Until recently, black sea bass were considered rare by most anglers. As a kid, I can remember hearing occasional reports of black sea bass being caught by striped fisherman, but not much more than that. Over the last few years, they have been appearing with increased frequency along New Hampshire’s coastal waters and in the Piscataqua River as far in as Little Bay. Now, there are so many black sea bass in New Hampshire’s coastal and estuarine waters that they are fast becoming the target of many local saltwater anglers.

My dad loved to striped fish from the bridges along the New Hampshire coast. He would occasionally bring home a random black sea bass. It was always a welcomed treat, because they were a household favorite at dinner time. The first time I caught a black sea bass was in 2012. I was fishing from my kayak for striped bass near the Sarah Mildred Long Bridge in the Piscataqua River when I hooked into a fish I thought would be a striped. It didn’t fight like a striped, though, and when I got it to the surface, I was not only surprised, but ecstatic. A little while later, I caught another and headed home for dinner.

**Follow the Squid**

Black sea bass (*Centropristis striata*) are members of the grouper family. They grow slowly, up to two feet long and nine pounds. Black sea bass caught in New Hampshire recently have ranged from 8 to 16 inches. They are very distinct looking; adults can be distinguished by their brown or black color, large mouths and a spiny dorsal fin with white bands or tips. Dominant males will grow a large blue hump just in front of their dorsal fins during the spawning season, while females usually have distinct vertical barring patterns. They are also what’s called “protogynous hermaphrodites,” meaning they all begin life as females and change sex to males between 2-5 years old. Little is known about why they change sex, but many speculate it has something to do with balancing the male-to-female sex ratio.

New Hampshire is considered to be on the northern edge of black sea bass range, but obviously it is not outside of it. These fish prefer deep water where there is structure. That makes New Hampshire’s Piscataqua River the perfect place for them, because it is deep and full of ledges, bridges and piers. Black sea bass feed on fish, crabs, mussels and razor clams. In the Piscataqua River and Little Bay, they follow the squid. As soon as I start seeing or catching squid, I begin targeting black sea bass.

**Warming Coastal Waters**

Water temperature seems to be a driving force behind the numbers of black sea bass in New Hampshire. As our ocean temperatures continue to rise, so do the number of black sea bass. N.H. Fish and Game has been collecting black sea bass catch data from recreational anglers since 1984. Every few years or so, there is a spike in the number of black sea bass caught, and each spike is greater than the last. All species experience highs and lows, but these peaks just keep getting higher.

N.H. Fish and Game Marine Biologist Kevin Sullivan speculates that there are other factors behind the appearance of black sea bass in New Hampshire besides water temperature. “I believe there has been a fairly large year class - 2011 - that is currently moving through the system, and that might be the greatest contributing factor to their presence,” Sullivan said. The largest catch ever documented by N.H. Fish and Game was in 2013, with 16,827 black sea bass recorded in the annual angler survey.

While I believe water temperatures and a large year class...
Author Tim Moore displays a prize black sea bass (15.5 inches, 2 lbs.-1 oz.) caught in the Piscataqua River last June.
While most species experience peaks and valleys, results of N.H. Fish and Game’s saltwater angler surveys indicate that the peaks for black sea bass appear to be rising, as do our ocean temperatures.

**ANGLER SURVEY DATA FOR BLACK SEA BASS**

While most species experience peaks and valleys, results of N.H. Fish and Game’s saltwater angler surveys indicate that the peaks for black sea bass appear to be rising, as do our ocean temperatures.

This male black sea bass is beginning to develop the characteristic blue hump in front of the dorsal fin.

The female black sea bass sports vertical bars along its flanks.

The General Sullivan Bridge spans the Piscataqua River between Dover and Newington, a favorite location for saltwater anglers looking for black sea bass.

have a lot to do with the increasing occurrence of black sea bass in New Hampshire, another factor may be at work. In 2012, I noticed a marked increase in the number of anglers targeting them. The higher catch rate in 2013 may have been a result of more anglers targeting them with no limits. Prior to 2014, there were no size or bag limits on black sea bass in New Hampshire. Over-fishing is the leading cause in declining fish populations, and it could have had an effect on the black sea bass that made their way into the Piscataqua River. In 2014, the N.H. Fish and Game Department imposed a ten-fish daily limit and a thirteen-inch minimum size limit. Ironically, fewer anglers seemed to be targeting them.

