

Long Island Adventures

I finished the work part of my trip to Long Island, one Wednesday in October, that left Thursday to opportunity to search for fish.

I made the trek to Montauk, arrived before 1st light and pulled on my cold and stiff waders in a stiff 25 knot NE wind with temps in the low 40's, not what I had hoped for. My first attempt at the water was to the north of the light house, but the conditions greeting me when I reached the beach were daunting with 5-8 footers crashing into a rocky beach, and the full wind directly into my face. I think the tears running down my cheeks from the stinging NE wind convinced me this was not the spot. So I did a 180 to try south of the point and hopefully out of the weather. On the way back up the path I met two other fisherman heading for the spot I just vacated with the same enthusiasm that had just departed me a few minutes before. "Giving up?" was their greeting, I grunted a "you'll see in a minute" and walked on.

I found the path, reached the south side of the point and conditions were a bit more humane. The stiff wind was now a glancing blow on my port shoulder and the breakers were a good deal smaller than the last spot. A half hour of casting various offerings had brought nothing more than a snag, a break off and a re-tie in the Arctic conditions. No fish were showing and the other few hardy souls, including the two I had passed on my way back from destination 1 who had likely come to the same conclusion as I, were also getting no action. However, I could see a very large concentration of gulls working 300-400 yards off the rip rap directly at the base of the lighthouse and thought I would make my way over to give it a look see. The riprap is similar to the Merrimack's south jetty, which is built to a height of 40-50' and protects the bluff from erosion. The upper level is flat and the granite is a secure platform from which to observe. Fishing from this level is another thing. One can reach the water, but retrieving line and landing a fish is another matter altogether. It is like trying to fish the Merrimack from the south side of the south jetty. I could see the birds were moving closer so I made my way down the rip rap closer to the water to the land of greasy granite. The surf was pounding and an occasional big wave would send spray over me, I was close to the water but still above the danger zone. I thought landing a fish here would be a real adventure. I chose a 2 oz crippled herring, a good tradeoff for casting distance and matching the peanut bunker that was likely being ravaged by both bird above and hopefully our finned friends below. On the third cast, a violent hit was transmitted up the line. I set back hard while thinking this must be a false albacore the way it hit like a speeding locomotive. After the strike I started to retrieve line, waiting for the opposition to start peeling off line in an attempted get away. Something was not right, there was something definitely on the end of the line but it sure wasn't fighting like anything I had caught before, it was more like a struggle than a fight. It was very difficult to follow the line in the water, as the spray had encrusted my specks, the wind was tearing my eyes and had put a large bow in the line. After a short while I was able to figure out where the

location of the terminal end of the line was and found struggling at the end of the line was a one good size and terrified herring gull.

Oh shit, now what to do? The landing issues I recognized before were returning to haunt me. I made my way lower into the land of now greased and weedy boulders, to a semi-protected perch, just above the surf line where I could navigate my feathered prey. Pump and reel, the struggling gull was not cooperating and the wind and surf were pushing the poor creature to the south of my location. I got it close, but still south of me. A couple of large breakers washed the gull under and into the rocks. This wasn't good, I feared the gull was in deep trouble and was about to take a real beating in the pounding surf and boulders. I could not see exactly what was happening to the poor gull now directly in the break of the surf and rocks, but after the next breaker the gull was pulled out of the rock with the retreating surge. I was then able to navigate it back in front of me where the next breaker crashed it just to my right. Taking up the slack line, insured the bird was not sucked out with the waters retreat. The ruffled gull was now perched on a large boulder within a short distance, not looking happy, but better than could be expected give the pounding it just took in the surf.

I practice catch and release, even for agitated gulls, but to release my first gull, I would have to move lower, very close to the surf line, something I would have cared to avoid. I navigated the last few feet into the land of greased ball bearings, weedy and wet boulders, without incident. The weight and power of the surf had the upper hand and while I had to keep attention to the gull I couldn't also watch when the larger breakers would hit, leaving me unprepared and defenseless. It wasn't long until a few larger breakers crashed at my knees and sent volumes of water directly into my chest and over my head, slamming me against the granite riprap. Wow that hurt and still does each time I sit down! The water found every opening in my foul weather gear and I could feel the water moving up my arms, down the hood and seeped into my waders. My front jacket pocket was like a bucket, filled with the north Atlantic.

Having watched the Birdman, Charlie Novotny, skillfully release a Merrimack River gull cousin earlier in the summer, I had an idea how it should be done and knew if I could get a rag over the bird's head I would be safer from the powerful beak. However the rag I removed from my front pocket was not going to much use, as it was soaked clump. I gave an effort to put it over the gull's head, without success. A combination of the weight of the water saturating the rag and the incensed and uncooperative gull were large impediments to this goal. I did catch a break when the gull bit the rag and held on, better than my hand! With the gull occupied with the rag I noticed the line was only tangled around the gull and the crippled herring was dangling free. I reached for the knife at my belt, grabbed the lure with my left hand while also holding my rod, cut the line and pulled the lure free. The gull now free quickly made a struggle back through the surf line to open

water and took flight without any gesture of appreciation. I figured it must be a native Long Islander?

After a short uneventful climb back up the rocks I exited, cold and soaked back to the level I started maybe 15 minutes before. The diving gulls had once again moved beyond casting distance. It didn't matter, even if they moved back in I wasn't going to enter the surf zone again.

After exploring less treacherous Montauk locations I made my way back west along the coastal roads, stopping for a warm-up coffee and scouted numerous locations along the south and north shores of the south fork without success. I could see the birds working maybe a mile offshore south of the island, seemingly heading the same westerly direction as I. Regretfully I would never connect with these pods of activity.

My last stop was the east jetty of the Shinnecock Inlet. I was able to catch bluefish and shad on the bottom, consistently for the next four hours. I caught no trophies, but did manage a few doubles of bluefish on the crippled herring and shad on the small teaser. It turned out a very nice weather day. I finally thawed out and a fifteen fish day, a pretty good end of the season and a good Long Island Adventure.