching, play hooky and get on the fish. If you are running a private boat on the west end, remember - if cod are chasing sandeels, they can be very shallow. The *Margaret* has had a shot of codfish over the past couple of winters and the gravel and inshore rocks like the old McAllister Grounds inshore of The Fishing Line Reef and the Warrior, Granite and rocks inside of Rockaway Reef have their moments.

For everything codfish and, most likely, the best discussion by "dyed in the wool" codfishermen go to <http://www.fishingunited.com/forum/viewtopic.php?f=38&t=287>.

Fishingunited.com is loaded with hardcore wreck fishermen from Maine to Florida and the discussions will teach you everything you need to know.

Staying local you can start by jigging herring or take a drive to one of the party boats for blackfish, ling and, possibly, mackerel. Mackerel will be spotty around the island, and if there is any concentration, the Sheepshead Bay boats will have the first shot at them in the Mud Hole and possibly farther south. Depending on what the crew tells you, expect the bottom fishing rig to be a hi-lo with clam for codfish and ling or a single hook with crab for blackfish. February blackfish boats locally can work deep at times, to 200 feet. That means braided, low diameter and no-stretch lines are the rule. Tie a barrel swivel to the braid and about five feet of fluorocarbon for your rig. Same thing if you are on a boat that drifts 17 Fathoms or the Ambrose area for ling and mixed bag fish. When drifting for ling and cod, put a piece of bergal strip bait on the low hook; ling like that a lot. Low diameter braid holds bottom better with less lead. Bring two sticks,

one with mono if you fish shallow and the other with 50-pound braid. And, don't forget to bring a casting/jigging stick rigged for mackerel, and do call the boat ahead of time and know what you can expect.

If dogfish are a problem, rig a single hook close to the bottom or fish crab baits for blackfish. Stay away from fish strip baits if the dogs are present. Fish strips will draw dogs like crazy, and don't move the bait when dogs are around. They are



Jigs run the gamut in size, shape and even color, be ready with a variety Courtesy FishingUnited.com.

sight as well as scent predators and will go for anything small that moves.

Or, check out one of the offshore trips in New York, New Jersey or Massachusetts if you want an adventure. These boats have been targeting sea bass, but some nice cod, pollock, bluefish and hake come up. Figure on 60- to 80-mile wrecks in 180 feet or deeper where the water temps on the bottom are warmer than inshore. Even weakfish showed one day.

Now comes the downers. Codfish are limited to 10 fish per man, sea bass are restricted to RSA boats, not sure about tilefish, but if memory serves, they are somehow restricted.

When the codfish went on hiatus several years ago, blackfishing really took off. Prior to that, chasing tog was a specialized fishery that attracted hardcore anglers experienced in the sport. Now everyone has gotten into blackfishing and for the novice it can be one frustratingly long day. Here is a tip for improving your blackfishing: the rod butt goes under the



Blue is an angler favorite for cod teasers and flies with blue sparkle rubber squids a best bet. Courtesy FishingUnited.com

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left arm, not right when reeling. This is universal for all fishing, even jigging bluefish or codfish. This will save you a lot of extra labor. Practice; you'll see. The cranking hand and shoulder have more freedom and you can react much faster when a fish suddenly starts to run or dig in for the bottom.

Speaking of a fish running or digging, many people tell stories of losing big fish repeatedly. That's just poor skills and overreaction. The first re-



These are typical "Viking" cod from the areas around Block Island and Coxes Ledge. Courtesy Viking Fleet, Montauk.

action is to pull back and thumb the reel. That's the worst thing to do. On a run, just keep the tip up and let him go. If a fish digs in and starts heading down, give him the tip first and then let him take line if he wants. Often with blackfish, fluke or codfish, the digging lasts only a



Cod tubes for squidding come in many shapes, colors and sizes. Courtesy FishingUnited.com.

few feet, but by letting him take the tip and have his head, he stops and you can get back to business. Never pull against a fish heading for the bottom; you'll only tear the hook out or break the line.

The stance for striking blackfish is back to the wind, side to the rail, rod downward 45 degrees and you strike by pushing down on the butt while lifting the fore-grip. The reel seat is

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your fulcrum point and should stay in position.

Don't strike on the picky bites; wait for the blackfish to pass the entire bait back to his crusher teeth. That bite is very different. But, and there is always a "but", sometimes the picky bite is all you get before you are cleaned. On bait, the boats will all have green crabs and clams, but buy white and/or calico crabs if they are available. Improve your edge by having what the fish want. Lastly, blackfish are shy, so keep a slight belly in your line and don't move the bait around. The line goes over your index finger and under your thumb in front of the reel. That lets you feel the light bites. If you don't get life, lift the rod and move the sinker

a few feet. Feeling with the sinker, especially with braid, you will be able to tell the hard rap of steel or rock over a sandy or muddy bottom.

Then there is the hook-up. Braid and mono require handling the fish differently. Mono has stretch and is more angler-error-forgiving. Braid has near-zero stretch, so something has to give. It's a given with blackfishing that you need to work quickly on the strike. You come from a downward 45-degree angle to upward 45-degree and set the hook. Here is angler mistake #2 – dropping the tip to start reeling and let the fish back into the wreck. The tip stays up and you take as many cranks as the blackfish allows and then slowly work the tip to perpendicular.

Braid mistake #3 – you strike too hard and a graphite rod will snap or the hook will tear out. Adjust the strike power to the line. A big blackfish, over 10 pounds, is going to stand on his head and dig for the wreck. With braid, expect him to pull you back down to the rail. With big fish, the best you hope for is to tire them out. Let them fight and you hang on for the ride.

Now, here comes the next dilemma. Do you sock down the drag and risk breaking him off or do you let him have his head and hope for the best? For me, depends on where I am. Out east, with heavy current, after the lift and first battle, the tide

has taken the fish up in the water column. Out east, I let them have their head in the tide. To the west on the reefs and wrecks where you are fishing right in the heavy snags with little current, it's lock and load and hope something doesn't break on the strike as you get the fish out of the debris. You will figure it out by experience. A lot depends on your rod choice, too. Mono, since it has

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Here is an action photo from the "Oceania" of two fish on. Drifting is often the most productive method of cod fishing. Courtesy "Oceania", Montauk.

stretch, can handle a stiff stick. Braid with no stretch will work better on slow taper or fast taper sticks with action where the rod bends at the tip or over the entire blank.

Chances are better this year for some relief on fluke regulations. A lot of folks gave up on fluke last year. If that's the case, start shopping and rigging now for the new season. Also, by now your tackle, rods and reels have been restocked, repaired and serviced. Tempus fugit!

Since flounder are now a two-fish-perman limit, other than the above, it's going to be a long, cold couple of months. So, go visit some local tackle shops, pull up a chair and learn while you shop. Believe me; they will appreciate the company this time of year.



The partyboat "Rosie" has relocated to Montauk for the duration of the winter to get the full codfish and blackfish season. Courtesy the "Rosie", Montauk and Moriches.