



COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN in Southport, N. C., turn to the sea for their livelihood during cold winter months as well as during the other seasons. Availability, in large numbers, of black sea bass is the motivation as there is a large demand for the fish on northern markets. Here, Capt. Tom McGlamery and Mate Randy Stewart winch up a double trap from the sea floor in 70' of water.

MATE RANDY STEWART is waiting for the signal from Tom in the house to drop the traps over a reef on the sea floor. He has just placed the bait inside the internal container, in which the fish is required to enter the trap itself to get at the bait.

## Trap-Fishing For 'Black Gold' Pays Off For Tarheel Fishermen

Story and Photos  
By Bill McDonald

SOUTHPORT, N.C. — Time was when December came, if you were a boatman of any persuasion here, you went into hibernation until the sun came back in April. No more.

After the first of the cold northers come whistling down the Cape Fear River these days, you're out 30 miles at sea on the good days, fishing 70' of water while searching for — and finding — the black gold.

Black gold — another way of

saying black sea bass, which the summer charterboat men, the shrimpers and commercial boats in general go after when the cold weather drops the seawater temps from the low 80s of August to the mid-50s and low 60s of early winter, causing the fish to concentrate in heavy schools on the sea floor.

The commercial boat Blue Claw, with Capt. Tom McGlamery and Mate Randolph Stewart aboard, go off there with the best of them and come home smelling like roses. Either

they just plain have the luck of the Irish, or else they are outright damn good.

At 4 a.m. one day late last year, we left the Southport dock, and Tom headed her offshore on a blackfish excursion with 32 wire-mesh traps aboard. Fifteen hours later, Tom eased her alongside Dick Skipper's fish-house dock with 52 boxes of valuable, high-demand blackfish aboard. Each box holds 100 lbs. of fish.

Though it would be 10 days before he got his money from the New York seafood wholesalers, Tom figured they would average 25 cents a pound overall, which will bring a whopping \$1,375 into the treasury.

They can't do that every day, of course, because winter weather at sea is too unpredictable, and you have to pick your spots to have a go at the fishing. As a matter of fact, Tom and Randy put in a lot of time as longshoremen at the Sunny Point Army Terminal while the cold nor'westers blow. But they regularly make a little hay every time the sun shines and the brisk winds lay down so they can get out there.

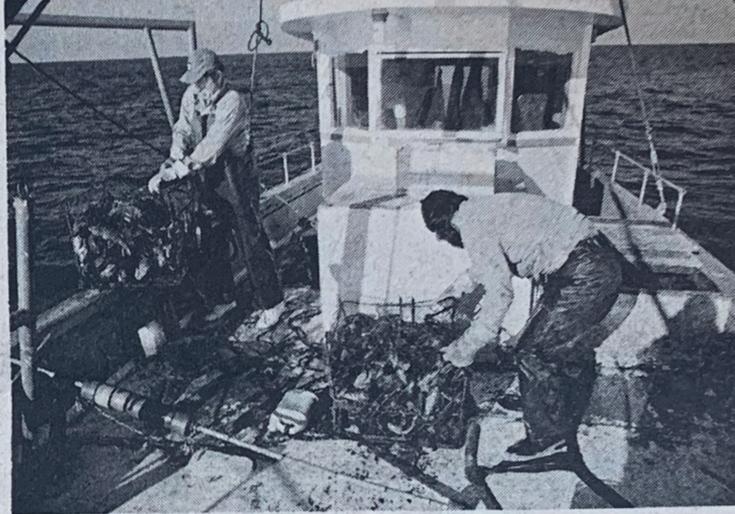
"You really ain't doing anything unless you can make a week's pay anytime you go off there for a day," Randy observed, "because of the uncertainty of the weather blowing up."

