

# Grace of the Food Chain

FEW THINGS FILL A SOUL WITH HUMAN PURPOSE LIKE A COOLER  
PACKED WITH WELL-ICED AND BLED BLACK SEA BASS



Artist James Prosek masterfully depicts *Centropristis striata*.

**“What a @#\$\$! racket,” I mumble to no one in particular,** as I take in the massive southward sky, a dome of high cloud centered directly overhead, everything bending down and in toward the horizon and into the drink. To the north, the Rhode Island mainland floats on a shimmering band of bent light. I, the “nature boy,” confirm that everything’s set, as my boss rounds up for a quick pass over a little cluster of boulders, cobble and mussel beds off the south side of Block Island.

I feel the 35-foot Down Easter slide out of gear and, on force of habit, pluck my rod out of the holder, tuck it under my left arm and swing the rig up for a final inspection. We glide for a second while Cappy checks his screens. Then we rumble into reverse for a moment to halt forward progress and wait for the prop wash to settle out.

We’ve just baited and dumped the last of eight large old-school fish pots in a half-mile square. Now we wait. And by wait, I mean rod-and-reel a bunch of huge sea bass.

In the two decades I’ve spent working on the water, the days I’ve felt downright smug about my lot in life have been variations on this morning’s undertaking: a windless, flat-ass calm, early-fall hard-bottom recon trip, working on big black sea bass, 3 pounds to more than 6. The world record black sea bass scaled a terrifying 9 pounds and change.

I don’t believe in the hierarchy of “worthy” sportfishing quarry, where a handful of species — tarpon, bonefish, marlin, tuna, striped bass and sails, among others — are ascribed incredible strength, cunning, wits, beauty and



prowess, while other species get scoffed at. It's an underdog thing. It's also a different ethic about our waters, the fish, the food chain, where the noblest quarry is what everyone eats with gusto, because in my world, the familial (blood or elective) feasting completes a rite that began predawn when we hung the last spring line on its designated piling.

When you lay same-day sea bass on a grocery-store seafood consumer, the gratitude radiates tenfold. Fish this good can't be bought for all the Franklins in a Manhattanite billfold, but it's traded for tomatoes or corn, or gifted to neighbors who understand the weight of the gesture.

Few things fill a soul with sacred human purpose like a cooler full of well-iced, bled, rinsed and packed black sea bass — or its yield in well-cut fillets, translucent, almost iridescent, on a plate beside the stove.

**Our first drift, I hang up** inside a minute — one hazard of fishing adrift around the broken ground that concentrates sea biscuits. Cappy rips his rig in, liberates a pair of wallet-sized specimens, each sporting a 4/0 octopus hook that looks, proportionally, the way a gaff head might in the maw of a 3-pounder. Not what we're after.

I fetch a replacement rig from a bunch dan-

gling off the plumbed bait barrel up against the wheelhouse. I slip on a sinker and bait up with squid and an oozing black glob of sea clam belly (the former for staying power, the latter for scent power) on each hook.

"This feels a little better," my deckmate announces, just as my sinker contacts the ground floor with a clank.

I note a respectable bend in his heavyish setup. I'm about to speak when I feel a wild thump and discover the fish has more or less hung itself with no help from me. I'm just squaring up to the rail, starting to pry the fish out of the seabed when a strange weightless plucking sensation shoots through the line to my brain. I snap the rod skyward. The tip barely moves.

For a second I worry I'm hung up again, but as I lean back on the rod, I note my new rock is bucking an awful lot.

"Got two," I announce.

Two good sea bass on one rig have a distinct feel, a weird, disjointed tugging and a consistent, substantial weight. Fish under 5 pounds fight comically hard in a way that makes it almost impossible not to smile, especially when your rig is full-up and you can lean back on the rod, balance yourself against the strain.

I will concede that bottom fishing isn't a fishery of endless technical complexity, by which I mean: "simple," not to be mistaken for "easy."



The fact that we're in the thick of a sea bass boom doesn't change one hard truth of the hunt for thick sea bass: the guys who have the real estate, the hangs, the wrecks, the rock piles, the little nothing bump off in the geographic center of mudflat nowhere, the mussel bed in 41 feet surrounded by an acre of 41 feet, the lat-lons corresponding to a bed, two Cadillacs long, one Prius wide, of small, still chewable mussels. Or the little nugget you steamed over on the way to or from tuna grounds, mined 7 years of logbook to find three almost identically worded entries — lat-lons, followed by "load of stuff hard on bottom." They're the ones with the good stuff.

Subsequent recon unearthed a flurry of honest-to-Christ 4-pound sea bass and a lone cod pushing 20 pounds. You can now recite the coordinates along with your wedding anniversary, wife's birthday, your bike lock combination and your first telephone number.

Here's the deal: You can prattle on for weeks about hooks, knots or teaser colors, but if you don't have some sea bass ground, debating tackle minutia is like rearranging the *Titanic's* deck chairs.

