

# Bullish on Blackfish

## Tricks and tips for targeting tautog

by TOM SCHLICHTER



If you wanted to create the perfect blackfish habitat, you'd start with a mussel-encrusted rock bottom, pepper it with a generous number of wrecks and large boulders then harden some of the shoreline with jetties, sea walls, docks and bulkheads. Next, add an abundance of crabs, including green, calico, hermit, fiddler and Asian, and mix in a shallow gravel bottom, sloping points and deeper water just a short run from port.



The author hefts a 15 lb. tautog taken on a party boat in Long Island Sound

What I've just described is Long Island Sound, as well as the recipe for some of the best blackfish action on the East Coast.

Indeed, each fall the Sound hosts a blackfish fishery that draws anglers from all over the Northeast (there is a spring run, too, but it's so tightly restricted that few anglers bother to fish it). From shallow jigging action inside the harbors and along shore to deep-water wreck fishing in currents that can require 6 to 12 ounces of weight to hold bottom, this 110-mile stretch of tautog Nirvana has it all.

### Hog of a 'Tog

"Whether you call them blackfish or 'tog," says Capt. Bob Wadsworth of the Sunbeam Fleet, which sails out of Waterford, Connecticut, "they taste great, fight hard and grow big in these waters."



A tog's teeth are designed for gnawing shellfish

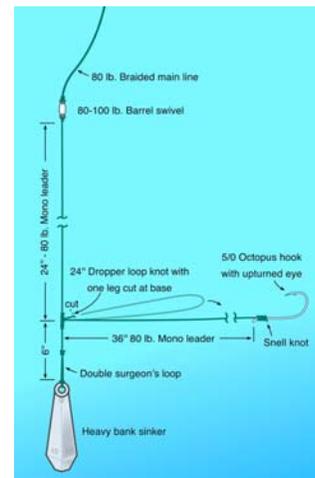
Wadsworth should know. It was aboard his boat two years ago that angler Tim Nguyen landed the Connecticut state record blackfish: a 26.6-pound, 34-inch brute taken near Two Tree Island in Niantic Bay on the first day of the state's fall blackfish season. That behemoth ate a green crab in

just 15 feet of water.

"Here on the eastern end of Long Island Sound, we generally fish in strong currents and often in deep water, so we favor single-hook bottom rigs with green crabs for bait. I try to keep it as simple as possible on my boat, especially with anglers who are new to blackfishing. The less specialized gear, bells and whistles, the more fish you are likely to catch."

### Simple Solutions

Keeping things simple is also the way to catch the biggest blackfish, according to Wadsworth. With only one hook, there is less chance of snagging on rough bottom or wrecks when a big 'tog decides to eat. Using traditional green crabs for bait also helps. Blackfish, Wadsworth explains, often bite softly on Asian crabs, hermits and fiddlers, so hits are difficult to detect, especially in deeper water. Instead, Wadsworth uses a whole, small greenie if the fish are biting aggressively, a half- or quarter-crab with the legs on when the bite is decent, and what he calls the "fillet mignon"—a quarter section with the top shell and legs removed—to tempt finicky feeders.



Basic dropper rig for blackfish

"These little things add up to more big fish," explains Wadsworth, "but there's not much rhyme or reason as to where, exactly, you'll find the bruisers. Many come from deep water, but a surprising number, like Nguyen's monster fish, are caught in the shallows and not far from port."

Amazingly, last fall Nguyen scored another monster white-chinner, this one a 13-pounder hooked in the same spot as his state record. Where that is, exactly, he isn't saying!

### Get Sticky

"That is the way it goes sometimes," agrees Capt. Mike Perri of the charter vessel *Flying Connie* out of Clinton. "The beauty of the Sound is that you can catch blackfish of any size in just about any place, as long as you get right on top of some sticky bottom."



Precision anchoring is the hard part to targeting blackfishing in the central and eastern portions of the Sound. Because the current pushes so hard though this area, most skippers avoid trying to double-anchor. Instead, they work hard to get into position over rocky bottom, ledges or wrecks and let the tide pin them in place.

"Don't be afraid to pull up and reset as many times as you need to," advises Perri. "I do this for a living, and it sometimes takes me four or five tries to get the boat right where I want it. Once you're in position, you can make small adjustments using your rudder." (to page 27)