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Shinnecock Inlet

Gateway to the Canyons

By Capt. John Raguso

When a category three hurricane struck Long Island, New York, in 1938, the storm wreaked havoc on the local population and left disaster in its wake. However, after the dust settled, fishermen and boaters owed this storm a debt of gratitude. Its powerful winds and storm surge created a permanent breach in the barrier island on the south shore, opening up Shinnecock bay to the North Atlantic. Now known as Shinnecock Inlet, this waterway provides anglers on the south shore with the most direct access to the Northeast's best wrecks and canyons.

Each year, hundreds of blue-water crews head out of Shinnecock looking for warm-water eddies that spiral off the Gulf Stream and the big-game species that call these fertile waters home. The headliners in the canyons include nine species of sharks, seven varieties of tuna, white and blue marlin, swordfish, wahoo and mahi-mahi.

Shinnecock's main attraction lies in its close proximity to four exceptional canyons that dot the 100-fathom line, which forms the edge of the continental shelf. With the Gulf Stream meandering

anywhere from 150 to 200 miles southeast of Long Island, depending on the month and prevailing winds, the period from May through November will see numerous warm-core eddies break off the main current due to prevailing southerly winds and storms. These spinoffs flow in a counter-clockwise motion from east to west, becoming trapped along the 100-fathom line off the island's east end. Many anglers flock to Montauk, located on the easternmost end of Long Island, to do their offshore fishing. However, those crews who sail out of Shinnecock (42 miles west of Montauk) actually start out closer to the best fishing grounds. The fabled Hudson Canyon, the Dip, the Middle Grounds and the Block Canyon Fish Tails range between 65 to 75 miles from Shinnecock Inlet. For many canyon ready blue-water boats, that equates to less than three hours' cruising time.

Crews targeting tuna should begin the day working the flats areas and lobster pots located in 40 to 60 fathoms. I've had a few 20- and 30-tuna days at these hot spots. No other inlet on Long Island's south shore can boast this much blue-water action that close to land.

Timing the Season

The offshore scene usually starts in earnest around the end of June and continues through October and into November when weather permits. But, diehard canyon hunters keep a sharp eye on the daily satellite surface-sea-

temp charts starting in April. On occasion, the season kicks off early with a push of warm water. The 2006 season was a perfect example. Several crews steamed out of the area's two hottest marinas (Oakland's and Jackson's in Hampton Bays) starting the last week of April, working a 68- to 73-degree warm-core eddy. They were rewarded with the seasons first white and blue marlin, tuna and mahi-mahi. Simply find the radical temperature break, from 50 to 70 degrees, drop in the trolling lures, and hold on for dear life. In a normal year, the first blast of Gulf Stream water arrives sometime in late May or mid-June to kick off the blue-water season.

During the summer, white marlin often move in closer to shore, cruising the 15- and 20-fathom waters just 8 to 12 nautical miles south of Shinnecock Inlet. Every so often, a bully-size blue marlin also ventures into the shallower 20- to 30-fathom depths if sea temps hover in the low 70s and football tuna or other forage fish are present. However, the peak marlin season begins in July and runs through September.

Some of the largest blue marlin migrate to the furthestmost northern stretches of their range. These bigger fish can tolerate cooler waters, and many of the blue marlin found off Long Island come in extra-large packages. Every year, rumors spread on the docks of granders spooling unsuspecting anglers fishing 50- and 80-pound-class outfits. Angler Bill Sweedler and Capt. Harry

Clemenz caught the largest blue marlin I have seen from these parts in 1986- a 1,174.5-pound blue taken from Block Canyon.

Surprisingly, swordfish make up the most abundant billfish catch out of Shinnecock, with dozens coming home on ice almost every weekend during the late summer and early fall. The swordies range in size from 75 to 300 pounds (a 540-pounder was caught last September on the full moon in Block Canyon). For the best results, crews work the 100-

fathom areas at night drifting whole squid (live or dead) adorned with green or blue Cyalume lightsticks. Chunking with whole sardines or butterfish baits under the stars also tricks a few swordfish and tuna. The most consistent action seems to come on the backside of the full moon.

The offshore tuna available out of Shinnecock Inlet represent this area's biggest offshore draw. The canyon catch includes bluefin, yellowfin, bigeye and albacore. Medium-size and giant bluefins

usually perform a drive-by in the fall months, following behind the draggers for free chow. Trolling a mix of spreader bars, green machines, cedar plugs, jets and rigged ballyhoo will all work in the canyons. The tuna generally take up residence from June through November, depending on storm activity and water temperature. Mahi-mahi show up in dense numbers from July through September. Wahoo make the scene in late summer.

Getting There

Most crews looking to schedule a stopover in Shinnecock Inlet during the season usually end up at Oakland's or Jackson's marinas, which cater to the offshore crowd.

Oakland's Restaurant & Marina (**631-728-6903; www.oaklandsrestaurant.com**) has transient slips set aside for visiting anglers for \$2.50 per foot per night, but call in advance for availability. Oakland's offers customers' diesel fuel, gasoline, frozen offshore baits, chum and ice. The best part of Oakland's is its location on the extreme south shore of Shinnecock Bay, only 200 yards west from Shinnecock Inlet. The ocean is literally a two-minute drive from the marina bulkhead. Four charter boats operate out of Oakland's; the *Mad Hatter*, a 43 Ocean; JF Fishing Charters, a 31 Whaler; and the *Peace of Mind*, a 28 Rampage. Contact Oakland's for more info. I also run charter trips from this location, taking both novice and experienced blue-water crews out on their boats to teach them the nuances of the blue-water game (**631-499-8140; capt.john@att.net**).

Jackson's Marina (**631-728-4220; www.jacksonsmarina.com**), located on the northern shore of Shinnecock Bay a few miles from the inlet and near the Shinnecock Canal, offers transient slips and all the usual amenities, including a 1,000 pound scale to weigh your catch. Three charter boats run out of Jackson's: the *Catherine Mary*, a 35 Viking; the *Gotta Go*, a 32 Luhrs; and the *Julia Rose*, a 28 Albin. For charter information, visit Jackson's website.

Visitors can choose from numerous inns and hotels, but keep in mind that Shinnecock Inlet is located in the Hampton Bays village of Long Island, a summer hot spot for fleeing city folk. Securing a weekend room on short notice from June through August might be a challenge.