

Sleepless IN

Dusk and dawn are times of transition, fleeting hours when the world slips out of or into the full light of day. These twilight periods offer magic moments, times when the marine world pulses with life. Every angler learns early on that if you fish the salt when the shadows are long, your chances of success are the best of the day.

Even the simplest organisms in the sea follow a daily pattern of activity based on light level, and this behavior sends a ripple effect through the entire food chain. Gamefish naturally are tuned into these rhythms, and as forage species become more active, so do they. Predatory gamefish also are primarily sight feeders, so twilight hours hold the day's first and last opportunities for them to use their vision to its fullest extent; it's only natural for them to take advantage of these times. Furthermore, when the sun is low on the horizon it creates a higher level of visual contrast, making objects more readily defined and three-dimensional.

There is every reason to believe this holds true in shallow water as well as on land, helping gamefish to see their prey.

But while dusk and dawn dramatically increase your odds of finding hungry fish, you should not expect them to jump into your stripping basket. You still have to work for each and every hook-up. And inevitably there will be sunrises and sunsets when even your longest cast and favorite fly will fail to produce a single strike. As in every other kind of fishing, success hinges on how well you're prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that come along. In short, you always need to be on your toes.

THE MAGIC HOURS OF DUSK AND
DAWN KEEP ANGLERS WIDE AWAKE



WRITTEN &
PHOTOGRAPHED BY
Ed Mitchell

NEW ENGLAND



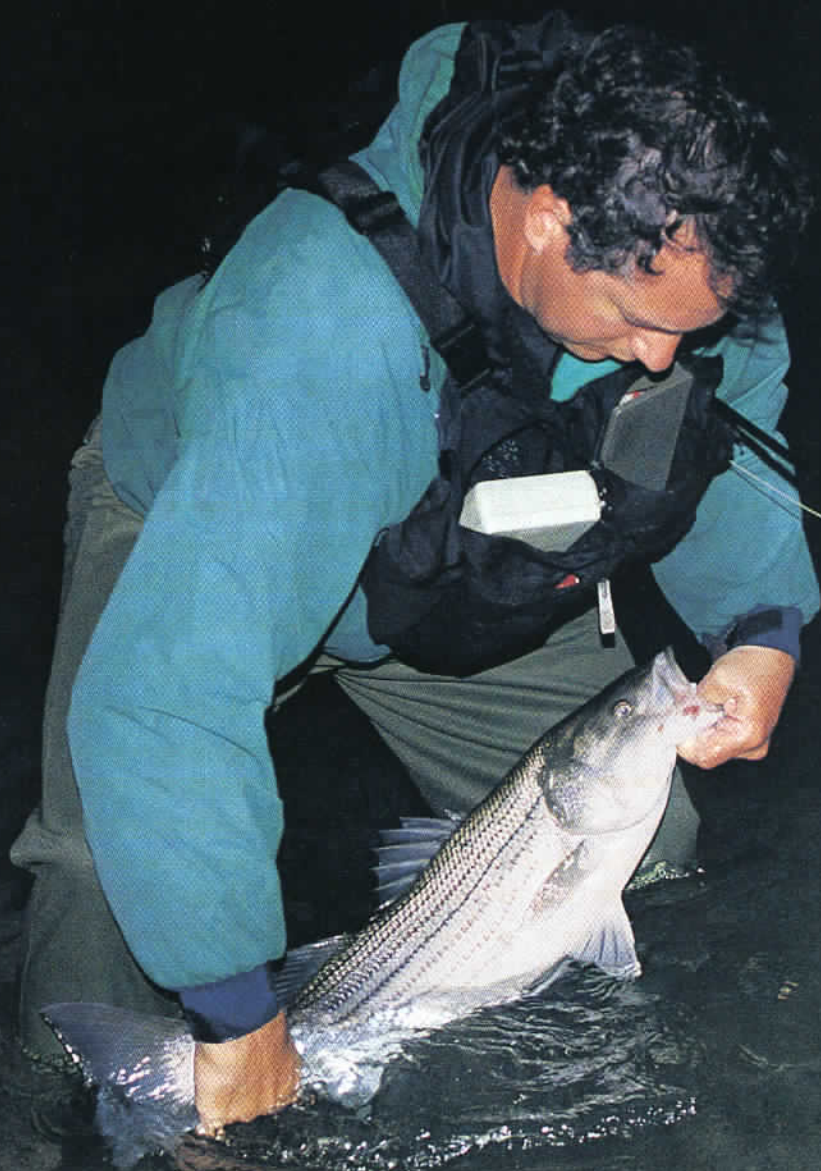
The first ingredient in any successful low-light fishing strategy is getting yourself to the water with time to spare. The reason is simple: It's not uncommon for dusk and dawn fishing to provide only short windows of opportunity, sometimes an hour or less. Arrive late and you could easily miss that window. This may mean setting your alarm a lot earlier than you'd like, but it's imperative to be there and be fishing well before the actual time of sunup or sundown.

