



CONSIDER THE LOBSTERMAN

SHIPS OUT AT THE CRACK
OF DAWN WITH A SMALL CONTINGENT OF MAINE LOBSTER FISHERMEN.
PHOTOS BY [REDACTED]



Lobstering requires spry, deft hands and a strong back. But in Maine, it's not just for the young: Lobstermen and women do it well until their 80s.

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A lobster's brain is located in its throat. Its teeth can be found in its stomach, and its kidneys are in its head. If that anatomy sounds like a jumbled mess, I can sympathize. My heart was somewhere in my throat and I was feeling downright crabby when the alarm woke me. Discombobulated, I blinked a couple times in confusion. The radar pings emanating from my phone had to be wrong. I looked at the clock. It read 2:30 a.m. I rolled around on my carapace, threw the sheet off what felt like 10 gangly limbs and darted towards my suitcase. My day in the life of a Maine lobsterman was just beginning.

When I think of a lobster pot floating on a hazy eventide, I picture a liability: a fouled prop and a tug-of-war contest with running gear. Somewhere between a minor inconvenience and an absolute catastrophe, a run-in with a trap line usually spells trouble. Sure, Crocodile Dundee, you can rid yourself of the entanglement by diving into the drink with a Bowie knife. But fail to retrieve the trap, and you've just messed with someone's livelihood.

Eager to know more about the other side of the buoy, I called up the Downeast Lobstermen's Association and spoke with Executive Director Sheila Dassatt. She had just finished working a full day on the water, tending to 250 traps. It was July, nearing peak season, when there are few—if any—days off. Said Dassatt, "Once a season starts I got to eat my Wheaties, because it's just nonstop." I told her I wanted to see first-hand how lobstermen and women make a living, and maybe roll up my sleeves and give it a try. She put me in touch with Ethan Turner, a 26-year-old lobsterman hailing from Stonington, Maine. Turner was no stranger to ride-along requests. Six years ago, he hosted a couple journalists from *Men's Health*. "It was a pretty long day, 10 to 12 hours, somethin' like that," said Turner. It was March, and the conditions were less than ideal. "We took a wave over the bow, and their eyes got huge. I think by the end of the day they were soaked."

Pfft yeah, but that was *Men's Health*, I reasoned. As the senior editor of I've gone toe-to-toe with a wrathful Poseidon plenty of times. I've also worked my fair share of construction gigs; one particular job involved hauling cinderblocks around for a mason. All I'd be doing is throwing some traps and lobsters into the mix. How hard could it be?



Clockwise from left: Capt. Ethan Turner brings up the traps using a motor; sternman Deven Haskell measures the catch; the author mans the bait station.



In the interest of credibility, I didn't want to cut any corners. I told Turner I was ready for a full day of hauling traps. I asked for a start time, assuming it would be somewhere in the ballpark of 5 o'clock.

"3:30 at the Stonington fish pier," read Turner's text.

Apparently, it wouldn't take long for me to eat my words. I sent him a reply: "Seeing that time just made me want to take a nap."

My eyeballs were humming as I drove south down the only thoroughfare that connects Deer Isle to the mainland, a dark, winding, wooded road. The proprietor of Blue Hill Inn where I was staying had warned me to keep an eye peeled for the island's namesake. In places along the tarmac, tire marks blazed parallel, swerving lines: burned rubber with a hint of ennui. Every so often a cove would appear, and my Honda Civic's headlights would illuminate a small skiff spinning alone in the oily pitch-dark. The self-proclaimed lobster capital of the world, Stonington is the southernmost point on Deer Isle, a solid three-hour drive from Portland. Its population has hovered around 1,000 for more than a decade.

For such a small community, Stonington has held on to its heavyweight title as the top lobster fishing port in the country. Other towns may have more licensed commercial captains, but Stonington's 181-boat fleet lands more pounds than any other port in Maine and employs more lobstermen, too. (Some estimates propose nearly one in five Stonington residents hold a lobster license.) To help lessen the load, it's not unusual for these boats to employ two or three sternmen, the heavy lifters of the enterprise. Sternmen are typically paid a percentage of the day's catch. Sometimes that percentage is taken "off the bottom," meaning after expenses for fuel and bait are deducted; sometimes that percentage is taken "off the top." So, if a lobsterman pays his sternman 17 percent off the top and his annual landings



In Maine, lobsters are affectionately referred to as “roaches” or “bugs,” a colloquialism from the days when they were considered peasant food.

equal \$200,000, the sternman makes \$34,000. (The Maine per capita income in 2019 was \$34,078, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.) Such jobs provide a source of income in many parts of the coast where few opportunities for lucrative employment exist.