### 50-BOX CATCH

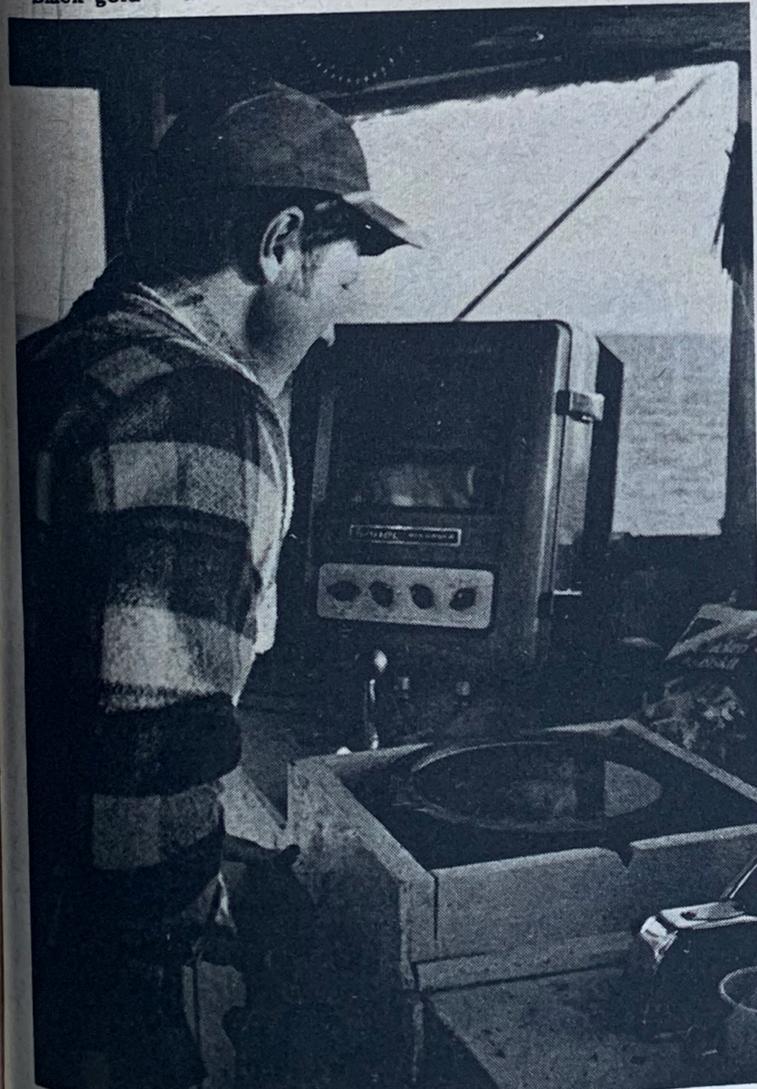
Last week, on a borderline day when the weather was questionable, they eased offshore and came home with 50 boxes of blackfish. Since fishing for the Southport commercial fleet had been poor to that point, the 50-box catch report was just about as potent along the waterfront as striking oil with a wildcat rig would be to the oil industry. It started a chain reaction of interest among the commercial fisherman.

Consequently, when Tom headed the Blue Claw (named in fond memory of his crabbing days, when he was known as

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TOM AND RANDY each wrestle with a nearly fully loaded fish trap. The first sets out on the offshore reefs produced far better results than the second and third sets in the same area.



CAPT. TOM closely watches his depth-recorder to see small reefs on the sea floor — the only places for dropping traps. At Tom's signal, Randy will put the trap over the side where passing schools of black bass are located. Sometimes the fish themselves can be "seen" on the recorder paper.



RANDY STEWART unloads a trap into the storage bin, which is already at the near-full point. When the last trap was recovered and brought aboard, there were 4,000 lbs. of fish in the bins, and another 1,500 lbs. were stored on deck.

# Trap Fishing

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Cape Creek Crabber) offshore, there was a small fleet of other boats along, including the Ellen, the Bolo, The Idle On, and Idle On II, the Riptide, and the Three Brothers boat. Everybody was there except the Running Bare. Everybody had the fever with Christmas coming on, and everybody headed offshore to his favorite fishing reef to set out his traps.

