



# Tug of War Season with Tautog May Start Early

by Capt. Dave Monti



Before you go striped bass fishing this spring, sneak in a tautog trip or two. The best fishing for the tautog is the fall, however, fish are caught in the spring too and this year we may have an early season.

Tautog (or blackfish) are a great eating fish. They are a bit of work to catch due to the maneuvering you go through to catch them and the bottom tie-ups and lost rigs that are caused as part of the process. However, their bulldog-like fight is very exciting and is very much like a tug of war between you and the tautog. Once the fish is hooked it will try to bulldog its way back down into rock or structure where it can cut the line or catch the sinker on a rock. So when the fish bites, it becomes the angler's job not to let it bury itself in the structure.

Anglers have their favorite methods, baits, rigs and places to catch tautog, here are mine:

### From shore or boat

The good thing about tautog is that they can be fished from shore or boat. The common thread is structure. From shore it is a matter of trial and error to find a sweet spot or hole that holds big fish.

You want to be able to be near structure or rock. However, cast too close to shore and you can easily get hung up on rock. Cast too far and your line may not be close enough for you to feel the bite and the current can easily take your sinker away and get snagged on structure.

From a boat it is important to position the vessel over structure. Locate the structure you want to fish (on sonar if you have it), estimate wind and current and anchor up current so as the anchor line pays out and the vessel is over the structure or slightly before it. Tie off the anchor and fish.

Tautog are very territorial so it is important to fish all sides of the boat, even cast a bit covering as much area as you can from different positions in the boat. Often times you will be catching fish on the starboard side, but the angler on the port side is not getting any bites. If still no bites pay out a little more anchor line to reposition the boat, repeat the process until you are totally off the structure and if still no bites it is time to move to another spot.

### Rigs and Bait

Tautog rigs should be kept simple... one or two hooks and a sinker. I use clam worms and live green crabs for bait. Softer baits, like clam worms are often used in spring.

When using crabs, break off claws and legs and cut the

crab in half. Depending on the crab size I may quarter it if large or use the entire crab if it is small. Hook the crab through one leg socket and out another. This exposes most of the crab and makes it easy for the tautog to put its mouth on the bait.

### Reduce Rig Loss

Loosing rigs is a common tautog fishing experience. To reduce rig loss consider tying the sinker on with 8 or 10 lb. test line or a rubber band so that if the sinker gets hung-up, the lighter weight line or rubber band breaks first and all you loose is the sinker and not the entire rig.

My favorite rig is homemade. I use one tautog hook connected to a swivel with a two or three ounce egg sinker on top sliding on a small three to four inch piece of monofilament line. Another swivel above the egg sinker connects the monofilament and the braid line (30 lbs.) coming from the rod/reel.

Since I have started using this rig bottom tie-ups have been cut in half. Braid line does not stretch, so this is my preference, whereas monofilament line may stretch allowing the tautog to reach structure.

### The bite and tug of war

Usually tautog will hit the bait with a tap, tap. My friend Captain George Cioe believes that tautog is positioning the bait for consumption with the tap before it goes for it and gets hooked. So it is important to have no slack in the line so you can feel the taps and then set the hook quickly.

Once the fish is hooked, keep the rod up and the pressure on the fish so it does not run to bury itself in rocks or structure.

### Little drag and consider braid

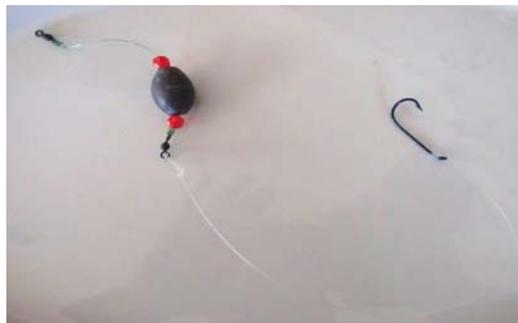
It is important to put little drag on the reel and apply constant pressure so the tautog comes up and does not go down. For this reason consider using braid rather than monofilament line that may stretch and cause the fish to reach structure and cut the line or snag the sinker.

### Regulations

At press time an early tautog season opening is planned for April 1 rather than April 15 as it has been for the past several years. **Jason McNamee**, Chief of RI Marine Resource Management said, "Our aim will be to keep the Rhode Island season as consistent as possible with our partner the state Massachusetts so we may have an April 1 opening this year." Catch limits for the spring season this year will likely be 3 fish/person/day. Visit [www.dem.ri.gov](http://www.dem.ri.gov) to confirm tautog season start date and catch limits.



Steve Brustein with a spring tautog caught in Narragansett Bay



Capt. Monti's tautog finder rig reduces bottom tie-ups by 50%