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NH tourist, the bluefish, soon to depart bay

By Dave Kellam
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DURHAM -- "The water boils with small fish swimming around frantically to escape, even leaping out of the water to get away. Terns swarm overhead as the bait is hit from all sides. It doesn't stop until they are all eaten. It is a wild scene."

This is an account of a bluefish feeding frenzy on Great Bay by Mike Dionne, the N.H. Fish and Game Marine biologist who spends much of his time on the water monitoring fish populations in coastal New Hampshire. The bluefish that are now gorging themselves in the Great Bay Estuary and off the N.H. coast have traveled hundreds of miles from their spawning grounds south of Cape Cod to enjoy New Hampshire's bounty. In September, the fish will turn around and eat their way back to the south.

Dionne notes that the favorite prey of bluefish in our region is menhaden, locally called pogies, but the ravenous predators will also devour herring, silversides, smelt and eels. Using razor-sharp teeth, the bluefish cut through baitfish as they feed. Their amazing choppers are what give the juvenile fish, about 6 inches long, their common name "snapper."

"You can actually hear their teeth snapping as you pull a net of them on deck," Dionne reports.

The sharp teeth of the bluefish are bad news for small fish and a challenge for anglers. Jason MacKenzie, at Suds-n-Soda in Greenland, says that the fish in the bay are hardest on the fishing equipment. He notes that "the medium-size bluefish in the 5- to 7-pound range in the bays will gang up on you. When the school is active, there will be two or three fish biting at your lure at the same time. Unless you have a long leader, one of them will bite through your line."

He recommends using a 24-inch, nylon-coated steel leader to defend against the sharp teeth.

When asked by customers how to catch a bluefish, MacKenzie offers this advice: "Go out fishing for stripers and act like the bluefish don't exist, then one is sure to hit your lure. If they're hungry, they will find you."

When a school of bluefish is in a feeding frenzy, nearly any lure that matches the size of the prey will work, such as poppers, spoons and plugs. Try using lures that sink fast through the school, because the larger bluefish and sometimes striped bass are feeding beneath the melee.

Curiously, the annual invasion of bluefish in the region has fluctuated through time. According to the Gulf of Maine Research Institute, bluefish were abundant in Colonial times; however, they seemingly disappeared around 1764, and did not reappear north of Cape Cod for another 70 years. Since then, the population has varied and this year seems to be about average.

Bluefish over 24 inches are being caught now near the mouth of the Piscataqua River. Upriver, schools of slightly smaller fish have been feeding near Adams Point in Durham and Great Bay Marina in Newington. Mornings often produce fish; however, schools of blitzing blues can be seen anytime of day or tide. Remember to keep an eye on the sky for a swarm of common terns over feeding bluefish. Now is the time to catch these marine tourists before they swim south for the winter.

Eye on Our Estuaries is an educational column initiated by the New Hampshire Estuaries Project about coastal watershed issues. The NHEP is a collaborative program involving governmental agencies, universities, nonprofit organizations, businesses and the public to protect, enhance and monitor the environmental quality of the state's coastal bays and rivers.

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