

Rediscover...

# The Lost Art of WINTER

**A**n amazing array of flounder species exists the world over, but winter flounder — also called blackback, sole or flatfish — is by far the most common flounder of in-shore New Hampshire waters. Others are nearby — you can find summer flounder, or “fluke,” just over the border in coastal Massachusetts; and our offshore waters are home year-round to yellowtail flounder, American plaice and other deep-water species. Anglers fishing New Hampshire’s seacoast are most likely to encounter winter flounder, though, so it pays to refresh your knowledge of this forgotten fishery, now beginning to experience a revival along the state’s sheltered coves and bays.

## Fun with Flatfish

First, keep in mind that flounder are masters of adaptation. Their surreal appearance, with both eyes on one side of the head, and dorsal and anal fins fringing most of the body, allows them to hide artfully on the bottom, with their white, eyeless side downward. Second, winter flounder are very different from their flatfish cousins, the summer flounder. Winter flounder are smaller, darker in color and have a mouth not even half as big as the summer flounder’s. They are “right-eyed” (the right side of the body has the eyes and color), while summer flounder are “left-eyed.”

Did you know that all flounder actually start out in life looking like normal fish? About 5-6 weeks after hatching, one eye begins to migrate to the other side of the head. Once complete, this odd configuration allows the flounder to nestle on the bottom to surprise its prey and hide from predators.

Effective camouflage also helps flounder hide — their upper side has melanophores (pigment cells) that expand or squeeze to appear lighter or darker to mimic the bottom habitat. That’s key for survival, because just about everything likes to eat flounder, including striped bass, cod and bluefish; even green crabs and heron prey on small, young-of-the-year flounder.

To catch winter flounder, you’ve got to know where these mostly stationary fish hang out.

While winter flounder inhabit the Atlantic coast from Canada to the Chesapeake Bay and beyond, populations mix very little



BY JANE VACHON AND KEVIN SULLIVAN

# FLOUNDER Fishing

and migrate only short distances. New Hampshire's winter flounder is part of the Gulf of Maine stock. During late winter, this population moves deep into Great Bay and other sheltered coastal harbors and coves, preparing to spawn in April or May. Ideal habitat is muddy sand with patches of eelgrass. They generally return to the same estuaries to spawn year after year.

The pre-spawning and spawning period is prime time for flounder fishing. New Hampshire anglers catch winter flounder from seacoast bridges, piers and jetties, and from small boats in sheltered shallow waters near the mouths of estuaries and harbors. Old-timers used to start angling from snow-covered bridges in Portsmouth as early as March, and serious action continues through June. The fish stay and feed in our coastal

waters through September, so anglers can pull in blackbacks throughout the summer, though it might take a little more

time and effort to get the bag limit. In the fall, the population migrates a few miles offshore.

## Downsize your Bait

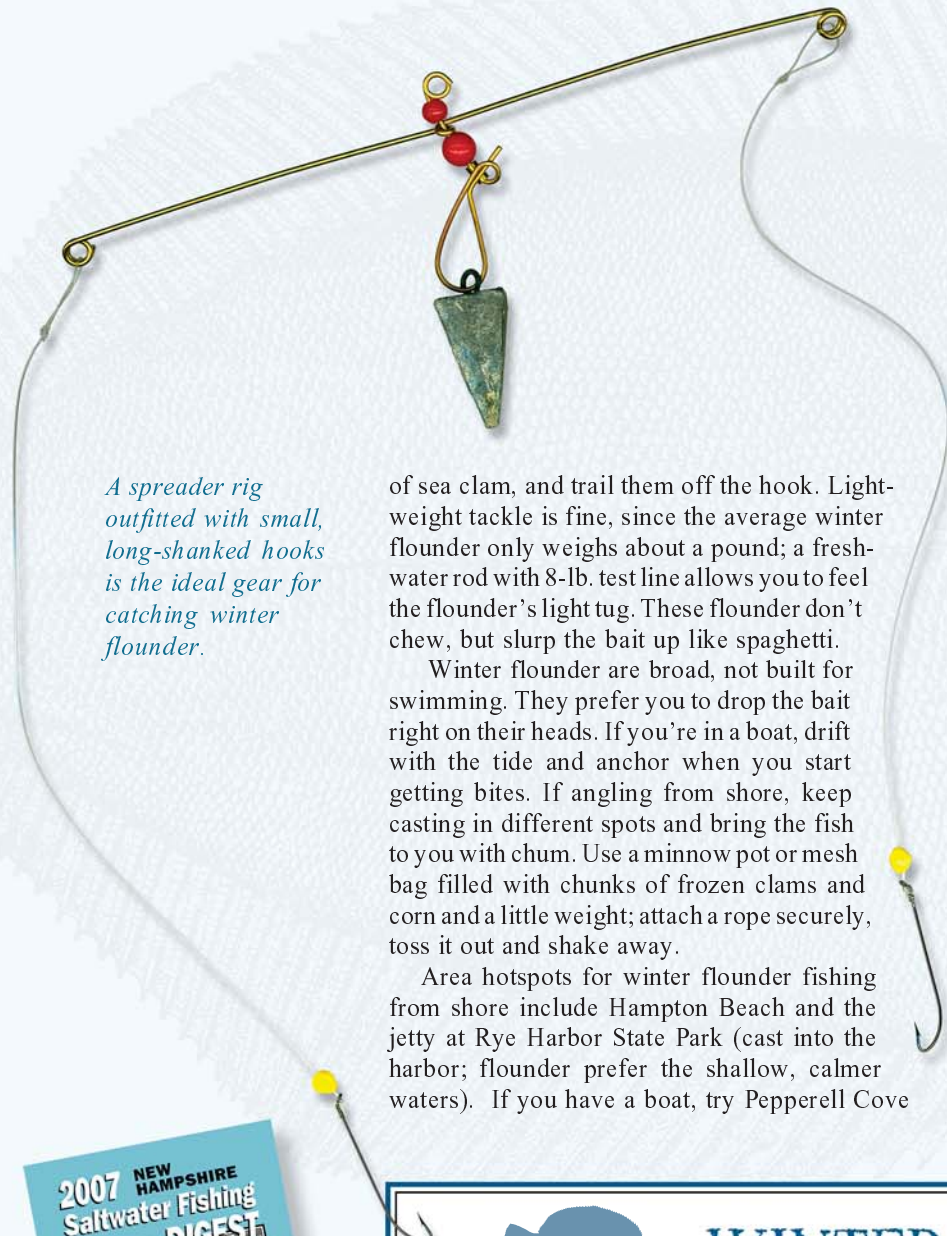
Winter flounder are lie-in-wait predators, settling into the mud or sand with extended eyes swiveling, waiting for dinner to come to them. Summer flounder, in contrast, have big teeth and will chase fish. Areas where rivers come together are good spots to fish for winter flounder, because food is stirred up, bringing their way small shrimp, worms and crustaceans. They feed during the incoming tide, not much on the ebb tide, and are most active at sunrise and sunset. (Check the *N.H. Saltwater Fishing Digest* at [www.FishNH.com](http://www.FishNH.com) for tide tables.)

