

if you like your fishing

FAST AND

FURIOUS

go for mackerel!

BY JANE VACHON

Mackerel get a bad rap. Sure, they make great bait. Experienced anglers chug out to the buoys at the mouth of Portsmouth Harbor, put down a six-hook “sabiki” rig and – if conditions are right – in a half hour have a live-well full of mackerel. Then the real fishing starts; the mackerel get hooked whole, like giant minnows, and tossed back in to get gulped down by a big striper or slashed in two by a raging bluefish. If you think of Atlantic mackerel just as bait, though, you’re missing out on some action-packed fishing fun. Going after these aerodynamic fish – cousins of the tuna that race through the water by the thousands in shimmering schools – can be a fabulous introduction to fishing and the memory of a lifetime.

Instant Gratification

Mackerel fishing is a great way to give beginning anglers and kids a taste of real fishing excitement. It doesn’t cost much to get out on one of New Hampshire’s half-day party boats (*see sidebar*) that head out to likely spots near Plum Island, White Island in the Isles of Shoals or along the rocks off Rye Ledge. Boat captains follow the fish and draw them to the boat with chum (cut-up fish) dropped in the water. The school of mackerel arrives, and thousands of darting, silvery forms surge under the boat, rippling the surface of the sea with their passage.

“Drop your lines!” yells the captain. You let your silver

diamond jig drop into the water so it’s just out of sight – maybe 15 feet down — and start jiggling. Bang! Instantly the hits begin, and dozens of silvery bullets follow the fish you’ve hooked right up to the boat. Haul your prize over the railing and a gorgeous, iridescent mackerel drops off into the bucket, its fluttering tail drumming a tattoo, revving like a boat engine out of water. No need for bait — just drop the bare hook back into the frenzied waters and prepare for impact as more seething fish join the fight for the flashing jig. Can you keep up?

“It’s a great way for people to get started, because it gets people excited about fishing,” said Kevin Sullivan, a Fish and Game Marine Biologist. You don’t need much equipment – a light, 6-8 lb. line and a standard freshwater rod (these can be rented on board for about \$5) – “and the action is fast and furious. This is instant gratification fishing. As soon as you put your line down, you’ve got a mackerel hooked. You might not be coming home with a trophy or a wall mount, but you’ll have a sore wrist from pulling in fish. For getting kids started, that’s the way to go.”

On a typical mackerel fishing expedition, you can catch 50 or more fish in a day, averaging 12 to 15 inches long, and maybe a pound each. “That’s a nice size fish for beginners or kids to handle,” says Sullivan. The mackerel’s lack of sharp teeth and relatively soft fins are another plus for first-timers; you don’t risk bodily injury getting this fish off the hook.

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Best Bets for Mackerel

Mackerel are caught mostly on half-day party boat trips. Fleets that offer half-day trips for mackerel in season (check websites or call for details on pricing and schedules) include:

Al Gauron Deep-Sea Fishing & Whale Watching, Hampton Harbor,
1-800-905-7820, www.algauron.com

Atlantic Queen II, Rye Harbor,
1-800-942-5364, www.atlanticwhalewatch.com

Eastman's Fishing Fleet, Seabrook Beach,
603-474-3461, www.eastmansdocks.com

Smith and Gilmore Deep Sea Fishing and Whale Watching, Hampton Beach,
1-877-272-4005, www.smithandgilmore.com

Prime Fishing Time

Mackerel chow down on zooplankton – a wide range of small shrimp and other small organisms – as well as pursuing fish like silversides. Because of this diet, they have no teeth to speak of, unlike stripers and bluefish. As New Hampshire waters warm up and food becomes plentiful – by the end of May and early June – mackerel fishing heats up, too.

