



The author with a fly-caught weakfish. Photo by Lefty Kreh.

Casting the Creeks for Weaks

Two generations of saltwater experts agree: Weakfish are a strong tonic for the mid-summer slumps

LOU TABORY

Where the Weaks Are

LEFTY KREH

FISHERMEN WHO HAVE CAST into the salt for many years have been overjoyed at the increasing abundance of both bluefish and weakfish along much of the East Coast during the past few seasons. The trend has been for more and bigger weaks each year and there seem to be more big weakfish around right now than anyone can remember. Good fishing can continue into the fall.

The weakfish is an inshore species, rarely venturing far at sea—although in the fall, when great schools of these fish migrate down the coast, they are sometimes found a few miles offshore and often beneath a large school of bluefish, when flies must be fished deep to take them. Weaks bite well both day and night, and in some areas, such as Long Island, weaks often feed and hit flies better after dark.

I prefer dark-colored or black flies for night fishing but many people do well on light colors. During daylight hours, I'm convinced that fluorescent-dyed feathers or bucktail are vastly superior to conventional colors. Hooks need not be large, even for big weaks—1/0 is more than ample. Bright orange or yellow, either together or one or the other in combination with medium-green or blue, are very effective colors—and a little silver mylar seems to help. However, when weakfish are found in the shallows, few saltwater fish will hit a popping bug better. Unlike striped bass, for which poppers must be teased along, the weakfish likes its popper hustling over the surface.

If you are really after a trophy weakfish (8-pounds-plus), your chances are much better if you locate schools of weaks in water deeper than 15 feet. The best fishing occurs when these fish concentrate over a shoal during periods of slack tide. Use a lead-core shooting head and drag the fly right on the bottom. After the tide begins to flow strongly, it sometimes becomes impossible, even with a lead-core, to get the fly to the fish.

Delaware Bay

The finest place I know to catch a trophy weakfish is in Delaware Bay. Brandywine Shoals is the hottest spot, although other nearby shoals can be great. This fishing starts sometime around the middle of May, although this year it was ahead of schedule—as it has been with weakfish all along the coast. It usually lasts for six weeks when the fish are apparently spawning. I've taken fish of more than ten pounds in this area whose bellies sagged like a female bass in the spring. It is not uncommon on Brandywine Shoals in May for each person aboard to catch ten weaks from six pounds to better than ten pounds each.

Fishing Brandywine Shoals is typical of anywhere you may try for weaks in water 15 feet deep or more. Drift or anchor (I prefer to drift) and cast your lead-core head directly up-current, allowing the fly to sink. Count—say to 25—then start stripping. If you get a strike on a 30-count, then repeat that procedure and you'll probably score on other fish. In the daytime, I like to hop the fly along the bottom but at night I swim it slowly.

TROUT AVERAGING 4-6 POUNDS taken on flies within driving distance of New York City! That may sound like a typical fish story, but there *are* places close to New York where trout of this size are average. When conditions are good, light fly rods for #5-6 lines are used and casts of 25-30 feet land *beyond* the fish.

I must confess, however, that "trout" though they're called, "trout" they aren't. They're actually the common saltwater weakfish, because a kissing cousin down the coast in Florida is the "real" sea trout—related to the weakfish but more accurately a variety of drum. (To be totally accurate, the traditional sea trout is the British "sea trout," an anadromous brown trout which runs into their rivers and affords some fine angling in the old tradition.) But, if you're down in cracker country, or even in the Florida Keys, where on any given day big-rodster Stu Apte can be seen merrily chasing them in his fast skiff, don't laugh when you hear them talk about "trout fishing." Now the name is catching on farther north, even if it does refer to the common weakfish, or squeteague, and not the spotted weakfish which is more like the southern sea trout which, if you remember, is really a drum—which is why ichthyologists use the Latin words in the first place! Everything clear now?

After mid-June, the fish seem to scatter throughout Delaware Bay and the best bet for locating them is to cruise slowly with a depth finder. After you see them on the scope you can either drift, chum or anchor.

Cape Hatteras Area

Weakfish can be expected to appear in large numbers in the Hatteras National Seashore area of North Carolina around mid-April. The hottest fishing is generally from Frisco to Avon.

