



Spring Fly-fishing Sandy Hook Bay

By Phil Metz

Well sitting here at the desk, well into a long, cold winter, I can't stop thinking about the spring fishery in Sandy Hook Bay. Although not always the first place to see action in the spring, Sandy Hook Bay holds some of the best spring fishing for bass and bluefish for the saltwater fly fisherman.

Sandy Hook Bay is comprised within a general area from the mouth of the Shrewsbury River near the Highlands Bridge down to the tip of Sandy Hook and across to the Earle Ammunition Pier. The majority of fly fishermen's accesses to the bay waters will be obtained within Sandy Hook Park. There are also access points in the town of Leonardo that should not be overlooked. Within Sandy Hook Park the key points for the bayside fly rodder are Plum Island, Spermaceti Cove and Horseshoe Cove. Each of these areas provides currents, flats, drop-offs that hold stripers, bluefish and weakfish during the spring season. On the opposite side of the bay, the Leonardo Flats explode with bluefish during the later part of the spring and hold cruising stripers and weakfish as well.

Plum Island

Plum Island is the southernmost bayside access point within Sandy Hook Park that juts out into the waters of the Shrewsbury River and the beginning of Sandy Hook Bay. This is a prime spot to begin your search for spring striped bass and bluefish. During the early morning hours, fish can be had inside the small lagoon area south of the island. As the sun rises, move to the head of the island and cast towards the current rips and lanes formed by the Shrewsbury River. It is here that large bluefish and stripers will seek out early season herring and menhaden and strike with abandon. Depending on tidal stage, fly fishermen can move toward the backside of the island and fish the cuts and gullies among the numerous sand spits. Striped bass and bluefish wait in ambush for baitfish to be flushed out of the salt ponds that form behind the island.

Spermaceti Cove

Not far from the Plum Island access point lays Spermaceti Cove opposite Lot C within the park. The cove consists of flat, holes and a series of old pilings that hold moving fish. The best time to fish Spermaceti Cove in the spring is an afternoon, early outgoing tide. During that stage, the waters that flushed in hours ago have warmed up and there is enough water covering the flats for fish to forage. As you enter the access point, the area to the south consists mainly of flats and should be fished during the very earliest stages of the outgoing tide. The area to the east contains a few drop-off holes and the series of old pilings that can be fished a couple hours into the outgoing tide. Regardless of the

distance between Spermaceti Cove and the main waters of Sandy Hook Bay, large fish will enter the cove and corral bait against the flats and shallow bank waters. Fish this area thoroughly.

Horseshoe Cove

Horseshoe Cove is the northernmost bayside access point within Sandy Hook Park that extends itself into the waters of Sandy Hook Bay. During the summer months, the cove is dotted with boats of all types, mooring or enjoying the surrounding waters. However, during the spring months the fly fisherman can access the deep hole just south of the point that encloses the cove. Backcast can be limited but the drop-off is relatively close to the shore so distance need not be a major factor. Early season bass will seek out baitfish and worms within the hole and occasionally bluefish will tear through the cove causing all kinds of havoc. At times, bass and bluefish will push bait concentrations up on the surrounding flats making for fast action.

Leonardo Flats

On the opposite side of the bay lies the town of Leonardo, mostly noted for the Naval Ammunition Pier that juts out into Sandy Hook Bay. Fly fishermen should follow the signs to the Leonardo State Boat Ramp and can park and fish to the east or west of the launching area. Although not overly abundant with shoreline access, Leonardo boasts flats that come alive with bluefish during early May. Bluefish can be readily seen smashing baitfish up to the shoreline during high and early outgoing tides. Throwing menhaden and herring patterns will certainly produce fish at these times and should not be overlooked as a fishing opportunity.

Fishing Sandy Hook Bay during the spring requires a minimum of an 8wt fly rod with sufficient backing for the strong runs of large bluefish. However, the ideal rod for the bay during this time is a 9wt, 9-foot fly rod. Later in the spring when large menhaden and blue back herring are present, flyrodders can break out the 10wt and cast some fairly large imitations for respectable fish. Floating fly lines, intermediate lines and sinking lines in both full and shooting taper can all be used when fishing the bay. During the early spring, the angler should carry an intermediate and deep sinking line and then add a floating line later in the season. Striped bass and bluefish will take a multitude of flies with jiggies, clousers, half and half flies along with a few worm imitations making up the early season box. As the season progresses and baitfish become more prevalent, bunker flies such as Wide Sides, Flash Flies, Lefty's Deceivers as well as Bob's Bangers and Blado's Crease Flies can be used to provoke mammoth strikes. It is also a good idea to carry a stripping basket to gain that sometimes all-important extra few feet of distance on your cast.

The saltwater fly fisherman can start fishing Sandy Hook Bay waters at the beginning of April. At this time, keep the flies near the bottom of the water column and strip back at a moderate pace. At the onset of May, Sandy Hook Bay busts wide open. Large bluefish enter the bay waters following herring and menhaden and are eager to attack flies mimicking their imitations. Striped bass lurk below waiting to pounce on disoriented baitfish. This is when it all seems to come together and might be the best time to fish the bay for striped bass and bluefish. Keep your eyes open for blitzes, which are frequent during this time and if you hit a fish in a certain area be prepared to catch others close by.

As May turns into June, the pods of fish begin to grow smaller and fish begin to set up in their summer haunts. The bay will still produce fish but the fly fisherman will have to work harder to obtain a good catch.

Sandy Hook Bay is a great springtime producer for the saltwater fly fisherman. Taking advantage of the season, the tide and the forage available and matching your tackle and techniques can produce some beautiful fish and fast action. Take time to study the nooks and crannies of the bay and you will be rewarded during the spring season.

Good luck.