



TRAVEL BRIEFS

Sport Fishing Capital?

The Often-Overlooked New Jersey Fishery Puts Up Some Impressive Numbers

By Capt. Dave Bender

I know, I know — you're waiting for the punch line. Well, as a longtime New Jersey charter-boat captain, I'm here to tell you that my home state offers some of the most productive offshore big-game fishing on the East Coast. I understand that most people usually don't associate New Jersey with blue-water big game, but the fact remains that some of the best blue water a fisherman could ever want lies just 75 miles from Manasquan Inlet.

Here in New Jersey we rely heavily on the Gulf Stream eddies and offshore satellite temperature charts to lead us to the warm-water hot spots. Although we are a long way from the true edge of the Gulf Stream, spiraling eddies spin off from the stream and push in toward our offshore canyons all season — even during the winter months. In fact, a local boat fished on New Year's Day 2000 and brought in the first tuna of the new millennium.

Out of Manasquan Inlet, our main fishing grounds cover one of the largest, most productive of all the canyons — the "Hudson," as we locals like to call it. Without getting into a geology lesson, the continental shelf runs just offshore of New Jersey, and it's scarred with huge underwater canyons that run from 100 fathoms out to 1,000 fathoms. (Imagine the Grand Canyon underwater, and you should get the picture.) The charter fleet out of Manasquan primarily targets yellowfin and longfin (albacore) tuna, but the billfish fishery here surprises most anglers. The

New Jersey state blue marlin record belongs to a fish weighing 1,046 pounds.

On the Troll ...

Most of the New Jersey charter fleet offers anglers a choice of two kinds of offshore trips: a troll trip or an overnighter. Trolling trips leave the dock at about 1 a.m. to arrive at the canyons by daybreak. These trips provide shots at an exciting number of different species: The warm-water eddies that spin off of the Gulf Stream bring in blue marlin, white marlin, wahoo, yellowfin tuna and even an occasional sailfish.

But tuna remain our bread and butter even on the trolling trips. It's not uncommon to troll the first-light bite and hook up with six or seven albacore in the 45- to 55-pound class. The charter-boat captains like these fish because of their size and numbers.

However, many large yellowfin and bigeye tuna usually shadow the quicker albacore, and a 175-pound bigeye puts up the fight of a lifetime for most anglers. If you're lucky you'll get to

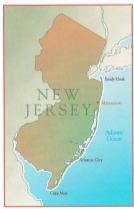
experience a "wolf pack," or multiple bigeye bites at the same time. Many times we've taken up to four 175- to 190-pounders at once.

... Or Overnight

Another popular trip the charter fleet offers is the overnighter. Most privately owned boats opt for this trip not only because it's cheaper, when considering hours fished, but also because the time spent offshore at night can be as exciting as it gets. The overnighter leaves the dock about 10 a.m. on the first day and doesn't return until about 2 p.m. the next day. The trip starts out with a troll until dark, during which we usually get our best bite, particularly for bigeye. Then once night falls on the canyon, the "chunk" begins. All night we throw cut butterfish chunks into the deep, targeting hungry schools of yellowfin. We enjoyed a tremendous season on yellowfin last summer, with fish averaging about 80 pounds.

As a bonus, night trips also provide a shot at swordfish. We always run a deep line for swords, and almost every night someone in the fleet catches one in the canyon. Just two years ago we boated 13 during the season, the largest weighing 180 pounds. But 300-pounders are not uncommon.

These overnight trips sometimes result in what we call a "mad-dog" tuna bite. When the yellowfin start biting like "mad dogs" you can put a dozen tuna in the boat in under an hour. Of course, not every trip is a slammer, but the good days outnumber the bad. During the previous five years we limited out with 18 yellowfin (three per angler) on most of our trips. It's not uncommon for an





RICHARD GIBSON

While most charter boats in the New Jersey fleet target tuna, warm Gulf Stream eddies bring plenty of blue and white marlin within easy reach of the area's long-range canyon trips.

overnighter to produce as many as 10 50-pound albacore, a dozen 60-pound yellowfin, five mahimahi and perhaps even a swordfish or a nice mako.

Oh yes, makos swim the canyons as do big threshers — unfortunately so do large numbers of blue sharks.

Blues Here, Too

Rarely a day goes by during the summer months that someone doesn't hook a large blue marlin over one of the canyons. In August, just before this issue went to press, the Manasquan fleet had a good four-day run on blue marlin. The bite was over a large area from the Hudson to the Spencer canyon, and Capt. Jimmy Gahm started the ball rolling by releasing an estimated 550-pound blue on August 7. The next day, Capt. Steve Matthews on the *Pepper* released a 300-pounder. On the 9th, the streak continued when Capt. Gerard Allesio on the *G Rod* released another



500-pounder.

And Sunday proved even better. Capt. Ken Avon on the *Due Course* released a 500-plus-pound blue and boated a 125-pound wahoo for good mea-

sure. That same day Capt. Allesio struck again, releasing a large blue estimated at 400 to 500 pounds, along with a large white in the 70-pound range. But the day belonged to Capt. Jimmy Early on the *Early Bird*. After catching four bigeye ranging from 175 to 200 pounds, he hooked into a monster blue. After a 1½-hour battle, they released the 15-foot marlin, calling it an 800-pounder.

White marlin make a great showing in the Northeast during August and September, and the guys in south Jersey target them regularly. The charter and private fleet in the northern ports such as Belmar, Manasquan and Barnegat target tuna and marlin, but the southern ports such as Ocean City, Townsends and Cape May target billfish almost exclusively.

Just last October we had a return visit from giant bluefin for the first time in quite a few years. Several giant bluefins in the 600-

to 800-pound range were landed in the "mudhole," a minicanyon that lies just 22 miles from Manasquan Inlet. Not long ago, big bluefin were regular visitors to the Jersey shore, and it is hoped that the recent catches at the mudhole foretell a return of these great fish to the area.

Vacation Spot

The New Jersey shore offers the vacationer clean, picturesque beaches and beautiful scenery befitting a place known as the Garden State. There are some great cities and some fine dining as well. On days when I'm not fishing, there's nothing I enjoy more than eating breakfast with my wife at one of the local seaside eateries. Here, I can watch the boats heading offshore, knowing that in just three more hours they will be on the grounds, plying the fish-rich waters off of my inlet, Manasquan, New Jersey — the sport-fishing capital of the world. 