

# Bluefishing from Shore

By Bryan Carter, Seasonal Technician

**Bluefish (*Pomatomus saltatrix*) are one of the most common and popular sportfish in New Jersey.** Because of their wide range in sizes and abundance, bluefish are a great angling option for kids and first-timers all the way up to experienced anglers.

**B**luefish are globally distributed. The largest bluefish has been recorded at 31 pounds 12 ounces, while the oldest is recorded at 12 years old. Bluefish become sexually mature at two years old, and spawn several times during the year. They come in a variety of sizes on the New Jersey coast and are easily identified by their silvery sea green color, large mouths with a single row of large sharp teeth and streamlined muscular build. They can occur in New Jersey waters generally from April to December during their migrations along the coast.

Known to be very aggressive predators, bluefish can go into blitz mode where they force baitfish to the surface and tear into anything in their path. Anglers can take advantage of situations like this, as well as the general aggressive nature of the fish to increase catch rates. While bluefish are known to take a wide range of bait and lures, matching the baitfish present at the time of fishing will improve angling success.

There's a seasonal nature to bluefish behavior linked to their migration and feeding patterns. Focusing on shore-based angling, what follows will highlight techniques for catching bluefish in New Jersey.

## Spring

Springtime in New Jersey provides the best opportunity at catching large bluefish from shore. Often referred to as "gators", these large 8–20 pound bluefish are migrating north, feeding on schools of bunker. Bunker are large, oily baitfish and the primary food source for larger bluefish. Bays, inlets, jetties, and sand beaches are all productive during the springtime. A couple of techniques are applicable for targeting these larger fish in the spring.

Angling with fresh bait (for useful tips, see [www.NJFishandWildlife.com/artbaitfish15.htm](http://www.NJFishandWildlife.com/artbaitfish15.htm)) is the most common method for targeting larger bluefish. Using chunks of bunker for bait to match the food source, bait fishing can be very successful on the beaches and in back bays. Heavy tackle is required, as bluefish are considered to be among the hardest fighting fish in New Jersey.

Large, sharp hooks and a wire or thick monofilament leader fished on a fish finder rig will produce the best hook-to-land ratios. Bait fishing is generally the more successful method when the water is murkier and the bluefish are not blitzing. The scent of the bait allows the bluefish to rely on senses other than sight to find your offering.

◀ This bluefish was caught in the Long Beach Island surf by Andrew Beck of Manahawkin.

Photo by Paul Presto



Lures can be productive when targeting large bluefish in the spring and are more applicable during blitzes. Popping plugs and metal spoons or jigs are the best lures to use during this time. Popping plugs are splashed along the surface, replicating a jumping bunker, a common escape method used when bunker are attacked. This method works well in calmer water along any beach or bay structure. Amazing visual strikes occur when bluefish launch out of the water to strike a popping plug.

Metal lures such as large spoons and diamond jigs also work well for larger fish. Best fished in deeper moving water such as inlets, a fast constant retrieve will cause the metal lure to wobble and flash like an injured bunker reflecting sunlight. The flashes cause bluefish to aggressively attack the lures. If a bluefish hits a metal lure but does not take the hook, continue the same retrieve and they will often continue chasing the lure and strike again. Replacing treble hooks with single hooks on lures will make unhooking these big fish a much safer process.

## Summer

Large bluefish generally depart the New Jersey coast in June, but soon after, the arrival of juvenile fish occurs. Locally called “snappers,” small 3- to 8-inch bluefish invade the New Jersey bays and beaches every July and August. Snappers are a great way for kids and beginners to get introduced to saltwater fishing. Aggressive and very abundant, snappers can be caught very easily to provide instant action for anyone learning to fish. Snappers fight hard for their size and are sporty on light tackle, but do not require the same size gear as the larger gators that occur in the spring.

Common around bayside docks and bulkheads, snappers can be caught using a variety of methods. Look for splashes of small baitfish jumping to escape snappers. The simplest method for targeting snappers is to use a bobber with a small hook and piece of spearing for bait. Spearing occurs in New Jersey bays and inlets in giant schools each summer and are the primary food source for juvenile bluefish. Other baits such as squid, bloodworms, live minnows, or mackerel are also effective for catching snappers.

