

JERSEY SHARKING

By Jason Hearon, Fisheries Biologist



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(Above) **Boat Side Blue** Jason Hearon leads a blue shark and releases it to swim another day. (Below) **Fish On!** Dave Appenzeller from Goshen, shark fishing the Misty Blue Wreck in mid June. A blue shark took the bait and after a short battle was boat side.

The waters off New Jersey offer a variety of opportunities for shark fishing. Sharks can be found from the shallow coastal bays to the deep, 100-fathom line of the Continental Shelf. A surprising number of shark species stay well inshore, making them accessible to small boats and surf fishermen offering good action with big fish. The more popular offshore species are usually targeted along the 20-fathom line and beyond. Wherever you choose to play—offshore or inshore—the lure of big sharks and excitement of burning off line at lightning speed will surely get your blood pumping!

Prime shark season in New Jersey gets under way in late May or early June—usually on the heels of the bluefish arrival. Blue shark are the first species to appear when water temperatures hit the mid-60s. By late spring, many anglers are chomping at the bit for the makos to make their appearance. The mako is considered an “extreme” game fish because of its ability to display adrenaline-raising, high-flying leaps up to 15 feet out of the water! Tiger, thresher, bull, hammerhead and other sharks also begin to appear around the same time.

Typically, a shark hunter's game plan is to drift over rapidly changing bottom contours (e.g., drop offs, ridges, trenches) or structure. These types of habitat are known to draw baitfish and the predators that eat them. The plan starts to materialize before the boat leaves the dock; a weather report containing the wind direction is the key ingredient. The strategy is to start the drift on the upwind side of the structure or bottom to be fished so that the wind blows the boat and chum slick across the targeted area.

The most important technique to successfully attract these toothy predators is to create a good chum slick. Chum can be made at home from ground fish such as bunker or mackerel, or purchased frozen from your local bait shop. Use at least two, 4- to 5-gallon buckets of chum for a four- or five-hour drift. There are multiple ways to disperse frozen chum in the water, but the easiest is to cut holes in the bucket, tie it to a cleat and drop it overboard. As the chum defrosts it disperses into the water column. Chum is quite oily, leaving a slick on the water surface and a scent in the

water designed to entice an apex predator straight to your boat. There's an eerie feeling the first time a big shark swims up your slick.

Variable ocean and wind conditions may require more advanced techniques to establish an effective slick, such as power drifting, sea anchors or adding weights. The same technique works when anchoring instead of drifting. Anchor the vessel on the upwind side of the structure or bottom to be fished. The wind blows the chum slick across the target area. Whatever method you choose, always remember to chum heavily.

Most mid-Atlantic shark species can be taken on 30- to 50-pound tackle such as 3/0 to 6/0 reels. Either star or lever-drag style reels are adequate on a stiff stand-up style rod. Rods are fished in rod holders with the reel left in “free spool,” clickers on.

Serious sharkers agree that live bluefish—swimming and splashing—generate an irresistible attraction to a shark. Fresh or fresh frozen bluefish, bluefish fillets, mackerel, mackerel fillets, tuna filets, bunker or small bonito will serve well to entice a toothy monster to strike. Baits can be livened up with the addition of skirts of various colors and size to help create a more realistic, live appearance. It is extremely important to keep baits fresh, as fillet baits will get “washed out” quickly and lose their effectiveness.

Wire leaders are essential due to the abrasiveness of shark skin, not to mention the mouth full of machete-like teeth that can wreak havoc on terminal tackle. Use 10 to 15 feet of 300-pound test braided cable or 150 to 250-pound test single-strand wire. Attach an 8/0 to 12/0 razor-sharp hook to the end of the leader and you are ready for battle. The hook should be size-appropriate for the bait. Larger hooks are required on whole fish while smaller hooks are better suited for fillets.

The number of lines that can be fished effectively without tangles or other problems is determined by the boat size and weather conditions. Since it is important to present baits



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throughout the water column, follow this example for a very effective technique. Let's assume three lines are put to work. Fish the first line approximately 200 feet behind the boat with a float. The float should be set to let the baitfish close to the bottom and may require weight to achieve this result. Fish the second line approximately 100 feet from the boat with a float set half the distance to the bottom. The third line should be fished about 50 feet from the boat without a float (free floating) and should be suspended 10 to 15 feet below the surface. Floats of various styles are available at any bait shop. All will work well, but some require the use of rubber bands to secure the line to the float. It's always good to have one rod rigged and ready to use as a pitch bait for the shark that swims undaunted right up the slick and latches on to the chum bucket.

A screaming clicker will announce a shark has taken a bait as line peels off of the reel. Don't be anxious to set the hook; give the fish time to take the bait fully. When a big shark makes its first run, hold on. Depending on the size of the shark, you may be in for a battle lasting several hours. While the battle ensues, other anglers should begin clearing lines and begin preparing to bring the shark boatside. Remember—safety first at this point in the battle.

Whether you practice "catch and release" or plan to deliver the coup de grace, it is dangerous to bring a "hot" fish to the boat, so make sure the shark is exhausted. If the shark will be hitching a ride home with you for a dinner date, other anglers should be standing by to gaff and tail rope the beast. The shark should be stretched out and hung from a cleat where you can make sure it is deceased. Never bring a shark aboard until you are certain it is dead.

A Highly Migratory Species (HMS) angling category permit is required to fish recreationally for any HMS-managed species including Atlantic tuna, shark, swordfish and billfish, available from the National Marine Fisheries Service at www.hmspermits.gov/. The recreational shark fishery is managed using bag limits, minimum size requirements and landing requirements (e.g., sharks must be landed with head and fins attached). Additionally, the possession of 19 species of sharks is prohibited. See regulations for *Sharks*, page 12. Then, get out and experience the excitement of shark fishing first-hand this spring! 