

## SUMMERTIME BLUES

*Casting for dinner and a story.*

BY CARL SAFINA

Toward dusk I often take a rod and some lures and head along the beach to a spot I like.

Fishing provides time to think, and reason not to. And it's true that, if you have the virtue of patience, a few hours of casting alone is plenty of time to review all you've learned about the grand themes of life—and to realize it comes down to one or two truths. Henry David Thoreau observed that, "Many men go fishing all of their lives without knowing it is not fish they are after."

But I am, indeed, after fish. My pursuit derives from a wondrous proposition: You go to the shore and look out at that infinite span of water that gift-wraps the planet and say, "Get dinner." The true act of fishing is the searching, the knowing when, where and how to begin looking for a fish in a whole ocean. Tides, moon phases, the cycle of seasons, the spots that produce. In a circular, self-reinforcing way, catching a fish both provides, and requires, a sense of place.

For those who don't fish, the ocean is just scenery.

I continue casting and reeling back. The forward motion makes my lure seem to be swimming.

Being at the water becomes a very different proposition when sending forth that inquiring, hopeful filament. I fish to scratch the surface of deep-dwelling mysteries, and for nearness to the beautiful, and to reassure myself the world remains. I fish to wash off some of my grief for the peace we have so squandered. I fish to dip into that great and awesome pool of power that propels the fishes' epic migrations. I fish to feel—and steal—a little of that energy.

I cast again. And again. Investing your effort, trying and failing, a modicum of eventual success, and life-and-death stakes; the act becomes an allegory of life and time. And precisely because it carries symbolic qualities, fishing can, in its best moments, feel like art.

But my fishing has no arbitrary goal, no score, nor the tribal warfare of sports or of games. It's not a game. A fish is a real thing. Its death is a real death.

Yet I think a modicum of fishing is justifiable for the table and for sharing with friends. Most people get all their food—every scrap of it, for the long duration of their lives—across a counter. I prefer not to imagine such a severed life.

When eating wild, every meal carries a narrative. A day remembered is a day lived, and fishing harbors that potential. So I also fish to obtain stories and share them into memory. Fishing often creates a story involving many of the people at my table—a

truly shared meal, entailing adventures and the craft of storytelling as basic to being human as tales around cave fires. This is a feat impossible with supermarket food, which arrives devoid of résumé.

In my kind of fishing, there are two kinds of disappointments: The first makes a hole in dinner plans. For that, vegetables suffice. The other holes your heart. Of the creatures that should be in a place at an appointed time and season, many come no longer. Menu substitutions might work for dinner, but not for the future of the world. A few recovered species don't compensate for the lost company of great beasts I once knew well. I have watched animals that once thrilled me—like bluefin tuna and mako sharks—driven to such staggering scarcity that fishing for them has transformed from celebration to moral transgression in my own time.

I keep casting and retrieving for about half an hour, questing for new memories. Nothing at all happens. Even the loafing gulls look bored.

Sunset yields to sun-down and the red west slowly deepens toward darkness. I'm about to quit when on a whim I decide to try changing lures. No fish have been showing at the surface, so I've been using deep-running lures. But when nothing is working, anything is worth trying, so I snap on a surface lure.

I watch it sail into the deep dusk, plop down and spread dark ripples in the flowing tide. I start retrieving, and since there's not quite enough light to see it, I listen as I begin chugging it across the surface. Pop... pop...poosh! I see a black splash. The line stretches taut and the rod dips, as a fish—a good one—thrashes furiously to shake the lure loose. Still



attached, it catches the current and frantically bee-lines away.

The fish runs and stops. I reel it closer, and it runs again. Failing to free itself, the fish slowly begins losing this tug of war. And in a few minutes the bluefish is thrashing at my feet and I grab the line and slide it ashore. It clamps the razor-toothed vice of its undershot jaw onto the shank of the steel hook. Exhausted and perhaps slightly stunned, its bright-yellow eye swivels but does not return my gaze. I put a foot lightly behind its head so it can't thrash and slash my hand, then reach down with pliers and pull the hook. I pick up a fist-sized stone and hit the fish decisively on its head, and its fins stiffen and shiver, then twitch a bit, relax and go still. Less an act of "mercy" than of hastening the death I've chosen to inflict, this is the aspect of fishing I find most unpalatable. Simply letting the fish suffocate in the air is easier for me, but more prolonged. For the fish, I'm not really sure which is worse.

