

## SPORTS

## New York Harbors Revitalized Fishing

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NEW YORK HARBOR

**UNTIL THIS MOMENT**, in 20 years of fishing, I never thought it possible to be in the situation I am in now: trying to free my silver Pradco Bomber lure from the Statue of Liberty.

My cast was off target, and now the tiny treble hooks are hung tight on the fence beneath her robe. The captain edges the 19-foot Mako boat closer, until I whip the line free.

We leave while Lady Liberty is still in a good mood.

This is one of the hazards of fishing here in New York Harbor, a newfound sport that has emerged with the comeback of the Hudson River—a well-publicized if still-doubted reality. These days, striped bass, bluefish, weakfish and fluke are all considered fair game for anglers who don't mind spotting the occasional corpse.

Few fishermen know these waters better than Capt. Joe Shastay, a New Jersey firefighter and owner of New York Harbor Sportfishing based in Verona, N.J. In search of striped bass and big blues, he fishes here 150 days a year, and until 1994 spent six years with an environmental consulting firm studying local fish behavior. Capt. Shastay bills \$335 for a half-day trip for three anglers, mostly Wall Street types on expense accounts.

"The fishing is dynamic," he says. "There's always five helicopters, two Circle Line tours, the L train running across the bridge and fire engines along the FDR [Drive]. It's New York."

On a recent winter afternoon, as we pulled away from the East 23rd Street Pier, Capt. Shastay tutored two friends and me on the finer points of urban fishing. Visions of moss-draped cypress trees and snowy egrets on lakes back home in Louisiana were blown away by the *thwoop-thwoop-thwoop* of helicopters overhead—the harbor is dense with heliports—as Capt. Shastay floored the throttle in a race to his favorite hole.

In seven years, Capt. Shastay, a 38-year-old mustachioed salt, has spotted three bodies in the drink. He ruins four propellers a year, partly from maneuvering the boat over underwater boulders, but mostly from hitting a flotilla of debris—refrigerators, chests of drawers, telephone poles, wooden planks. A few months ago he piloted through an oil spill off 14th Street.

Despite its reputation as a waste-filled waterway, this harbor is one of the world's great estuaries—a unique ecosystem where freshwater and saltwater are fused by river currents and ocean tides. Here, against the New York City skyline, in one of the busiest ports in the world, are some real lunkers, promises Capt. Shastay, who has helped land 30 striped bass on a good day.

The fishing is best in the spring and fall, and while it's still good through winter, Capt. Shastay says business drops precipitously with the thermometer. In the

fall, many striped bass fatten up on shad, herring, crabs and worms before migrating north and south to coastal waters. Other game fish, such as bluefish, swim alongside striped bass in the tide rips near the mouth of the Hudson until colder temperatures send them south. Much of the Hudson River's young striped-bass stock—from one to three years old—winters within the New York estuary. In the spring, the older fish return to spawn.

As helicopters pass overhead, Capt. Shastay eases the boat to deserted wooden docks jutting out from Pier 11 in lower Manhattan. We throw white rubber lures resembling bait fish into the East River. After a half hour and only one bite, we move on to another of the captain's alleged hotspots: due east of the United Nations building on 42nd Street. The bait this time is slimy, wriggling, footlong eels.

Like an experienced cattleman positioning his horse, Capt. Shastay holds the boat in the strong currents by keeping the motor in low gear, near a half-acre island that was once a dangerous granite outcropping. He says that predator fish hang out

around such structures so they can easily dart into the flow; baitfish can't outswim bigger fish in such strong tidal current.

The action heats up near 125th Street, at Hell Gate, a section of the river whose powerful tides and rocky reefs fashioned a watery graveyard for ancient ships. Divers still come here in search of gold and silver carried by the British frigate *Hussar*, which sank in the channel in 1780.

Above us is the Triborough Bridge, which links the borough of Queens with Manhattan and the Bronx. As a wrecker approaches a stalled car on the bridge, one fishing partner, Ray Gilmore, starts whooping. His arched pole is pointed at the water. He lands a beautiful bluefish—slick and iridescent—which weighs in at about seven pounds and measures 32 inches.

Suddenly, my pole is ripped from my grip. The tiny reel screams. After a five-minute fight, the fish surfaces. A strip! At least 12 pounds! I bring him to the boat, but just as Capt. Shastay grabs it, trying to grip its lower jaw, the fish shakes free. A trophy lost.

Capt. Shastay warns us that we can

take the day's catch home—a legal stripper is 28 inches minimum—but we might not want to eat it. The waters here have been polluted for centuries, ever since the settlers of New Amsterdam dumped buckets of raw sewage into the river. The New York Department of Health advises that people avoid eating more than one meal a month of striped bass and one a week of bluefish from the East River. And the agency warns: "Women of child-bearing age and children under the age of 15 should eat no fish from these waters."

That's because some fish still have tissue traces of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs—chemicals that contaminate sediments in waterways and are suspected of causing cancer, infertility and birth defects. "Sometimes they come up with sores on them, but most of the fish are healthy," Capt. Shastay assures us. My friends and I exchange furtive glances, but it turns out there's evidence to back him up.

"There is a resurgence in the health of the harbor," says John Waldman, a researcher with the Hudson River Foundation, which tracks water quality. "It's not an absolutely clear picture, but things are getting better. We're seeing oysters in places we never saw 10 years ago." Oysters are a good indicator, he says, because they're "more sensitive than clams and mussels, and they can't walk away."

Researchers point to other positive signs, such as the return of herons, egrets and peregrine falcons. New York's Department of Environmental Protection says aggressive pollution-control programs and clean-up efforts have forced bacteria and other contaminants to their lowest levels in three decades.

And helped by Atlantic coastal states' strict fishing limits, the striped-bass numbers are "as strong as we've ever seen," says Byron Young, a marine-resource specialist with the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

For all that, a big pollution culprit remains "combined sewer overflows," which discharge untreated waste, including street litter, into the harbor during heavy rains. And heavy industrial PCBs remain from many sources.

After a few more stops, and a few fish later, we head back to the 23rd Street Pier. Capt. Shastay throttles the motor. Off in the distance, the Verrazano Narrows bridge linking Brooklyn and Staten Island shimmers like a string of emeralds. We take the catch into my friend Ray's restaurant, where we dine on bluefish fried in a light dusting of cornmeal, covered with tomatoes and onions. The tastiest thing I've ever eaten out of the East River.