It was a three-hour run to the fishing grounds, and Randy got fancy with the fry-pan and whipped up a fine sausage and scrambled eggs and hot coffee breakfast enroute. That best of all good omens, a small group of porpoises, played at our bow wave while we were hooked up running. They must have stayed

with the boat three or four miles and as suddenly as they had joined us, they were gone. But they picked us up again near sundown on the run home.

Tom and Randy work well as a team. Tom fishes a "live-bottom" area, with coral and rock ledges showing on one of his sensitive depth-recorders, noting the exact loran reading to facilitate return to productive reefs. When he reads a sharp elevation on the recorder graph-paper, he signals Randy, who is waiting at the gunwale to drop baited traps over the side. They cover a general area, sometimes putting out traps at 100' intervals.

The fish traps are 2' x 2' x 2' cubes made of galvanized chicken wire stretched over a heavier metal frame. They are baited inside with menhaden

with two entrances through which the fish enter. Due to the structure of the entrance, the fish cannot exit. The trap, which sinks to the sea floor, is connected to a floating buoy at the surface with 150' of line. The buoys are cane poles with lead at the bottom, corks in the middle and cloth flags at the top, which "provide good visibility for a considerable distance across the open water.

Some boats may fish 50 traps, depositing them along a line around a submerged reef. By the time the last trap has been put overboard, the boat returns to the first trap put out, and the first set is in progress. When the trap is winched up from the bottom, it is emptied of black bass, rebaited and put back overboard.

The whole secret, according

to Tom, is reading that depth-recorder skillfully. It may only show the very slightest rise on the graph, but the fish are concentrated near those irregular rises, and you've got to hit them because this species won't swim far to get at the bait.

## 56-60 DEGREES

"My experience has shown the best fishing is when the seawater temp is between 56 and 60 degrees," Tom explained. "When the water becomes colder, the fish move further offshore into deeper and warmer water, and the bait on which they feed moves out altogether. Under these conditions, the fish are hungry and school up better. You could have fished a given reef last week and missed everything, and you might return to the same rock this week and load the boat."

Tom and Randy fished the 32 traps over the next eight hours. Sometimes the traps would be raised by the winch and they would contain more than 100 lbs. of blackfish each. More often the traps would have only 50 lbs. at a time, especially after the first set.

The two men filled storage bins that held 4,000 lbs. and, toward the afternoon, filled an area on the deck marked off by separator boards with an additional 1,500 lbs. Tom said it was the best trip he had had in three years. The 42' workboat took on a pronounced list to port with the weight of the fish predominately on the left side. The fish were piled so high near the gunwale that several were able to flip themselves back over the side and escape.

Still wearing their oilskins back at the dock, Tom and Randy worked with a shovel offloading the day's catch into baskets that were raised to the dock by winch. The fish were washed, graded and iced down in 100-lb. containers. The men had invested 18 hours in the day and still had yet to fuel, hose down the deck and clean up the boat. They would go right back tomorrow, except for an unfavorable weather front moving into the area. It was already raining and the wind was picking up.

Tom still vividly remembers his first trip offshore right after buying his boat — Nov. 7, 1969. "I'd just bought her, and she was five or six years old. We ran offshore that first time with the other boats. We had just arrived at the fishing area and turned on the depth-recorder, and it barely worked 15 minutes before it stopped completely. Fishing without a recorder is like walking around blindfolded," Tom said.

"We passed another boat and asked him where to fish, and he said, 'Just run to the northwest and drop off your traps 100 yards apart.' We fished and hit some and drew blanks on others," Tom said.

"About that time we ran out

of fuel in one of our two 50-gal. tanks, and the engine stopped. We switched over to the other tank, but couldn't get the engine started because the battery was too weak. There we were with all our traps out, broke down and drifting.

"There were four or five other boats working in the area, and the closest was a half-mile away. We had a dead radio because of the battery, so we waved until we got his attention. He came alongside and loaned us a battery, but it was so low we still couldn't crank the engine. He took us in tow and started home.

