An Ocean of Air

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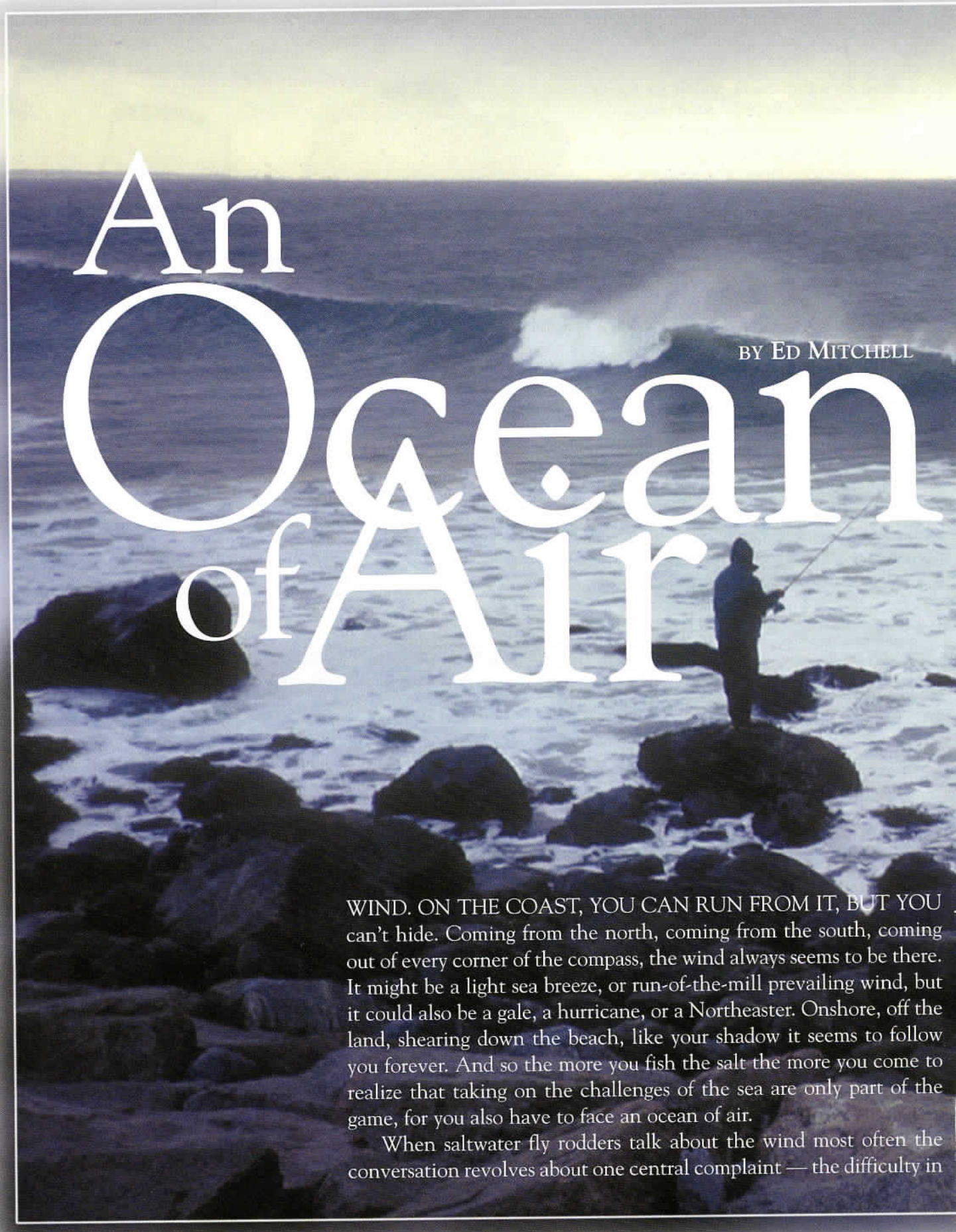

WIND. ON THE COAST, YOU CAN RUN FROM IT, BUT YOU can't hide. Coming from the north, coming from the south, coming out of every corner of the compass, the wind always seems to be there. It might be a light sea breeze, or run-of-the-mill prevailing wind, but it could also be a gale, a hurricane, or a Northeaster. Onshore, off the land, shearing down the beach, like your shadow it seems to follow you forever. And so the more you fish the salt the more you come to realize that taking on the challenges of the sea are only part of the game, for you also have to face an ocean of air.

When saltwater fly rodders talk about the wind most often the conversation revolves about one central complaint — the difficulty in

casting. If there is a boater in the crowd, rough seas are the next concern to arise. Still, that is usually as far as the discussion goes. Now there is no denying that both of these problems are important and worthy of our attention, but in truth the wind impacts our angling in a number of ways, many of which are rarely discussed.

