

Delaware Bay *Dangerfields*

By Tom Pagliaroli

The late, great blue-collar comedic artist's signature statement instantly came to mind that early May afternoon while engaged in a conversation with a pair of obviously ecstatic anglers at Fin-Atics Marine Supply in Ocean City.

Seems that the duo just weighed in a couple of stripers that tipped the scale at a combined 50 pounds. Both were caught in the Great Egg Harbor Inlet. Nice bass, these, and the fishermen were justifiably proud. I mentioned that the day before I'd decked a 76-pound black drum aboard Captain Bob Cope's Full-Ahead Sportfishing over on Delaware Bay.

The bass were fooled by clam baits, as was the drum.

"But," as one of the guys emphasized, *"it was only a drum."*

Never mind that the one fish that nearly tore my arms from the shoulder sockets and was so expeditiously lip-gaffed by Captain Cope 20 minutes later counted for one more, plus a pound, of their nearly-identical linesiders. What was startlingly apparent was the disdain for the inner tube thick-lipped bottom feeder that, with weights in excess of the century mark, is a true inshore big game quarry. Thankfully, this attitude is fading rapidly, being replaced by a refreshing appreciation for the size, sheer pulling power and fine eating afforded by what is called among Delaware Bay principals, disciples and growing legions of converts as "drumfish."

Drum Dining:

Drum scales are too tough to cut through, so slice just under the skin and peel each side. Now fillet and discard the dark meat. If the drum is over 40 pounds, carefully remove the rack of ribs. Basted in a lemon butter melt over a grill, the strips of meat between the bones is surprisingly close to lobster tail in texture and taste. The main meat is like *seafood veal*: a bit chewy but bursting with a rich flavor that lends itself to myriad methods of preparation, including grilling, pan frying, broiling and baking. (A personal favorite is Drum Parmesan.) Try smoked drum; it will make your tongue want to slap your brains out!

The "yuck" side of a potential drum feast? The appearance of cysts in the meat, especially in the bigger fish. Merely cut, remove and you're good to go.

**"I tell ya, I get no respect.
No respect at all!"**

Rodney Dangerfield

never caught one or never caught one over 35 pounds. This game fish is magnificent in its brutal simplicity and strength. Yeah, hook and hold on to a horse or two, get it to the boat, and preconceived notions do a 180 real quick."

How big are the drum pounding through Delaware Bay? The decent fish are 35 to 50 pounds, the good fish 50 to 80 pounds and the great fish over 80 pounds. Last year, a new Garden State record was established by William Kinzy with a 107 pound behemoth caught from the Sandi Pearl charter boat.

"But there are bigger drum out there," says Captain Cope, whose client best in '06 was a biceps-withering 95½ pounds. One that pulled the hook at the stern was visually estimated to be 20 pounds heavier. "A monster," claimed the captain, shaking his head.

With a countenance even a mother would have trouble tolerating, the yellow-eyed, subsurface noisemaker is nonetheless a study in physical functional perfection. It cannot be mistaken for any other fish prowling the bay. Broad of shoulder with a highly arched back to plow through the rip-snorting tidal currents, the brass and gold-colored ivory-bellied drum sports long pectoral and ventral fins and a broad tail fin that aid in maneuverability. The bottom of the lower jaw is festooned with barbels that act as taste sensors (much in the same way as those on a catfish) to assist in locating and pre-tasting clam, oyster, mussel and crab sustenance. The namesake thrum-bhroom-boom sound resonates as a muscle is smacked against the air bladder. Oftentimes it's heard while in the boat and can trigger your rod-grabbing reflexes. However, actively drumming fish are not on the feed, merely moving through the water column looking for love. Hooked and in the boat, though, the booming can certainly be disconcerting.

Drum begin appearing in Delaware Bay as the water temperature approaches the 57-degree mark. This usually occurs between the second and third week in April. The fish will be in small schools of mixed-size fish ranging from 25 to 50 pounds. By the last week in April, the main migration is in full swing, with boomers of all sizes – including the hundred-pounders – pushing up the bay on their mating runs. By the last week in June when water temperatures exceed 68° F, drum are rolling out to the open Atlantic.

The feeding activity of this light-sensitive over-eater is most influenced by moon phases and the subsequent tidal pulls. The new and full moon, with their strong impact on tidal energy, are the single most powerful influence on drum feeding activity. A week prior to the full moon, the incoming tide running into the sunset/evening period is prime time for fishing. On the new moon, either the incoming or outgoing tide running in to the dark will put the bait in front of foraging fish. On the average, it's a 5 to 10 p.m. deal, with the wildest bay bottom vacuuming activity occurring

photo: Tom Pagliaroli



Mary Inman of Manahawkin decked her first black drum, a 76 pounder, aboard Captain Bob Cope's Full Ahead Sportfishing on Delaware Bay last May.



photo: Tom Pagliaroli

It was almost dusk on the Friday before Father's Day near the Mia Mull Light on Delaware Bay when Joe Kennedy of Flemington nailed this 48-pound black drum aboard Captain Bob Cope's Full Ahead Sportfishing.

between 6 and 8:30 p.m. There can be an intense dark-to-daylight bite (5 - 7:30 a.m.) on a tide running into the early morning for those who like to get started in the dark.