Stonington’s compact, postcard-like downtown was completely empty when I pulled into the parking lot at 3:30. I knew the wharf’s whereabouts from the day before, after coming down to check out the sleepy little hamlet. Century-old houses stood the test of time—and Maine’s harsh winters—near the waterfront. Lobster rolls were on the menu at every restaurant, even the ice cream shack. As the sun was setting on a long work day, I happened to run into Turner’s stepfather-in-law, John Robbins, on the pier. Around us, a forklift beeped its way through unloading the day’s catch. I asked him if all the fishermen ship out at the same time. “Ethan leaves on the early side, makes us all look bad,” he said.

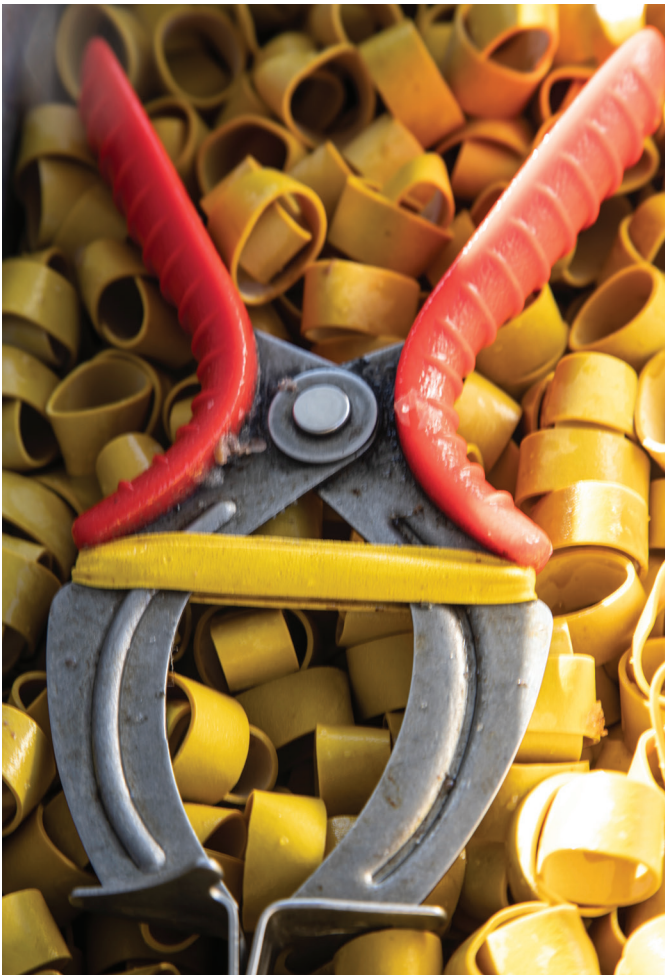
Sure enough, the next morning, there was the *Captain Jack*, Turner’s 37-foot Mount Desert Island, with the wharf to itself. A Chevy Silverado was backed up to the edge of the pier. Turner was operating a crane, offloading extra buoys and other gear from the pickup bed into the boat. Artificial light flooded the cockpit but little else. I had on a pair of bright-orange Grundéns bibs on loan from a colleague. I put one foot on the slick metal ladder attached to the pier, grabbed the handles and descended. Over the low rumble of the 500-hp C9 CAT diesel engine, Turner intimated we were ready to head out. As I was beginning to

wonder just what, exactly, I had gotten myself into, the 28-year-old sternman, Deven Haskell, introduced himself. When I told him what magazine I was from, he looked surprised. “This is a little different than the boats you guys usually get on,” said Haskell. No kidding.

After stopping to refuel, we made our way over to the wholesale dealer, Little Bay Lobster, to purchase some bait. (Headquartered in New Hampshire, Little Bay Lobster claims it’s “the largest harvester of North Atlantic lobster in the world” and ships live lobsters to 19 countries worldwide.) When it comes to bait, each fisherman has a preference. “In the wintertime, you want bait that is going to stay,” said Turner. “Hauling through every three days, [some] won’t last that long.” In the interest of preservation, Turner prefers tuna heads and skate in the winter, and pogies in the summer. As we talked, wharfmen stacked crates filled with pogies and red rockfish heads.

With the *Captain Jack* sufficiently reeking of diesel and fish, we were finally underway. In the harbor, we passed some of the fleet at mooring. Ghostly, unmanned lobsterboats rocked gently in our jet-black wake. Their transoms were painted with names like *Glory Bound*, *Rhonda Jean* and *Defiant*, suggesting fiercely independent, hard-working, family-oriented owners.

