

# Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

John Bulmer

## Reely Seeing by Richard DeMarte

Each time I head out on another fishing trip, the birth of the new day never ceases to amaze me. For the past ten years, ever since my fishing adventures first kicked into high gear, I've seen more sunrises than any other person I know (besides Dad, my best friend and fishing partner). As we climb aboard our boat and pull away from the dock before sunrise, the calm soft silence of the new day embraces us and my heart starts to race thinking about what lies ahead. It's a sequence of events that never ceases to amaze. It never gets old, and no two days are ever the same.

Finding bait is always our first order of business, so with the sky starting to lighten we search for bunker, the twelve-inch baitfish most sought after by the striped bass we're fishing for in our home waters of western Long Island Sound along the New York/Connecticut border. A telltale slap on the water's surface catches my eye and within a heartbeat I throw my snag-hook and have caught my first bait of the day. A few dozen casts later, our baitwell is full and we're dropping anchor along the rocky shoreline in one of our favorite striper spots. Within minutes, we deploy four baits (two live and two chunks) and almost immediately one reel starts to scream. The day is already a winner!

Being out so early is a treat for a number of reasons. Oftentimes the families of ospreys that have returned to this area after a twenty-year absence put on a show, screeching and swooping high over our heads. They see the same pods of baitfish we do and demonstrate

their superior fishing skills as they swoop down to the surface, zoom along at high speed, extend their talons and latch onto a bunker. The show usually ends as they make their way back to their nest to feed their young. It really is a sight to behold, and one that I'm fortunate to witness dozens of times each year.

Caring about western Long Island Sound is a family tradition. For four generations, my family has contributed to protecting this amazing and awe-inspiring estuary by participating in and supporting environmental activities and organizations like the Fishermen's Conservation Association and the Marine Fish Conservation Network. And while I never begrudge any angler a fresh-caught meal, I practice catch-and-release and am proud to have personally tagged, measured, weighed



and released more than 750 striped bass in the last few years—a couple of which measured nearly four feet long and weighed close to 36 pounds. I figure that if only five percent of the fish I released were breeding-aged females, that's 37 females returned to the water to spawn. Given that each female between 10 and 20 pounds lays one to three million eggs, that's a lot of potential future stripers. Even factoring in a tiny survival rate, the impact of release is profound, and to me, this is what balancing recreational fishing and conservation is all about.

As my journey continues, looking ahead to my future, I can "reely" see that little contributions truly make a difference in helping to ensure the health of this estuary for generations to come.

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