In this article I am going to focus on what is perhaps the most dramatic and least mentioned way in which wind influences coastal fishing. Naturally what I have to report is based on my experiences and hence most pertinent to the manner in which I fish and my home waters — which is to say mainly from shore in Southern New England. If you fish in this region- fine - this article should benefit you. But even if you live elsewhere, I hope that by mixing my observations with your knowledge of your own waters, you may better understand the role wind plays in your locale. And regardless of where you wet a line, I would like at the very least to spur you to think more about the impact of wind.

My basic premise is this: Wind direction has a major effect on the feeding behavior and migration of nearshore game fish. Because the winds are lightest and most consistent during the dog days of July and August, this phenomena is not very evident in the summer. During the spring and fall,

however, when winds are far stronger and more variable, a shift in the wind can have a profound influence on the fishing.

Spring

In the spring, the migration of striped bass and bluefish up the coast into New England is likely snapped into gear by the lengthening hours of sunlight. But the rate of migration seems to be heavily influenced by wind direction. If the prevailing southwesterly wind holds, the migration is very often on its typical timetable and the fishing is on track as well. While this southwesterly wind is in place the fishing is apt to be good to excellent. And the longer the wind persists, the more predictable the fishing becomes. All is well.

If the wind swings from southwest to the northeast, however, in April, May or June, all bets are off. This signals the arrival of a cold front and frequently the fishing nearshore shuts down with the speed of a pricked balloon. So completely does the action die that anglers find themselves muttering that old angling adage "Should have been here yesterday." Fact is I would like to coin a slightly different phase. "You should have been here when the wind went the other way."

How can a cold front change things so dramatically in one day's time? Obviously fish are wild creatures and therefore survival dictates that they remain sensitive to changes in their environment. And of all the environment elements, fish are perhaps most sensitive to water temperature. Moreover every species actively seeks to stay within its own preferred thermal niche. In the spring, water temperatures are marginal and therefore even a small drop in water temperature can produce a marked change in the behavior of

About the Wind

Here are some additional thoughts about the wind. First some general rules to angle by. Weather reports are great, but often enough they are wrong. So you don't really know what the wind is doing until you get to the beach. Most often the portion of a shoreline facing into the wind will have more plankton, more bait and more game fish than the portion in the lee. Over the course of years this has held true too. Generally speaking, a steady pattern of prevailing winds produces steady, predictable fishing while a stormy conditions tends to make for extremes -either red-hot action or nothing at all. Now onward to some specifics.

Water Clarity

Sooner or later you will arrive at your favorite fishing spot to find the water badly discolored or full of loose weed. It happens to everyone and it can be a major disappointment, especially if you have made a long drive to get there. Here are some tips to help you anticipate the trouble. A wind off the land, even a strong one, rarely is a problem. These winds tend to reduce wave action, which in turn tends to increase water clarity. This is especially true in late fall. An onshore wind, however, does the opposite. It tends to decrease clarity, usually in one of two ways.

Over a shallow sandy bottom, an onshore wind quickly stacks up waves that in turn mix up the bottom and puts sand into suspension. In my experience,

migratory fish.

Now you might be thinking that a single day of cool air temperatures could not possibly chill local water. You are right. But the strong wind associated with a cold front can alter water temperatures in the space of a tide or two by driving in colder water from offshore. And that is exactly what happens; here is a dramatic example. I have seen a stiff northeast wind in June drop the water temperature nearly five degrees on Lobsterville beach on Martha's Vineyard, in the space of one day.

Can fish feel the change in wind direction associated with a front? I'm not sure, perhaps not. But strong fronts and the winds that accompany them are also connected to significant changes in barometric pressure. One comes with the other. For instance, with a cold front the pressure drops increasingly until the front passes, at which point the barometric pressure rockets up. And I have a hunch that fish can sense that change in the barometric pressure. At least it has long seemed to me that fish, particularly those in relatively shallow water nearshore, react to those changes in pressure. It could be that rising and falling barometric pressure are in essence a warning to fish that environmental conditions are about to change and that they need to get ready.

Here is something else I have seen on the water. The more abruptly the front arrives, and the faster the barometric pressure changes, the more dramatically the fishing changes. For instance, a weak cold front, one traveling 5 to 10 knots, will have less of an effect. This is particularly true if the weather preceding it has not been terribly warm anyway. A bigger cold front, one moving at 20-knot north wind and

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a 15-knot wind is not something to worry about. If the day before your trip hosts 20 knot or stronger onshore wind, however, there well could be a problem. The key is often how long the wind was cranking. If it lasted only half a day, you probably are all right. If it blew all day, best to call ahead and get a report from a local tackle shop. The good news is that after the wind dies these shallow beaches recover fairly quickly. Expect them to be fishable in a couple of tide's time.

