



LEFTY KREH PHOTO

Bluefish Blitz

For the fastest action on saltwater, place yourself in a shoreline feeding frenzy. And hold on!

ED JAWOROWSKI

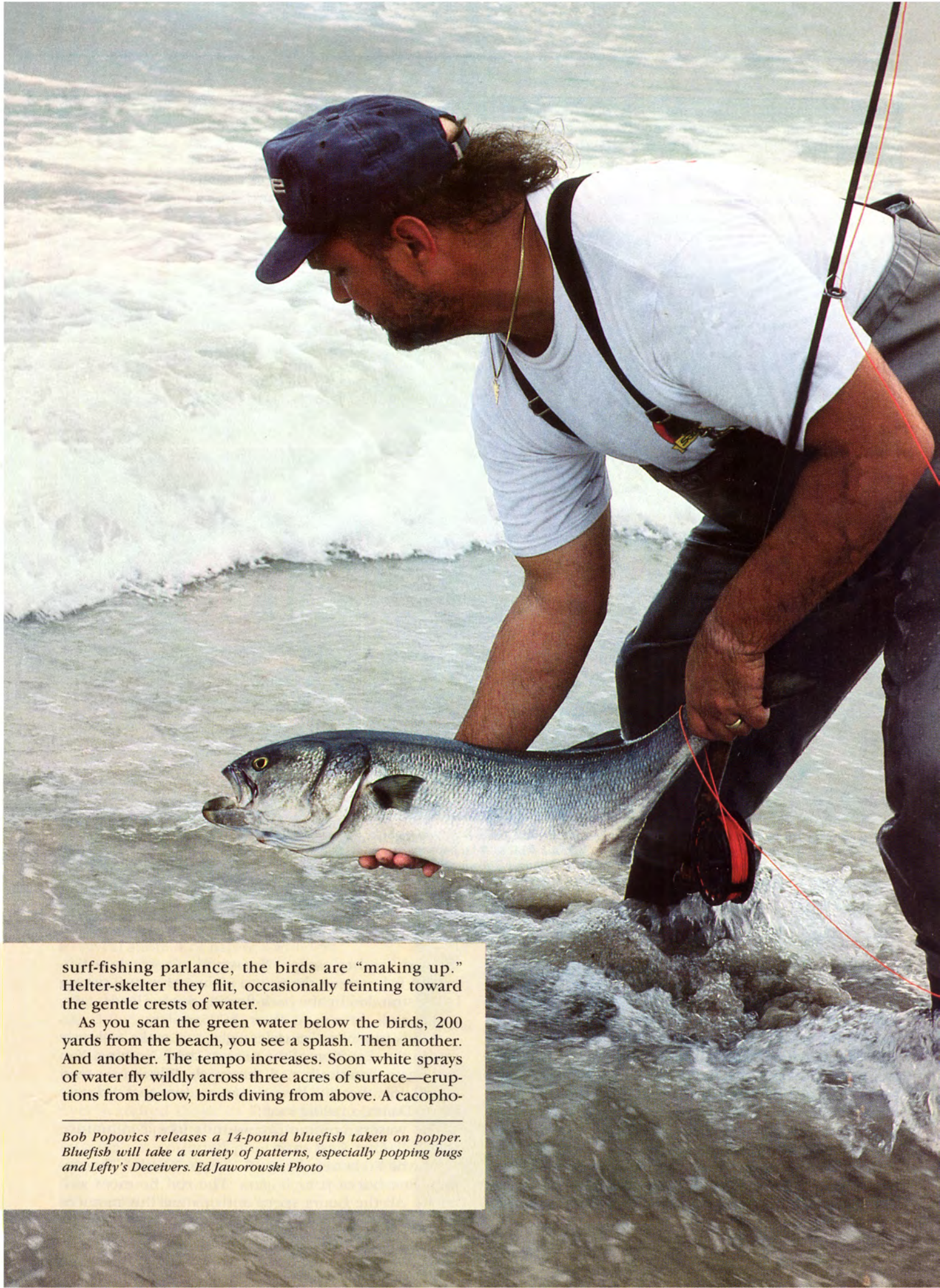
IT SEEMS INSIGNIFICANT when a few gulls appear, circling a hundred feet above the gentle chop of the Atlantic Ocean. The birds seemingly multiply before your eyes. Then to your right, another half-dozen gulls catch your attention as they leave the beach. They head from shore to join the others. When you look back to the main flock, you see 200 pairs of wings beginning to beat in a chaotic frenzy. You are witnessing one of nature's awesome displays that can inspire, entertain, and humble us.