The key factor driving the Atlantic mackerel's migration is water temperature. During the winter, mackerel congregate out in the ocean along the continental shelf, where waters hundreds of feet deep offer more constant water temperatures and some protection from storms. In the spring, mackerel are on the move, heading northeast and towards shore. They spawn off the coast from New Jersey to southern Massachusetts, and later

in June and July they move on to the western Gulf of Maine for the rest of the summer. (Another contingent of mackerel intermingles, but spawns farther north in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.)

As the summer progresses, mackerel begin to have some big, bad company off New Hampshire's coastline. By mid-May, big, hungry stripers are on the scene, eager to make a meal of mackerel; and by July, slashing, toothy bluefish are also prowling New Hampshire waters. These predators push the mackerel farther north. By mid-July and August, most of the mackerel have fled to cooler, safer waters off the Maine coast. They venture back towards the end of the summer, making for more great mackerel fishing at the end of August and September (but keep in mind that it can be hard to find a half-day party boat after Labor Day). By late fall, the mackerel once again head for the open ocean.

Built for Speed

So you're bringing home a big haul of mackerel. Can you eat it? Sure you can – it's good baked, fried or grilled (try grilling it with a thin layer of mayonnaise on top – delicious). Mackerel have the red muscle meat of long distance swimmers. These fish are fast and incredibly aerodynamic. Fish of the open ocean, they never stop swimming. They don't sit on the bottom waiting for a meal, but instead stay constantly on the move. Mackerel use oxygen at such a high rate that if they stop swimming in warmer waters, they die. These streamlined fish are designed for speed, with a perfect bullet shape, modified dorsal fin and stabilizing rows of

ATLANTIC MACKEREL

(*Scomber scombrus*)

Mackerel Stats

Length: average of 12" to 15"

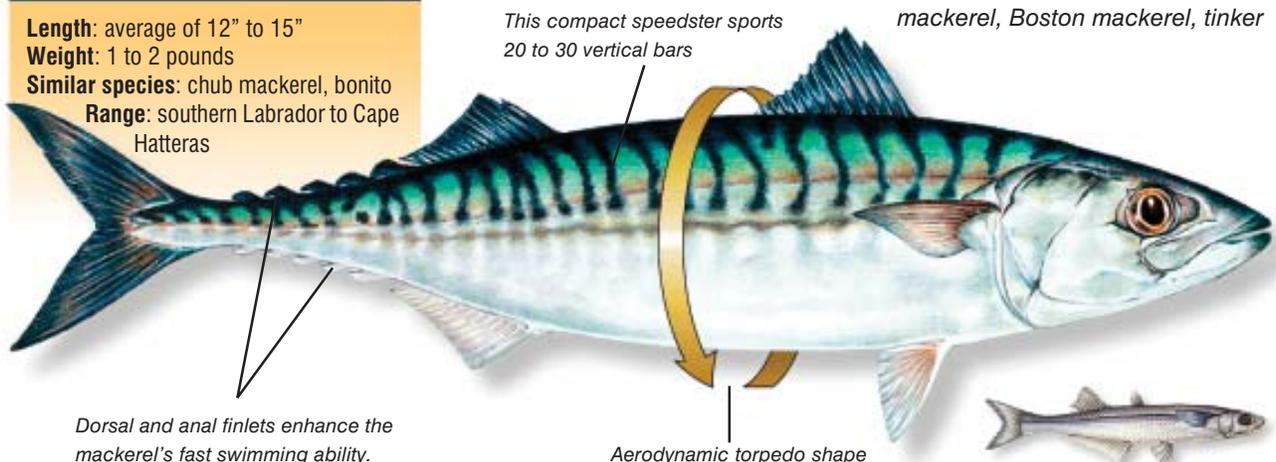
Weight: 1 to 2 pounds

Similar species: chub mackerel, bonito

Range: southern Labrador to Cape Hatteras

A.K.A.

mackerel, Boston mackerel, tinker



VICTOR YOUNG ILLUSTRATIONS

Future Anglers:

CCA-NH Takes Kids Mackerel Fishing

For the past five years, the Coastal Conservation Association of New Hampshire (CCA-NH) has teamed up with the Seacoast Big Brothers/Big Sisters to host a kids' fishing day.