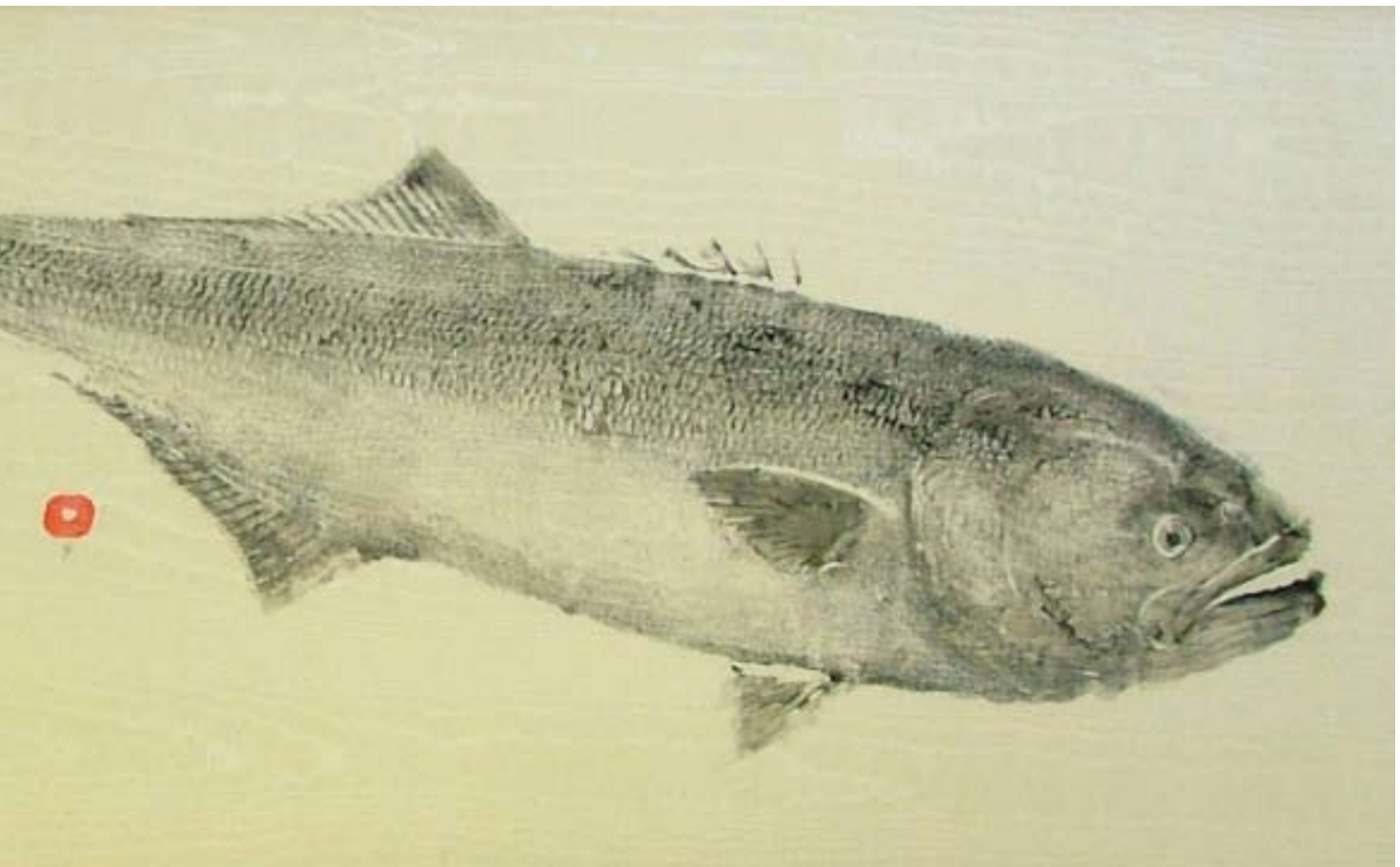
In two more casts I catch two more bluefish. As soon as I pull

the third thrashing fish ashore, I hang up the lure, string up all three fish, and begin walking home in black fog.

The motivation to catch persists longer than the actual need of food, giving rise to that most peculiar of all predatory acts: catch-and-release fishing. The problem with catch-and-release is that it's hard on the fish; the hooks injure them, the handling bruises them, the exhaustion makes them vulnerable, and some die. I have grown past catch-and-release. I now practice kill-and-go-home. Less is more. An ample sufficiency is enough.

For early-season bluefish they were unusually fat, and they tasted really, really good. 🍷

*Carl Safina lives in Amagansett and directs the Blue Ocean Institute, a global ocean conservation group he founded. His books include *Song for the Blue Ocean*, *Eye of the Albatross*, and *Voyage of the Turtle*. He will be contributing a regular column on the ethics of our seafood.*



Fish rubbing on yellow moire by Annie Sessler, [www.eastendfishprints.com](http://www.eastendfishprints.com). Bluefish caught July 2007 by Jim Goldberg, a mile off Culloden Point, using butterfish as bait.