

## **FISHING JONES INLET**

**By Frank Schiff**

**The August sun was hidden behind patchy clouds as I tossed a double hook high-low rig loaded with two dozen spearing. I was nabbing one keeper fluke for every 10 throwbacks. Every August, the fluke season goes into full swing at Jones Inlet. Yet not everyone fishes for fluke. Thirty feet to my right, a fisherman settled in on the surf with his fly rod. For ninety minutes, he whipped his green number 9-line back and forth. I was hooking a fluke every 10 minutes, while the fly angler only battled the wind. What a waste of time, I thought. As I reeled in another fluke, I glanced over to my right. The fly angler's rod started to bent, pulsate and wobble. He reeled furiously. His drag sang. My first impression, it must be a big bluefish. The upper half of his rod bent into an upside down L. With my throwback fluke in hand, I stopped to witness this epic battle. Within minutes, the feisty fighter was flopping head and tail on the sand.**

**I looked over. The fish was shaped like a torpedo unlike a fat bluefish. What the heck was it, I thought? I had already released my short fluke and planted my fishing rod into my sand spike. Then I walked over as the fisherman unhooked his green and white nymph fly from the fish's mouth. I glanced and noticed the yellow polka dot spots. It was a Spanish mackerel.**

**Every species of fish in our waters could be caught at Jones Inlet. The inlet is like a fish aquarium. Of course, there is the usual cast of characters, fluke, bluefish, striped bass, blackfish, etc, nevertheless other species make guest appearances. Bonitos, whale like sunfish, Northern Stargazers, if the fish inhabits the Long Island waters, eventually it will show up at the inlet. I've seen a lot and caught a lot at the inlet. For me, Jones Inlet is my backyard. I live only eight miles away and I have been fishing there for over 30 years.**

**It's my turf and I know the surf.**

### **FLUKE FISHING JONES INLET'S ACE CARD**

**A huge school of 20 to 24" fluke swam near the shoreline at Jones Inlet in August, two years ago. That year anglers were only allowed to keep three flukes at 17" or more. Tossing my high-low rig twenty yards, I reached the maximum in only a couple of hours. I walked off the sand**

with a 20, 22, and 23-inch flukes. Those days are the better ones, yet it's possible and likely to happen on the Jones Inlet surf on any given day.

Because I use a drop net to catch my spearing at Jones Beach piers, I'm not shy about putting sometimes eight spearing on each hook. I believe the bigger the bait, the bigger the fluke.

On the day I caught the three big flukes, the tide was rushing in to flood status. Yet, fluke could be caught on all tides. They just have to be there. And during the summer from June to September, they're there, a lot more often than not.

Jones Inlet of course is the gateway to the back bays of Nassau County, and the State Boat Channel that leads to the Great South Bay. For fish, it's like a superhighway to get to wherever they want to swim.

What makes the Inlet a hot fishing spot, however, is the underwater sand structure. The inlet slopes radically, a five-yard flip of the wrist drops a rig in 10 feet of water. And the inlet slopes all the way to the channel.

When the fluke migrate to the Inlet in June, by July in droves, they lie on the slope bottom waiting to ambush baitfish. As the baitfish swim above them, the fluke attack to feed. This is another reason why Jones Inlet is a prime surf fishing mecca. Loads, and I mean loads of baitfish. I've witness a half-mile stretch of baitfish hugging the shoreline. Every sort from spearing, peanut bunker, mullets in September, bay anchovies, and newly spawned snappers.

Needless to say, flukes have a field day feasting on the baitfish.

For the most part, the baitfish hug the shoreline, so do the flukes. Sometimes, I only need to toss my rig three yards to hook one.

## HOW TO GET THERE

For those who never fished Jones Inlet, it's located on the opposite side of West End 2 parking lot. To get there, you drive to the Jones Beach West End Boat Basin. You follow the road to the U.S. Coast Guard station, then make a left before the coast guard gate onto the hard dirt road. Because it's state property, one needs a \$15 state night fishing permit, or a four-wheel drive vehicle. The state Department of Environmental Conservation officers and the State Park Police check the parking lot often. So you need to follow the rules.

Once you're on the dirt road, follow it for a quarter-mile until you see the Inlet shoreline rocks and the water. Make a left and go to the

gravel parking lot at the end. If you don't have a permit or a four-wheel vehicle you could park in the boat basin parking lot.

Once parked and your permit displayed, walk through the opening of the wood fence barrier onto the sand path with grass on both sides. Keep walking for a 100 yards until you arrive to the waterfront beach. (This is not Short Beach. Short Beach is on the U.S. Coast Guard property and you're not allowed to fish on it). Other options, nevertheless is to fish in front or on the rocks at Jones Inlet, which is also productive.

After a short walk to the beach, you'll be gazing at Jones Inlet. Since the sand structure changes there year by year, you'll notice at least one point of land sticking out. This year, I guess because of the mild winter, the sand structure is similar to last year's. Out of habit, I'll fish the point, where the sand curves out into the inlet. If there's no fish biting there, I'll move to the backside of the point, or somewhere near the end of the rocks, where you first walk onto the beach. Of course, I lack x-ray vision and can't see where the fish are at the moment. So I walk to a variety of spots until I find the sweet one. It changes, sometimes from hour to hour, day to day, or week to week. You have to experiment by trying different locations.

