

Calculus of Fluke

THE CIRCUITOUS ROUTE FROM HOOK-AND-LINE
MERCENARY TO MENTOR

For three weeks, I've taken a running inventory of my fluke-fishing experiences to lay out a rational case for my obsessive 20-year campaign to put a cutting point on my doormat-catching skills. For most of my rod-and-reeling career, I've been forced to defend the honor of my target species of choice. Fluke fishing is bottom fishing, and bottom fishing, according to so many striped specialists and bluewater blowhards, is brain-dead simple: If you locked a chimpanzee in a broom closet with a couple of rods and a tackle box, he'd emerge a week later as an accomplished sinker-bouncer.

Yeah? If I locked a chimpanzee in a closet with a half-dozen 50-wides and some spreader bars, he'd come out still a chimpanzee. And 90 percent of your Mensa-grade tuna would still never have seen a hook. And fishing, regardless of the species you prefer, would still be what you make of it.

I'll admit that my own fishing interests have been heavily influenced by the circuitous route I followed into the fishery. Because there were no boats in my family of origin, my only way out of the inlet was in oilskins. Fishing was a professional undertaking with financial consequences right from the starting gun.

My learning curve was steep, the only saving grace being that I had some fish-cutting experience from a Block Island fish market. The truth of working a

deck — it took me almost three seasons to fully understand this — is that, to be worth a damn as a mate, you need to understand not only how the fish you're targeting operates, but also the way your paying anglers think. Fluking was our high-summer bread and butter, and it was the first fishery I set out to master because I knew that as I got a better handle on putting fish in the boat, I would see a direct and fairly immediate return in my tips.

Over seasons, largely as a matter of professional competence, I took a bigger interest in my own fluke catch rate. As I took my precious time behind the reel more seriously (read: as I started to pay attention) I sought out more technically involved rigging methods, and I picked up better gear specifically with fluke in mind. I took advantage of my access to the captain, whose fluking expertise rivaled that of 95 percent of other skippers I know. I also put out feelers to friends on other boats — not just party and charter boats, but also the fish-trap boats, dayboat draggers and gillnetters, as well as pinhookers (the rod-and-reel commercials). I compared notes with legitimate fluke experts from other ports. And I began to understand that some of the most valuable intel comes from fisheries other than fluke, and from gear types other than the rod and reel. Knowing the timing and distribution of bait

The author has spent two decades focused on the Tao of fluke. He comes at the fishery from the perspective of a hard-core rod-and-reeler and former deckhand.

