



by Nick Honachefsky

The official start of summer is here! And not just because Memorial Day, traffic-jammed parkways and suntanned tourists have hit. For most anglers, the summer flounder, aka fluke, season kicks off the start of summertime since it just reopened on May 29 with an 18-inch minimum size and 6-fish bag limit. Fluke are the most sought after summertime fare and hot spots exist all up and down the coast of Jersey for the tasty flatfish. Striped bass fishing will be on high alert in the early to mid-part of June as the cows of 30 pounds and more are prevalent in local waters. Bass fishing may last well into the last days of June as it has in years past, so cross your fingers.

Some fantastic news came last month regarding black sea bass seasons. The Recreational Fishing Alliance has been pressuring NMFS to extend the sea bass season for this year and it looks like the current black sea bass season will be extended an additional 90 days with the proposed new season running from May 22 through October 11, with an additional open period of November 1 through December 31. The proposal would keep the size and bag limit the same: 12-1/2 inches and 25 fish per angler. Thanks to the Recreational Fishing Alliance's persistent efforts to persuade NOAA to reopen the fishery, the wintertime fleet will not lose hundreds of thousands of dollars as they did last winter from the closure of the season. Learn more about the RFA and the RFA Legal Defense Fund at www.joinrfa.org.

RARITAN BAY

Well, the flounder season fizzled out in the R-Bay, but that was expected this year since a lack of fish in the bay has been the trend for the past five years. We can only hope that commercial fishing regulations get tightened enough to allow the flounder to bounce back to their former glory. Striped bass and bluefish have been the main show inside the bay. June should still be holding big cow bass of 20 to 40 pounds in spots like West Bank, Romer Shoal, Flynn's Knoll and back inside by the Ammo Pier. If bunker schools continue to filter into the bay as they have done in May, then bass should be on them until the water temperatures breach the 65-degree mark and they move northward. Live bunker or bunker chunks will take the bulk of those bass, but if bluefish are around, be sure to switch up to a 50-pound fluorocarbon leader to help prevent too many bite offs. Raritan Bay should shine with fluke activity.

The shallower flats back inside the bay will be holding more fish in the early part of the season since the water will be warmer there and fluke will be more active and aggressive. The Ammo Pier, Coast Guard station and flats up on the channel edges will be prime spots to drop down smaller 1-ounce bucktails or squid and killie combos. Fluke may even be holding way back in the bay by the Keyport Flats area and off Union Beach.

NORTHERN COAST

Bass were blasting apart bunker schools in early May and the earlier-than-usual presence of spring strippers should continue to run rampant along the northern coast through June. Some 20- to 40-pound bass were actively crashing bunker schools off Long



Captain Al Ristori hoists a Barnegat Bay bass caught on a bunker chunk.

Branch on May 6, which was crazy early for such big fish to be around. Normally, early bass are more dialed into trolling presentations of shad bars, umbrella rigs, stretch 25 plugs and bunker spoons, but these bass were already homed in on bunker schools and jigs as they tail-slapped and hound-dogged live bunker baits.

Though you really just have to search around and find where the bunker are, the perennial hot areas to find bunker schools are the Red Church, Elberon and Deal jetty tips, Shrewsbury Rocks and Shark River inlet area. The snag-n-drop technique will work best here, if you can't castnet a mess of live bunker for the livewell. Simply attach a size 5/0 weighted bunker snag hook to a snap on the end of your leader, cast out, let it sink to a 5 count and then engage the bail and rip it through the school until you feel a wiggling weight. Put the bail in free spool and hang on until the bass inhales the bunker and pulls off line. Click the bail and set back on the bass. Fluke fishermen will be actively pounding the hardscrabble grounds off Long Branch and Elberon to find fluke. Flatties will be hanging tighter to the coast in the shallower waters in early June, and bucktails tipped with squid strips, fluke bellies or Berkley Gulp Swimming Minnow grubs will claim the most action on early season fish.

CENTRAL COAST

Summer flounder-pounders will be targeting the backwaters and back channels of the Manasquan River and Barnegat Inlet and Bay to find flatfish action. Historically, the Manasquan River and Barnegat Bay hold some quality large fluke in May and early June, and I even landed fish to 8.5 pounds a few years back on May 5. I have seen plenty of three- to five-pounders, as well, sunning themselves on the early season flats. Since you will be fishing water from 5 to

15 feet deep, bring the small bucktails for sure if you plan on fishing the backwaters, and don't forget to tie a dropper with a size 3/0 teaser lanced on since the teaser will many times get more hits than the bucktails. Focus on drifting the ICW channel edges of the Manasquan River and Oyster Creek and Double Creek Channels in Barnegat Bay. Oceanside, the Sea Girt and Axel Carlson Reef sites will be holding fluke as they push out of the backwaters and set up on structure. Concentrate on drifting over the 20- to 35-foot humps and bumps off Spring Lake, Mantoloking, and Seaside Heights to pull on fluke.

Bluefish schools pushed back into Silver Bay and the Manasquan Inlet area a lot earlier than usual as two- to four-pounders seemed to be omnipresent in May. They should definitely be around to harass small poppers, Ava 007 metals and bucktails all through June. Striped bass should be schooling all up and down the coast from Manasquan down through Island Beach State Park. The same method of liveling bunker will be the most viable option to hook into a cow, but you can also troll bunker spoons off the deeper waters of Island Beach or drag shad bar rigs from Bay Head down through Ortley Beach since the waters are a bit shallower there. Be on the lookout for thresher sharks thrashing through bunker schools. Every June we have been lucky enough to have them around and they are one heck of a sight to see! If you feel brave, try and send out a freshly filleted bunker bait or two on a stand up rod to see if you can convince a thresher to take a bait, and get ready to hold on for a long battle!

OFFSHORE

Shark fishing will take top billing for offshore adventurers as makos, threshers and blue sharks are all on tap in the 20- to 60-mile range. Well defined ridge lines at spots like the Fingers, Resor Wreck, Glory Hole, Mud Hole, and The Slough should all be shark attractors for sharkers setting up chum slicks and drifting over the rolling bottom. We will have to see just how the sharking will materialize this year since last year it was a very quiet season on makos and threshers. Probably the most interesting happening is the spring and early summer presence of cod on the 15- to 30-mile wrecks.

Cod up to 30 pounds continued to be caught through the month of May with the Shark River Reef area holding plenty of 23- to 26-inch keepers in the 5- to 10-pound class. The comeback from cod is a welcome sign, and if you are offshore on a wreck, don't be afraid to anchor up for a moment or two and drop down a Vike jig or some fresh clam baits to see who's home. Way offshore in the 300- to 600-foot depths, golden tilefish will be on the bite. Large filets of mackerel or whole squid will attract the burrowing brawlers to the hook. Be sure to use circle hooks since the stretch in the line and vast water depth drastically negate the J-hookset; circle hooks are well designed to set in such conditions.

Summertime is here and what better way to spend the hazy, lazy days than dropping a line in the water! Good luck to ya!