

Rockfish season off to promising start

By **Peter Baker**

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By sunrise Friday, hundreds of fishing boats were on station from Brewerton Channel south in Maryland waters of Chesapeake Bay as the spring season for rockfish opened with a new minimum size limit.

After several spring seasons with fewer days and minimum sizes ranging from 36 to 32 inches, this year the Department of Natural Resources lowered the size limit to 28 inches.

Oddly enough, the lower minimum is intended to protect the fish, which make up more than 80 percent of the spawning stock for rockfish (striped bass) from North Carolina to Maine.

DNR's reasoning is that at the larger minimums, fishermen were hooking and releasing too many fish below the legal limit, and many of those fish hooked and released were dying afterward.

By lowering the limit to 28 inches, maintaining a one-fish-per-day limit and not allowing anglers to cull their catch (trading out smaller fish for larger fish caught later in the day), DNR reasoned, hook-and-release mortality would be reduced -- and Maryland anglers would have a better shot at their piece of the rock before the spawners migrate down the bay to the Atlantic and north to New England.

Reports from opening day suggest an excellent catch rate.

"The weather was excellent, and the fish cooperated, too," said Fred Donovan at the Rod and Reel Docks in Chesapeake Beach. "About 20 of our 25 boats went out, and a lot of them came in early with limits, and by the end of the day I think all of them had their limits."

Donovan said most of the Rod and Reel boats were fishing the channel edge off Chesapeake Beach and the C and R Buoy, where Capt. Paul Sacker's party on the Cindy S. landed a 40-pound rockfish and several others in the 40-inch range.

"Lures were a mix of umbrella rigs and parachutes and 21 Tony spoons," Donovan said.

Capt. Ed O'Brien, vice chairman of the National Association of Charterboat Operators, runs the Semper Fidelis out of the Rod and Reel Docks, and had a party of 10 out on opening day.

"In four hours, we had our limit," said O'Brien, who was fishing the western edge of the shipping channel in depths of 42 feet and greater. "It was unbelievable. They were hitting on long lines, dummy lines, spoons,

parachutes and bucktails, and bucktails were definitely the best -- white heads and chartreuse bodies or the other way around, too.

"I think I was the luckiest guy out there for a change."

The biggest fish O'Brien's party landed, he said, was 38 pounds and 46 inches, and a number of other rock caught were in the upper 30-inch range.

Next weekend (May 1-3), the Rod 'N Reel Captains Association will run its annual pro-am tournament out of Chesapeake Beach and several other weigh-in stations between Breezy Point and Deale.

"For anyone who wants to get south of all the Whitbread race activity next weekend, this will be a good area to fish," O'Brien said. "Obviously, the fish are here and they are big."

On May 3, the restart of the Whitbread Round the World Race will be held at the Bay Bridge, and the U.S. Coast Guard will have in place a seven-mile exclusion zone from roughly Sandy Point to Thomas Point from 10 a.m. to 2: 30 p.m. No boats will be allowed to cross through the exclusion zone during those hours.

"So, whether you are coming out from either the Eastern Shore or Western Shore and want to get to the other side of the bay, you have to go around that zone," O'Brien said. "We, of course, xTC are well south of there, and the fishing will be free and clear."

The Rod and Reel tournament has a grand prize of \$5,000 and a \$30,000 bonus prize if the grand prize winner sets a state record for rockfish. Entry information is available by calling 800-233-2080.

Charlie Ebersberger of Anglers Sporting Center in Annapolis said opening day activity was slower than some years but steady through the day.

"The season is more spread out now, and with a Friday opening there wasn't a mad rush," said Ebersberger. "But just about everyone who came through got their fish. I haven't heard of anyone who got skunked -- and the best news is that all the fish we have seen already have spawned."

Ebersberger said parachutes and bucktails seem to have been the most successful baits, but that Mann's Plus 30 hardbaits also are in demand among trollers.

The spring season runs through June 14 at the 28-inch minimum. The creel limit is one per person per day.

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