When fluking, I use a two-ounce sinker, sometimes as light as one-ounce, the inlet's current, nevertheless, is fast, and two-ounces will drift rapidly. Of course, that's good for fluking. To use the current to your advantage, toss your rig to the opposite side of the current flow, so it will cover more ground. The more the rig moves, of course, the more likely you'll come across fish. When the tide turns slack, don't be overly concerned about your rig not moving. Flukes are active, aggressive feeders, there's a good chance a fluke will swim to your spot. The only drawback about fluke fishing in the inlet, however, is there are plenty of shorts. It takes sometimes up to 20 shorts before you can land a keeper. Those shorts, nevertheless, will keep you busy.

## **FIGHTING THE BLUES**

Flukes are most abundant in the Inlet. Second is Bluefish. On occasion, a bluefish about seven pounds will be hooked, but it's more common to catch a two-pound cocktail bluefish. And when the Bluefish invade the Jones Inlet shoreline in the beginning of May, usually around Mother's Day, the arm weary action is literally non-stop for a month. During the beginning of the season there are bigger bluefish. As the

weather warms, the big bluefish prowl into the back bays, and the cocktails show up.

My bait of choice is soft plastic. I used Fin-S or Bass Assassins. I prefer to stay away from the deadly Sassy Shads, because often the bluefish would chop off the paddle tail missing the hook. The result is putting another soft plastic bait on the lead head. As far as lead heads, I use about 3/8 to 1/2 ounce, enough to throw it at least 10 yards.

Believe me, when I say ferocious bluefish will chomp your soft plastic bait into shredded pieces. Usually, I have to replace it after my second bite. Yet soft plastic, or tins, are deadly to catch bluefish in the inlet. My weapon of choice, however, is soft plastic.

Like fluke fishing, there is no need to throw far for bluefish. A simple flip of the wrist, will put you in water deep enough to catch these fighters.

To add fun to the Jones Inlet experience, I always use light-tackle. A six-foot sturdy graphite rod with a small quick reel, equipped with 10-pound test is sufficient. Just make sure your fishing line is fresh, because even a 2-pound cocktail will snap it if it's frayed. As far as leaders, I avoid them. My personal belief is leaders deaden the action slightly. So I tie the lead head directly onto the line. Then thread my soft plastic bait through the center part of the head and piece the hook through the belly.

Like fluking, sometimes you have to walk up and down the beach to find the hot spot for bluefish. Usually, however, if the bluefish are there, everyone on the beach will catch them and crossed lines will happen.

## **STRIPERS PAY VISITS**

There are also striped bass at Jones Inlet. Although striped bass fishing is nowhere as good as fluke or bluefish. For the most part, schoolie stripers are caught at the inlet shoreline. Once in a blue moon, those bottom fishing with bunker or clams will pick up a keeper striper. Not often, however, at the inlet, it seems the stripers prefer deeper water at the inlet instead of the shoreline.

Since the State Boat Channel starts at the bridge leading to the Point Lookout piers at the eastern end of Reynolds Channel, it cuts into Jones Inlet. The water in the channel is deeper and that's where the big stripers prefer to feast. As far as striper fishing close to shore, from my experience, Jones Inlet is a good spot to catch 22-inch striped bass. They

are caught on bait and lures. Tins, soft plastic, swimming plugs, poppers, rattlers, all work to catch stripers at Jones Inlet. Even though bait outperforms lures.

Once again, like the fluke and bluefish, there is no ideal spot to catch bass. You just have to walk the beach, stop, cast, and if you catch nothing, you have the option of moving. Some walk around the beach to fish West End 2. It's a hike, over one-mile, but if your into exercise, why not.

If I were targeting keeper size stripers, however, I wouldn't feel lucky at Jones Inlet. For that I would go next door to West End 2. There are a lot more big stripers on the prowl along the shoreline there, then the inlet surf.

### **TIDERUNNERS NOT SO WEAK**

Jones Inlet is also ideal for weakfish, when they're in the neighborhood. Last year, I saw an angler reel in a 10-pound yellow tail weakfish from the surf, using a 017 -diamond jig tin lure. I looked in awe as he walked off the beach with his tiderunner slung over his shoulder.

Six years ago, weakfish were abundant at Jones Inlet. I nabbed a 27-incher from the surf on a white one-ounce bucktail sweeten with plastic bait on the hook. In total that year, I caught about a half-dozen big weakfish at Jones Inlet. Once, I saw the angler to my left hook into a big weakfish, within seconds, my rod was curling. I would guess the weakfish were swimming in schools hugging the shoreline.

For that weakfish, I tossed my bucktail several yards out and bounced it on the bottom by lifting and dropping the tip and reeling slowly. The faster you reel the more likely you'll hook into a bluefish, which sometimes school with weakfish.

Yet in the last five years, weakfish haven't shown up in great numbers at the Inlet. Once in a blue moon, someone will catch one, all the time a tiderunner, nevertheless, the pick has been inconsistent since 2000.

