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Head Start On

FALL FLOUNDER

by Carlos Bastos, Jr.

I don't know many people who would turn down a chance at catching a mess of winter flounder, but most fishermen concentrate on flounder primarily in the spring. Maybe this is because the fall has so many species of fish to choose from or that some fishermen think that you can't put together a decent catch in the fall.

The first reason is a valid one. The fall period offers so

face with the cold water. I try to make it out to the ocean as much as possible but when I can't because it's windy, I know exactly what I'm fishing for that day - winter flounder.

LOCATION

The same areas that you catch flounder in the spring are worth a try in the fall. For the last four years I have been fishing the mud flats that come off a channel in about 3 to 5 feet of depth and no one would ever think about catching fish there. I found that area in the spring and the fishing was fantastic so my fishing companion was always trying to convince me to fish there in the fall. One day I gave in and we totaled 33 big flatties in four hours fishing. I discovered that they maintain a pretty steady pattern. In the fall they move onto the flats and feed before burying themselves in the thick mud. Springtime comes along and as soon as the water temperature reaches about 44 degrees they go on a feeding binge. In the fall, I have to wait until the bluefish clear out of the flats before I fish there for flounder.

To consistently catch flounder in the fall you have to find an area that they use to spend the winter. I have caught them at places like Romer Shoals but they do not stick around for too long. I have had many of trips in the spring and fall where I could

have easily brought home 80 or 90 flounder.

HIT THE WRECKS

One area that really produces big flounder are the local wrecks outside of Sandy Hook. I like to start fishing those areas around the middle of October. This type of fishing requires a lot of patience and a little skill. Flounder gather along the edges of the wrecks and it is your job to find which edge. I usually start by fishing the part of the wreck that is on the downside of the current. If I don't get any hookups within a half-hour, I'll try a different side of the wreck.



A few essential items needed for floundering - chum pot, anchor(s), marker buoys.

many options on what to fish for that some days it's hard to make a decision. I fish primarily on weekends and on Friday evenings I am usually trying to put together my game plan for the following day. I can tell you that I have a hard time deciding whether I am going to troll some stripers or maybe jig some blues and albacores or bottom fish for sea bass and blackfish. So where do flounder come in the picture?

When October rolls around it usually means I have about six weeks to still fish on my 17-foot center console and with those northwest winds getting stronger and colder every day, I just get tired of getting sprayed in the

Another problem that you might encounter while fishing the wrecks for flounder are the bergalls. If they are thick your baits will only last a second or two down there. The best thing to do in that situation is to anchor directly on the wreck and then start letting out anchor line 3 feet at a time because you don't want to be too far back. As soon as the bergalls stop biting, tie up your anchor line.

Flounder are rarely caught directly on top of the wreck, but I have also caught some big blackfish while fishing for flounders. Once you find a particular wreck that is holding fish, you can count on them being there every October because they follow a consistent pattern every year.

RIGGING UP

I like to fish as light as possible when I'm out on the mud flats. With the water being only 3 to 5 feet deep a light conventional or spinning setup is all that you will need. I fish with 10 or 12-pound line on my reel and my rod is 7 feet in length. I have to go a bit heavier when fishing the wrecks because of the deeper water (40 to 60 feet) and because if you hook up with a big blackfish you are going to have a hard time pulling him out with a light rod and light line. A fast taper medium rod will do just fine and the reel should have at least 20-pound line on it.

On the terminal end, I tie a double hook rig using a 30-inch piece of 20-pound leader and a pair of 2/0 Owner hooks. I first snell the one hook at one end and make a dropper loop for the second hook about 15 inches up from the snelled hook. At the other end of the rig, I make a small loop so that I can run the whole rig through a small dropper loop that I placed about 3 inches up from my sinker on my main line. I also like to put small chartreuse grubs on my hooks. They seem to work extremely well especially when the water is a little cloudy.

Most fishermen that I know like to drop their rigs to the bottom and let them sit there until they get a bite. I like to bounce my sinker a few times and then let it rest for about five minutes or so. I usually get a bite as soon as I stop bouncing the sinker. I think they initially come towards the bait because of the bottom being stirred up and then when the bait is found they bite it very aggressively. On the mud flats, I almost lost a few rods because one of us wasn't paying attention and the fish started swimming away with a rod.

BAITING UP

If I am fishing for flounder on the wrecks, I like to use clam strips and mussels. Thin strips cut 1-inch long and 1/4-inch wide work well. On the flats, I stick to using sandworms. I chum a lot in both areas that I have discussed but I do it differently at each area.

While I am fishing the edge of a wreck, I use a big chum pot that I tape across the middle with duct tape. The reason that I do this is so that the chum disperses slowly due to the stronger tides. I also use a chum pot on the flats but the fish respond better when we ladle out the chum. All you need is a tuna fish can and a small stick to nail it to and you're in business.

I start making my own chum about two to three weeks in advance. I buy four bushels of shucked clam and I blend them in an old food processor that I bought at a flea market. A little rice mixed in with the clam will not hurt either. For my chum pots, I freeze chum logs that I make by first cutting 6-inch sections out of PVC pipe and inserting a plastic bag in each section. Then take your clam chum and pour it into the bag. Tie off the bag and

you're all set. When you are ready to use them, just simply pull out the bag and dump the chum log into your pot. The rest of the chum I place in a plastic container and put it in the refrigerator. Mix in a little salt to preserve the clam a little longer. It usually stays fresh for about 3 weeks. One thing to remember is to try to find a refrigerator that is not in your kitchen. You might end up sleeping on the couch the night before your fishing trip.

ANCHORING TIPS

Everyone knows that when you are fishing for flounder you don't want your boat to swing at all. On my Proline, I carry two anchors so when I fish out on the wrecks, I bridle both anchors off the bow. When I fish on the flats, because the water is calm there, I can anchor with one on the bow and the other anchor tied off at the stern. You do that in the ocean and all it will take is one big wave to capsized your boat.

Continued On Next Page



Added bonus - flounder fishing on wrecks will also get you into some decent blackfish.

SEARCH TACTICS

I found the mud flats mentioned earlier, completely by accident. My usual spot was not producing that day so I just took a shot and anchored on these flats coming off a deep channel. Until that day I was a firm believer that most flounder were caught in deep holes and in channels but now when I fish that area I anchor up and just wait for the fish to turn on because they usually do.



Carlos Bastos, Sr. with a 3-pound winter flounder caught on a wreck in 60 feet of water.

I wish I could tell everyone which wrecks hold flounder but it took me a lot of time and research to find the right ones. If you fish the Sandy Hook area like I do, check some of the local wrecks especially those located in between the channels and the Scotland area. Also search out some local dive groups on the Internet. They can be extremely helpful in telling if the fish are on the wrecks and you might even be able to squeeze out a loran number or two.

This fall, try giving flounder a try whether it be that other fish aren't biting or the winds are too much for you to head out to sea. You won't have much competition and you just might come home with some tasty flounder filet for dinner. Tight lines.





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