Turner comes from similar stock. A fifth-generation lobsterman, he can trace a lineage of seafaring captains on both sides of his family tree. He took to it almost immediately, receiving his first lobster license at the ripe old age of six. “When I got to be 10 or so, I started goin’ pretty



much every day,” said Turner. “My mom didn’t want me to go, but I was awake every morning, so my dad would say ‘Well, you might as well come.’” After graduating high school, he attended one year of college before dropping out to pursue his quarry fulltime. Almost three hundred of his traps were spread out in between the low-lying islands to the south—the same places his dad showed him, and his father before him, and so on. But now, since lobsters aren’t showing up in shallow waters with the same frequency, Turner also places traps further offshore.

The wide-scale disappearance of *Homarus americanus* from New England shores is a not-so-well-kept secret. To this day it stands as a cautionary tale. That lobster tail balancing out the surf ‘n turf special on your plate? There’s a good chance it came from Maine. (The state catches 80 percent of the nation’s lobster supply.) While Maine lobstermen have recently overseen an unprecedented multi-year boom, there’s been a steady collapse of the fishery from New York to Rhode Island. Dr. Richard Wahle, director of the University of Maine’s Lobster Institute, a multidisciplinary research center that supports a sustainable and profitable lobster industry, calls it “a tale of two fisheries.” “In Southern New England there’s been a pretty serious decline that was brought on by extreme warming events and shell disease,” said Wahle. At the same time, climate change has created favorable conditions for Maine lobster, who are also benefiting from a depletion of ground fish predators by commercial harvesting.

In 2019, the total haul across Maine was 100.7 million pounds, valued

at nearly \$500 million. While this might sound like a lot, it signaled the continuation of a disturbing trend for lobster landings. Following the often-cited glut of 2016, which set a record at the Maine Department of Marine Resources for more than 130 million pounds harvested, each successive year has seen an average drop-off by almost 7.5 million pounds. “Since the 1980s, we’ve seen about a six-fold increase in lobster landings in Maine,” said Wahle. “Those increases elevated the fishery to its current status as the most valuable fishery in the nation right now. Of course, the big question is how long that’s going to last.”

Wahle referred to it as “a cresting wave that has been moving northward since the 90s,” with similar booms in Rhode Island and other states decades ago. In recent years, there has been a pronounced uptick in landings in Newfoundland and the northern edge of the Gulf of Saint Lawrence. Will the effects of climate change keep pushing lobsters north? Will “Maine lobsters” one day be harvested solely by Canadian lobstermen? Said Wahle, “Ultimately, it’s still uncertain as to how severe the impacts of climate change are going to be.”

A razor-thin, iridescent flame was smoldering on the horizon as we pulled up to the first buoy. At the helm, Turner spun the wheel, adroitly placing the brown-and-white marker against the starboard side. I had to think fast to avoid the water that came flying through the scuppers, soaking the deck. I fully expected a gloved hand to immediately reach for the buoy, bobbing on the surface. But ... nothing. Haskell asked if it was time. Turner held up two fingers. I wondered aloud what the

holdup was. He explained that each day, the state email system sends them a different start time. Today we started at 4:53 a.m. I didn't know what was more unbelievable: an old salt fanatically checking his email, or a motley group of fishermen—who can't agree on anything—adhering to a government-sanctioned schedule!

As they worked, the radio was tuned to SiriusXM's Turbo station, a mixture of hard rock from the turn of the century. As Limp Bizkit and System of a Down played through the speakers, Turner would position the boat, snatch the line with a boat hook and attach the "string" to a metal line hauler and flip a switch. Turner had two traps connected to each buoy, or string. The hydraulic motor spooled the line up, hauling the traps up from the briny depths. Once the traps were positioned on the gunwale, Turner took the buoy and dunked it into a barrel full of hot water and disinfectant to kill any unwanted growth. (On winter days, he will sometimes throw a can of soup in there, letting it heat up for lunch.)

Next up was Haskell. Popping open the lid on the rectangular traps, he removed the lobsters with one hand; the other one held a metal gauge. Without missing a beat, the smaller lobsters—which they call "snappers" for their tendency to flick their tails—were thrown overboard. The keepers were carefully examined, identified as male or female, and measured using the gauge. Lobsters measuring between 3.25 and 5 inches from their eye sockets to the beginning of their tails were placed on a metal slab. Using a tool to pop open a thick yellow rubber band, each lobster had its claws banded, then Haskell tossed them into the tank. After baiting the now empty traps, he threw them overboard. And the entire process would start over.

Around 6 a.m., Haskell took out a blue tin of Skoal and packed his lip. They had already brought up about 25 strings when he asked me to move so he could wash off the black grime smeared along the deck. Haskell was born and raised on Little Deer Isle, just north of Deer Isle in Penobscot Bay. With only 300 year-round residents, it can be a tough place to grow up. "You know everyone, and everyone knows you," he said. "You can't get away with shit."