By late May, these fish begin to move back into Pamlico Sound and generally, large schools of them come through the channel between Ocracoke and Hatteras islands. They spread out in the Sound and can often be located with spinning or plug casting tackle, then tried on flies.

Maryland-Virginia Coast

By late April or early May, weakfish are all along the Virginia coast and have moved into Chesapeake Bay. For the past several years, the best fishing has been at the Maryland-Virginia line in Tangier Sound. Great schools of weaks spend the summer here feeding on the prodigious numbers of alewives and menhaden.

Delaware Bay is the premier spot for weakfish on the mid-Atlantic coast, perhaps rivaled only by Little and Big Peconic bays on Long Island. Using a lead-core shooting head, you can expect good fishing here in May and part of June.

The inlets to Great and Barnegat bays in New Jersey

The weakfish that move into the New York area under an assumed name around mid-May provide great light-tackle fishing. Now don't you freshwater buffs be disappointed. The angling I am about to describe may change your whole outlook on fishing the briny deeps. After all, weakfish can be taken in the same manner as your "other trouts"—the brooks, browns, and rainbows—with light rods, short casts and a dead drift.

Now I can't claim to have discovered this type of fishing. When chasing weakfish I generally used much heavier tackle, often a rod that handles a #8-9 fly line. I enjoy taking weakfish on standard saltwater tackle, but taking weaks on lighter equipment is real sport. Actually, under certain conditions, the delicate tackle is more suited to the fishing.

Joe Falky and Bill Bradshaw, both of the Salty Fly Rodders of New York, turned me on to this type of fishing. The Salty Fly Rodders host a fly-fishing Get-Together every spring on Shelter Island, which is at the mouth of Peconic Bay on Long Island. The GTG is generally scheduled for the first week of June, which is peak weakfish time. There are also enough striped bass around then to delight any angler. The GTG in 1975 was held early, the third weekend in May, so I planned another trip to that area for a week later.

can be superb for weakfish in early May. This year everything is well ahead of schedule, but by mid-May the weaks are usually working the baitfish swept out by the tide. The weaks move into the shallows of area bays to spend the summer.

New Jersey to New England

The jetties in New Jersey and New England can often furnish some good weaks during the warm summer months if you use fast-sinking or lead-core shooting heads. The many rocks present mean you will have to use Keel flies.

Long Island has a run of weaks around the end of April to the second week of May, and this year they moved in early. The south shore of Long Island has many small creek mouths that can produce weakfishing both day and night. Shelter Island has many such creeks that can make for exciting fly fishing. I prefer black or dark flies but many score well with all white ones. The Shinnecock Canal that connects the ocean with Big and Little Peconic bays is a super weakfishing spot. These two bays furnish the best weakfishing in the upper range of this fish. This fishing starts in early May but there are weaks around until October when they begin their southern migration.

Biologists haven't explained the tremendous new abundance of weakfish. For years it has been unusual to catch more than a few and a fish of more than four pounds was a monster. They warn that such a fantastic number of very large weakfish will not last—you may want to try it this summer, since these fish might not be around too many more seasons. —



Ray Smith rigs up for weaks on a shallow flat at sunset. Photos by Lou Tabory unless otherwise credited.

I was Joe Falky's guest and we were planning to spend the entire weekend in pursuit of weaks. Joe, being a light-tackle buff, uses a 6-foot rod for #5 line. Not only is the smaller outfit more fun, but it's also more effective on small tidal creeks.

Short Casts for Big Fish

WE WERE FISHING THE CREEKS that empty into the Pecos and Shelter Island bays. Many of the creeks are small, some only a few feet across, and most fish are caught in less than five feet of water.

When a tidal creek starts to empty, it pours large amounts of bait into the open water at its mouth. Fish know these feeding stations and move into the creek mouths to feed. These brackish or saltwater creeks are the breeding, rearing, feeding and living places for many different kinds of baitfish and crustaceans. Mummies, spearing, sand eels, shrimp, crabs, sea worms and others all become easy prey for gamefish. In many ways it is like stream fishing because the angler casts across and drifts the fly down without retrieving. The angler must be on his toes if he wants to take fish.

