

SHARKING GONE BAD

A rough surf, a bloody bluefish and a bleeding thumb. One evening's bull-shark run went sideways a long way from shore — and there was a warning he should have heeded.

BY DINK MURPHEY



OUR SHARK-FISHING ADVENTURE with the kids was set for Thursday.

It was only Wednesday, but the water looked good, and there wasn't a strand of June grass in sight to turn our line into a tangled mess. June grass had wrecked our shark outing the year before, so when Kevin suggested we go for it that evening, I agreed.

Our gear had been ready for days. A six-foot boat rod and a Penn Senator 6/0 reel spooled with 100-pound test. A homemade rig of weed-eater line—a Texas shark's money-saving favorite—ready to attach. At the business end: a steel leader, a 20/0 circle hook and a heavy spider weight to grab the sandy bottom. And we'd been blessed with a big bluefish from our outing the day before—ideal shark bait.

We would be practicing catch-and-release, so the rest of our gear waited in a bucket: rope to snare the tail and pull the shark into shallow water, bolt cutters for a quick snip of the hook from its mouth, gloves, a flashlight—and a camera to document whatever mayhem might ensue.

THE RIG

What Went Out Past the Breakers

Rod & reel — six-foot boat rod, Penn Senator 6/0

Line — 100-pound test

Rig — homemade, weed-eater line

Terminal — steel leader, 20/0 circle hook

Anchor — heavy spider weight (*left on the beach*)

Bait — one big bluefish, cut for blood

Release kit — rope, bolt cutters, gloves, flashlight, camera

Safety — life jacket, SPOT GPS locator, electrical tape

As agreed, we all met on the beach at 6 p.m. My kayak rested on the dry sand, waiting to be paddled out to the second sandbar for the bait drop. The glorious second sandbar—a major feeding ground for the bull sharks that frequent the Emerald Coast.

I began preparing the bait. Kevin suggested the surf might be a little too rough, that maybe we should wait until tomorrow as originally planned. By then my adrenaline was really pumping. I kept working on the bait and said, "Let's just go for it." If we lived near the coast it would have been different, but our time was limited to a seven-day summer vacation. Besides, the kids were fit to be tied with excitement. My adrenaline climbed. I was locked in

on the decision, admitting only to myself the doubt that lingered beneath it.

Working a little too fast, I cut my thumb on the razor-sharp tip of the 20/0 circle hook. Not a small cut—a gaping one. The kind that could easily have used some of that purple superglue hospitals charge dearly for. Maybe even a few stitches. One of the kids ran back to the cottage for electrical tape, and I gave my thumb a quick, creative wrap, hoping it would hold through the paddle out.

Back to the bluefish. I ran the hook through the mouth and out the gill, then punched it into the gut and back out near the tail, and strapped on a couple of zip ties to keep the hook in position—a strategic placement for a quick jab into the jawbone of an unsuspecting bull. For added effect I finished the bluefish off with cuts, slashes and pokes, partly for show for the kids, but also to present a bloody bait. Sharks, after all, love blood.

My son Chas asked whether the blood was from the bait or from my thumb.

I wasn't sure.



I zipped up my life jacket, leashed my paddle to the kayak and boarded for an immediate launch, just after a wave crashed down. Kevin took the rod, set the drag open and kept his thumb on the spool to prevent a backlash. Like every day before it on that trip, the surf was rough. I was confident I could make it through the breakers, but I worried about how much water the kayak would take on. A little water in the hull was normal for most of my rigs; too much was not good. The more I thought about it, the more I resigned myself to the fact that a “turtling” was a real possibility that day.

Paddling up and over some oncoming waves and straight through others, I found it a challenge to regain speed after each one. Struggling to catch my breath between them, it dawned on me: I had forgotten to attach the spider weight to the rig before launching. The heavy weight that was critical to holding the bait on the sandy bottom—keeping it from drifting down-current or, worse, back to shore.

Returning for the weight was not an option. I knew I couldn’t muster a second outbound battle. I would just have to make the drop and hope the bloody bait produced quick results.

I was nearly at the drop point. I only needed to clear one more wave and gain a little more distance to reach the flatter water over the sandbar, where I could detach the

bait from the snap hook at the rear of the kayak. A fairly simple task—but not one you want to attempt with a wave coming in.

The next wave came. I wouldn’t clear it.

It happened so fast. I wasn’t quite straight enough on the bow, and I didn’t have enough speed. I probably did have plenty of water in the hull. None of it mattered now, because I was in the water—and my kayak was upside down.

Leave the kayak. Leave it with the hidden bait below it. Leave now.

— THE DECISION

As I struggled to right the kayak, commands shouted in my mind. *Find the bait. Detach it from the snap hook as soon as possible.* The sliced-and-diced, bloody bluefish was dangling somewhere in the water below the kayak. I don’t recall ever actually looking for it; my mind locked onto righting the kayak and climbing back in. Visions of sharks homing in on my bait were not very comforting, and they probably clouded my judgment a bit.

I’m not sure how much longer I tried, unsuccessfully, to right the kayak. But before I knew it, my mind was made up.

Leave the kayak. Leave the kayak with the hidden bait below it. Leave now.

So I did.



As I began a backstroke toward shore, I looked over my shoulder to get a feel for the swim ahead. It didn’t look good. The thought that it was prime feeding hour for sharks wasn’t helping. I was wearing a life jacket, but waves and currents can do strange things in those waters—especially that far out in the surf.

As I always do, I was carrying a SPOT GPS locator in my life vest. I wondered if it would be necessary. What were Kevin and the others thinking back on shore? Would they call for help? Would I become the laughingstock of friends and family for having the Coast Guard, or some other local authority, rescue me from the surf? The fear was real—one I don’t recall ever having felt before. I powered the SPOT on, but I decided not to hit the emergency button.

Not yet, anyway.



FOUR FEET OF WATER

Backstroking on to what seemed like the halfway point, I remembered my injured thumb. My cut thumb, leaving a tasty blood trail in its wake. (Probably the result of watching too many episodes of *Shark Week*.) Nonetheless, my right arm shot into the air like an overly eager schoolboy wanting to answer a question, and I switched to a one-armed backstroke.

The arrival in shallow water was uneventful. I was still floating horizontal, still backstroking. Only when my heels scraped the sandy bottom did I realize I was in four feet of water. I did my best to raise my late-Elvis frame from the surf.

Before I could absorb the questions from the kids or the worried looks from my buddies on shore, I began to hear that little voice in my head. Not mine—my wife's.

"Honey, I think it may be a little too rough out there. Maybe you shouldn't go shark fishing this evening."

She is usually right. Yes, on so many occasions, she has been right.

She was right again.

I only wish I had listened. ■