The flock steadily descends to the surface. A dozen smaller terns appear, then another dozen. In

surf-fishing parlance, the birds are "making up." Helter-skelter they flit, occasionally feinting toward the gentle crests of water.

As you scan the green water below the birds, 200 yards from the beach, you see a splash. Then another. And another. The tempo increases. Soon white sprays of water fly wildly across three acres of surface—eruptions from below, birds diving from above. A cacophony

Bob Popovics releases a 14-pound bluefish taken on popper. Bluefish will take a variety of patterns, especially popping bugs and Lefty's Deceivers. Ed Jaworowski Photo





Fishing for bluefish in the Atlantic surf need not be complicated. Use a 9- or 10-weight rod with a reel that has some saltwater protection. Various #1/0 to #3/0 poppers and streamers work well. To prevent the bluefish's teeth (below right) from slicing your leader, tip your six-foot leader with a few inches of wire or heavy mono.



LETTY ARBETH PHOTO

ny of squawking gulls and screaming terns can't cover the noise of fish beating the water to a froth. It's a sight-and-sound show no Hollywood set can match.

The entire scenario moves steadily, relentlessly toward the beach, right toward where you are standing. The mayhem builds, closer and closer. Not 75 feet ahead of you, like a depth charge exploding, a 15-foot circle of tiny rainfish rises into the air. Massive heads break the surface in pursuit, jaws wildly snapping in a constant, reflexive motion. You can see the fury in the yellow iris of each predator.

Now they are inside the first line of breakers. "My God, are they going to come right into the shallows?" The three-inch prey race through the waves and onto

the very sand to escape. You stand awestruck as ten-pound fish pursue them into inches of water, risking being stranded by the back-flowing wash. Heads, tails, and dorsals thrash and cavort in the milieu.

Hands trembling, muscles tight, you make a clumsy cast in the direction of the nearest swirl. Nothing. You cast again, frantically. "All these fish. Why won't they take? Look; that guy has one on, so does that girl over there. Damn, a tailing loop!"

The watery commotion sounds like a miniature waterfall. Cast. Cast again.

"Maybe I'd better change fl..." Zap. "Ouch." The zipping line burns your fingers. The rod bounces and bucks. All the hours spent anticipating this moment

and thinking about how you would handle it seem to have been wasted. Forty feet away you see a dozen swirls in an area the size of your kitchen floor. You're tied to one of them, but you can't even tell which one. Whap. A breaker dowses you, knocking off your glasses.

The fish races to the right. Now he's going left. Up and out, shaking his head. "Is my drag too tight? What about the knots? Will he cut me off? Should I follow him down the beach? There must be thousands more out there."

This is a blitz, an all-out feeding frenzy that sets your pulse racing and your imagination soaring. Words like bedlam and mayhem only hint at the activity called a blitz.

Some use the word blitz in a cavalier fashion for any surface activity involving a passing school of feeding fish. Veterans know, however, that a blitz is not a transitional, momentary occurrence; it's not a cast or two and gone. Schools of fish may show themselves and offer sporting opportunities often during the course of a season on the Atlantic coast, and for several minutes they may move into casting

range, affording a quick shot for fly rodders. An all-out blitz, though, can last for hours, and it may stretch for several miles along the ocean front. A blitz is one of those splendid moments when a variety of factors combine to reveal another of nature's wonders.

Huge schools of gamefish, hungry and aggressive, occasionally intercept even larger schools of baitfish. When the predators can corral the prey—rainfish, mullet, spearing, or sandeels—usually against a shoreline, a blitz may develop. Several species of gamefish may feed in blitz proportions, but the word is almost synonymous with bluefish. If you have ever watched trout in a hatchery gobble handfuls of pellets or seen films of piranhas attacking a wounded prey, you have some idea of what to expect. The differences are that blues are stronger and larger than trout or piranha. They also school in greater num-

bers. No freshwater experience compares. The famed salmonfly and Green Drake hatches are thrilling in their own right but can't even hint at the activity which marauding bluefish represent.

There is something different about a blitz; it can go beyond hunger. The mayhem heightens until, instinctively, the blues chop and slash at anything in range. Occasional newspaper accounts report attacks on bathers along resort beaches, but these are unintentional, though the victims may not believe it. In their frenzy, bluefish chop baitfish, lures, lines, anything that comes into their path, even each other. They may then spit up the contents of a full belly and resume their onslaught.