This is no ordinary event — CCA-NH charters the Atlantic Queen out of Rye Harbor and takes 25 youngsters and their Big Brother/Big Sister mentors out for a half-day of mackerel fishing. The kids, age 6 to 17, and their mentors become fishing teams, experiencing the day together.

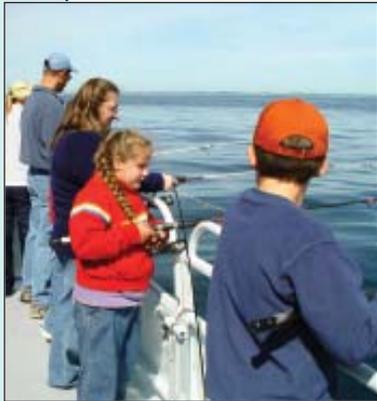
likely spot for mackerel, and soon thousands of fish churn through the waters around the boat. Everyone who has a line in the water gets a hit. "These fish fight pretty hard," said White. "Mackerel are in the tuna family, so they're great fighters." With helping hands from a number of CCA-NH members on board, the kids are soon pulling fish in and sending their lines back out into the thrashing throng of mackerel below.

White recalls a young boy who had caught a mackerel at one of these events. "He was so excited, he wrapped his arms around the fish and ran up and down the boat showing people. The fish was flapping and scales were flying. He was so proud!"

After their fishing adventure, the boat docks, and the whole group enjoys a beachfront barbeque at Wallis Sands State Park, courtesy of and prepared by other members of CCA-NH who are busy cooking while the anglers are working up an appetite. The kids all take home a prize — a tackle box or a rod and reel — but they also take with them the memory of an amazing day and an exciting introduction to the fun of fishing.

For Seacoast Big Brothers/Big Sisters, the kids' fishing day "is probably our most sought-after event of the year," said Amanda Cole, Director of Client Services for the organization. "It's so good of CCA to do this event for us. The kids are all smiles — they'll never forget the trip."

Based in Portsmouth, CCA-NH is involved in many restoration projects along New Hampshire's seacoast, from working on salt marsh restoration to serving as a watchdog on pollution issues affecting Great Bay and the coastline. Its vision is to first, protect the resource, then improve current and future fishing for everyone. Find out more about CCA-NH at www.ccanh.org.



Kids learn the excitement of mackerel fishing off the N.H. coast.

"This is one of the days I really look forward to," said G. Ritchie White, a member of the Board of Directors at CCA-NH and a former Fish and Game Commissioner. White takes a lead role in planning the kids' fishing day, as well as participating with the Board of Directors in carrying out the annual fundraising banquet that helps to pay for the event. "It's one of the highlights of my fishing year. The kids really enjoy it and are so appreciative."

CCA-NH sets the event for the first Saturday in June, when large schools of Atlantic mackerel have returned to New Hampshire waters. Why mackerel fishing? "We always focus on mackerel, because for a half-day of fishing, we know ALL the kids will catch fish. There's a 100% success rate," said White.

The Atlantic Queen takes the crew out to a

finlets above and below — an amazing design that allows a mackerel to propel forward at great speeds with a mere flutter of the tail.

This athlete of the open ocean gives us a wonderful recreational fishery. In recent years, the estimated recreational mackerel catch in New Hampshire has been as high as 471,000 in a single season (the average is about 300,000 a year). Mackerel fishing makes for exciting action with-

out the wait. You know you'll catch fish. They're thrilling to see, easy to catch and tons of fun to reel in. And you never know — a breathtaking bluefish might swoop in to take that mackerel off your line. It's all part of the fun of going after the silver bullet.

WJ

Jane Vachon is Associate Editor of New Hampshire Wildlife Journal.

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— Amanda Cole**

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