Deep beaches are less prone to discoloration from wave action, but deep beaches more often have rocky bottoms and hence are home to large amounts of weed. If the waves break a good deal of this weed loose and it ends up in the water column, it can be a real nuisance. Once again an all day onshore wind of 20 knot or greater wind should catch your attention. Unfortunately this weed deal may not go away quickly. Once it gets piled up, the tides and the waves tend to keep it place. It may well be a couple of days after the wind dies before the place is back in shape.

And the type of weed is important too. The common green rockweed is one thing. It will get hung up on the fly, but if the surf is colored red-purple by mung weed, you're in big trouble. Mung weed is soft, collapsing around the line as well as the fly making fishing next to impossible. In my experience mung weed is restricted to fairly exposed shorelines. For example a northeast wind on Cape Cod can mung things up.

Fog

Wind direction is also a precondition for fog. During the spring and summer months ocean temperatures are well below air temperatures. When a warm, wet wind from the south runs over the cooler water, fog can develop. In my area this is most likely if the dew point is high, near seventies or above, and the tide is flooding, bringing cooler water nearshore. Further north, Cape Cod and beyond, the water is always colder and therefore a dew point closer to 60 degrees is sufficient to set things up. In the late fall, a different kind of fog occurs. Now things are reversed; the water is warmer than the air. Hence a dose of dry northerly wind over sea can cause fog to stream upward off the surface of the water. This type of fog is called sea smoke. Unlike the advection fog of summer, this fog is not very persistent, usually happening at dawn and lifting a couple of hours thereafter.

Time of Tide

A windy day can alter the scheduled time of tide, and on occasion even the expected tidal range. Here is a basic rule: strong persistent winds headed in the same or a similar direction to the tide will speed it up and may increase the amount of water being moved. Winds opposed to the tide do the reverse. For example, here in Southern New England, a north or west wind may delay the arrival of high tide and reduce its height.

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accompanied by a change in barometric pressure, will have a much bigger impact, especially if it arrives after a long period of warm southwest wind. This type of sudden blast sends near shore game fish hightailing out from the beach. True the action may be red hot just before the front arrives, but expect it to then shut off like a light switch. Likely, fish are reacting to the weather in a preemptive way — grabbing a big meal and then scrambling for the sanctuary of deep water before the situation has a chance to really deteriorate.

How long does the lull in action last? In the spring, most cold fronts last only a day or two. And once the wind turns southwest again, the fishing builds back. If you must fish during the cold front, your best bet is to work from a boat over deep water. If the cold front becomes stationary for several days, the water temperature may drop even further and the fishing will remain very poor. But as soon as the southwest wind returns, get to the beach. The fishing is likely to bust wide open.

In the spring, an east or southeast wind is usually a precursor to a warm front. As with a cold front, initially you get a falling barometer. Again expect the action to slow, but this time not for long. As the front nears, rainy weather may show up and the bite resumes. After the warm front passes, pressure increases slightly, the wind goes southwest again and the fishing is fine.

Fall

The autumn migration is linked to the shortening hours of sunlight, but as in the spring water, temperature plays a critical role. In early fall, the wind in my area is still mainly in the southwest. Normally, northerly winds make a grab for the reins in October, and by November the prevailing wind is northwest. If the summer has been warm and the southwest wind hangs on well into October, water temperatures drop slowly. As a consequence the action may not be as intense as it can be, but the longer it takes for water temperatures to fall the longer the season lasts, especially if there is an abundance of forage fish available.

In the fall cold fronts bear down with much greater speed then they do in the spring. Once again these fronts are going to reduce water temperature, but forcing cold water inshore stimulates the fishing by kicking the migration into high gear. So a northern blow can be a good thing, lighting a match under the fishing. For instance, striped bass that have been spread out over a large area begin to school, feeding en mass and with greater urgency. If a series of back-to-back northerly blows push through, it increases the fish's desire to leave, and what's more it seems to prompt them to take the quickest route south. This not only reduces the length of the season; it can literally cut some shorelines out of the picture.

Tagging studies have shown that in a typical year striped bass and bluefish coming down the coast from Massachusetts will feed along the Rhode Island coast and then push into Long Island Sound, traveling as far as the mouth of the Connecticut River before turning south toward Montauk. If the fall is very stormy, these same fish may well take a short cut home, cutting across from Rhode Island directly to Montauk.

If a northeast blow has pulled the plug for shore anglers, all they can do is wait for a shift in the wind. As soon as the wind turns back to the southwest the fishing nearshore will resume, often with a vengeance. It must also be noted that the impact of a particular wind direction during a particular season can be highly local. In the fall, for example, several days of Northeast wind may be the kiss of death for anglers fishing from shore in Connecticut. The wind will drive plankton, forage fish and game fish off the beach. That same wind, however, may well pile everything up along the shores of Long Island creating a dynamite bite for anglers all the way to Montauk.