

Hooked On Recovery

October 14, 2005

More Surf Fishing

Every year, Arno and I head to Cape Cod around Columbus Day weekend. Stripers and bluefish are fattening themselves up for the migration south and the fishing from the beach is usually quite good. I really enjoy getting away for a bit and spending some time with great friends in the wind, sand and salt. And, this year, the rain. We brought Russ with us too and although we caught fish, it was difficult considering the weather and other fishing conditions...

As soon as we hit the beach, we saw some fish activity. Shortcast abandoned his preferred fishing method and launched a monster cast with the wind when a bluefish struck. He set the hook, the water erupted near the fish and line tore from his reel. At first, we didn't know what was happening. After a hundred yards or so, the line stopped screaming. Far down the beach, a huge seal rolled onto his back with Arno's bluefish in his mouth. The popper was still in the fish's mouth. Did the seal just flash us a smile? After tussling with the seal for a considerable time, the line broke and we all looked at each other. I said, "That was different", and we continued fishing.

After awhile we noticed a pattern. If a seal was off to our left or right, and started swimming in our direction, we would usually hook up. We think they were herding schools of fish in front of us. Why? So they could grab 'em and play with us. Russ had his first three fish taken by seals. One guy, who was fishing about a quarter mile away, was getting pulled down the beach toward us. I think he had really strong line and couldn't break it. As he strolled through our mini-encampment he muttered loud enough for us to hear the New York accent, "This is getting freaking aggravating!", except he didn't say freakin'. Up and down the beach we'd hear guys yelling at the seals. One time, I hooked a fish when I saw the seal coming after it. I held the spool of my fishing reel, in effect freezing the drag, and sprinted up the beach in attempt to haul the fish out of the water. The seal grabbed it right near shore, but I managed to slide the fish out of his grasp and onto the sand. I noticed the poor blue had a big slash in its side. Being the mature, calm, cool individual that I am, I grabbed the bluefish by the tail, and with the rod in the other hand started dancing the tall geeky guy jig. That's also an old fisherman's jig. The seal surfaced and gave me the evil eye. I rub it in and yelled, "I'm faster than you! I beat you. Where'd you get your swimming license, K-Mart? You call yourself a seal?!? I've seen manatees swim faster than you! Ha ha ha... I won! Your mother wears a snorkel! Na na na na naaaa." The seal looked at me oddly, got a little irritated, flipped me the fin and disappeared under the water. As I walked up the beach to the truck, Arno and Russ looked at me a little oddly too. I guess I just had to let off some steam.

Later that day, we were fishing in a crowd of about thirty surfcasters. I noticed a guy in a pink hat fishing with a neon green lure. What a dope. First of all, real surf fishermen don't wear pink hats. And they don't fish with neon green lures. Then I watched him cast! He could really, really cast. Then he hooked up. Then he hooked up again. All right, maybe he wasn't such a dope. Being only a few yards from us, we watched him catch a few blues, then a really big striper. Now I got aggravated. Dang! I look more closely at that stupid lure he was using. He was fishing a neon green needlefish with a bright yellow bottom. Other guys start rummaging through their tackle boxes. The ones who had that color started hooking up too! The guy in the pink hat caught a few more blues and another big striper. Now I'm scrounging through every

lure box I own looking for neon green with a yellow bottom. So is Arno. I had some that were close but the fish wouldn't hit 'em. Sandy has always wondered why I need so many lures... well it's for a time like this! That stupid neon green lure was the only color that was working. Man, I was frustrated. We didn't catch a single fish that evening. After a trip to the tackle shop, I now have a neon green needlefish with a bright yellow bottom in my truck, brand new, unopened in its package. That color will probably never be hot again. Next year it'll be something different like pink or orange or fuchsia or some other stupid color.

After the first day, the weather turned on us. The wind shifted out of the east into our face, this is usually a pretty good sign. When the waves and weather are in your teeth, the bait is getting pushed closer to the beach, which usually translates into blues and stripers being close to the beach. The wind got so strong that I had to take a four ounce tin and whip it into the wind with a sidearm cast to keep the lure just over the wave tops and out of the wind. Sure enough blues were feeding and they would hit with fury. However, the wind reached gale forces and by the time high tide and massive surf rolled in, the entire beach was under water and unfishable. We were pinned up against the dune grass and decided to head for the barn.

After the storm subsided, we're fishing in the dark and Shortcast is doing his thing fishing sand eels on the bottom. He is standing near the water, his sand spike and bait are a few feet behind him. After reeling in and checking his bait, he goes to get some fresh sand eels and notices that his bag of bait is gone. Coyote footprints are all around the sand spike. Big coyote footprints. Russ flips on his head lamp and follows the footprints. They travel a few feet behind where he and I were fishing. Kinda creepy, thinking that some big ol' hungry wild dog is sneaking around in the darkness behind us and we didn't have clue. Maybe it was better that way.

So those are a few stories from my last fishing trip. I wish something profound would come to me on how to relate it all to recovery. I can say that the enjoyment and the emotion and the fun are all real today. Not artificial. I didn't need, or want, a six-pack to make me feel better or make the experience better. Being there, being rooted in the moment is one of the greatest gifts of recovery. I thoroughly enjoyed the entire trip. I enjoyed wrestling with the seals, the challenge to my preparedness (no neon green), the tough weather conditions and most importantly, the friendship of Arno and Russ. I came home refreshed and relaxed. I thoroughly enjoyed the welcome from my family. I guess it's all about enjoying life. Today, life is good.

One day at a time.

Hooked on Recovery is a biweekly message from CCAR Executive Director Phillip Valentine, person in recovery since 12/28/87, devoted husband, a father of five and just another surf fisherman. These thoughts, views and opinions reflect on his personal recovery and are not meant in any way to speak for the entire recovery community. He welcomes all your comments and suggestions on this column, email him at phillip@ccar.us. Visit the website at www.ccar.us to read the entire series.