

Notes *from the* Cockpit

Ummm... is it really almost 2026? Are my kids all out there adulting on their own? Do my knees and elbows ache more than they used to, is that bald spot really visible when my back's to the camera, and is that "new" project called "____" really in its eighth year of publication?

Yes to all of the above—wow, time flies. And while my own children have aged out of needing my assistance on a daily basis, my son David will become a father any day now. Soon I'll be bringing grandkids aboard the boat. Some of you have already reached this stage, while others are struggling to find the best ways to bring your own young children out on the water.

Since I'll soon need to use them once again, I have dug deep into my somewhat foggy memory banks to remind myself of the critical tips and tricks I employed to get through a day of fishing when my kids were mere tykes. I now pass those tips on to you angling parental units everywhere. You can thank me later.

- Be very, very careful to completely slather the child in sunscreen. Fail to do so, and mom will be very, very angry. If you left the dock without any sunscreen aboard, protect the child from sunburn by gently placing him or her in the fishbox for the duration of the trip.
- If the child refuses to stand still, runs around the boat, or presents a casting hazard, gently place him or her in the fishbox for the duration of the trip.

- If the child interferes with fishing in any way, shape, or form, you know where to (gently) put them.
- When choosing a life jacket for kids under the age of three, be sure to get one with a grab-strap on the head support. This will make it easier to lift them back out of the fishbox at the end of the day.
- Snacks are a critical component of any fishing trip with kids aboard, regardless of their age. Stock up with plenty of Slim Jims, candy bars, and pickled eggs.

- Toddlers get bored quickly and you'll need to keep them entertained—loud crying must be avoided at all cost, lest the child spook the fish. Come up with a list of onboard activities that will keep them busy, like spinney radar-rides and livewell swims with those cute bluefish.

- Upgrade your raw water washdown with a high-pressure pump and outfit it with a quality spray nozzle. You can't be expected to dig out wipes and fresh diapers when there's an epic bite going off, but a few blasts with sufficient water pressure will resolve soiled diaper issues in seconds.

- If the pacifier falls overboard, Spike-It markers make an excellent substitute. As I recall my kids were partial to shrimp flavor in chartreuse.

- Kayak anglers should add seatbelts to crate stowage systems.

- Repeat after me: "Honey, we're going to need a bigger boat."

Just in case any of my kids happen to be reading this: don't worry, I'm just kidding around. I promise to treat your children with the same love, care, and respect I treated you guys with when you were little and we went fishing. Wait, scratch that...



Notes from the Cockpit

I don't know about y'all, but I for one am sick and tired of icy winds and white stuff piled up on top of my boat covers and I'm SO glad spring is finally on the way. This January was particularly onerous with all that snow and cold, and much as I do appreciate having had something of an ice fishing season this winter—for the first time in a long time—I was growing fond of the 50-degree January days we enjoyed for a few years in a row. Heck, the past few winters have been so warm it's made me feel like a real global warming winner. Sure, climate change has its downsides, too, like more crazy storms and that coastal flooding thing. But its upsides include more fishable days on average each winter, which is a massive plus.

Speaking of the upsides to global warming: Have you ever caught an Arctic wolffish? I've heard that they're mighty tasty, and while these fish were more or less off-limits to recreational anglers up until recently, these days we can get in on the action thanks to what top government fishingtologists have termed the "Expanded Global Warming Fishing Area" (EGWFA).

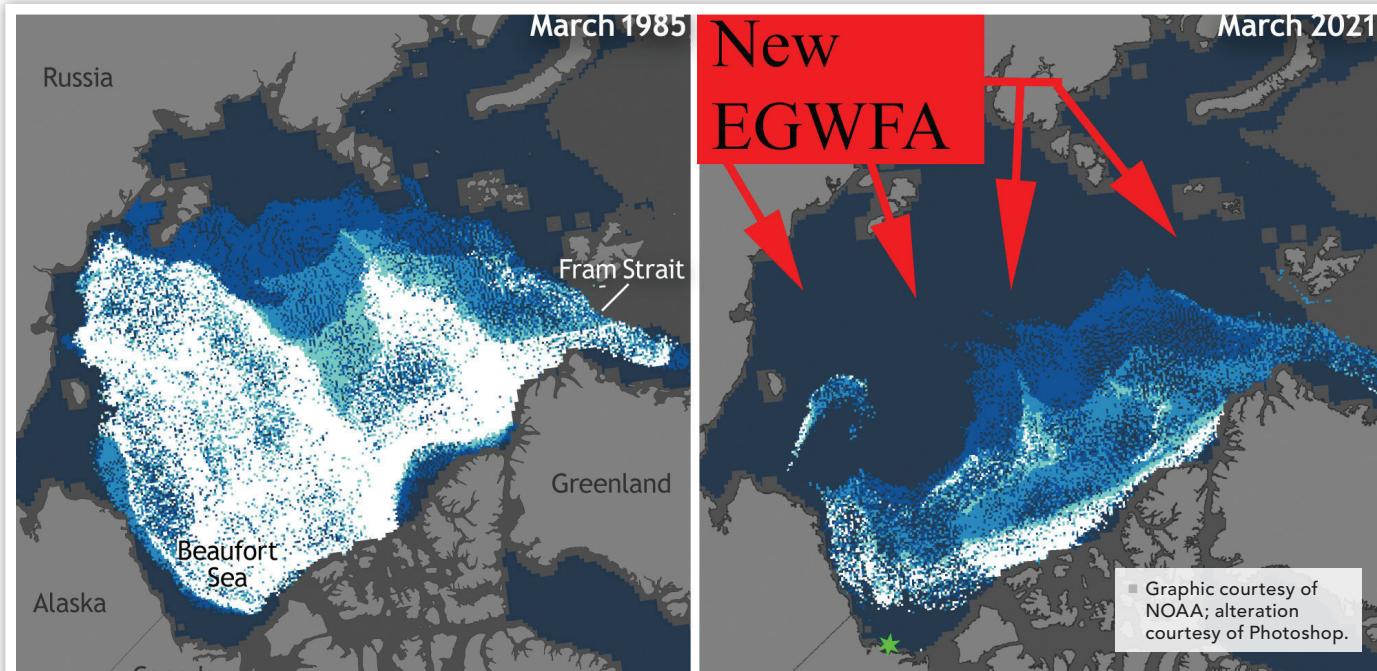
According to NOAA, the amount of arctic ice remaining after the summer melt has shrunk by 13 percent per decade relative to the pre-1980s era. In other words, our EGWFA is growing by leaps and bounds! So, if you're willing to make the 3809 nautical mile cruise from the Chesapeake Bay to the Arctic (or trailer to Tuktoyaktuk, Canada, and launch from there), the wolffish is now a species you can add to your bucket list.