Snappers can be caught on artificial lures as well as bait. Metal spoons—similar to those used for large bluefish in the spring but smaller in size—work well for catching snappers. Using a 1/8 or 1/4 oz. metal spoon retrieved quickly, lots of snappers can be caught. The flashing created by the spoon imitates an injured silverside.

An even more popular method is the use of a snapper popper. Snapper poppers consist of a barrel shaped float with a small hook 18 to 24 inches behind, coated in flashy hair material or surgical tubing. The float is slowly retrieved and popped

along the surface making a loud splashing sound. The sound of the float attracts the snappers to the area. The flash of the hook provokes the snappers into biting. Because of their easy use and high success rates, snapper poppers are good rigs to use for anglers learning to fish with artificial lures.

## Fall

During September, most of the summer species depart New Jersey waters and fall species begin to make their way down the coast. Every year, New Jersey anglers anticipate the mullet run when hundreds of thousands of striped mullet flood out from the back bays to migrate south along the beaches. The abundance of mullet provides a new and substantial food source for bluefish. The small snappers leave the back bays and larger “cocktail” bluefish, ranging from 9 to 20 inches, feast on the striped mullet saturating the surf and jetty pockets. The mullet run traditionally lasts throughout September and October.

Taking advantage of the amount of bait present, early fall can be a prime time for New Jersey anglers to catch bluefish. As before, matching the bait present will provide the best results for anglers targeting bluefish. Most tackle shops will supply fresh mullet for bait during this time of year and that is the best option when bait fishing.

The most effective way of fishing mullet is using a mullet rig, which consists of a float to keep the mullet off the bottom, a stout wire approximately the length of a mullet, and a detachable hook. Bluefish bite their prey from the tail end, so to increase hookup ratios, the wire is inserted through the mullet's body and the hook is attached to the wire near the tail. Small chunks of mullet can also be used on traditional high-low rigs, however more bluefish likely will be landed on a mullet rig.

Once again, lures work well when targeting bluefish in the fall. Swimming plugs are the best lures with which to mimic mullet. These plugs are about 6 inches long and very thin in profile. A lip on the front causes the swimming plug to wobble back and forth like an injured mullet trying to swim. Fast, straight or erratic retrieves will get the attention of bluefish.

Many New Jersey anglers prefer to use white and powder blue colored swimming plugs to even better replicate a mullet. Generally, mullet rigs work better on flat open beaches where a longer cast is required. Swimming plugs may be the better option in inlets, jetties, and steep surf banks where there is more structure to hold the bluefish, and more water deep enough to work the swimming plug.

In some years, the large “gator” bluefish return along the New Jersey coastline later in the fall. Often times these larger bluefish remain offshore on their southerly migration. However, pods of

# Bluefishing — The Best Defense...

Remember to always be prepared with a pair of needle nose pliers when targeting bluefish. A bite from even a small bluefish can cause damage. It is a good idea to have extra rigs or lures ready as bluefish will bite through leaders and damage non-metal lures. While soft plastic lures are widely successful when targeting other species, avoid using them when bluefish are around. If planning to keep bluefish, the New Jersey regulations are a bag limit of 15 fish per angler per day, with no minimum size and no closed season.



(Top) Frank Strouse with a handsome bluefish.  
(Bottom) A nice bluefish was hooked by Jeff Stives.

bunker and Atlantic herring can sometimes draw large bluefish in tight to the surf. Most bluefish caught from late October to early December are bycatch from anglers targeting striped bass. For those interested in targeting bluefish during these months, using methods similar to spring bluefishing is the best option. If sand eels are present, use a long narrow profile lure such as a diamond jig with surgical tubing.

## References

Chesapeake Bay Program — Field Guide:  
[www.chesapeakebay.net/fieldguide/critter/bluefish](http://www.chesapeakebay.net/fieldguide/critter/bluefish)

Loving Long Island — Catch and Cook:  
[www.loving-long-island.com/snapper-fishing-on-long-island.html](http://www.loving-long-island.com/snapper-fishing-on-long-island.html) 