

Clam Nights on the Sod Banks. **By DJ Muller**

Across the water Staten Island lay still as the sun lies down for an evenings sleep. The waters of the bay are stained and slowing. All around us are brown weeds, drift logs, and an unbelievable amount of garbage. A steady stream of anxious surfcasters has lined up on the banks, some have even built a fire, perhaps they are more interested in staying warm than catching fish. Geoff Turner baits up and cast his bait into the Raritan, and waits as the end of the incoming tide completes its tide cycle. We have been waiting for the turn of the tide. The outgoing is always the most productive tide, as the warm waters of the day's sun drains the shallows and puts the stripers on the feed. Any shallow water mud baits work well in April, worms are very good, but the exurban prices lately have pushed us to use our old stand-by...the clams. Clams hold a second place to no bait mind you! Turner and I make some small talk watching a purple sky run into black when suddenly his rod goes down hard. He grabs it from the spike and sets the hook. The fish peels off some drag and then concedes, a short time later Geoff washes up a nice 16 pound striper. Bigger than the usual striper on the sod banks, but by no means unheard of. They usually run from 20 inches up to about 16-18 pounds, but every once in a while a 20, 30, or even a fish close to 40 pounds gets pulled out of this area every spring. It is why I put in my time. It is not common, but it does happen, and I'll take my chances.

Every year by the time April rolls round, I am raring and ready to catch some stripers and I'll bet you are too. Yeah, so they may be on the small side, but it still beats waiting another month for the bigger fish to hit the beach. Don't get me wrong, there are big fish caught all along the Raritan shores, but just not terribly consistently. Every year, I get at least a couple teenagers and a bunch of smaller fish. This time of the year, I am out for fun and to get the spider webs out and to enjoy some beautiful sunsets, not to mention meet some very, very nice people. Not that the sod banks for me are a social thing by any means, when I fish, it is all business. Once the business is taken care of (my bait tossed out), then you have time to socialize until the next knockdown. I have met some extremely nice and knowledgeable old-timers on the banks. They are a walking wealth of knowledge and history. Although I only see them in the spring of each year, they are always a pleasure to talk to.

The best time to work the sods is the top of the tide, at dusk. The warm outgoing water, is best, coinciding with the oncoming darkness pulls the bass to the banks the way a magnet draws straight pins.

Fresh clams, a couple 8-9 foot rods and you are in business. I usually carry 2 nine foot rods. These are enough to give me a legitimate shot if a big bass knocks on the door. Some guys use small 5 and 6 foot set-ups, and I would love to see how they would handle a true cow should one come calling...."Moooooo!" I use a matching reel, like a Penn 704Z or Slammer 360 or 460. 30 or 50 pound Test Power Pro or Fireline would be great, and if mono is your forte then 15-17 pound test mono will do the trick.

A lot of the fishing this time of the year can also be done during the day as long as it is around high tide. If it is low tide, stay home and watch Sponge Bob Square Pants re-runs you will get more out of it that way. The water gets so low that there is barely enough water for even a small fish to swim in. I always plan my trips around the high tide, thus I

write on my calendar the good tides at my destination, and then I plan on fishing at those times when they correspond with dusk. For example high tide in early April this year on Sunday the ninth, is at 6:20 p.m. The next evening high tide is at 7:02 p.m. This means the tide will slow down and slack at around these times give roughly an hour leeway, and the outgoing will begin at dusk and into the dark. I will make it a point to be on the banks at this time. The night, as you know, brings very good fishing, as stripers are known to be nocturnal feeders. Some nights can be very good mind you so don't be afraid of the dark. Many times on a hot bite I will stay until the bite cools, it may last for three or four hours. Sometimes it only lasts for 20 minutes.

Another considerable factor is wind. Wind is important whenever you fish. If the wind is stiff, and out of the northeast, north, or northwest fairly hard, 15-20 knots, or more, stick with Sponge Bob, as the water can get rough and dirty, quickly. Depending on where it is that you fish, and knowing which way it is that you will be facing (this is something you should know), reside yourself to the fact that if the wind will be stiff and in your face that will need to take a pass on the session.

Besides rod, reel, and clams, I also always bring a couple plugs with me, just in case. You just never know what may erupt in front of you, as the area in which your are fishing is common ground (or should I say water) for thousands and thousands of bunker. Adult bunker move into these waters in the spring, as large schools will often appear and move past you. I'm not quite sure why, as menhaden spawn offshore and the larvae make their way inshore into estuarine environments to grow, but regardless these huge schools of adult bunker will some times pass by on their way to...somewhere. I know I don't need to say it but I will anyway, where there are big bunker, there are big bass (or blues). Be ready!

What I will try to remember to do is carry a snatch hook in the bucket. If the bunker come through I will either snag and drop, or more commonly, snag bunker and fish the fresh chunks. While doing this, a few years back, I wound up with a nice 22 pound bass that was eager for an easy meal. A trophy? No. A nice way to start off the season? Yes!

There are many good access points along the Raritan Bay sod banks; Morgan, Keyport, Cliffwood Beach, Pebble Beach, Union Beach, Keansburg (not really a sod bank), and on further east. All these areas hold fish, and all give you a shot at a fish that will make you happy for a good week.

Get the cobwebs out have some fun and catch some fish, maybe even meet a new friend. Please make it a point to clean up you stuff and your area when you leave. It is up to us as fishermen to be responsible to the shoreline on which we fish. If we are responsible, we will have our spots and access' for a long time. If we leave our garbage and leave other peoples garbage, we run the risk of losing what we have. So be responsible to the land on which we fish.

See you on the banks!