A critical point for anglers is that winter flounder can only eat very small things. The mouth of a winter flounder opens just  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch wide, compared to a gape of 1-2 inches for a summer flounder, so you need specific hooks and baits to catch them. Use long-shanked flounder hooks attached to "spreaders" (see photo, next page), with a 1- or 2-ounce weight in the center, just enough to keep the rig off the bottom, depending on the strength of the tide.

People get into trouble because they use big hooks baited with large chunks of fish, a setup that's way too big for the blackback's small mouth. Instead, use sea worms or thin strips

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*A spreader rig outfitted with small, long-shanked hooks is the ideal gear for catching winter flounder.*

of sea clam, and trail them off the hook. Light-weight tackle is fine, since the average winter flounder only weighs about a pound; a freshwater rod with 8-lb. test line allows you to feel the flounder's light tug. These flounder don't chew, but slurp the bait up like spaghetti.

Winter flounder are broad, not built for swimming. They prefer you to drop the bait right on their heads. If you're in a boat, drift with the tide and anchor when you start getting bites. If angling from shore, keep casting in different spots and bring the fish to you with chum. Use a minnow pot or mesh bag filled with chunks of frozen clams and corn and a little weight; attach a rope securely, toss it out and shake away.

Area hotspots for winter flounder fishing from shore include Hampton Beach and the jetty at Rye Harbor State Park (cast into the harbor; flounder prefer the shallow, calmer waters). If you have a boat, try Pepperell Cove

(Kittery Point), on the Piscataqua River at the mouth of Portsmouth Harbor. This area is easy to access, sheltered from wave action and has lots of flounder. Many New Hampshire anglers with boats also head south to fish the mouth of the Merrimack River in Newburyport/Salisbury, Mass., an area rich in both winter and summer flounder.

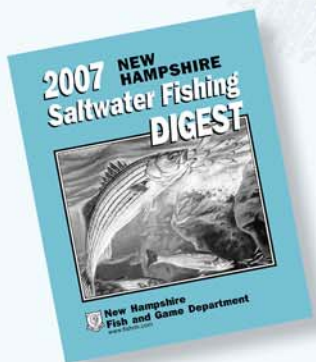
## Rebuilding Stocks

Wondering why you haven't seen more people angling for this familiar groundfish? It's not your imagination — the fact is, times have been tough for these fish for decades. Winter flounder stocks crashed in the 1980s — going to almost nothing. The stock was overexploited, both commercially and recreationally, and hit a record low in 1993.

Not seeing many flounder, people eventually stopped fishing for them, and techniques weren't passed along to new anglers. Winter flounder fishing is a local fishery that's skipped a generation — basically becoming a lost art.

The good news is that, locally, winter flounder stocks are showing signs of rebounding. For the last three or four years, Fish and Game has documented a large catch of young flounder in its annual seine surveys. A fairly long-lived fish, winter flounder can live up to 15 years and can hit 20 inches in length. In this region, they generally reach the legal-to-catch size of 12 inches in 3 to 4 years.

