

Singing the *Blues*

New Hampshire's *other*
Saltwater Sportfish





At daybreak, the deep, calm water just beyond sea-foam breakers on the Atlantic Ocean seems machine-gunned in bursts of activity. Roving and rushing at prey like hungry wolves, it's school-feeding bluefish—half teeth, half tail—in a coastal feeding frenzy.

BY STEVE HICKOFF

While striped bass get many a coastal Granite State angler's attention, saltwater aficionados double the pleasure by targeting blues. The bluefish are out there for saltwater anglers to find, and the time is NOW. Want fishing excitement? You've surely got it with bluefish.

Where, Oh Where?

Great Bay. Little Bay. The Piscataqua River.

Here, there, most everywhere. . . .

Along the Atlantic coastline and out to the Isles of Shoals—where baitfish go, bluefish follow. Find the baitfish, and you're in business. It's a matter of being out there in the right place when the action commences—which can vary with these restless fish.

New Hampshire surfcasters can try coastal rivermouths and tidal creeks right at the turn of the incoming tide—preferably at daybreak or during the false dawn, as bluefish seem to feed voraciously right after the summer sun rises out over the offshore Shoals. Low-tide situations seem to enhance the blues' wolfpack instinct to trap baitfish against exposed rocky ledges and hard-sand beaches.

Study the underwater structure and how the tide moves with it. In time, you'll acquire an insider's perspective to target these restless, relentless predators.

Like stripers, bluefish migrate north in the spring to these locations. By summer they lurk, feeding and moving in schools. Then both species head south for the winter, sharing the same coastal waters.

Mackerel—a good cut bait for marauding bluefish—sometimes hold at the Piscataqua River mouth, or offshore, where you can catch them by jigging, then store them in live wells for immediate fishing or freeze them for future use. Sometimes smaller baitfish roam away from land, or upriver into Little Bay and Great Bay. Other times, baitfish activity is hard to come by. You just have to keep at it—first to find baitfish; then the blues. Using high-tech fishfinders, modern baitfish-seeking anglers might locate schools lurking on offshore humps. Blues could be nearby.

Seasonal Piscataqua River anglers—flanked by the New Hampshire and Maine shorelines—seek out humps, and put their bait down toward that bottom structure for stripers. Often blues will be right in there with the mix, nailing a live offering on its way down.

By boat, anglers might find bluefish roving offshore by day after their early-morning feed, in waters beyond the rock-hugging stripers. You can chum the water and toss cut bait.

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When reeling in or handling a bluefish, don't let those needle-sharp teeth anywhere near your fingers! This surface popper didn't stand a chance.

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You can cast big metal lures and even flies. In all honesty, anglers who enjoy both stripers and blues relish the action both provide. Some boaters who chum smelly concoctions into the sea to entice striped bass by day, wince at the appearance of bluefish and the ubiquitous dogfish. Such anglers might decide to cast big jigs into currents and let them drift back for fast-action angling. In such cases, with oversized lures, wire leaders might not even be needed as insurance against the sharp-toothed gamesters.

Cast When You Can

You can catch them as early as springtime, but mid-summer to the post-Labor Day September period can be even better as blues go. Last year on the Seacoast, by mid-August, three- to four-pound blues were all over the fabled Great Bay fishery: the waters off Adam's Point, locations near the Stratham railroad trestle, and so on. Small surface lures seemed to be the trend on these fish, usually at the end of incoming tides until the surge moved out again. As such phases go, watch for gulls working baitfish schools. Blues should be there too.

Elsewhere along the coastal shore last summer, Rye and Hampton party boats were reporting superb morning fishing for their clients. Southern locations, such as the Merrimack River on the New Hampshire and Massachusetts border, held bluefish blitzes at the rivermouth.

I've caught bluefish as early as springtime on their return to our coastline, but the shore fishing of late August into September is unrivaled—and what we New England surfcasters wait for. By late August last year, shoreline feeding frenzies increased as saltwater fish—both blues and stripers—began their southern migration. In such situations, the predatory sportfish push schools of baitfish right up into the shallows. Enterprising anglers greet them.

Edge of the Mayhem

Often this time of the year brings late-summer storms. The rough weather changes water color along the shoreline. Blues (and stripers) begin to linger in discolored currents along the coast, as if utilizing the murky water to hide. Onshore winds—into which we cast—push warmer water toward us. Baitfish follow.

With these onshore winds moving warm water toward the beachfront, colder water replaces it offshore. This may account for why big fish move inshore, too. The beauty of it for the boatless surfcaster is that the roving fish that were targeted all summer by watercraft anglers are now just a cast away.

As a result, a great time to nail blues from shore is September, and even into early October. After



Labor Day, beach anglers can roam the coastline, watching for schools of blues and stripers. A good pair of binoculars helps, if you like to scout from your vehicle in “run-and-fish” mode. You can also just watch for gulls hovering above the frenzy. Move fast, though, and keep your gear at the ready. Once there, fish the edges of the mass of sportfish and baitfish. Back when I was learning this game, I’d cast right in the middle of it, and sometimes spook the entire school.

Boaters can work the edges of this mayhem the same way.

Know too, that while we are talking blues here, stripers will be in the mix—often beneath the roving blues, chowing on the falling bits of bluefish-chomped baitfish. So, if you just want blues, fish with topwater plugs and retrieve them fast. Consider wire leaders to avoid cut-offs—or not. Classic Rapala offerings still work. If you want a mixed-bag of stripers, too, fish fast-sinking lures or weighted baits. It’s all good.

Fly Fishing for Fanatics

“Are you crazy? Bluefish on flies?!”

Fly-fishing rods and reels need to be matched for durability and balance, as casting to blues must be done quick-off-the-mark when blitzes are spotted, and once the fish is on, your tackle will be tested.

