

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

Our waters have been warming up at an unusual pace since ice out by means of heavy rains late in February. This early thaw was followed by ten days of abnormally warm temperatures in March that were punctuated by record-setting floods. This trident of unusual weather events set up the region for this spring's roller coaster of alternating sun, rain and howling winds, which was closer to the extreme than the median range of their respective spectrums. End result was a unique spring.

As of this writing the progression of temperature-related fishing events such as herring runs, worm spawns, plus the arrival of squid and menhaden were two or three weeks ahead of last year, when the Sound was still in the 40s during most, if not all of May.

Mother's Day Weekend was windy and very cold, though the sun had already warmed the waters in coastal inlets and estuaries well up into the 50s and even low 60s.

This means that by now literally all the species with open seasons should be in our waters to catch, with stripers and fluke at the top of the availability list, with more warm-loving scup, bluefish and sea bass coming into the picture more strongly later in the summer. Winter flounder and blackfish are both closed, flatfish until next spring, but tautog reopens from July 1 through August 31.

Over the past decade I've canceled more fishing and even hunting trips each year (due to excessive wind conditions) than any single or string of years in the past.

Winds are caused by temperature differences in the atmosphere, the larger the air mass and greater the difference in temperature, the stronger the winds are going to be after storm systems pass through the region. The Pacific "El Nino" is the reason New England weather has been so extreme so far this spring. Fishermen have lost many days on the water to relentless, howling 20-plus mph winds.

June - the time of year when those hot, mid-summer doldrums tend to settle things down for a few weeks, before the hurricane season comes into play. This year due to the relaxation of regulations, Rhode Islanders have been fishing since May 1 with Connecticut and New York residents on the water since May 15.

Since fluke management plans were first put into effect during the late 1970s, fluking in the tri-state area has been a confusing mess for both recreational anglers and law enforcement, because the regulations are not the same for all three states.

Connecticut and Rhode Island both fish under a 19.5-inch minimum length. Rhode Island has a six-fish creel limit, Connecticut anglers can keep three, New Yorkers are allowed only two fish and both must be 21 inches. For this reason, when crossing state lines, recreational fishermen must be legal for the waters they are in, not the waters they "were fishing in", especially when returning to the launch

ramp, where spot checks are most likely.

Culling or "high grading" (which is defined as taking a fish out of a live well and releasing it in exchange for a larger fish) is against the law in Connecticut, so the decision to keep or release a legal fluke must be made immediately upon landing each fish. Due to the super large length limits imposed on fluke fishermen this year, they will be catching and releasing, in essence, "culling" their way through many shorts in order to catch a limit of keeper-sized



Lures that look like squid are what to cast to match the hatch this time of year around most of the regions major reefs.



summer flounder.

For this reason I firmly believe that more fluke are being damaged than protected by the current set of fluke regulations throughout the northeast region. Bottom line is, honest fishermen must learn to cope with these large length limits by employing angling techniques and philosophies that will minimize the number of deep hooked, under-sized fluke they will cer-

tainly have to "cull through" during the course of the recreational fluke season. There are a number of simple things that can be done to minimize the negative effect recreational fishing can have on this valuable resource.

First and foremost: Never leave a baited fluke rod unattended because they have too much time to swallow a hook deeply into their maws. Hold the rod all the time to feel for bites and then set the hook quickly. Use larger baits and hooks to filter out some of the smallest fish. Once in the boat, de-hook, measure and release the short fluke as quickly as possible.

Fluke are a species that tends to become depleted in popular, heavily fished areas as the season wears on. If 2010 is like last couple of years, many skilled "fluke meisters" will be handling 10 or maybe even 20 shorts for every legal sized fish landed. For this reason, anglers who actively participate in this popular and fragile fishery need to do what they can to protect the many shorts they will most certainly be handling this summer.

Squid are an important food source for nearly all marine predatory fish. Every spring when they show up, their presence creates some of the best, easiest striper fishing of the entire fishing year right about now! As high schoolers we first began jigging spring run stripers with "Smiling Bills" and a pound or more of lead in the Race. The squid they spit up on the deck was an indication as to why those white buck-tails with a piece of pork rind worked so well. They were the closest match to "the squid hatch" available at that time. Today, rather than painful weight lifting for hours, we now scratch the surface, using light spinning tackle and many of the hundreds of lures that are squid clones in shape and color.

Depending on how deep the striped bass are feeding and the drift speed, terminal tackle will range from a one-ounce classic bucktail or Fin-S style soft plastic teaser on a triangular jig head to Salt Shaker paddle tails, Slug-Go's and Hogy's of all sizes. Over the past few seasons we've had great success, especially for those larger, average-sized schoolie stripers when casting Yozuri Hydro Squids, a hard plastic swimming lure with plastic tentacles in amber and pink.

Lately, the first keeper-sized, squid-feeding striped bass show up at what might be considered "contact points" along the northeast coast, as they round the corner at Montauk Point, chasing squid, menhaden and other sources of food and reach the spots where anglers are fishing.

The first schools of post-spawn, mostly keeper-sized stripers are generally caught in The Race around May 20, give or take a few days (though it's likely they are present earlier most years). At this time, and shortly thereafter, these first spring-run migrants spread out to feed around the reefs, rock piles and rip lines from

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