Here at home, meanwhile, we can look forward not only to warmer winters but also a growing EGWFA of our own. Once sea levels rise enough, navigating from Solomons to Cambridge may be no more complex than driving your boat in a straight line. Running aground on the Poquoson Flats will be a thing of the past. And anyone who's fished the bays behind Assateague and Chincoteague knows how careful you have to be to stay in the channels there today, but in a few years we might be able to beeline it from the boat ramps directly to the inlet without having to worry about all those twists and turns

through the marsh. In fact, the boat ramp may more or less turn out to *be* the inlet. See what amazing upsides we could soon be enjoying?

Now, I know some nay-sayers out there might be worried that the risks and downsides outweigh all the good that climate change could do for us anglers. And they have a point, sort of, but the fact of the matter is that if this "problem" could be solved, the government would have taken care of it long ago. Just like they did with drug addiction, health care, and crime. Besides, there are plenty of folks out there who don't believe all this climate stuff is real in the first place, and none of the superPACs have funded their scientists and reporters well enough to settle the argument yet.

Some other negative nellies might ask, "_____ it seems like maybe you're jesting a bit. How can you be so flippant about such a serious problem?" To them I say that humor is the best antidote to stress and anxiety. And with the way the climate has been acting around here we have plenty to be anxious about. Besides, I really would like to catch a wolffish.



★ Tuktoyaktuk, Canada (look out for icebergs)

Back to the Bunker



■ Bunker are a food source for, well, just about every predator species swimming in the Bay. Photo by NOAA.

No, we're not talking about the doomsday-prepping cavern you carved out in your crawlspace—we mean the fish! Most readers go fishing in the one and only estuary in the nation, the Chesapeake Bay, where large-scale commercial netting of bunker (aka menhaden, aka pogies, aka alewives, aka fatback) is still allowed. Decades ago with the destructive power of multi-boat purse seining in enclosed waterways clearly evident, one state after the next eliminated the practice in all of their bays and sounds. All except Virginia, which today commands the quota for about three-quarters of the entire Atlantic catch.

Are you hearing the sound of a broken record? Yep. The battle to push those boats out of the Bay has been going on for as long as most of us have been alive. And the commercial interests have won nearly all of those battles without breaking a sweat. I say “nearly” because the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission (ASMFC) did finally institute a harvest limit in 2012 (note that this was triggered by an interstate Commission, not by a decision

made by the state of Virginia—similar to how an ASMFC decision forced Maryland to reduce the striped bass limit when the state didn’t particularly want to). And that cap has been reduced at times. Of course, we should also note that Omega Protein willfully busted the cap (and basically bragged about it by publicly announcing their intent) in 2019.

The latest front in this never-ending battle opened up with “ecological reference points,” which essentially means considering the fish’s ecological value as a food source for other species, in addition to considering the maximum sustainable yield. And with the decline of striped bass as well as links between osprey nesting failure and a lack of menhaden being suspected, those fighting to push these boats out of our waters seized upon ecological reference points as a cudgel. The only problem? There weren’t as of yet any localized Chesapeake Bay scientific studies demonstrating the exact links between bunker, ecology, fishing impacts, and economic importance. There was a need for solid data in order to swing that cudgel and

knock those boats out of the Bay and into the open Atlantic.

Enter: the Virginia General Assembly. In 2023 they introduced a bill directing the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS) to develop such a study. But then Omega lobbied, the bill was watered down, and instead they voted for VIMS to merely outline the details of what a potential study might entail. A year later, the Virginia House declined to fund the study and instead pushed it to 2025. And in 2025, you guessed it, again Virginia lawmakers have killed multiple efforts to fund the study.

What an exceptionally effective tactic: if you don’t like what you think science will tell you, simply stop the scientists from doing any work.

The battle goes on. Times change. Administrations change. Eventually the scientists will do their study. And eventually, the bunker boats will be forced to steam out into the open Atlantic before they can set their quarter mile-long nets. The only question is, how many rockfish and osprey will still be around when that finally happens?