

BONANZA AT BAFFIN BAY

Giant trout provide thrill of a lifetime

On a wall at home hangs the cracking, fading mount of a speckled trout caught 17 years ago. Two ounces shy of nine pounds, the fish is a legitimate heavyweight and remained my personal best until last week.

During two unforgettable hours on Baffin



Doug Pike

Bay, that benchmark was shattered. Repeatedly.

"You need to get down here, buddy," said Capt. Cliff Webb, who began stalking trophy trout a decade ago in the Laguna Madre south of Corpus Christi. "How's tomorrow look?"

Tomorrow, which would be Thursday, looked dreadful. There was work to do, little of which could be postponed with impunity.

"I'm talking giant trout on topwaters," Webb said. "Nine- and 10-pounders, in two feet of water. You can't believe it."

My calendar slammed shut.

Driving through steady drizzle near Victoria the following morning, there was serious consideration of a U-turn. I reached for the phone.

"Keep coming," Webb said from the boat. "We've already caught about 15 fish over eight (pounds)."

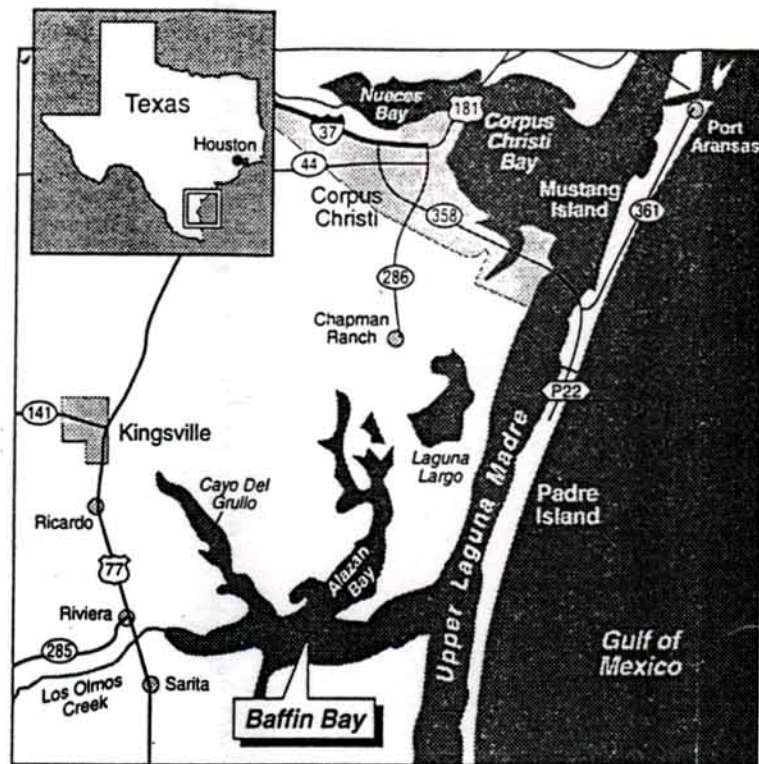
I blinked hard, expecting at any moment to see the ghost of Rod Serling standing in the headlights and raindrops. My foot fell heavier onto the accelerator.

We exchanged greetings in Corpus Christi, then hurried to Bird Island Basin, a top-notch public launching facility within the Padre Island National Seashore.

It was 2 p.m. and still raining when Webb negotiated a rocky stretch known locally as Hell's Half Acre.

Those rocks, some as large as automobiles, actually are the fossilized remains of prehistoric worms. They are distributed haphazardly throughout the bay and lie just beneath the surface.

Outside the marked intracoastal waterway, the Laguna Madre system is ex-



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tremely shallow. To be practical, boats here must be capable of running in one foot of water or less. Also, skippers must know the area's hull-breaking anomalies as well as they know their own neighborhoods.

Webb was raised in Corpus Christi and spent his youth looking over the shoulder of his father, retired Texas Parks and Wildlife Department game warden Carl Webb. Now 37, he understands Baffin Bay well.

For 10 days, Webb explained as the trolling motor pulled us into prime water, he'd been on these fish. Specks smaller than seven pounds were a rarity, and he'd lost count of how many 30-inch-plus trout had been measured and released.

The first indicator of what would come was a ceaseless procession of thick wakes darting in advance of the moving hull.

"They're still here," Webb whispered.

