

Sea Rogue



FISHING CHARTERS
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Springtime is Prime Time for Sea Bass

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Black sea bass, *Centropristis striata*, is an important fishery to Long Island anglers. In recent years more and more anglers have found out how fun sea bass fishing can be. Finding the right piece of structure, be it a wreck, mussel bed or artificial reef usually results in some fast action and assure you get to take home some tasty fillets for the dinner table. Most of the sea bass you catch in the springtime will be in the 1- 3 lb range, and fish of this size provide great sport on light tackle. Sea bass are a great introduction for novices and especially kids to the sport of fishing. They are relatively easy to catch and once you locate them, you are pretty much guaranteed steady action.

A Little Background Sea bass spend the winter months in depths from 200 to more than 600 feet, and come spring, begin to move inshore where they will settle on structure-laden bottom. They will stay throughout the summer until their fall migration back to deeper water. Some of the larger adults will begin their annual offshore migration as early as August.

Sea bass have an unusual lifecycle as most are hermaphroditic, reproducing as both female and male at some time in their lives. They are all born female. The age when the switch from female to male occurs is debatable, although most will have done so before six years of age. Many biologists believe the numbers that change sexes are dependent upon the relative size of the school and health of the fishery.

Prime Time May through June is prime time for sea bass along the South Shore. During the past few seasons the spring sea bass fishing has been phenomenal for those targeting these fish. The spring fishery has also featured some real big sea bass in the 5 – 7 lb. range. These are the mature males with the turquoise hump on their heads. Last season, fishing out of Jones Inlet, the hot action carried through most of the summer. During the summer months, you may have to cull through shorter fish, but rest assured you'll land more than your share of keepers. In addition, summer fishing means the addition of porgies and triggerfish to your cooler, providing additional good eating.

Seek Out Structure Sea bass and structure go hand in hand. However, unlike with blackfish where being tight to structure is paramount to success, sea bass are more forgiving. In fact, they are often off the structure and patrolling the perimeter. This is especially true when there is a strong wind and tide as fish tend to stage towards the leeward side of the structure. There are numerous habitats a short ride from all the major south shore inlets. Among them are Moriches, Fire Island, Hempstead, Atlantic Beach and Rockaway artificial reefs, the Cholera and Angler banks, and numerous local wrecks. Most of these spots are just a few miles off the beach and within easy range of small boaters. You'll find their locations marked on any good fishing or navigation chart. The Captain Segull series of charts are an excellent source for locating these structures.

Setting Up Typically, I prefer to anchor up on a particular spot. This is especially true when fishing a wreck or reef. Run to your designated GPS coordinate and watch the fish finder until you see the bottom rise. Often you will see markings all over and around the structure. That often translates into a large population of sea bass. With a GPS, anchoring is easy. Return to your GPS coordinate and slip into neutral to see how your boat is drifting. Once the direction is established, go back to the coordinate and run your boat in the opposite direction. I usually travel three times the depth of the water then drop anchor. Once the anchor has grabbed, then pay out line until you're sitting atop the structure. If the action begins to taper off, work the anchor rode to fish different sections of the structure.

I will drift fish when fishing more expansive bottom structure such as the Cholera banks as it allows me to cover more area, and the fish are generally more spread out. However, conditions need to be right, meaning little to no wind. Too fast a drift requires the use of heavy sinkers, which can eliminate the opportunity to fish with light tackle. Ideally, a slower drift (under .5 knots) is preferred. Once the fish are found, use your chart plotter to short drift that area.

Lighten Up When it comes to tackle I say go as light as possible. Bottom fishing is all about the "feel" and when targeting sea bass there is no need for "beefed up" tackle. I prefer a 6-7 foot rod rated for 10 – 20 pound line and fitted with a Shimano Takota 300s or TR-100s. In addition to custom made sticks, my favorite rod for sea bass fishing is the Shimano Trevala (10 – 30 pound) jigging rod. It provides incredible action and my customers are all smiles seeing their rod is doubled over by a big knucklehead sea bass, yet it has enough backbone should a husky striper or blue decide to grab your bait. I prefer braided lines such as 30 pound Power Pro as they are super sensitive with no stretch so you feel every bite. These lines also have a thinner diameter so you can fish with less weight.

Fish & Cut Bait Catching sea bass is easy once you find them. The sea bass is predominantly a bottom feeder so I prefer to fish with bait. Fresh shucked skimmers are my bait of choice followed by local squid. These baits are readily available at most bait & tackle shops across the Island. On occasion sea bass will strike at jigs and buck tails, especially when tipped with squid or sparring.

Regarding terminal tackle, a simple hi-low rig is all you need. I start with 40-pound leader material, preferring to go a little heavier to protect against abrasion as your rig rubs against the structure. At the bottom I tie a dropper loop a few inches above the sinker and about 10" above that I tie another dropper loop. The dropper loops are large enough so that I connect a 3/0 Gamakatsu octopus hook directly to each loop. If I am drift fishing, I will snell the hook to a piece of leader material and then connect the hook to the dropper loop. This longer leader allows the bait to flow more naturally while drifting. When fishing "sticky" bottom, it pays to tie your rigs in advance so they can be replaced quickly. This will allow you to get back in the water quickly during a "hot" bite.

Excellent Eating In my humble opinion, sea bass are probably the best eating fish from our local waters, although I do love my cod. Their firm white flaky meat is favored by many anglers in our area. Sea bass are easy to fillet and can be broiled, pan seared or fried, and they make the best fish sticks you'll ever eat. Your kids will love 'em too! Another delicacy is Asian-style deep fried whole sea bass. If you've never tried it, you do not know what you are missing. Any way you prepare it, sea bass is simply delish!

This spring, put in the time, identify some productive bottom in your area, and try some light tackle sea bass fishing. I think you'll find it a blast!

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

