

Winter sheepshead tactics

Pic: A sheepshead smiles for the camera.

Plummeting temperatures from cold mornings in the mid 40’s  dropped our water in the sound to as low as 58 degrees. Anglers willing to wrap up and brave the cooler temperatures were rewarded with the best sheepshead fishing we have seen so far this winter. During these extreme cold periods sheepshead fishing can be as good as it gets.

Deeper docks and jetties in and around the passes along with nearshore wrecks held lots of early season sheepshead. Though this is not glamorous fishing it requires a different skill set. After being able to place a bait right up against a barnacle covered structure you then have to try to hook these fish.

When a Sheepshead bites a bait it feels like small little dings as they often never take the bait solidly.  One way to describe it is like you are chewing around a chicken wing bone. During the nibble I have my clients slowly lift the rod tip. If you feel solid pressure on the lift the rod tip will bend, then give a quick short strike. Even then they have such a hard tooth filled mouth once they are on I often pop them a few more times to make sure the barb is in the fish.

Sheepshead can be a very frustrating fish to catch because of how good they are at stealing bait from a hook.  Using small baits on a small hook will increase your hook up ratio.  I like to use a 1/4oz jig head  with a 2/0 hook. I then thread a shrimp on the hook by breaking off the tail. Shrimp easily curve naturally onto the hook when pushed on tail first. Once on the hook I pinch off the head, this makes a small compact offering. This bait is not only harder for the fish to steal but is also very aerodynamic which helps with a accurate cast.  I find having the weight right on the hook gives a better feel of the bite than either a sliding weight or split shot.

Sheepshead are also one of the more popular fish for shore bound anglers to target all winter long. Bridges, piers, jetties and pilings will all hold great numbers of these fish. You don’t need much tackle, bait or even a boat to get in on this action. Many of my seasonal clients love taking home a fresh sheepshead dinner. Since sheepshead feed on crustaceans the meat is firm, white and sweet allowing it to be prepared in many different ways.

FWC rules and regulations on sheepshead are a 12 inch minimum size and a 8 per person per day limit.  These delicious fish have a very large rib cage and yield very little meat for there size. Although they are very plentiful I’d suggest not keeping anything less than 14 inches. Like all fish they are always better when eaten fresh so only take what you plan on eating.