

Virginia Beach fishing makes the A-list
Stripers, blues and sea bass highlight the great, and diverse, offerings
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VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. — "I love it when a plan comes together."

Large bluefish, like this one jigged up by Claude Bain, are numerous on an offshore wreck. If you watched the once-popular television series "The A-Team," you may remember this iconic statement, often made by the leader of that soldier-of-fortune unit, Col. John "Hannibal" Smith.

Alas, too often fishing-travel expeditions don't live up to expectations or follow the script that you've prepared.

But on the last day of a three-day fishing excursion here, when unseasonably warm weather could not have been any more cooperative and the fishing could not have been much better, Eric Burnley and I found ourselves repeating the words of Smith (played by the late George Peppard, in case you're wondering).

Our Virginia Beach fishing adventure started with a day offshore, running from 24 to 35 miles from Lynnhaven Inlet with charter captain Herb Gordon and Claude Bain of the Virginia Marine Resources Commission.

The mission was to probe offshore wrecks, which Gordon and Bain were confident hadn't seen much pressure recently.

My mullet-strip-baited hook had yet to hit bottom on the first wreck when Bain pronounced, "They're here," and deftly reeled in a 2-pound sea bass.

For more than an hour it was non-stop sea bass catching, with some of the fish topping 3 pounds, and all of it while drifting.

Normally you have to anchor precisely, right over the top of a wreck so bottom-dropped baits are most effective. But the wind was so light that we didn't have to anchor.

The sea bass seemed to disappear about the time that the spiny dogfish (a small shark) arrived. And after a half-hour of constant dogfish catching, we pulled stakes and headed further into the Atlantic toward another wreck site.

En route we encountered three separate schools of bluefin tuna marauding small bait and dallied awhile with one school in hopes of catching one or two of these torpedoes.

We didn't have the tackle necessary for these tough-pulling fish, but tried futilely anyway, even though Gordon put his boat almost within casting range of the quick-moving tuna on several occasions.

A little later we anchored on another wreck and ladled chum into the current to establish a trail that might attract bluefish.

And attract them it did.

During the next two hours we caught at least 15 blues, none less than 8 pounds and some as heavy as 13 pounds.

Several were caught on bottom-dropped bait, and several on rapidly pumped-and-retrieved jigging spoons.

The best attractant, however, was a buzz-bladed, in-line spinner with a single hook and a strip of bait.

Left to drift 80 feet behind the boat at the top of the chum line, with the blade slowly turning, this lure probably caught half of the blues that we landed.

I have to confess that as good, and fun, as the action was, I was salivating over the prospects of consuming both sea bass and bluefish, neither of which I'd eaten in a while.

The former are known for their sweet flesh, but the latter are generally disliked because of their dark and oily nature, and the fact that they spoil quickly.

However, when a fillet of bluefish is heavily covered with peppercorns and lemon seasoning and smoked, it's a delicacy. I was glad to keep a few and to accept a few that my companions didn't want, their destination being my electric smoker.

Want stripers aplenty? Find active birds

On the two succeeding days we fished exclusively for stripers at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay, both around the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel and near various shoals to the west of that bridge.

Black sea bass such as this specimen are plentiful on offshore wrecks. The 17-mile-long bridge-tunnel, which spans the Chesapeake from Cape Charles to Norfolk-Virginia Beach, is arguably the greatest striper magnet on the East Coast, producing fish along its countless pilings and especially over the rocky bottom covering the tunnels.

We caught a few stripers, or rockfish as they are locally known, immediately at the northern tunnel along the Chesapeake.

But on both days the better action occurred when actively diving hordes of seagulls and terns gave away the presence of feeding stripers.

The bass numbers were at times massive, and the trick was to spot working birds, motor ahead of or beside them and troll or cast-and-jig. Assorted bucktail and plastic-bodied jigs worked very well, fished at various levels in the water column.

There were times when four or five of us were hooked up, and whenever the action slowed we moved until another pile of working birds was located.

The stripers were so numerous, in fact, that you could just sit on a spot where you marked fish on your sonar, without any working birds, and pick up a few bass by jigging. But the more exciting and productive tactic was to find working birds and keep up with them.

With so many fish around, and so much bird activity, it was a lot of fun, and not terribly difficult.

Given the mild weather and windless conditions, it was the kind of thing that you would love to get a youngster or newcomer to enjoy, since success was virtually assured.

Even when the schools of birds and fish temporarily disappeared, you could catch bass by trolling plugs.