Weakfish, in these situations, can be almost as tricky as real trout, because the fish have a large variety of food to choose from. The angler must find out what the fish are feeding on and try to match it—don't match the hatch, simulate the bait! Furthermore, he must imitate the natural action of the bait and decide whether to dead-drift the fly or work it. Each creek has its own characteristics and it helps to know the creek you're fishing.

On the first night, I had my System 8 fly rod and Joe was armed with his 6-foot stick. There were other anglers on our creek and as we walked into the water one of them, Bill Bradshaw, hooked a fish. Before I had time to stretch my line, Joe made a cast and was also into a fish. Joe was using a 4-pound-test leader, trying for a world record in the 6-pound class of the Salt Water Fly Rodders of America. He landed the fish and found it to be short of the required weight by a half-pound. The record was 5½-pounds and a new entry must top the existing record by one-half-pound.

I walked back into the water and started casting. After four casts, Joe walked in beside me, made a cast and was into a fish. At this point I was frantically changing flies. Up the beach, Bill Bradshaw was duplicating Joe's performance. I had asked Joe what he was using and the answer was a plain yellow bucktail. As he walked out again I asked him, "Hey, Joe, how far are you casting?" He laughed and said, "The last fish was on about a 20-foot cast."

This was the answer—short casts so the fly could be controlled. I shortened up my casts to about 40 feet or less. With my 70-foot casts I probably was getting hits and could not even feel them because of all the slack line. Scientific Anglers puts a little lump in the line called a Telecast, which lets the angler know by feel when he has 30 feet of line outside the tip-top that will perfectly match the rod action. It is also an ideal indicator for distance when fishing at night. Making short casts and fishing a dead drift paid off, and I quickly took my first fish.

Creeks for Weaks

WEAKFISH ARE NOT FANTASTIC FIGHTERS if you compare them to bluefish, jack crevalle, bonefish or tarpon, but they do put up a good bulldogging battle and are capable of making short runs, certainly more powerful than most trout. They are similar to small stripers although not as quick. Bass strike very quickly and are more active immediately after the hit.

A selection of the author's weakfish flies proved effective in the Long Island area. Note that yellow is the dominant color.



Using light tackle that gives the fish half a chance helps; even a 5-pound trout would have little chance against heavy saltwater gear. Another point in favor of light tackle is the soft mouth, which gives the weakfish its name. Light tackle is less likely to tear out hooks.

Finding productive places to fish is fairly easy if you know the fish's habits. If a tidal creek has not been altered seriously by man, it should support feeding fish. Generally the best time to fish a creek is when the tide water is pouring out of it. Although this should be at the first part of the falling tide, in some places it is not. Many creeks have small openings so they take much longer to fill and empty, and it may be 2-3 hours after high tide before such creek flows start to ebb. To be successful, the angler must either research the area carefully or fish with a local who knows the tide.

There are always exceptions. The following night we fished the same creek that was so productive the night before. Thinking it might be good earlier, we tried it while the tide was still flowing into the creek. Surprisingly, the fishing was very hot but the fish left when the tide started out. Apparently they may feed before the tide and leave when they are supposed to be just getting there.

Fishing such places can be frustrating—just when you think there is a pattern, things change. Wind, tide, dark or bright night, rain and water temperature can all affect the fishing near a creek. The one sure thing about

creeks is that they are easy to find—just look on a nautical chart. Because creek fishing is almost always at night, it is best to locate a creek during the day. Then you're not groping around in the dark and ending up finding the creek with the front end of your car. Another intelligent move is to check out the spot in the daylight on a low tide, since some creeks have steep banks and wading can be very dangerous.

If everything looks good, give the spot a try on a falling tide after dark. First check the creek for bait by shining a light in the area and noting what type of baitfish or crustaceans the water holds. Do not shine a light where you plan to fish or while you are fishing, since a light flashing on and off will spook fish. If bait is plentiful, there is a good chance that fish use it as a feeding station. The best way to check out such areas is to fish 3-4 nights in succession. This way there is a good chance of running into fish on at least one night.

