



The "Other" Bass

Stripers aren't the only game in town. For fast action, black sea bass provide a fight with a warrior and a tasty reward.

This isn't fishing, this is work!" I thought, as I watched Captain Michael Potts lift a quadruple-header of feisty, fat, black sea bass over the transom.

Potts turned toward the cooler and in one sweet motion had all four fish flopping in the Igloo as he set about freeing them from his hooks. I sent my line back to the bottom, having just dumped a pair of two-pounders into the cooler, and steadied myself against the port gunwale to wait for the next bite. Within seconds, I was hooked up again. On the starboard side, my fiancée, Felicia, and Rocco, our mate for the day, were both reeling as well.

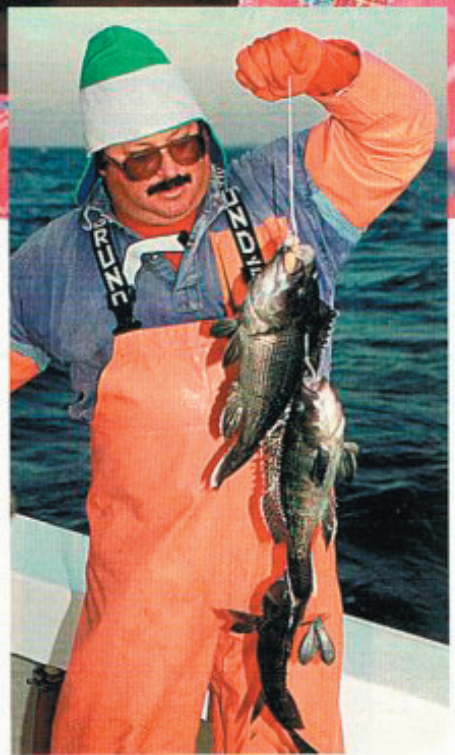
Under any circumstances, this would have qualified as an unbelievable day, but consider the fact that it took place in 20-knot winds with seas topping out at over six feet. It was one of the most amazing bottomfishing trips I've ever experienced under some of the worst possible fishing conditions for probing the depths. I can't guess what it would have been like on a nice day, but I imagine it probably would be too much work, not to mention the

slow trip home as the weight of the catch bogged down the boat.

A Fish for All

I wasn't surprised we scored exceptionally well on the "CBs" while fishing with Potts. He is, after all, one of Montauk, New York's premier charter-boat skippers. Like many charter skippers, he is also a part-time "pin-hooker," as commercial rod-and-reel fishermen are known. But, sea bass are one of those species anglers can find on their own under more humane conditions. After they learn the ropes, competent fishermen connect more often than not with these tasty treats. With the aid of a skipper like Potts, the score is just better and faster and, usually, bigger fish. With just a few tips, however, anyone can be in the game and do just fine most of the time.

Sea bass are an "everyman's fish;" numerous, cooperative and often available close to port. Fishermen catch them in 10 feet of back-bay water during the fall months or offshore in 60- to 120-foot depths almost any time of the year. Either way, they'll put up a



UP FROM THE DEPTHS - Black sea bass (top) captured the author's imagination with their iridescent glow and character of a "veteran gladiator." Montauk's Michael Potts (above) brings a triple catch over the gunwale—everybody eats tonight.

good scrap if taken on suitable tackle and they're entertaining with their own brand of fast-biting action. Anglers should check local regulations for size and bag limits.

To know the sea bass is to catch the sea bass, so a little background information seems to be in order. This species is a member of the grouper family, *Serranidae*. Like many of its close cousins, sea bass are protogynous hermaphrodites and sexually dimorphic. In fisherman's terms, this simply

Two tuna fishermen swear the mako looked

against the coral shore, the shark became rigid through the torso while its great head struck, stunned and worked its way under the paralyzed tarpon, tossing the 100-pound fish in the air like a silver log, then biting it cleanly in two as it tumbled.

We sat silent in our skiff, awed by the ferocity of the moment. Nibbling at our lunch sandwiches, we watched as a shadow on the distant flats became a living shape gliding toward us. With sinuous motions as fluid as the currents around it, the hammerhead kept coming until it was alongside, almost directly beneath us in a few feet of crystal-clear water. I looked into each of its luminous green eyes as the shark paused, motionless, appearing to deliberate on its options.

Our skiff, I knew, was 17 feet from bow to stern, and that shark spanned most of the distance as it lay there—its dusky length so foreboding against the ivory sand, its girth so charged with force. My breath would not come until the shark's sweeping tail flickered and that hammerhead slid onto the flat, its dorsal and shoulders riding high up to the moment it reached a channel and vanished in the blue unknown.

Jacques Cousteau—the grandfather of scuba diving—said that riding a motorcycle is much more dangerous than diving in tropical seas. Maybe so, but how many of us have been struck dumb by the sight of a Harley? None but the shark brings as much mystery to its relationship with man. There is within us all, still, after all these centuries, a residual fear of the unseen creature, the predator beyond our vision. It is our terrible imaginings that swim with the hammerhead we cannot see.

Capt. Frank Mundus, from Montauk, N.Y., the original "Monster Man" (see "Role Model," October 1996), knows our terrors well. This showman/skipper, who changed the future of charter-boat fishing that day in 1964 when he towed the incredible carcass of a 4,500-pound great white into Montauk Lake, is an expert analyst of our shark psychoses.