You can fine-tune your plans based on the idiosyncrasies of the particular species of fish you're after. Striped bass, for example, prefer to feed in the faint light before actual sunrise and tend to disappear when

the sun climbs over the horizon. Atlantic bonito, on the other hand, feed better after the sun is actually on the water, and the action builds into the early morning.

Once you're on the water, fishing in the twilight requires a good deal of concentration. Signs of life, ranging from a quiet swirl to a few baitfish leaping about, are often subtle and hard to detect in low light. If you're one of those people whose heart doesn't really start beating until noon, then dawn fishing is going to be a special challenge. Do everything you can to shake out the cobwebs. As you climb over the last dune or rock pile on your way to the beach, take a deep breath and focus yourself on the task at hand. And always be

*Phil Farnsworth
releases a
striper caught
at last light.*



ready to move immediately toward anything that even vaguely hints of feeding fish.

Perhaps the most critical part of a successful low-light strategy is figuring in the effects of the season. On the most basic level, this means adjusting for changes in the time of sunrise and sunset as the seasons advance. Seasonal changes also affect the behavior of many species of fish, triggering major inshore/offshore or north/south migrations and changes in daily feeding habits, and these profoundly affect the quantity and quality of dusk and dawn fishing. It pays, therefore, to keep track of these changes in a fishing log.

In southern New England, where I fish most often, the arrival of autumn brings falling water temperatures and some of the finest fishing of the year. Gamefish chow down with abandon, utilizing every chance to score a meal. Not surprisingly, dusk and dawn fishing gets a real shot in the arm at this season, and each trip holds the possibility of walking into a full-scale blitz. Still, it pays to keep your ear to the ground, for in some years the fall action is concentrated along specific areas of the coast. For example, the southwestern shores of Rhode Island were not as productive as usual last fall, but just a short distance away in the waters around Newport the action was outstanding.

During fall, fish tend to migrate along the coast in schools. If you hear of a good dusk and dawn bite in a specific location, try to get there as soon as possible; the fish may move on in short order, and then the action wanes dramatically. After that it may be several days to two weeks before another school travels through the same area. The later in the fall you fish, the more this "hot-and-cold" scenario appears to hold true.

If forced to choose between dusk and dawn at this time of year, I would take dawn for a couple of reasons. Since gamefish feed heavily all day long during the fall, they are apt to be more hungry and aggressive at first light. Also, it has always been my feeling that many migrating fish travel during hours of darkness, and the fish you find at first light may be fresh in town and ready to clobber anything that moves. Dawn fishing in the fall also is less apt to die down as the morning progresses, so you can continue fishing into the day with excellent success.

Fall is also the time when you can try for a grand slam, which in our waters is a striper, a blue, a bonito and a little tunny (false albacore), all in the same day. The first weeks of October frequently hold the most promise, since the little tunny will soon be making tracks southward. With luck, you may be able to catch all four species within a matter of hours, although more often you should expect to spend most of the day. The hours around dusk and dawn are often critical to your chances of success.

Angler Phil Farnsworth fights a Long Island striper at sunset.



Blues are big eaters and come boldly to the breakfast table. Like striped bass, look for them to get under way in the weak glow of predawn.

I recommend concentrating at dawn on the two more difficult parts of the slam, the bonito and little tunny, then fishing as much of the rest of the day as necessary to fill out your score card. If things don't go your way, at least you'll still have dusk to look forward to.

Usually there is a final push of stripers and blues in November. This fishing can be intense, but rarely lasts long, perhaps a week or two at most. It also tends to jump from location to location, and comes close to the beaches only early or late in the day. The reason is that the stripers and blues are chasing members of the herring family which are very sensitive to light. In the hours before dawn these baitfish feed near the surface, often in shallow water. When the bass and blues blitz them, you have a good chance of hooking up. As the sun rises, the herring head for deeper water and the action moves offshore, and even if you catch up with it in a boat you had better have a way to get your fly well down. With the approach of dusk, the herring may move back in, offering a possible second bite close to the beach.

