



How to Fish For Blacks

(Salt Water)

By: Ramon J. Ross

Not even a nearsighted angler wearing rose-colored sunglasses would call the blackfish handsome. Before he could qualify for such a compliment, the blackfish, alias tautog, would need the services of a masseur to streamline his chunky chassis. Then he'd have to move into the painting department where, after his rough skin was sanded, gayer hues would be applied to his sides of faded tar. Even then, the blackfish would present a ludicrous appearance without the services of an orthodontist to straighten his buckteeth.

These shortcomings, however, haven't lowered the blackfish's popularity among the thousands who angle for him between Delaware and Cape Cod, where he holds forth in abundance, though his range extends from Canada to the Carolinas. Any loyal black-fisherman would be the first to point out that beauty is only skin-deep. None knows better than he that, once the coarse hide has been removed and the blackfish is in the skillet or pan, no apologies need be made. He's good eating.

No fish has greater need of armor like skin than the blackfish. It protects' him as he feeds among sharp edged rock pockets and ledges, where concentrated muscular power is more of an asset than speed. What his dentures may lack in beauty, they more than make up in efficiency. The black has two varieties of teeth; sharp incisors in the front, grinders in the back. He uses the front ones for nibbling barnacles and mussels off rocks, as we nip corn from the cob. The back ones he

uses for crushing. The black doesn't have to remove the shells from clams, crabs, lobsters, barnacles, mussels, and shrimps before eating them.

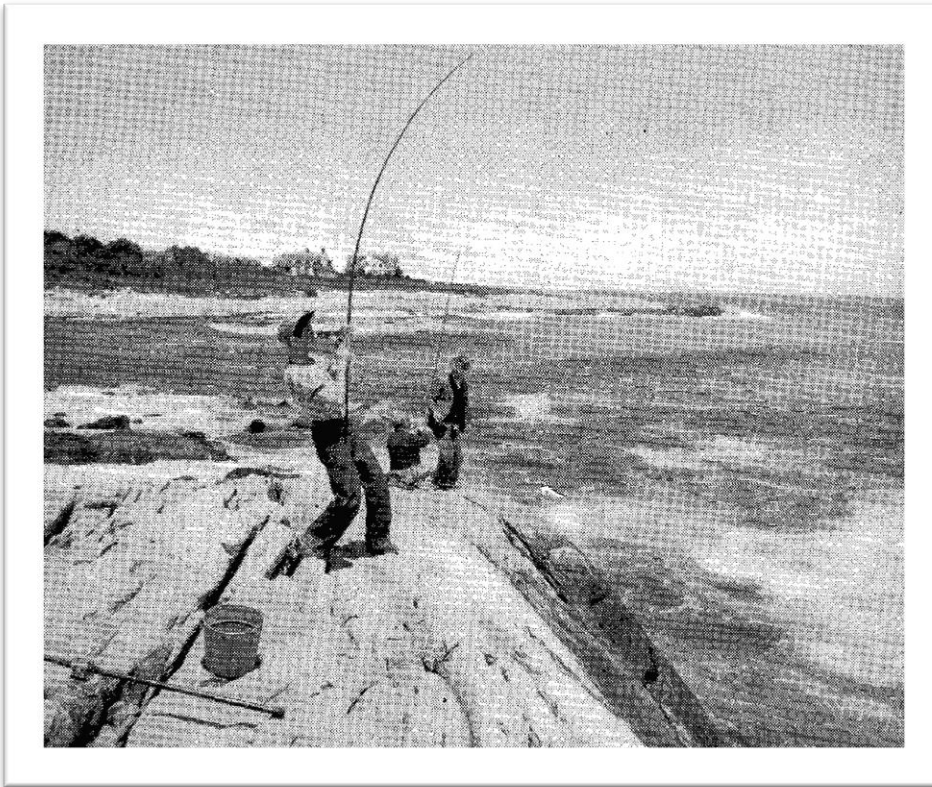
One morning early in June I cast two crab- baited hooks' to the foot of a pile of rocks and let the sinker take them to bottom. Then, pulling the baits, along Slowly, I kept sweeping them until I felt them drop into a hole that swirled with the flooding tide. I reeled in until the line was as taut as the waves would allow.