Haskell estimates it takes him one minute to retrieve the contents of each trap and bait it. "I've been doin' this forever," he said. He started lobstering with his dad, then his cousin. Unlike a majority of outfits nowadays that cycle through multiple sternmen, Haskell and Turner have worked together consistently for over seven years. More hands aboard means less work, but also less profits. So as the only sternman aboard, Haskell is handling almost every lobster they catch. I asked him if he ever gets pinched. "Oh yeah, all the time," he said. He showed me his forearms: They were tattooed with half a dozen marks.

The long days at sea can be taxing, especially for Turner, who has a wife and two boys, ages four and six months, at home. Luckily, his wife comes from a family of lobster fishermen too. "I think it helps," said Turner. "You've got to be from a fishin' family to understand the lifestyle. You're gone almost every day, all day."

As a year-round operation, Turner and Haskell are at sea most days. While the winters can be brutally cold, and there's the added danger of slipping on an icy deck and going overboard, they only haul occasionally through those months. (Lobsters tend to be more dormant in the winter.) During peak season, from June to October, they haul six days a week, waking up around 2 a.m. each day. Haskell said he goes to the chiropractor every other week. He routinely feels pain in his shoulders and back from picking up the 45-pound traps. It's a hard life, and temporary relief can be found in dark places, like the bottom of a bottle. Or a needle.



I asked Haskell if he sees himself lobstering forever. Does he have any interest in captaining his own vessel? "I haven't figured it out yet," he said. "I'm going to ride this out till it sucks."

"And it hasn't started to suck?" I ask.

He smiled: "Not completely."

By 8 a.m. or so, they had gone through 120 traps when I made my debut at the bait station. "Toxicity" played in the background. Up until that point, I hadn't really understood the music choice. Hard rock really isn't my cup of tea—especially in the morning. But as I stabbed the bait-iron through the eyeball of a severed rockfish head for the umpteenth time, the musical choice made sense to me. I said as much to the guys. They mentioned one of the lobstermen in the fleet didn't listen to any music at all. The only thing more concerning than the guy who only listens to heavy metal, we all agreed, was the guy who did this in silence.

After watching Turner all morning, I wondered how he distinguished his traps from the countless others. It seemed like an obvious question, but I had never given it much thought until now. "More or less everyone uses their own colors," he said. Aside from the state registration number on the buoy, the white-and-brown scheme comes from his grandfather. His dad's colors were a slight variation of the same pattern. Like knights of the realm, or a family crest, every trap held its own special significance to a family. Knowing that, I realized I could never look at a field of lobster pots the same.

I asked Turner if he expected his sons to follow in his footsteps. "I don't know. I'd like 'em to, but I also don't want them to," he said. "The way regulations are goin', it's gonna get harder and harder to make a livin' doin' that."

It was a sobering prospect. The idea that when he finally retires, his family's colors might end with him. If lobster fishing disappeared from the coast, could his sons find employment? In his famous 2004 article, David Foster Wallace advocated for the lobster's wellbeing, and continued existence, in "Consider the Lobster." I had never heard anyone advocate for the wellbeing, and continued existence, of lobstermen.

Back at the wholesale dealer, Haskell stacked the crated lobsters on the deck. One at a time, the wharfman carried each crate over to an industrial scale. Altogether, we had harvested 515 pounds. Turner compared lobster fishing to the game of chess. "You've got to know where to be, when to be. You've got to make all the right moves—and if you don't, you don't do well," he said. Today's haul was about average.

A lobster hears using its legs and tastes with its feet. Luckily, after being awake for more than 10 hours, I could still taste with my mouth when I located a picnic table at the Stonington Ice Cream Company, only a stone's throw from the pier. In the summertime, lines can stretch down the block, with eager tourists waiting to order an ice cream cone or, just as likely, a lobster roll. It was midday by the time we got back, and only a few people were milling around, waiting for their food to arrive.

Covered in sweat and fish guts, I was social distancing the old-fashioned way. I didn't care. Atop a white-and-red checkered paper tray was my prize. As I took my first bite of the lobster roll, I couldn't help but wonder—why did this taste so good? Was it my imagination, or was the butter sweeter, the meat more succulent after finishing a long day on the water? Maybe it had something to do with being at ground zero for fresh-caught Maine lobster. Or maybe it had something to do with witnessing all the backbreaking labor that goes into bringing these tasty morsels ashore. Whatever the reason, I was famished. I tried, but I couldn't savor the feeling for long. All it took was a few bites and it was gone. □