Anyone can catch black sea bass if it's a purely quantitative exercise. But without the possibility of cracking 5 pounds in the process, I'd rather make a couple swipes at the lunch cooler, stuff my face with cold cuts, wipe my hands on opposing sleeves and stare into the briny middle distance, trying to remember, say, the joke that goes with the punchline, "the potato goes in front."

Now, after a minute taking back line I'd deployed to hold bottom, the fight is vertical. I'm genuinely surprised how hard the mystery fish are dogging me. I'm half expecting to see a big cod emerge from the murky depths.





*Jigs work well on larger fish.*

“Good one, huh,” says my boss as he dumps his reel in freespool. “Let me know if you need a net on that.”

The suspense is killing me. It could be almost anything down there. A few more cranks, and I see the barrel swivel on my rig flash into view, but still no sign of whatever’s on there. Almost no other species in our waters can out-camouflage a sea bass from above.

A 3-pound sea biscuit has the top hook solidly in its jaw hinge — nowhere near enough to explain this fight.

“I’m up,” I announce, “Got that net?”

The bottom fish is a good one. My partner deftly bags that one first, gathers up the smaller one on the way up. The larger looks obscene. I’d guess 7 pounds if I didn’t know better. So 5, probably.

I glance toward my railmate just as his rod goes down hard. A split-second later mine does, too. No head-shakes. No bounce. Obscenities all around. It takes a moment to figure out what’s happening. The line’s clearly hung up, but there’s some limited play: I can gain about four cranks before it stops dead. We scan in all directions for evidence of lobster gear, the buoys on up-and-down lines, but see none. Probably an unmarked gillnet or a string with too-short buoy lines sucking under in the tide — standard fare for Block Island’s south side. We break off, then gather around the helm to investigate.

Sure enough, it’s a gillnet. We find another string a couple of tics east of where we’d started that first drift, then some lobster gear just west of the mystery net. Trying to anchor hemmed in like that seldom ends well.

Two hours later, a couple dozen solid sea bass and a handful of big porgies on ice, the skipper wants to go check the pots. When sea bass are thick, a mesh bait bag of sea clams seldom holds on beyond a couple of hours. Rod-and-reeling seldom, if ever, keeps pace with good fish pots.

At least we got a few, and more importantly, I got the biggest one in the box, which means Cappy’s buying the Guinness.

### **This mission was more than a decade**

ago, well before the abrupt spike in black sea bass populations across the Northeast. With the change came not only more and bigger BSB on the old ground, but swarms in all sorts of places no one could recall having seen them





*A black sea bass and a mess of big porgies are headed for the fillet table.*

before. The places that had always collected a few suddenly had knots of them. No doubt, the transformative effect of aptly-named Hurricane Sandy had a hand in the distribution shakeup. A storm that changed the entire lay of Block Island's south side had even more dramatic effects below the low-tide mark. Some known wrecks silted over and vanished completely, while whole constellations of hitherto unknown structures got cleared off and began to take on tenants within a season or two.

More important, climbing water temps — which have sparked a marked shift northward and eastward in the migratory patterns of other stocks, such as summer flounder — have also likely triggered our recent BSB invasion.

In the seasons since, the rod-and-reelers have embraced the advantages of the new arrangement.

Unfortunately, the population explosion has been tempered by one huge regulatory caveat: Lack of the statutorily mandated science to

guide decisions, and a call for management accountability, have subtracted from already miniscule catch targets. As stocks grow exponentially and spread out, more anglers catch more sea bass, and landings spike, triggering quota-overage paybacks in each successive year. We call it the “death spiral”: booming resource destroys fishery.

And so a fish in exponential population growth, a fish hard-wired to run other same-tier predators off ground, a fish aggressive enough, fishermen argue, to threaten other rebuilding stocks where they overlap, will flourish indefinitely. Sadly, this fish, which could easily shoulder some pressure from overburdened fisheries such as striped bass, fluke, tautog or cod, remains trapped in bureaucratic limbo.

Our new sea bass bonanza, then, will be fished as black sea bass always have: as a welcome bycatch bonus for guys targeting other species. Then, for a short period according to state regulations, when the possession limit

jumps just enough to support an hour or two of dedicated sea bass highgrading, we'll attempt to put up fillets for winter.

I'm less worried about the big kill than with maintaining the spirit of celebration around seasonal bounty that imposes some predictable order on my charmed life of perpetual adolescence beside the sea.

The black sea bass could be the most strikingly beautiful of any creature that lives coastal — long, graceful fins, striking white and electric-blue highlights, big fleshy humps on the foreheads of the joes.

According to my increasingly eccentric take on the fishing life, where the avoidance of macho B.S. lives in my bones, black sea bass swim on both sides of the jagged line between the fire in my belly and the water in my soul: proof that I still live by the grace of the food chain, and evidence, by their very design, of larger gears turning, a greater clockwork presiding over the fleeting eons.