





Speck-tacular

Despite ongoing trouble with brown tide, South Texas' Baffin Bay still is the place to go for trophy-class speckled trout.

Text and Photos by Doug Pike

"GO HOME," I mumbled to myself. "Turn around and cut your losses."

Partly cloudy sky in Houston had turned to heavy overcast at Wharton, then a steady rain just short of Victoria. This was no day to fish the Laguna Madre, especially on four hours of sleep and with two more hours of highway ahead.

"I'm at Victoria and it's raining and I'm dead tired," I whined to Corpus Christi charter captain Cliff Webb, whose invitation the night before had inspired this whole ordeal. "What do you think?"

From his boat somewhere on Baffin Bay, Webb answered my question with one of his own.

"It's raining here, too, but we've got about a dozen trout over eight pounds, all on topwaters. What do *you* think?" he asked.

Never mind whether or not I adhered to the 55 mph speed limit between Victoria and our rendezvous. Let's just say I got there more or less on time.

We chatted for two minutes. I drooled over three monster specks in Webb's ice chest (and bound, at a customer's request, for the taxidermist) for two more. The obligatory greeting period seemed to last forever.

"Can we go now?" I begged.

Webb snaked his way around the rocks that guard Baffin Bay from reckless boaters, settled the motor to idle speed and eased onto a mirror-calm flat. The cold drizzle continued, and I still wasn't so sure I'd made the right decision.

AWSOME SIGHT

Then the trolling motor was eased over the side. Then its prop scuffed the bottom. Then all hell broke loose.

In every direction from the boat, thick wakes pushed away from the threatening noise. Big wakes, like something a loaded skiff makes as it putters down a canal.

"They're still here," Webb whispered.

"If it floated and made a little noise, it got eaten."

At the end of a long cast, my topwater plug drew a heart-stopping strike. I could feel the big trout's head shake as it tried to break free. The fish came close without much struggle; maybe Webb had overstated the size of these specks.

Then I saw the fish. Then it saw me, and the real fight began. Several honest minutes later, Webb reached into the water and retrieved for me a speckled trout of at least eight pounds.

"Not bad," he shrugged, "about 29 inches."

Then, before I could react, he slid the fish back into the water.

Then he caught a nine-pounder, then I caught a bigger trout and he caught a bigger trout than mine.

All on topwaters, all alone on Baffin Bay in the middle of February.

The fog got worse, and Webb started looking over his shoulder.

"We can't stay much longer," he announced, "or we won't be able to get out of here."

HIT AND RUN

In all, we fished the spot barely two hours, during which we wasted many minutes changing lures to see if there was something these giant trout wouldn't eat. If it floated and made a little noise, it got eaten.

We lost count of exactly how many fish were caught, but I'd guess around two dozen. The smallest was a 3-pounder taken when Webb stopped short of the hotspot on our second drift. His next cast, also off prime water, produced a five-pounder. Every other trout we caught was at least seven pounds.

Since I'd never caught a 30-inch speck before, I did keep track of our fish in that class. We had five. The last and largest fish I released was 32 inches long and fat as a football.

When it was over, after my heart had retreated far enough beneath my throat so that I could speak, I questioned Webb as to how he'd found those fish and why they were there.

After all, Baffin Bay was and still is suffering the effects of an unprecedented algae bloom known as brown tide. And to hear many of the locals talk about it, you can't catch big trout on artificial baits in algae-tainted water.

But we did.

Baffin Bay always has had a reputation for producing giant speckled trout. Anyone who fishes there for three or more consecutive days, almost any time of year, can expect to hang at

least one trout larger than six pounds.

But we had two dozen fish, most of which were larger than eight pounds.

BETTER LUCKY THAN GOOD

Up front, let me say that I take no credit for our success; anyone else there on that same day would have done equally well. Even Webb admits to having stumbled onto this herd of spotted elephants almost by accident. He even took another guide in there one day to share the wealth.

Otherwise, though, he kept pretty quiet. And for two weeks, two unher-

clear through that two-week period, the effects of all-day sunlight lingered.

Mullet and other forage species sought the more temperate tide flowing over the flats. In their wakes came the trout, the biggest that Baffin Bay had to offer.

More than once that unforgettable afternoon, from somewhere in the fog, Webb and I heard the violent splashes that signal the plucking of another link from the marine food chain.

Based on what I saw and heard and felt down a doubled rod, I wouldn't have dangled an unprotected finger in that water.

In one of the big sows was a 14-inch speckled trout. Whole. In another was a mullet nearly an inch longer. Also whole. Girths went as high as 19 inches.

For curiosity's sake, I ran the accepted formula for weight on my largest trout. It was 32 inches long with, conservatively, an 18-inch girth. The result: 12.96 pounds.

Spring and summer on Baffin Bay passed without reports of any concentrations of giant trout such as those Webb found. According to biologists, though, the fish still should be there.

For all the bad things attributable to brown tide — dying seagrasses, dimin-



ished weeks of watching his clients land (and usually release) at least a couple of fish longer than 30 inches, he had the whole of Baffin Bay to himself.

The veteran guide figures it this way: In a normal winter under normal water condition (which, for the Laguna Madre, is air clear), the biggest trout would have retreated by February to deeper, warmer holes. Water on wind-riffled flats would be too cold, for bait-fish and for predators.

Brown tide changed the formula. Since sunlight was unable to penetrate the algae bloom, its warmth didn't reach the deep holes. The sun's rays did, however, raise water temperatures on the flats. And because wind had been unusually light and sky generally

“One of these big trout had swallowed a 14-inch speck whole.”

“Good day not to be a mullet, huh,” Webb observed.

It wouldn't have mattered what size mullet, either. Days later, finally certain that the whole trip hadn't been a dream, I called to thank Webb. He'd been to the taxidermist with those fish from the morning session, the ones I saw in the ice chest.

There, Webb said, a state biologist had taken measurements and checked the stomach contents of each trout.

ished light penetration, a deadly effect on juvenile sportfish, and self-perpetuating growth cycles — the algae seems to have negligible impact on adult trout and reds.

Also, colder weather does seem to stifle the bloom, which results in slightly clearer water throughout Baffin Bay during the winter months.

All of which adds up to the potential for a replay of last winter's incredible trout fishing on Baffin Bay.

In early November, I called Webb to ask if he'd been thinking about that stretch in February. And, shamelessly, to reserve a couple of spots in his boat about the same time this year.

“Are you kidding,” he laughed. “That's all I've been thinking about.”