John Trant displays a well-fed striper. We fished with John Trant on his 26-foot catamaran-hulled boat these two days, and he was quick to move from the Chesapeake Channel to the Thimble Shoals Channel and various places in this large bay mouth region to find schools of actively feeding fish.

It seemed like we caught a lot more stripers than other boats by doing this, mainly because when we found the schools we always caught a bunch of fish, demonstrating that mobility pays off at this time of year.

In fact, it is the month of December that really shines in this region for striped bass. Our fishing took place at the end of November, just before the usual migration of really big stripers (20- to 40-plus-pounders).

By the time you read this, those who are interested in trophy fish will be earnestly fishing live eels around the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel pilings, trolling the edge of the pilings and the top of the tunnels, and trolling the deep channels.

During this month in the Virginia Beach area, the average air temperature is 57, and the average water temperature is 54, which means that, except for those cold front-induced blow days, it's not too uncomfortable to be fishing here.

Something for waders and small boaters, too

Not all of the great fishing action locally takes place out in the bay, as there's plenty of opportunity to catch fish if you're a wader, surfcaster, pier angler or small-boat operator. There are many places for public access of one type or another.

One night, for example, I fished with Ric Burnley, a writer who lives in Virginia Beach and a super-avid kayak angler.

If you're going ...

For general information about saltwater fishing in this area, check out the excellent and highly informative 70-page "Virginia Saltwater Angler's Guide," available free from the Virginia Marine Resources Commission at this Web site.

Virginia conducts a popular annual saltwater fishing tournament (in its 50th year in 2007), which awards citations to anglers who catch notable fish.

It also conducts a commendable Game Fish Tagging program using qualified volunteers. We tagged some of our sea bass, and one 2006 volunteer has tagged 2,600 fish by himself!

For information, visit the tournament Web site and the tagging program site.

To fish with Herb Gordon, contact him at 757-464-3974. Gordon fishes year-round for all inshore and offshore species. He specializes in large striped bass during the winter months.

There is plenty of fishing throughout the year for species other than those mentioned in this article. Among the more popular quarries at other times are seatrout, weakfish, amberjack, cobia, black drum, red drum (redfish), and flounder.

To view information about kayak fishing in the area, visit the Web site of Kayak Kevin, or contact him at kayakkevin@gmail.com.

In addition to the fishing, there's plenty to interest people locally, not the least of which is all things connected to the military.

When fishing you share the local waters with all manner of military and commercial watercraft, and are almost guaranteed to see freighters, containerships, cruise ships, and the like, plus likely to see an aircraft carrier or other navy vessel. We observed two submarines and a battleship.

There are several state parks and wildlife refuges in the area, plus the Virginia Marine Science Museum. Bird watching, whale watching, kayak and canoe touring, and camping are locally popular.

You can get information about these and other opportunities, plus ample accommodations and excellent eateries, from the Virginia Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau at 800-822-3224 or its Web site.

He and his equally avid friend "Kayak" Kevin and I paddled in the dark from a public launch in Willoughby Bay to the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel, where small stripers were stacked up near and between the pilings and bridge spans.

It was a terrific outing, not only because in about three hours I caught more than two dozen stripers on a light spinning rod and jigs, but also for the ambience, as it were.

This is sort of like urban guerrilla fishing, and probably the noisiest angling anyone is likely to do. Constant traffic streams overhead on the bridges, of course.

But the real noise comes from across the bay where all kinds of training activity is in progress, including helicopter pilots practicing their craft for hours on end, their dissonance occasionally being droned out by a sonic-booming jet flying overhead.

The bass don't seem to mind the terrestrial frenzy. In fact, you can sometimes see them on the edges of the shadow lines of the bridge, facing into the current and ready to pounce on food. Kevin, who will soon be guiding hearty anglers on this exciting kind of fishing, has made an art of this, spotting fish and literally choosing which eager-biting striper to cast to.

According to Burnley, kayak fishing (both daytime and nighttime) is getting more popular locally, and our nighttime adventure thoroughly underscored the tremendous diversity in places and means of catching the abundant local fish.

And now let's get back to my earlier "A-Team" analogy. Remember that show's necklace-wearing tomahawk-haired character, Sgt. Rosco "B.A." Baracus, played by Mr. T? He used to call people fools and often said, "Pity the fool" when referring to a vanquished foe.

Well, I say, pity the fool who doesn't get down to Virginia Beach and see what a great metropolitan fishing area this is.

Ken Schultz is the author of the new book "Bass Madness," as well as "Ken Schultz's Fishing Encyclopedia," available through www.kenschultz.com.