A few seconds later, I felt something nibble at the crabs. It felt like a series of light taps such as a pilfering cunner or blowfish might produce. Ignoring them, I held the baits stationary. Blackfish often approach bait with restraint, mouth it delicately, and withhold their wallops until they're ready for the big attack.

The light nibbling continued several minutes, then stopped. Though I was almost sure my hooks had been robbed by lesser bandits, I held the line taut. I was about to reel in when I felt a husky pull. Responding with a counterstrike of the rod, I experienced that wonderful feeling which is conveyed when a, good fish has been hooked solidly.

You can't fool around with Marquis of Queensberry rules when your barb buries itself in the mouth of a blackfish, His fighting technique is about as refined as that of a charging buffalo. His immediate objective is the nearest nest of rocks, a jagged crevice under a ledge, an old wreck, or a barnacle studded piling. If you want to let the blackfish know who's master you have to start slugging. That's what I did.

This bulldozer rammed along for maybe 20 ft. before I could rein up hard enough to stop him and feel the force of his weight. He hung suspended between bottom and surface as he hammered back at me with a ratio of two wallops to one. Then, switching his course, the black steamed along a few more feet, twisted like a roped maverick, plunged, and bored. His barroom tactics forced me to brace my feet against a rock so that I could keep his snout clear of barnacles, mussels, and serrated granite which could easily have cut my line. It took 15 minutes of uninterrupted give-and-take before I landed that 8-lb. black with my glass bait-casting rod.



The way the blackfish uses his teeth can be very misleading to the fisherman. Inexperienced anglers have to acquire the "feel" of his method of taking bait. That's because he first picks up bait with his frontal incisors, then passes it

back to his grinders, where he crushes it before swallowing. The time this procedure consumes varies with the bait, the fish, and, in some cases, the season. Hard bait, such as a crab or clam, requires more time for crushing than a worm or a piece of squid. Sometimes a blackfish will almost gulp a tidbit, and early in summer he displays better table manners than he does in the fall.

Attempts to set the hook too soon after the first nibbles are felt invariably will fail. That's because at that time the hook is in an area of the fish's mouth where it slides over teeth and cartilage too hard to penetrate. Delaying the setting yank until the hook has passed back to the fleshy regions of the mouth or throat almost always guarantees contact.

The code which vibrates up and down the line once a black starts taking the bait is easy to interpret. First there'll be a series of nibbles, little tugs which increase in tempo and power. Then there may be a short lapse in between tugs followed by a solid pull which raises the curtain for the show: Now's the time to hit back - hard and fast. Sometimes, of course, a black will take it into his head to yank the bait and run. You'll know what to do when that occurs.

Locating good spots for blackfish is easier than learning the technique of setting a hook. The black's diet virtually limits him to places where mollusks and crustaceans are available. Breakwaters, jetties, and piers abound with this type of provender. Every rocky shoreline has gullies where holes and pockets provide shelter and yield food for blackfish. For the boatman, outside reefs, oyster and mussel beds, and sunken vessels exist nearly everywhere. Some of the best black-fishing is done off the shores of little islands.

It's been my experience that the best shoreline spots for black-fishing are where the water retains a depth of from 5 to 9 ft. at low tide. Though white-whipped surfs seem more beneficial than harmful, I've seldom seen good black-fishing where powerful currents brush the shore. In outer waters, on the other hand, you'll often find large concentrations of big blacks at the tips of tidal sweeps - particularly if those sweeps happen to end up in rocky places.