Fishing the Flats

ALTHOUGH THERE IS NOT THE CONCENTRATION of fish found around creeks, shallow flats can be very productive at the right times. On incoming tides, weakfish will move onto such flats in search of food and, like most predators, will work in schools to trap and confuse bait. Weakfish give a telltale "pop" when they feed on the surface and on a quiet night this sound can be heard a

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Weakfish. . .

long way. The wise angler works such shallow areas by casting blind in search of fish. If fish are heard, the angler must move quietly toward the sound. In low water, any noise will spook fish and the fly rodder must be cautious. A boat will cover much more ground and can be used for this type of fishing, however, a wading angler can approach fish more quietly once they are found. I feel wading is a better way to fish in shallow places if the long rodder can be comfortable in doing so.

When wading, I use a stripping basket made from a rubber rectangular dishpan. Cut two belt holes in one long side and strap it around your middle. The cost is about two dollars and is much better than any that is made commercially. A piece of grass-type "welcome mat" in the bottom is helpful because it keeps the line from sliding around and getting tangled.

If you hear fish down the beach, you can just leave the line in the basket and move toward the sound. This way the angler does not have to reel up his line, walk to the fish, then strip out the line again. If there is a weed problem, it is impossible to leave line in the water, and around creeks there is always debris of some sort flowing from the estuary.

When choosing flats, try to find an area that is close either to deep water or a known feeding area. This way there is a good chance of finding fish after dark. Flats, like most shallow areas, are generally productive only during darkness. As with the creek mouths, it is best to reconnoiter them during daylight so you can determine just where to fish.

Boats for such fishing can be small runabouts because most of the fishing areas are sheltered bays and back-

Bruce Newmark with a night-caught weak.



The Brandywine Lighthouse in Delaware Bay can be a good area for big weaks. Photo by Jim Bashline.

waters. A 10-14-foot lightly constructed craft that is easy to handle, paddles well, and will go into shallow water should fill the bill perfectly.

Tackle and Flies

TACKLE FOR THIS FISH CAN BE AS LIGHT as you want. Nevertheless, an outfit that is too light, like a midge rod, may suffer the consequences. My suggestion is a 6-7-foot glass stick for a #5-7 line and a reel of good construction with a large line capacity, at least 150 yards of backing. There is that occasional large fish that moves into the shallows to feed and the angler must be ready for them.

Most fishing will be done in less than five feet of water, so either a floater or sinking-tip line is the best choice. The floater is easy to fish with and much better to cast with. I always keep a spare line or two with me, one sinking-tip and one full-sinking line. Conditions can change in a short time and the long rodder should be ready for it. I have changed a fishless night into a productive one by changing lines.

The Shelter Island Weakfish Fly is a favorite pattern for weakfish in this area. It is a yellow bucktail with a grizzly saddle hackle on each side of the wing. Actually, any small chunky bucktail seems to work well for weaks, but yellow is by far the superior color and seems to outfish all the other colors hands down. Some of the shrimp patterns are also fish-getters and I had good success with a small Lefty's Deceiver.

It is best to stick to a few good patterns in various sizes. Fished properly, a dozen Honey Blonds in assorted sizes will cover 75 percent of the fishing situations for weaks. Again I *emphasize* the dead drift and keeping control of the fly at all times. Even when fishing the flats where there may be no current, a very slow retrieve works best. The slow action of the fly seems to turn on weakfish but don't hesitate to try other methods if the old standby fails. There will also be nights when you are in the middle of popping fish and everything will fail.

The hot spots are any and all creeks that flow into the Great Peconic, Little Peconic, Shelter Island and Gardiner's bays. It is up to the angler to do some research which should be simple because, as I mentioned before, creeks are easy to find. Although I have yet to try places like Great South Bay or East Bay, other anglers say they are also good. I am sure most areas sheltering bait of various kinds will produce weaks when the run is on.

For die-hard dry-fly enthusiasts, the common weakfish will never be a substitute for freshwater trout. However, those who would like to say they have taken a large "trout" on light tackle should give weakfishing a try. They may not be brown or have red bars on their sides, yet the weakfish is a true gamefish in all categories. They are big, beautiful fish that fight well, take small lures near shore—and remember, weakfish do have spots! —



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