Weight-forward lines will let you cast into the teeth of an onshore wind. Presentations aren’t nearly as delicate as freshwater offerings on small trout streams. Want to fish on top? Fish popping bugs on floating lines. Sinking tips can be used on baitfish-mimicking patterns. True sinking lines can work for blues (but more likely stripers), and force you to tote many options in your sagging fly vest.

Where reels are concerned, backing rules—lots of it. A football field of it will do. Blues love to run and muscle you during the ensuing fight, and you have to be ready.

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Gluttonous blues will bite at almost anything when they’re in a feeding frenzy. Some lures to try (from left): big jig with attractor/spinner; floating minnow bait to imitate local forage fish or baitfish; crankbait, pogie-style.

BLUEFISH *(Pomatomus salatrix)*

N.H. State Record

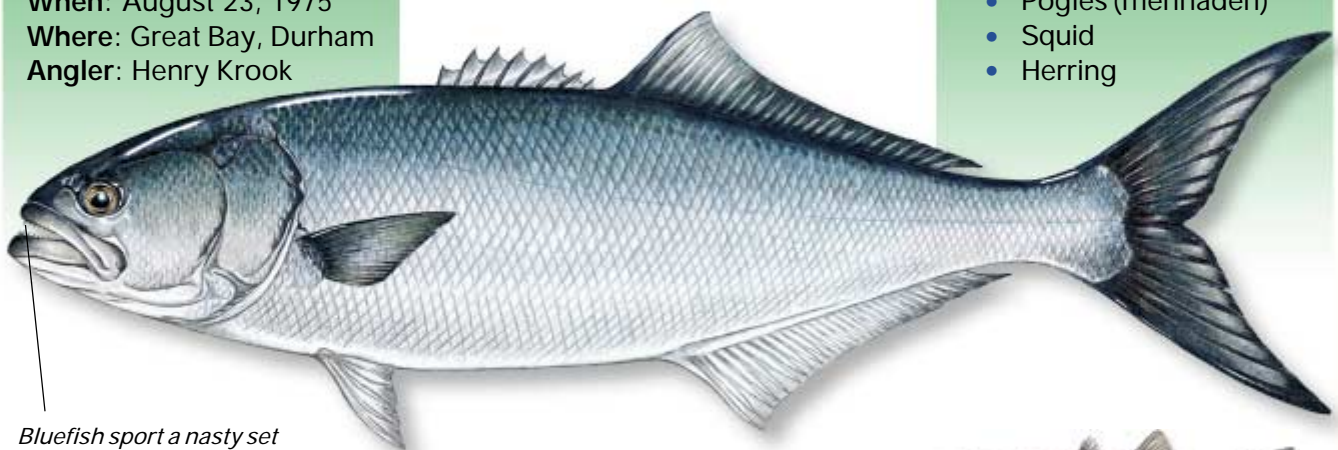
Length: 39 inches
Weight: 21 pounds
When: August 23, 1975
Where: Great Bay, Durham
Angler: Henry Krook

A.K.A.

Tailer, slammer, chopper

Effective Natural Baits

- Live eels
- Mackerel (chunks)
- Pogies (menhaden)
- Squid
- Herring



Bluefish sport a nasty set of needle-sharp teeth. Wire leaders are an important part of the angler’s arsenal.

The Atlantic silverside is one of several species of schooling fish that the bluefish targets for a feeding frenzy.



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Fishing for blues from shore is best in September and even into early October. Get out early and cast often.

Finding Bait

Two places along the N.H. seacoast provide live bait with reliability: Suds-n-Soda in Greenland (603-431-6320), and Taylor's Trading Post in Madbury (603-742-5931).

As the season wanes, bait becomes tougher to find. Some coastal anglers freeze theirs as mid-September arrives, attempting to extend coastline angling into October.

—S.H.



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Rods can range from 8¹/₂- to 9-foot offerings paired with 8-weight line to 9- or 9¹/₂-foot surf sticks matched with 9- to 10-weight line.

My basement and closet are full of a range of fly rods, many of the old-school type; some that I've used for three decades (seriously). Sea-lashed tackle takes a beating, and I try to scour gear with soapy suds after each trip to the coastline. Do that, and your gear—fly tackle or spinning—will last longer.

Bluefish tend to strike from the rear, accounting for why you can catch them on flies—often after they've repeatedly nipped at your offering. Apply tension when you feel it on the other end. Sometimes, yeah, they'll part with your pattern, their teeth slicing away at the fly.

Wire shock tippetts (say three or four inches long) can offer insurance, but can hinder casting.

Baitfish along the New Hampshire coastline range from silversides to sand eels, as well as herring and menhaden. Fly anglers (and indeed lure casters) can try to match these based on size and color estimates, along with a good sense of available patterns out there, of which there are many.

The Blitz Is On

Stripers run big, fight hard. A bluefish does both, including some breathtaking tailwalking and jumping that's unrivaled in this part of the world. Some guys, I swear, claim boated or beached blues intentionally size them up, and bite them with the intent to inflict harm. Mythmaking or not, blues don't take it sitting down.

How do you recognize that the blitz is on? You may first notice a sweet watermelon smell — familiar to all saltwater anglers — that indicates baitfish are nearby and being targeted by predatory fish. Visual evidence then appears: a blue or two may sweep by the boat, or a mob of them may appear near a breakwater or ledge, hammering the smaller baitfish in question.

Friends, bluefish tend to get your angling blood up just a little. Get out there and enjoy it.

A longtime *N.H. Wildlife Journal* contributor, *Foster's Sunday Citizen* newspaper columnist, outdoor photographer and flyfishing book author, Steve Hickoff (hickoff@comcast.net) makes his home in Kittery, Maine.




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