

Fishing & Hunting

By Richard Seale



Fiddling with, and for, sheepshead

Sheepshead fishing is quite good in Bogue Sound as I write this in mid-August. The sound has lots of nice structures along its periphery such as piers, bridges and the port walls. Depending on the depth of water around the pilings of those structures, they provide great habitats for sheepshead. These fish have specialized mouth parts with buck teeth and very tough inner mouth parts that allow them to grind shelled foods such as barnacles and sea urchins which live on pilings.

A technique to fish for these most comestible fish is to pick a set of pilings to fish. First off, edge up to the chosen piling and, using a long-handled tool like a garden shovel, scrape off a goodly amount of barnacle growth from the piling. In some places you will note that a lot of barnacles have already been shaved off by previous sheepshead fishermen. This will create a chum slick and will bring in nearby sheepshead as well as other fish. After this task is done, you can tie off from a piling so your boat is pulled away by the tide. If in shallow enough water, it is a good idea to set a stern anchor at an angle off the seaward stern so you can adjust the position of the boat by using the bow and stern lines. Sometimes you can set the boat up and then pull yourself into the piling to do the scraping.

You will want to have a stout rod rigged with a good reel filled with 25-pound test or more abrasion-resistant braided line, and a leader of 30-pound test or more. The leader needs to hold a one-to-three ounce sinker at its terminal end and a stout, live bait-style hook (#1 or #1/0 hook for fiddler crabs and up to a #3/0 hook for urchins) about 12 inches above the sinker on a short side loop of leader. From hook loop to top of leader need only be about six inches. Stout rigging is necessary due to the fact that a sheepshead, once hooked, will try to escape into the pilings. This often ends

up wrapping your line around the barnacle-covered pilings, where sharp edges will threaten to cut the line. You cannot go too far into "stout rigging" because most bites of a sheepshead are very light. The common tongue-in-cheek advice is to "set the hook just before you feel the bite."

This trait means you will need a good supply of bait. Locally there are two live baits that you can obtain at low tides: fiddler crabs and sea urchins. Fiddler crabs are small crabs that scurry through the marsh grass and sometimes cover an open area of a marsh with swarms of crabs. A fine-mesh, long-handled net, like a crabbing net, is a useful tool. You can hand grab these crabs, too. The males have a claw that can nip you, but it usually is just a pinch.

You will need several dozen crabs for each person on a sheepshead fishing expedition. The crabs are hooked at one end of the shell. Sea urchins can be caught at low, slack tide on exposed bridge girders and pilings. To use these for bait, you will need to trim off the long spines with a pair of scissors. The round shell and body of the sea urchin is then hooked through the bottom hole with the point of the hook pushed through the top of the shell. Both of these baits can usually be purchased at fishing supply stores by the dozen. Fiddler crabs can be kept alive in a slightly tilted cooler for several weeks with a little bit of salt water and with goldfish food. Sea urchins are harder to keep alive.

Drop your line next to a piling until the sinker hits bottom and then lift the sinker just off the bottom. This tension arrangement usually provides you with the most sensitive feel so you have a better chance to set the hook just as the sheepshead tries to gently grind the bait off the hook. Once hooked, the fish puts up a nice fight. A landing net is a good tool to use in getting the fish onboard, and needle-nose pliers are handy to unhook this tough-mouthed fish.

Watch out for the long stiff dorsal spines on this fish. Size and limit regulations are a minimum 10-inch fork length and 10 fish a day. These black and white, vertically striped fish can run up to 15 pounds or so, though most caught are smaller than that.

Fish in the 14-inch-plus sizes are OK to filet. Sautéed in butter or broiled with a butter rub, you will find that the sheepshead is one of the finest of table fare fishes, fileted or not.

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