



Whoosh!

A Spearfishing Primer

By Craig Tomlin, Fisheries Biologist

The weather is perfect for early June with a slight land breeze, high 70s air temp, mid 60s water temp, rising tide and no swell. You and your buddy double-check the gear while planning for the day's adventures. Your heart begins racing as time draws near but you tell yourself to calm down, breath slow, relax.

When you gently slide into the water, your instincts and training take over. You have entered the beautiful and alien ocean world. Your eyes take a moment to adjust as your ears hear the rhythmic clicks and pops of sealife. Descending into the nutrient-rich green abyss, you begin to see soft coral, sea stars, mussels and crabs. It's hard to believe there is so much life! Tautog, seabass and lobster come into view. Out of the corner of your mask you catch movement, then a puff of mud and it's gone! A huge flounder, the biggest you have ever seen, has disappeared. That's the way it goes when spearfishing in New Jersey. You don't always get dinner, but you always make a memory.

The New Jersey coastline, along with its many wrecks and reefs, is a diver's paradise. Yes, New Jersey. While we do not have the tropical blue water of the Bahamas, the Garden State offers many great opportunities in your back yard.



A nice stringer of flounder and triggerfish were speared by Jason Hearon on the Wildwood Reef.

Craig Tomlin/NJ Div. Fish and Wildlife

New Jersey's vast artificial reef system (see reef article, page 6), the many natural undersea formations plus the large number of shipwrecks all create terrific habitat for fish as well as for diving. The best part: to access these fish meccas there is no need to hop on a plane bound for the tropics. Numerous exciting dive spots are accessible either from shore, private boat or by chartering a dive boat. In many cases the dive opportunities are close enough to go after work and be home in time for a late dinner. Hopefully, dinner will include fresh seafood.

This spearfishing overview can put you well on your way to bringing home great memories and tasty table fare from New Jersey's marine domain.

Training

There are two approaches for exploring the underwater world: freediving and scuba diving. Whichever you choose, training is paramount and cultivates safe and responsible spearfishing practices. Freediving classes are now readily available. These not only increase your level of safety, they increase the amount of time you can safely stay underwater. A freedive class is taught by a certified instructor in a controlled environment.

Scuba classes are available at any local dive shop. Also taught by certified instructors in a controlled environment, a scuba course will teach you how to safely use the equipment and certify you to become a scuba diver. No matter which path you choose make sure you get trained by a reputable agency.

Basic Diving Gear

Acquiring equipment follows training. Diving with a dive charter or through your dive shop allows you to rent most of the equipment, a great way to decide what equipment works best prior to buying your own. Whether you decide to free dive or scuba dive the first piece of essential equipment is a well-fitted mask to keep out water so you can see the underwater world. A snorkel (yes, it's also needed for scuba diving) and fins are additional essential pieces of gear. A snorkel allows you to breathe on the surface while the mask is still under water. Fins are needed for mobility with their wide surface area propelling a diver through the water.

Additional gear includes a wetsuit for warmth and protection and either a dive knife or dive scissors. Last but not least, get a "diver down" flag. All dive vessels must fly a diver down flag alpha when divers are in the water to alert other boats to go slow and stay clear of the area. Even when diving from shore you must use a dive flag.



Diver Down Flag



Alpha Flag

Spearfishing Gear

When it comes to spearfishing equipment, it's best to keep it simple. The less complicated your equipment the less likely to fail and the easier to use. A pole spear is a great way to start; they are inexpensive and can last a long time. While not as flashy-looking as a wood gun, the pole spear is probably the ideal weapon for hunting summer flounder and around rocks.

For those wanting to start with a speargun, several companies make relatively inexpensive, higher-quality models. The main advantage of a speargun over a pole spear is the shooting distance. Remember this advantage is lost when the water gets cloudy and when the gun is not agile enough to make the quick shot on that huge flounder buried in the sand.

Once you've chosen your speargun you will need a way to store your catch until you return to the boat or shore. A hoop stringer works well as would a catch bag or a line stringer. Again keep it simple; whatever works for you is your best choice. Also recommended is a spike or a pointed dive knife to quickly dispatch the harvested fish. Practice with your equipment and become proficient before you begin diving.

Know Before You Go

As with most sports there are regulations. Recreational fishing regulations and size limits always apply but there are several special regulations that relate only to spearfishing. These special regulations preclude certain fish from harvest with a spear and set forth the manner in which you may spearfish.

Spearfishing Ethics

Even those new to the sport are responsible to maintain the standards practiced by spearfishing enthusiasts worldwide. Unlike anglers using rod and reel, there is no catch and release. You must only shoot what you can eat—no more. This allows our sport to be one of the most environmentally friendly forms of fishing by creating no bycatch. Take only clean ethical shots and follow all season, size and limit regulations. As visitors to the underwater world, we must respect the habitat and the creatures that live there by leaving behind only bubbles.

Safety! Safety! Safety!

Safety is everybody's responsibility. Whether on—or in—the water, be cautious of people around you. Diver down and alpha flags must be respected by everyone.

Remember to check your gear—and your buddy's gear—thoroughly. When scuba diving, always monitor your air and bottom time as well as that of your dive buddy. When free diving, strictly adhere to the one diver up-one diver down approach. Remember all safety tips from your diver training and always dive within your limits.

Remember, a dive buddy is essential for safety and can add to the fun. By working together, both will be safer, more efficient hunters and have someone with whom to share stories at the day's end.

Be Aware: Spearfishing Requires Extra Precautions!

- ♦ Never load a speargun out of the water.
- ♦ Never point a spear at anything unless you intend to harvest it.
- ♦ Treat every gun as if it were loaded
- ♦ Know your target and what's beyond.

Being a safe and responsible spearfisher can bring years of enjoyment. New Jersey offers many opportunities for spearfishing along our coast. Get out and enjoy this great marine resource close to home.

Be sure to check out Fish and Wildlife's Record Fish Program (<http://NJFishandWildlife.com/recfish-salt.htm>) with a new spearfishing category which includes many species that frequent New Jersey wrecks and reefs!