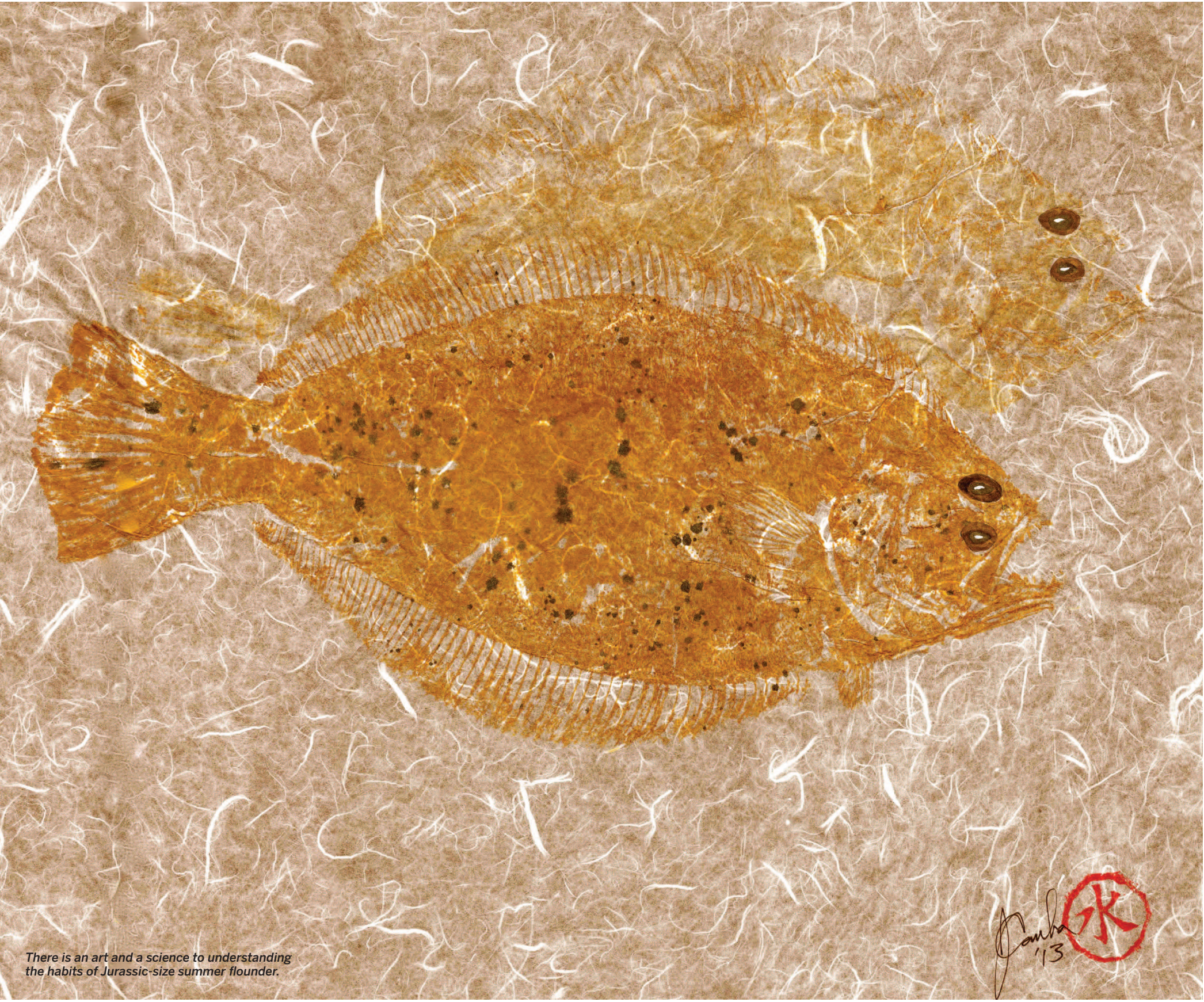


runs (squid, butterfish, herring, mackerel) can provide invaluable clues about likely concentrations of big fluke. Likewise, developments in other fisheries, especially early and late in a season, frequently coincide with changes in fluke patterns.

The cumulative effect of plugging into such a pipeline was a much more robust sense of the bottom within our range and the ways tidal influences or sea conditions affected the grounds we fished. More important, paying closer attention to developments in commercial fluke fishing (or fluke bycatch in other directed fisheries) opened the flues in my imagination and filled the long gaps in a highly seasonal interest in fluke biology. In time, I picked up winter work on commercial vessels, first gillnetting monkfish along the 30-fathom curve and, later, dayboat dragging all over Rhode Island Sound and Block Island Sound.

With the shift to commercial methods, I got a handle on the lay of grounds beyond the high spots and the hard bottom where most rod-and-reeling happens. I began to understand fluke movements, both migratory and tidal. Where my ongoing doormat hunt was concerned, I got regular chances to handle Jurassic-sized slabs that we hauled from little stretches of bottom I would never have associated with fluke. In particular, large-mesh gillnet provided regular glimpses of specimens from 12 pounds to the high teens and, during one trip early in my commercial initiation, the largest summer flounder I've ever seen. That fish, which overshot the length and width of a regulation fish tote with inches to spare on all sides, must have taped 4 inches thick at the center bone and scaled well north of an unspeakably huge 20 pounds. Still, wherever my life on the professional deck carried me, I was always glad when I found May on the calendar and knew I'd soon get back where I belonged: behind a reel.

During the first decade or so that I fished, I gained a solid, holistic understanding of the fluke that filter into my area in April and May and recede offshore, bound for winter grounds outside 40 fathoms, in September and October. More to the point, I cultivated a year-round understanding of a fish most recreational anglers experience on a fleeting four-months-a-year basis. It's a hell of a lot easier to learn the nuances of big-slab behavior when you spend seven days a week drifting around their grounds and collecting \$20 for every new revelation. On the other hand, the longer you fish, the greater the danger that



There is an art and a science to understanding the habits of Jurassic-size summer flounder.

the feverish adolescent energy that carried you up the steepest leg of your learning curve will disintegrate under the strain of mortgage payments, seasonal burnout or the increasingly grim over/under for fishing futures. The day it becomes a purely monetary undertaking is the day you've destroyed a major lifelong interest.

During my near month-long meditation on summer flounder, I've stockpiled enough rhetorical ammo to mow down an entire platoon of elitist stripermen. I also unearthed one not altogether reassuring truth: I'm a fair hand with a rod and reel, good with a knife or a landing net, and can speak or write fairly articulately when the subject of fluke management comes up, but on balance, I'm nobody's angler, and there was nothing recreational about the course I steered to get where I've wound up, as a recreational fisherman who finds more potential relaxation at gunpoint in a hostage situation than in sitting idle in a fishing boat. I'm a hook-and-line mercenary who looks shiftier in peacetime.

Awhile back, a friend who spent the winter dragging brought me a half-dozen fluke that included one pushing 10 pounds — all last-tow stuff, well-iced and in top shape, from a quick day trip outside to 40 fathoms (24 hours dock to dock). He hovered while I filleted them carefully on a fish tote in my driveway. I peppered him with questions.

There had been squid everywhere (on the drag bottom), he said, from 40 fathoms out to the edge — enough meat in some areas that they'd been towing day and night, chipping away at reasonably clean squid.

Immediately I started thinking about outside spots, a couple of pieces in deep water that must get a few big fish before it warms up right out front and everything parades north up onto the beach.

When my friend left, I pulled out two paper charts. Two hours later, my wife and daughter retrieved the neatly trimmed quarters of a 4-pounder I'd rinsed and wrapped in a paper towel to dry. Kaya, who was 6 at the time, wanted to add some pulverized nuts to the bread crumbs. "I'll do it," she told Mom.

The fish, prepared by Kaya, fried by Mom, was, in a word, incredible. "Next time," I told the little one, "*you're* going to catch the fish ... and fillet them and prep the fillets and then fry them."

I'll teach you, I added, under my breath, feeling better with some real fish in my belly and a new mission taking shape.