

Sea Rogue



FISHING CHARTERS
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Bag More Tog: Fishing the South Shore's Wrecks and Reefs

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The South Shore of Long Island is home to numerous wrecks and reefs that are easily accessible to boats running out of our south shore inlets, and you don't need a big boat to fish these structures, providing the weather is on your side. In the fall the Atlantic Beach Reef, Hempstead Reef, Fire Island Reef, McAllister Grounds/Fishing Line Reef, Rockaway Reef, Iberia wreck and the Stone Barge are among the places that play host to blackfish, and in some cases, big bulldog blackfish. Last season, nearly each trip produced tog in the 7 – 8 lb. range, with some days seeing fish to 11 lbs. If these locations are not already in your GPS a good place to start is a Captain Sea Gulls chart. Once you've fished and learned an area, you will be able to begin creating your own waypoint database for each location.

Setting Up on Structure Fishing tight to the structure whether it's a wreck, rockpile or rubble is key for increasing your chances of catching big blackfish. For bigger boats with a double anchoring system, this task is a little easier. However, let me take a minute to discuss the technique for setting up with a single anchor. Once you've found the "spot", put the boat in neutral and let her drift. This will give you a read as to how your boat will lie in the wind and tide. Your GPS will make this easy. Take this time to get the anchor and rode ready for deployment. After a minute or two look at the tracking marks on your GPS. It will show in what direction you have drifted from the spot meaning you must run in the opposite direction to set your anchor. Follow the tracking line past the waypoint. My rule of thumb is

to run past the spot at least 3 times the depth of the water. So if you are fishing in 60 feet, I would run at least 180 feet past the spot to drop the anchor. If windy go a little further, if calm you can go a little less. When you drop the anchor make sure it is on the bottom then pay out some additional line. Next, put the boat in reverse on a course heading back to the waypoint to help set the hook. Once set, you can pay out line as needed to ensure you are settled in over the "sweet spot". A grapple can also be used once anchored to help prevent you from swinging - especially on windy days. Remember, if you are off the structure you may as well be fishing in a desert.

KISS To pull big blackfish from the sticky structure, you will need tackle that is up to the task. A 6 -7 foot rod rated from 20 – 40 lbs matched with a 3/0 or 4/0 conventional reel is ideal. I use custom sticks outfitted with Shimano Tekota # 500s spooled with 40-pound Power Pro braided line due to its sensitivity and lack of stretch. These lines also have a thinner diameter so you can fish with less weight. A 10 foot stretch of 50 lb. leader material is joined to the braided line using a double uni-knot.

When it comes to my terminal tackle for catching blackfish I prefer to keep it simple starting with using only one hook. I snell a single 3.0 or 4.0 octopus hook to #50 mono leader material (fluorocarbon can also be used). I prefer Gamakatsu

hooks as they are razor sharp right out of the package. I connect the hook to a dropper loop on the leader a few inches above the sinker. Normally, you'll be fishing in anywhere from 40-80 feet of water so be prepared to use between 4 – 10 oz. of lead depending upon the tide.

While the thought of a doubleheader catch of keeper blackfish is very appealing, more often than not the second hook can create more trouble than it is worth, especially when fishing in "sticky" areas. Not only will you lose more rigs but the last thing you want is a big tog on one hook with the other caught up in the wreck. This results in you losing both rig and fish.

Go Green When it comes to bait, green crabs are my bait of choice. They are easy to obtain and they work well during the fall season. Hermit crabs are like "candy" to blackfish, however they are often hard to come by. I find the best way to rig a green crab depends upon how the fish are biting that day. Some days the blackfish prefer the top shell removed and some days it doesn't seem to matter. The same can be said for whether to fish them whole (cracking their shell) or cut in half. My advice is to start out by cutting them in half and removing the shell, legs and claws. A good pair of fishing shears is needed. You can always change the presentation based upon what they seem to prefer that day. No matter how the green crab is rigged, you must insert the hook by passing it through one of the leg holes, ensuring the point of the hook is exposed.

Patience Now that you are all baited up, it's time to go fishing. When my line hits the bottom I bounce the sinker up and down a few times before letting the bait settle on the bottom. I learned this trick long ago from an old timer and it has worked for me ever since. Perhaps it creates just enough commotion to grab the attention of Mr. Blackfish. You will typically start getting light "taps" right away. Often these are from bergalls, sea bass or even small blackfish. Don't swing at these light, rapid bites. Just wait and have patience.

Blackfish are one of the toughest fish to catch, especially the big boys. Their bite is very distinctive. At first you will feel light bites as they are mouthing the bait. Again, don't swing. Wait until you feel a harder tug which is when they have passed the bait to the back of their mouths and are starting to swim away. This is when you need to set the hook hard and start reeling fast to get them off the bottom. Five or six cranks of the reel handle should ensure you won't be taken back into the structure.

Blackfish are powerful fish so a slow and steady retrieve is important. Do not pump the rod or rush the fish to the surface, especially if there is a big tog at the end of your line. Remember, the fish will be fighting hard to free himself from the hook. Always have a net ready and lead the fish in head first.

Keep a Log Blackfishing is one on my favorite types of fishing. Yes it can be challenging at times, but also very rewarding. It takes time, practice and patience to hone your skill at catching these fish. So pick a nice day and fish some structure that is close to your home port. To improve your catches over time it is very important to keep a log for each trip with regards to date, catch data, locations fished (waypoints) tides, wind conditions, etc. After a few seasons you will have valuable information that will help you target the right place at the right time.

A word of caution, especially for us smaller boat owners, the fall weather can be unpredictable, so check the forecast before leaving the dock and maintain a watchful eye while out on the water.

Captain Bob Schmitt runs Sea Rogue Charters out of Freeport, NY. He has been fishing LI's south shore waters for over 40 years.