The boat must be perfectly still, with a rare double anchoring sometimes required. This can be tricky in the pulsing, rolling springtime currents.

The initial take is a reverberating "bump, bump" as the drum goes headfirst into a smash-the-shell exercise. To strike now means a miss. The solid "whump" of the take and a tightening of the line indicates the fish has made the commitment.

Black drum do not suffer sissy tackle easily. Forget the "sporting" light tackle outfits, as these fish mean business and are perfectly capable of incapacitating the inadequate rod and/or reel, not to mention snapping the line.

Drum hunters should spool with 30-50 lb. test monofilament or 50-65 lb. test braid for a main line. While many prefer clear line, the "hi-vis" lines in chartreuse, gold or orange are easier to see as afternoon fades to dusk and then into twilight. Go with a 36-inch, 50-pound hard mono leader via a fish-finder rig (fluorocarbon is not necessary in Delaware Bay's mocha precincts) gripped to either a star drag or lever drag reel and

a corresponding medium-heavy or heavy action 7-foot rod. Do not skimp on the bank sinker ballast, as the bait must be totally stationary. Always attach more weight than you think you'll need. You're in the mix with 4-8 ounces attached. On the fish-finder rig, the drum will not feel any resistance when sucking the bait and moving off.

Spinning does have its place on the drum scene. A heavy action 5½ - 7-foot boat rod armed with a high capacity reel equipped with a smooth, wide range front drag, strong gears and power handle to control the drum's plowing bursts, blasts and bottom 'n broadside maneuvers will beat most any drum.

Landing is done either by net or gaff. The former is all about fish to 30 pounds, the latter an underneath lip grip with the hook for bigger, badder blackies. With either method, keep the deck clear, as the muscular drum, even worn from the fight, can thrash 'n crash enough to wreak havoc on ankles, shins and untended tackle.

Fresh surf clam is the one and only bait. Not frozen clam; *Fresh* clam! Figure on a bushel per trip. Unfortunately, fresh surf clams are sometimes not so easy to procure during the height of the drum run, so ordering in advance is highly advised. Two of the most reliable shops when it comes to the bivalve bait bounty are Captain Tate's Bait & Tackle in Dennisville, and Jim's Bait & Tackle in Cape May.

Great Bay has been experiencing a wild renaissance in its black drum fishery. During the past three years, drum up to 65 pounds have been landed in the Grassy Channel stretch, with more than a few dragged onto the sedge from the bank at Gravelling Point and Ohio Avenue. "The drum bite is a bonus...a double shot a week or two after the first recorded striper," says Scott Albertson of Scott's Bait & Tackle on Mystic Island. Again, fresh surf clams are the key to drum attentions. The fish vacate between the second and third week in May, about the same time the bluefish roar in, although they have been taken in Great Bay as late as the first week in June.

(Continued on page 10)

It's a good idea to crack a few clams overboard as an attractant, but only if the tide is not running too hard, to allow the "chum" to get to the bottom as close to the boat as possible. Should the tide be smoking, the clam will be swept away too quickly and may serve to attract drum to a boat anchored below, or above, your position. Bury the business end of the meat in to a 6/0-8/0 full circle hook, or, for those who prefer the actual eye crossing hook-set, a 10/0 J-hook. The advantage of the former is that it allows you to fish with the rod in a holder (a "Rodney" in D-Bay parlance) and results in about a 95-out-of-100 grab securely in the corner of the jaw as the fish pretty much hooks itself.

All that is required is to remove the rod, point it in the direction

of the departing drum and crank the reel handle when the line pulls tight. A J-hooked wad of quahog requires the standard upward set to bury the barb. Unfortunately, unless perfectly timed, there will be a fairly high percentage of swallowed metal. When releasing a gut-hooked fish, cut the line as close to the mouth as possible. The hook will eventually rust or get passed through its system. For these reasons, always utilize bronze instead of stainless steel hooks.

The best spots to beat the drum include, on the New Jersey side, the Pin Top, Tussey's Slough, the Punk Ground and the area around the Mia Mull Light. On the Delaware side, it's Slaughter Beach and, for some unique shallow water (10-12 foot) drumming, the Coral Beds on the west side of the Broad Kill Slough is the locus. 