

Feisty

White Perch

Fine Fish in a Small Package

By Maryellen Gordon, Assistant Fisheries Biologist



Tom Pagliaroli

Collins Cove in the Mullica River provided some good white perch fishing for Chris Fitzsimmons.

The white perch, *Morone americana*, is a member of the temperate bass family and not a true perch. These fish resemble their much larger relative, the striped bass; however they are shorter, deeper-bodied and lack stripes. They are deepest under the first dorsal fin, creating the appearance of a hump. White perch have two dorsal fins, which are barely connected. The first dorsal fin has 8 to 10 strong spines and the second is completely soft rayed.

As water temperatures rise in the spring, adult perch begin their spawning run and move upstream into brackish and fresh waters. Females will release 50,000 to 150,000 eggs over a period of 10 to 21 days. A single female is surrounded by several males, then eggs and sperm are spread at will over sand or gravel bottoms.

After fertilization takes place, eggs hatch in one to six days. Juveniles remain close to their hatching grounds through much of the summer and fall. During winter months, they tend to move into deeper waters of the bays. White perch spend most of their lives in close proximity to the area where they were hatched.

White perch are schooling fish, from their youth through adulthood. They prefer open water, steering clear of cover and structures, but can be found near bridges and submerged logs. Lake populations of perch feed both during day and night, but are generally more active in low light. Both freshwater and saltwater white perch populations spend the day in deeper waters then move to the shallows and inshore waters at night. As young, they feed primarily on aquatic insect larvae, but as juveniles and adults, they consume a variety of small fishes, crabs and shrimp.

For several reasons, white perch are one of the most sought after fishing targets. Found in both fresh and brackish waters, these perch are plentiful when located, making them an easy target for anglers. They can be caught at any hour of the day, but are most active during changing light conditions. For their size, they are a bit feisty and can put up quite the fight. Perhaps an even greater selling point is how delectable they are to the palate. Some say that white perch are one of the tastiest fish in New Jersey's waters.

Knowing where to find these fish is one of the keys to successfully fishing for them; the other is figuring out how to attract them. Good places to try are creek and ditch mouths, drop offs to deep water and eddys. Talking with local anglers may be the best way to learn about white perch hot spots. If the locals won't give up their secret fishing sites, ask around at area bait shops.

While perch can be fished any time of the year, ice fishing in late winter/early spring might be the most productive. Perch spend more time in dense schools on the prowl for food during early spring, which can make for a very busy day of fishing once you locate the school. During summer months, perch are more spread out requiring more time to look for your prize.

When temperatures grow cooler in late fall and early winter, perch will gather in shallow weeds. As mid-winter

approaches, perch will migrate to the nearest deep pool or basin. They welcome the spring ice thaw by moving towards their spawning grounds. Keep in mind that perch are small predators and will follow their food source.

When trying your luck at ice fishing remember that ice should be a minimum of 4 inches thick for a single angler, 5 inches or more to support several anglers single file. Drill several holes for a more efficient way to locate the fish. The most effective method of ice fishing is jigging where you raise just the rod tip about a foot and drop it back to where it was, repeating every five to 10 seconds.

Live bait should be your choice when searching for a school. Perch tend to congregate at about 15 to 25 feet. Once you locate fish, continue fishing around that depth with live or artificial bait. Whether fishing in the colder or warmer months, suggested live baits include minnows, worms and grass shrimp.



Useful artificial baits

include vertical spoons or flash spoons, horizontal jigs and swimming lures. A sure-fire combination is to put a minnow head on one hook of a vertical spoon.

New Jersey has many good places for white perch fishing. Head north to Lake Hopatcong for a little ice fishing. If you're

in the south, try Collins Cove on the Mullica River or Amasa Hole on the Bass River—the newly constructed pier seen from Exit 50 on the Garden State Parkway. Other productive white perch fishing locations are the Raritan River, Manasquan River, Toms River, Great Egg Harbor River, Tuckahoe River, Maurice River and Cohansey River.

No matter where or when you try to catch these lively fish, you are sure to have a fulfilling day out on the water!

For information on white perch by marine fisheries biologist Hugh Carberry, visit our Website at NJFishandWildlife.com/artwhtperch.htm.

Thanks to Marc Resciniti (Bureau of Marine Water Monitoring) and Hugh Carberry (Bureau of Marine Fisheries), contributors.

A simple recipe worth trying!

Beer Battered White Perch

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| 8 whole white perch, dressed | 1 cup flour |
| 1/2 cup butter, melted | 1/2 cup cornstarch |
| 1/2 cup beer | vegetable oil |
| 2 eggs | |

Beat eggs and mix with butter and beer. Stir in flour and cornstarch. In a deep fryer or pan, heat oil on high. Dip each white perch in batter and then fry until golden brown. Drain on paper towels and serve. Serves 3 to 4.