Dusk and dawn action resumes in May. At that time of year I would give a slight edge to dusk, especially when it holds the better stages of the tide. The

fishing is primarily for striped bass, although bluefish appear by mid-month, particularly offshore and around islands. On Long Island Sound, the sun rises around 6 a.m. (Daylight Savings Time) early in the month, but by May's end it's up a half hour earlier. Sunset is

While dusk and dawn dramatically increase your your odds of finding hungry fish, you should not expect them to jump into your stripping basket. You still have to work for each and every hook-up.

before 8 p.m. at the beginning of the month, gradually advancing to about 8:20 over the course of four weeks.

Early June brings one of the best low-light fishing events of the year, involving striped bass and one of their favorite menu items—the sand eel. When everything clicks, you get a regular dusk and dawn bite that not only takes place day after day in the same location, but lasts for weeks. It's one of my personal favorite fishing experiences and something I look forward to each year. It's also some of the most predictable salt-water fishing you'll ever find. With local experience, it's possible to tell within 15 minutes when the first swirl will show.

In order to take advantage of this bite, you must first find a place where sand eels bed down in large numbers. As a rule, they prefer beaches with sandy bottoms, tidal currents, and proximity to the mouth of



an estuary, such as a coastal river, inlet, or salt pond. That narrows down things quite a bit, but even in areas with all these features the action may be focused on only a hundred yards of shoreline. So local knowledge is extremely helpful.

Look for this fishing to start slowly sometime around 6 p.m. and build toward sunset, which occurs near 8:30 at this time of year. The fishing may continue all night,

dawn dwindles for the same reason, although "schoolie-size" bass are more tolerant of the warmer temperatures and may still be around in good numbers. However, as the striper fishing wanes a bit, a new game starts to take its place. Now the focus switches to bluefish.

Blues are big eaters and come boldly to the breakfast table. Like striped bass, look for them to get under way in the weak glow of predawn. Unlike bass, however, they are much more likely to stick around as the light brightens. A late dawn, one where the sun's appearance is delayed by clouds along the eastern horizon, extends the action further into the

WHEN to Set the Alarm

The times of sunrise and sunset not only change by season, but also by longitude. In June, if a Florida guide tells you to be at the boat at sunrise, you should be strolling down the dock no later than 6:30 a.m. But if you made the same arrangement with a guide in Rhode Island, you'd need to be on the dock nearly a full hour earlier.

Even in New England waters there's a small but noticeable difference as you travel from north to south. For example, sunrise and sunset in the western end of Long Island Sound are about 10 minutes later than on the tip of Cape Cod. You need to be aware of these local differences.

Besides getting to the water on time, you should also have your tackle prepared ahead of time. Make sure your rod already is rigged up and you've packed all the right equipment, including flies, leaders, flashlight, sunglasses, and foul-weather clothing.

The last thing you want to do is waste these precious short twilight hours fumbling with or searching for your gear.

but in the predawn light, as the sand eels emerge from the bottom, there is often an intense flurry of feeding. In the best locations, this first-light bite is a true spectacle, involving literally hundreds of striped bass swirling, breaching, tailing, even jumping out of the water. But there's no doubt you're in a race with the rising sun, for as the light brightens the action quickly dies.

By the middle of July the sand-eel action tapers off in most locations as water temperatures climb. This is especially true in the shallower bays. Your chance of finding a large striper at dusk or

morning, especially if the tide is still running. At this time of year, blues are ready for a fly all day long, but activity clearly peaks again from late afternoon into dusk. My favorite searching pattern for blues at both dawn and dusk is a popper, and a noisy presentation generally outproduces a subtle one. Nevertheless, you may want to vary the speed of your retrieve according to the light level. Gradually speed up your retrieve as the light rises at dawn and slow it down again at dusk.

The warm waters of August add another ravenous mouth to the morning meal, the Atlantic bonito. Within several weeks, it is joined by a similar fish, the little tunny. Unlike bluefish or striped bass, you should not expect to see these scaled-down tuna working overtime in the weak glow before dawn. They seem to prefer to hit the snooze alarm for a couple of extra winks, bursting more fully on the scene as sun first greets the water. With sunrise around 6 a.m., they often appear between 7 and 7:30, but may be as late as 8 or 9. Once they arrive, however, they roll through the rips and inlets, eagerly seeking food.

Then, before you know it, it's fall again, and the table is once again set for the last fishing of the year during those magic hours of dusk and dawn.

Fly rodder readies himself for the twilight bite at dusk in Sengekontacket Pond on Martha's Vineyard.