Angling Strategies
Since black sea bass prefer very specific habitat, knowing where to find them is easy. Figuring out how to catch them, however, can be difficult. The most challenging factor is access. Bloody Point in Newington, Hilton Park in Dover, and the Newcastle bridges are favorite spots of shore anglers, but some of the prime spots, such as the rock piles in the Piscataqua River and along the coast, are accessible only by boat. For kayak anglers, the strong currents of the Piscataqua River give them short windows of opportunity before the current becomes too fast to drift over rock piles or stay next to bridges long enough to get their jig to the bottom. Getting, and keeping, that jig on the bottom is not easy in the fast current.

When I target black sea bass, I fish in 20-70 feet of water where there is structure. Rock piles, ledges, debris, wrecks and pilings will all attract and hold black sea bass. Tackle should include 1½- to 3-ounce jigs, depending on how swift the current is moving. Around slack tide, you can get away with a 1½-ounce jig, but as soon as the current picks up, you will need to increase your jig weight to around 3 ounces. My favorite jig is the Elite Deluxe 1.4 from Daddy Mac Lures. This jig triggers bites better than anything else I have ever used. When the current starts to rip, I switch to one of their heavier 2.8-ounce diamond jigs. Black sea bass are very scent-oriented, so tipping the hook with a strip of squid will get you more bites, especially when the water is muddy, such as after heavy rains.

There are two different methods most anglers use to catch black sea bass. Shore anglers will usually cast out a hook baited with squid and a weight attached below the hook, and let it sit on the bottom, because it is often impossible to vertically jig from shore. If you can get directly above your target area, such as when fishing in a boat or from a bridge, then vertical jigging is by far the most effective method.

It is important to make sure that your jig is near the bottom; that’s where the black sea bass are. They don’t often chase a jig too far from the structure they like. Drop your jig all the way to the bottom, then reel it up until it is just off the bottom. Then bounce the jig as fast as you can until you feel a bite. It is usually necessary to reel in and drop back down, because the currents will sweep your jig away and raise it off the bottom. Make sure you bring plenty of jigs to replace the ones you lose when your line gets snagged in the rocks. It’ll happen.

PAN-SEARED BLACK SEA BASS
Pan searing is a favorite way to cook black sea bass. These fish have a very mild flavor, and require very little seasoning. To prepare your own fresh caught sea bass, start by filleting and skinning the fish. Then quickly rinse the fillets to remove any scales or slime and pat dry. Season the fillets with a dash of salt and pepper and set aside. Heat a non-stick skillet on a medium/high setting and add two tablespoons extra virgin olive oil. Pan sear the fillets for approximately three minutes per side or until the meat is firm and browned. Add a sprinkle of lemon and serve with rice and greens, and you’ve got yourself a home-cooked gourmet meal.

Succulent Flavor
Everyone has a recipe and a preferred method for cooking their favorite fish. Some fish are best baked, while others are best when fried. Black sea bass have a succulent flavor and are one of my favorite fish to eat pan-seared. When cooked, the meat is firm, white and mild-tasting, with no strong flavor whatsoever. You can also fry or bake black sea bass; the firmness of the meat once cooked eliminates the need to worry about overcooking.

There is much speculation around why the number of black sea bass in New Hampshire waters is increasing. Could it be rising ocean temperatures, or is it simply that no one ever targeted them? Only time will tell. Until then, there is an abundance of them and I, for one, will be enjoying every minute of it.

Tim Moore is a licensed N.H. hunting and fishing guide and the owner of Tim Moore Outdoors LLC, offering kayak fishing charters and Lake Winnipesaukee ice fishing charters. Visit TimMooreOutdoors.com.
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