Normally, Baffin Bay water would be clear and we would have seen the fish. For several years now, though, much of the bay has been awash in a prolific algae bloom called brown tide that tints the water but does not harm fish.

Area anglers cursed the change and, for a time, abandoned Baffin Bay. Compared to typical bay color along the upper coast, though, brown tide doesn't look so bad.

Washtub-sized swirls boiled every few yards, and from the distance came the unmistakable sounds of aggressive feeding activity.

Webb is convinced that brown tide, at least indirectly, drew these fish into shallow water.

In the past, Baffin Bay's trout retreated to deep holes through the cold months. During each of the last three years, though, and always in January, he's found them on the flats.

They're looking for warmer water, Webb said, which most winters is the deepest water. Brown tide stifles penetration of sunlight beyond a few feet, however, so the area's channels and holes have yet to heat.

Water temperature at more than 10 feet last week hovered in the mid-40s. On the flats, on the heels of a cold front that produced snowfall as far south as Galveston, readings were 10 degrees warmer.

Our first strike came in less than 10 minutes. I set the hook rather casually and without a clue as to the trout's size. When a head the size of a honeydew thrashed the surface, I nearly came unglued.

That speck was 29 inches long and impressively thick, a trophy by any standard. Webb called it a "pretty good fish."

The next 130 minutes were unforgettable. We drifted, alone in mist and fog, and had explosive strikes every few casts. Twice, we both were hooked into enormous fish.

They hit jointed Thundersticks particularly well, and Jumpin' Minnows and Redfins and, in retrospect, most anything we threw. The fish were hot, too; the ones that didn't leap like tarpon streaked like bonefish.

Webb kept a few trout for use on a stringer mount he's having done for fishing shows. I killed only one fish, a nine-pounder that inhaled my plug and damaged its gills.

Baffin Bay guide Cliff Webb thinks brown tide actually has helped trophy trout anglers. Fish such as this one are feeding on sun-warmed flats now and are expected to remain there for several weeks.



Doug Pike / Chronicle

The rest were released.

We made note only of fish 30 inches or longer. There were five. The last trout I released was 32 inches and as fat as any we caught.

Thickening fog abbreviated the trip. The big wakes and boils were as numerous when we idled off the flat as they were when we arrived.

Webb took his fish to the taxidermist Friday and called me that night.

"One of them had a 14-inch speckled trout in its stomach," he said, "and another one had eaten a 14 1/4-inch mullet. They had girths up to 18 inches."

A fluke? Probably not, according to biologists.

"It looks like a good 'big trout' year," said Larry McEachron from TPWD's Rockport lab, noting that fall and spring gillnet surveys of the Laguna Madre produced lots of fish longer than 24 inches.

Most everyone I know figured specks that large are at least 10 years old, but recent studies indicate otherwise.

According to Bob Colura, an upper level Conservation Scientist at the Perry R. Bass Marine Fisheries Research Station in Palacios, many of the trout we caught could have been only three or four years old.

The ranges of age relative to size, as established by Colura and his staff during an ongoing study of 2,000-plus trout to date, are remarkable.

Among females, which normally are larger than males, fish between one and two years old varied from nine to 26.2

inches. Third-year fish ranged from 15.7 inches to 27.8 inches. Sixth-year trout have been as long as 30.1 inches and as short as 14.8 inches.

Colura said growth rates vary greatly from bay to bay and even among fish from the same area. Cautioning that all his data still was "preliminary," he did say that fish in the Lower Laguna Madre seem to grow faster through their first year than specks elsewhere.

Why the explosive growth in Baffin Bay? Colura thought the trout may be going through a "double up to catch up" phase behind that fish-killing freeze. If no more deadly cold occurs for 15 or 20 years and the population stabilizes, Laguna Madre trout may not continue to grow so quickly.

Regardless of age, these fish are impressive. Youth may explain their aggression. Webb plans to work that flat incessantly until it plays out altogether or produces a new state record.

The current mark — 13.56 pounds and 33.75 inches by Mike Blackwood of Corpus Christi, was landed on March 16, 1975, very close to where we fished.

I couldn't help but wonder about that 32-inch of mine.

Webb confirmed at least an 18-inch girth. By those numbers and by the accepted formula — L x G squared, divided by 800 — she weighed 12.96 pounds.

And she's still out there, eating 14-inch mullet.