Here is Mundus aboard his *Cricket II* explaining great white paralysis to

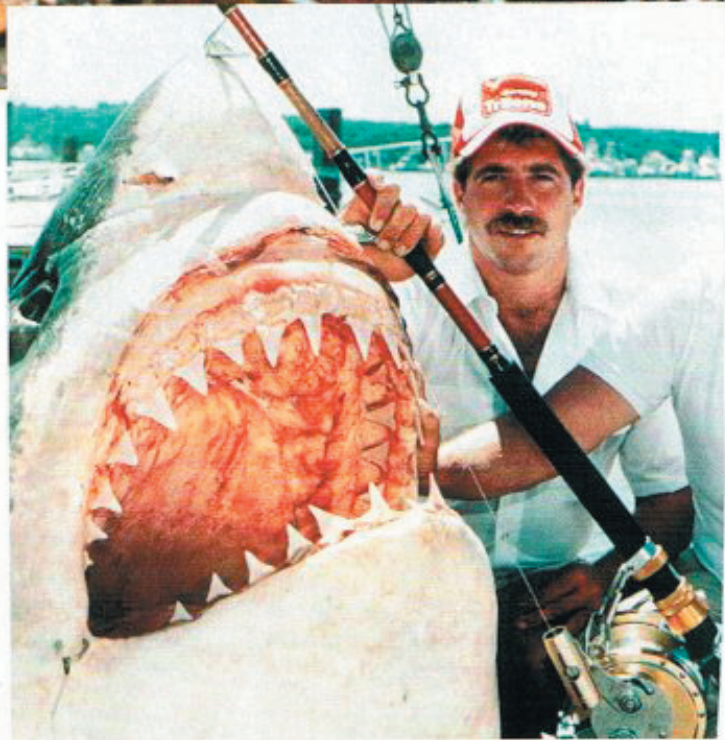


porter Russell Drum: "If I'm down in the cabin looking up to the cockpit, I can tell when a great white shark shows up. The guy doing the chumming, his arm gets stuck."

Like the time late one afternoon, miles offshore of Montauk Point, when the mate, ladling bloody gruel off the *Cricket's* stern, went stone-stiff when he saw what rose from the depths.

"It would've took a wrecking bar to pry that ladle out of his hand," says Mundus. "That's what a great white will do to you." Experiencing that trill of terror, feeling the charge of adrenaline rush that one-on-one contact with sharks so dependably brings, is part of the reason why shark fishing took saltwater angling by storm during the post-Mundus decades.

All but totally ignored prior to the 1960s, sharks of every species are now sportfishing trophies with space



granted them in the International Game Fish Association's (IGFA) annual record books—34 species total, with line-class records accompanying their listings. There are shark tournaments and shark derbies and shark-fishing specialists at almost every saltwater charter-boat marina from rockbound Maine to sunny San Diego. There is, apparently, no end to the attraction, no denying that frisson of primal fear that

"Down here, we fish artificial reefs and near-shore rock piles quite a bit," he said. "The problem is that everyone knows where these places are and they get fished pretty hard. For areas where sea bass are on everyone's hit list, it becomes important to try and find a spot that hasn't been fished out in the past few days."

Brewer suggests trying your luck at mid-week when fishing pressure is lighter and well-known sea bass haunts have had a day or two to recharge with an influx of fresh fish.

Personally, I like to combine the suggestions of Potts and Brewer by targeting small, less popular pieces of bottom and alternating between several spots from trip to trip. One trick that has worked very well for me over the years has been to scout deep-water holes back inside the bays, usually within a half-mile or so of an inlet, for small wrecks and rock piles. While most of the fleet concentrates on bigger, ocean-side pieces, I can have a small back-bay spot all to myself.

In one part of eastern Moriches Bay, on Long Island's East End, for example, there is a sunken 12-foot wooden boat resting in about 30 feet of water. A couple of other anglers have found it over the years, but it's the kind of tiny, unmarked piece where you can anchor up on Thursday and pretty much know that it's been left alone for a day or two. I've had days here when I've caught a ton of sea bass, just as if I was on some big piece of bottom structure two miles offshore. I'll hit this spot one day, work the back of the inlet jetties the next, maybe try a well-known inshore piece the next time out and then make my rounds again. By letting a small spot rest instead of hitting it again and again, day after day, I almost ensure myself that dinner is just a drop of the bait away.

Ready, Set, Go

While you can get away using spinning gear when working relatively shallow water for sea bass, conventional gear is really a better choice as it offers more backbone and greater line control. For bay waters, I choose a setup that can handle 12- to 20-pound test lines and two- to three-ounce sinkers. For ocean action, 20- to 30-pound test gear that can accommodate five- to eight-ounce sinkers is a better choice.

As far as the terminal end of a sea bass rig is concerned, this is standard bottomfishing. Most anglers choose clam or strips of squid for bait and they lower them to the bottom on a standard hi-low rig featuring a pair of

size 1/0 to 3/0 beak baitholder-style hooks. Set the bottom hook six inches above the sinker and the high hook just far enough above the lower one so that the two will not touch. Get your line to the bottom, lock your reel in gear, and wait for the fun to begin.

Sea-bass action should be just hitting stride in September, so get in on the fun. Ask around at the dock or a local tackle shop to find out which bottom pieces were hot for blackfish or cod in the spring, check out which spots produced porgies in July and August, and start looking for fuzz on

your recorder. With a little luck and a little patience, anglers can get into those "CBs" until their arms are ready to fall off—and big grins of fishing fatigue will spread across the faces of the crew by the end of the day.

On that day over Cerebus Shoals with Michael Potts, we were already smiling when we lost count of our catch—even our double-headers—and we had been fishing for less than an hour. Eventually, the action slowed from phenomenal to simply fantastic. We left the fish biting and headed home early. ▣



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