While the coastal commercial flounder fishery has not seen a big jump, there are some good signs.

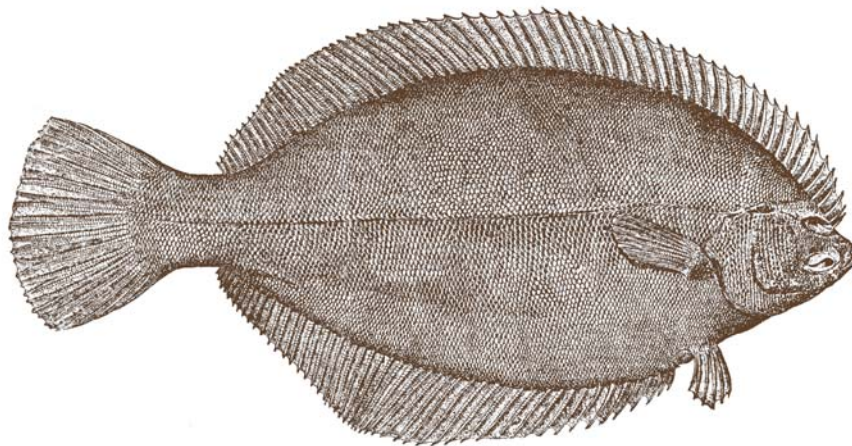


*No license is needed for recreational saltwater fishing in N.H., but state regulations govern the taking of saltwater fish and other marine species. The minimum length for keeping winter flounder is 12 inches; the daily bag limit is 8 fish.*



## WINTER FLOUNDER

The flounder most commonly caught by recreational anglers in New Hampshire, winter flounder are "right-eyed," which means the dark-colored side with the eyes occurs on the right side of the fish. Also called "blackbacks," winter flounder have a very small mouth and head compared to summer flounder.



## Diving for Flounder

A new generation is diving into the increasingly popular sport of underwater spearfishing, or “gigging,” flounder. “It’s catching on, just like surfing,” says Marine Biologist Kevin Sullivan, who enjoys donning a snorkel, mask and flippers and gliding over the sandy shallows in search of flounder in his free time. You can use SCUBA diving equipment and a wetsuit, but there’s no need if the water’s not too cold.


Dive-anglers carry a “gig” – a pole about 5 feet long with three sharp prongs on the end and an elastic loop that stretches to the end of the pole. “It’s pretty hard to see flounder, because they are so well camouflaged and their instinct is not to move,” Sullivan says. He spots flounder eyes peeking out from a silty hiding place on the ocean floor and releases the elastic, sending the gig pole flying. If his aim is true, he’s got a flounder. Sullivan retrieves the pole, stows the fish in a catch-bag floating at his side, and moves silently on. “Remember, things look bigger underwater, so be sure that flounder meets the 12-inch minimum before you spear it!” he cautions.

Being immersed in the ocean world is a big part of the thrill of dive-fishing. Sometimes Sullivan startles a sea raven – a fish that can suck water into its stomach and blow up to a huge size. Skates float past, as well as pollock, cunner and striped bass.

Gigging is most popular in June, when the sea is warming and flounder are actively feeding. Anglers have been spotted dive-fishing over the sandy coves at Rye Harbor, Great Island Common in Newcastle and off the Isles of Shoals. “Who knows?” says Sullivan. “Dive-fishing for flounder just might be the next big thing!”

– Jane Vachon

Numbers are up in Fish and Game’s sampling of young flounder in Great Bay, the Piscataqua River, Hampton Harbor and Little Harbor. Trawl surveys in both New Hampshire and Massachusetts are also showing increased abundance of adult blackbacks since the late 1990s. We’re seeing increased catch by anglers, and last year – for the first time in a decade – New Hampshire had directed party boat efforts taking groups down to the mouth of the Merrimack River to fish for winter flounder.

With the return of winter flounder, perhaps more people may discover this rewarding fishery, which yields one of the best eating fish around. Winter flounder have a famously thick fillet with delicious, tender white meat. You might love to *catch* striped bass, but you’ll love to *eat* flounder. This tasty fish is one of many creatures that rely on New Hampshire’s estuarine habitat to flourish. With populations on the rise and growing interest among anglers, it may be that winter flounder fishing won’t be a lost art for long. 

*Kevin Sullivan is a marine biologist for N.H. Fish and Game. Jane Vachon is associate editor of WJ.*



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*The flounder’s color is highly variable, changing to mimic the pattern of its bottom habitat to camouflage it from predators (including giggers!) and prey.*

## SUMMER FLOUNDER

A few summer flounder stray into New Hampshire waters, but most are found to our south. Also called “fluke,” summer flounder are larger in overall size than winter flounder and are “left-eyed.” They have larger mouths, armed with sharp teeth, and are more mobile than winter flounder. Notice the prominent, dark, hard-edged spots.