Where It Happens

BLUEFISH MIGRATE FROM Florida in the winter to past the Carolinas, and on up the Atlantic coast to New Jersey and New England in late spring and early summer. Smaller bluefish, known as "sappers" and "tailors," up to three pounds or so take up residence in bays and inlets throughout the summer. Larger fish tend to stay in ocean waters, and these "choppers" provide most of the opportunities for blitz conditions along the beach, particularly in September and

October when baitfish migrations peak.

The bluefish catches in North Carolina and Massachusetts have traditionally received deserved notice, but midway between the two I have had some of my most memorable experiences. The entire New Jersey coast, from Gateway National Recreation Area at Sandy Hook, in view of the Manhattan skyline, to Cape May Point, can be the scene of bluefish activity. South Jersey (Cape May, the Wildwoods, and up to

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Deep pockets and sloughs close to shore also offer good places to cast to bluefish, because baitfish often collect in the calmer waters.

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Bluefish Blitz . . .

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Ocean City) has lovely beaches, but they tend to slope more gently, so bait-fish are seldom forced tight to the beach by gamefish, and blitz conditions are less frequent. Absecon Island,



A bluefish and saltwater streamers.

on which Atlantic City is located, suffers, so far as beach fishermen are concerned, from population density. Brigantine Island and Long Beach Island have slightly better physical conditions, and the fishing tends to be more consistent.

North of Barnegat Inlet the beach contours are more favorable. Deeper pockets and sloughs closer to shore offer places for bait to collect. Seaside Park, Seaside Heights, Lavallette, and towns to the north have provided great action in recent seasons. Once north of Point Pleasant, the beach again changes. The barrier islands typical of southern New Jersey give way to narrow beaches and numerous jetties. Beach access in many towns from Belmar north is more restricted, too.

Prepare Yourself Well

FISHING A BLUEFISH BLITZ need not be a complicated affair. Your favorite 9- or 10-weight rod, a sound reel that has some saltwater protection, and a small assortment of popping bugs (#1/0 to #3/0) and Lefty's Deceivers will do fine. Six feet of leader, down to 12-pound-test, should be tipped with a few inches of wire or heavy mono (50-pound minimum). Bluefish school by size, so you can lighten your tackle proportionately for smaller fish.

You might think that getting a chance at hot action is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Granted, it doesn't happen every day; but how often have you really hit the salmonfly or Green Drake hatches just right? I suggest you stay in touch with the shore scene. Contact tackle shops, read local papers. Two seasons ago, in June every morning for nearly a week the blues frequented a stretch of beach that I fish; this can happen when weather and ocean conditions are stable. And when fish do put in and trap their meal at the end of the ocean, they give you plenty of time to set up and try different techniques or flies—or take pictures. Paul Kukonen in New England and Bob Popovics in New Jersey have been able to capture some incredible film and video footage of bluefish mayhem in the surf. Occasionally the fish feed in the wash throughout the day, regardless of tide changes.

In coastal areas where blitzes are likely to occur, you can expect to see construction workers' trucks sporting surf rods and, more recently, fly rods at the ready. I've seen workers scramble from the rooftops of half-

finished homes, store owners hastily close shops, and couch potatoes spring to life when the cry "bluefish blitz" rang through the town and over the telephone lines. It's worth every effort you can make to be with-

in striking distance when the bluefish blitz occurs.

ED JAWOROWSKI is chairman of the classics department at Villanova University, near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Bluefish Blitz Sources

Betty and Nick's
807 S.W. Central Avenue
Seaside Park, NJ 08752
(201) 793-2708

Bruce and Pat's
317 Long Beach Boulevard
Surf City, NJ 08008
(609) 494-2333

Stevens Bait and Tackle
Long Branch, NJ 07740
(201) 229-4957

Brackman's Bait and Tackle
110 Magee Avenue
Lavallette, NJ 08735
(201) 793-3266

Jim's Bait and Tackle
Cape May, NJ 08204
(609) 884-3900

Brielle Bait and Tackle
800 Ashley Avenue
Brielle, NJ 08730
(201) 528-5720

The Compleat Angler
2600 Post Road
Southport, CT 06490
203-255-3503

Point Pleasant Hardware
528 Arnold Avenue
Point Pleasant, NJ 08742
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FLY FISHERMAN

A woman wearing a red cap, a tan fishing vest over a yellow long-sleeved shirt, and dark waders is standing in a shallow stream. She is holding a large, silvery trout with both hands. A camera is hanging from her neck. The background is a lush green forest.

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