Good black-fishing seldom is enjoyed by those who, after finding a likely piece of rocky water, merely toss their baits to bottom and let them rest there. Unlike the striper and the blue, the black hasn't predatory drive. You have to go to him. Your bait may be soaking in an empty spot while, less than 12 ft. away, there's a hole teeming with blacks. When you're not getting any strikes, move your baits, a yard or so at a time, until you locate the pay-off zone. It may not be far away.

Blacks commonly caught these days run to between 2 and 5 lb., but big brothers and sisters weighing 6 and 12 lb. aren't uncommon, even in waters available to onshore anglers. The all tackle world record black was taken in June 1951. It weighed 15 lb. 14 oz. and had a girth of 19 and 1/2 in. Commercial fishermen have brought in bigger blacks than that, and I've always felt that one of these days soon a sports angler will chalk up a new record for the rest of us to shoot at.

When that happens I wouldn't be surprised if the new king-pin of blackfish falls for any of these popular and proved baits: crabs, clams, periwinkles, sand fleas, sea worms, or shrimps. I've been around when blacks have grabbed strip baits and salt-water streamers, but they prefer the other items.

Probably green crabs lead all other baits used by anglers in attracting blackfish. Part of their acceptance is due to the fact that they're available in most bait shops

and are easy to rig up on a hook. Just break off their claws and legs, peel away the top shell, run the hook through a leg joint, and bury it in the body. Large crabs may be cut in half, producing two baits.

"Why do you have to dress crabs for a fish that eats them whole?" a friend once asked.

I don't know, but it's been my experience that crabs so prepared catch more fish than those that aren't. Maybe the black becomes suspicious of the way a whole crab acts on a hook. And when it's stripped, he may not recognize it as a dangerous object. Who knows?

Fiddler crabs - those little fellows with the big claw-come next on the hit parade. They're usually hooked through the body after the large claw is broken off. Blue-claw crabs, along with several other larger varieties, are also attractive to blacks. Preparing them for the hook, however, requires more surgery. They should be cut in pieces about the size of a pack of paper matches. Hermits, the crabs that occupy shells vacated by periwinkles and other shellfish, are the best and rarest of all black fish baits. But they're so soft and so vulnerable to scavenging cunners that anglers who find them usually use them on bass and weaks.

Clams usually are available as baits. The soft-shelled kind are hooked on, shell and all, through their tough necks. Then the shells are crushed lightly, so that inner juices seep out and create minor chum streams. Hard clams are removed from their shells and cut into strips before being offered to the blacks. Round clams, quahogs, and periwinkles are presented in the same manner.

Sand fleas are hooked on whole. They're on the soft side and often pests will clean them off your hooks before the blacks come around. But they make fine baits, and sometimes the blacks are hungrier and quicker than the cunners and blowfish.

As may be inferred from the blackfish's rugged build and the character of his surroundings, it's wise to go after him with strong tackle. The regulation "cue stick" type of boat rod equipped with a reel that holds 150 yd. of line is widely used. Some anglers get the last mileage out of old surf sticks by using them on blackfish. Still others swear by 12 to 25-ft. cane poles or hand lines. I'm one of the minority who almost always uses a glass bait-casting rod.

For black-fishing top grade linen and nylon lines are as impracticable as square-edge pyramid sinkers. Good lines fray quickly, and square sinkers get snagged on rough bottoms. Moderately priced linen lines of 12 or 15 thread and rounded bank sinkers weighing 1 to 4 oz. are good enough. Tie the sinker on the end of the line and place two hooks, about 6 in. apart, above it.

Though you can dispense with swivels and leaders when fishing for blacks, use only the best hooks obtainable. Blued Virginia patterns from sizes 1 to 8 are fine, with sizes 3 and 4 leading in most sections. These can be bought rigged to tarred snells tough enough to defeat even rocks and bucktooth blackfish.

The black fish gives the onshore angler two chances to catch him - spring through early summer, and from Labor Day to Thanksgiving. He'll give you a run for your money.