### **SMORGASBORD OF FISH LIKE AN AQUARIUM**

Outside of the usual suspects, other fish species visit the Inlet. Spanish Mackerel, for one, Bonito and Little Tunny. When the bonitos and little tunnies enter the inlet, there presence is known. Seagull and

terns are flocking all over. They are aggressive feeders and mercilessly chase bait all along the Inlet. The best time to catch them is late August and September in the years they show up, usually following a sizzling hot summer. Of course, it could be bluefish chasing the bait, but there is a likelihood it could be bonitos and little tunnies who some years show up at Jones Inlet. The water temperature usually has to be in the mid-70 degree for these fish to come into the inlet.

These fish are, however, harder to catch than bluefish or fluke. Maybe they are smarter, but you could throw a lure in the midst of their feeding frenzy and they won't touch it. Sometimes, nevertheless, they do. I guess the dumb ones hit the lures.

When they are around, they are fun to catch. Why? They are fighting machines, just like bluefish. They'll peel drag from a small reel so one needs to be ready if they hit. It could take at least five minutes to reel in a 3-pound bonito.

Other fish that pay a visit to the Inlet is, of course, Spanish Mackerel. It's rare but they are caught here.

Also some years, 2-pound shad show up.

## **BOTTOM DWELLERS ON THE ROCKS**

When I first started to fish Jones Inlet in the mid-1970s, I strictly went for blackfish. Thirty years ago, it was nearly impossible to fish the beach. Reason - there were mosquitoes and gnats everywhere. Just by fishing there, you left looking like a teenager with severe acne problems. And I mean millions of pesky bugs. You could fish comfortably for no more than one minute before you were spotted and targeted. This situation was straightened out in the late 1990s when the state government decided to spray chemicals in Jones Inlet to rid the area of pests. Now it's comfortable and fishable.

Yet thirty years ago, it wasn't. Only the rocks were fishable because the mosquitoes and gnats ventured there less often. For blackfish the old construction dock along the rocky shoreline is a haven. Big blackfish hang out here. My biggest was 5.2 pounds that gave me a fight worthy of the golden gloves.

When I hooked it, I knew it was big, so I reeled in like a madman. I wanted to lift the brute off the rocks. There are rocks covering the bottom of the old construction dock, it's a massive graveyard of sinkers and hooks.

The old construction dock is situated at the end of the gravel parking lot. It's where you see a low level rusty steel fence surrounding a point. When I go for blackfish, I usually fish in the middle of the old construction dock. By far, the best time to fish is slack tide. If you fish, however, when the tide is moving fast, most likely you'll snag your rig on every toss. To free it is an art form, taking years of experience. Even then sometimes there is nothing one could do about it except break the line, usually 40-pound test.

I chose to fish one hour before the slack tide up to one hour after. That way I keep most of my rigs, tied with a 3-ounces sinker, and the blackfish seem to bite good enough during the slack tide time span.

My bait of choice is green crab. I half it and remove a couple of legs to pierce my hook in one joint and out the other. A small green crab is also effective. I'll remove a couple of legs, and piece my hook through two leg joints and use the whole crab after smashing the top a little bit.

For blackfish, however, one needs to stay on one's toes. They are subtle nibblers, but when hooked, they turn into ferocious fighters.

Last year, however, blackfish failed to show up at the old construction dock. Of course, it changes from year to year. Last year, it could have been the sand that pushed into the old construction dock to the disliking of blackfish. Yet it changes every year. This year could be a hot blackfish bite.

Also, there are hordes of porgies, sea bass, kingfish, and winter flounders along the Jones Inlet rocky shoreline. To catch these fish, the best spot is where they are visible rocks bordering the shoreline. Winter flounders only show up here for a few weeks usually in June. Sea Bass, Porgies and kingfish stay here throughout the summer. The porgies and sea bass, however, are usually small and under the size regulation to keep them. Once in a while you could catch a 12-inch sea bass or a 12-inch porgy, but most likely they will be too small to keep. Yet they are there along the rocks. Best bait is usually clams or worms. Catching a winter flounder is usually an accident since no one there actually targets them.

### **AQUARIUM IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD**

Overall, Jones Inlet is an open aquarium loaded with a variety of fish species. Even though the popular inhabitants are fluke and bluefish you could catch a big striper or weakfish.

I have fished the inlet off and on now for the last 35 years. In the last 10 years I have fished there at least four times a week if not more

**often. Why? I live in Wantagh. If you look at the address of Jones Beach you'll discover that the entire State Park is in Wantagh. It's in my neighborhood, eight miles from my house.**

**Needless to say, I've seen a lot of action at Jones Inlet, and of course some slow quiet days. Yet that's fishing, some days they bite, some days they don't. Over the years, I've seen a million and one stories take place before my eyes. Such as the fly angler battling the Spanish mackerel. I've seen 20-pound skates hooked, once I even saw a wounded sunfish swim into the inlet. The inlet is a water road for fish. When I drop a line at the inlet, I am simply diverting some fish traffic onto my on the sandy surf.**

**#**