"We hooked up that low battery, let the water pressure spin the propeller and tried the battery again. She started. We made it the rest of the way on our own and spent the next several days getting everything in good shape.

"Next trip out, we fished a small rock area and put out our 13 traps. We started to pull them, and the first one was bone-dry empty. Looked like it was going to be a very long day.

"We started to pick up the other 12, and the first one was so jam-full there wasn't any slack or vacant space inside. The wire sides of the trap bulged outward with the weight of the fish. When we opened the trap door to empty the fish, they were so tightly packed inside we had to use a stick to pull out a few so the others could pour out.

## 200 LBS. OF FISH

"When a trap is that full, it holds 180 to 200 lbs. of fish. We pulled the other 11 traps, and there were 2,500 lbs. of blackfish on that first set. Two other boats came over and dropped off their traps on that little rock also, and the three boats had 200 boxes of fish at the end of the day.

"The seawater temp will drop lower in January and February," Tom added, "and we'll move 20 miles further offshore. That's when we'll spend two days and a night at a time. We'll fish the first day, leave our baited traps out that night, and fish the next day and come home. It will be cold — in the 20s, with a sheet of ice on the deck next morning when we leave the dock. But it gets right much warmer 30 or 40 miles out on the shelf due to the nearness of the Gulf Stream."

Tom and Randy have worked together for several years now. Randy hails from Washington, D.C., and was headed for Florida several years ago when the car broke down near Southport. He's been here ever since.

"He's a good man, and he hustles," Tom said. They both do. Those full fish boxes tell the story when they bring the boat alongside the fish-house at night to offload.



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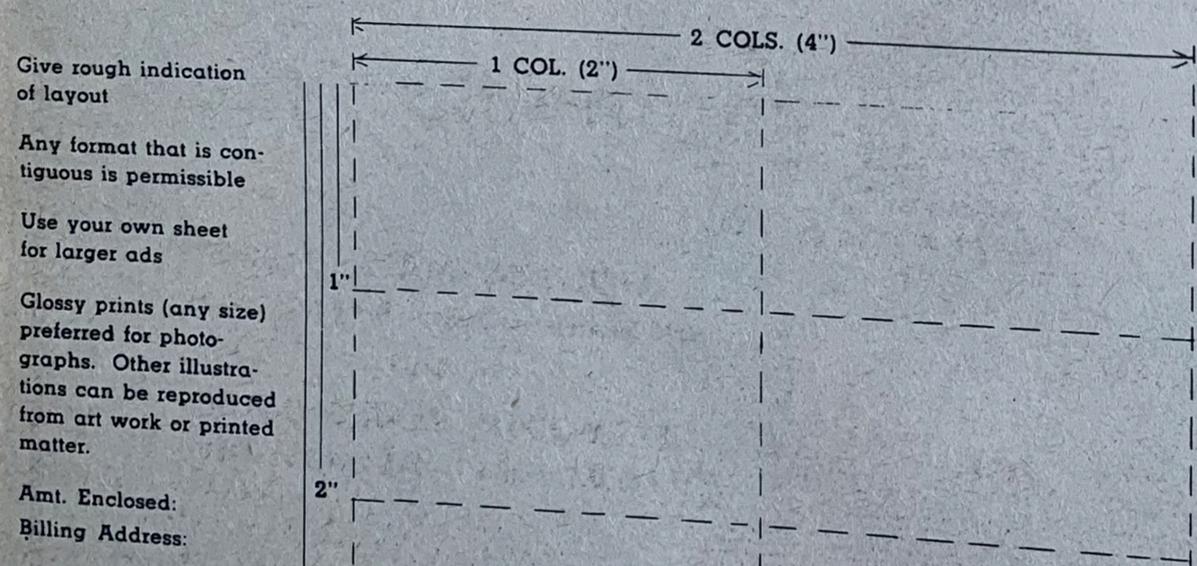
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