

LEGENDS OF THE FALL - TROPHY ROCKFISH PROVIDE CHALLENGES AND SATISFACTION FOR CHEASPEAKE BAY ANGLERS BY DOYLE DIETZ (Published November 4, 2018)

CHESAPEAKE BEACH, MD. -- When East Coast anglers think "Legends of the Fall" their thoughts have nothing to do with the mountains and plains of Montana where the 1994 historical film was set. No, those anglers find their fall legends swimming in the depths of the Chesapeake Bay, when large trophy-size rockfish — as striped bass are called by native Marylanders — begin making their layovers in late October through mid-December on their migration runs from the coastal waters of New England to the shores of the Carolinas. There is a two-fish limit, the minimum length is 19 inches, but one fish may surpass 28 inches and are the main target for anglers.



Two weeks ago four Pennsylvania anglers put their archery season on hold and made a quick trip to the Maryland Western Shore when Captain Drew "Worm" Payne had an opening aboard his 52-foot charter boat the Big Worm. Payne docks his boat at Rod 'N' Reel Dock, conveniently located at Chesapeake Beach Resort & Spa, making booking a charter, lodging and dining a one-stop destination — although dinner one night at Abner's Crab House located across the street is not to be missed.

Payne has fished the mid-Chesapeake Bay most of his adult life, and as a youngster was so devoted to fishing he had his own worm garden, earning him his nickname. After mating on several charter boats he became a licensed U.S. Coast Guard captain [and] has run his own charter boat since 1998.

Mating aboard the Big Worm is Josh Lowery, who has been fishing the Chesapeake Bay fulltime professionally for 17 years and also has a guiding business focusing on waterfowl hunting. Together they have developed a system of teamwork that allows them to work as one when setting baits, stacking rod spreads and boating fish.

Targeting large rockfish in the fall and early winter has its challenges, which include dealing with rolling waves, changing winds, cold and the total chaos when multiple hookups occur. Although it is rare to boat a fish in the 40-inch class that are present in the spring trophy season, fish between 30-35 inches are common in the fall. Three of the fish in the limit catch of eight, plus a "boat fish," exceeded 30 inches, with the longest 33 inches. Of the remaining six fish, they measured between 20-24 inches.

Leaving the dock at 9 a.m., a northwest wind was producing a gentle chop that increased the further Payne ventured into the Bay. In spite of the conditions, no sooner had Lowery finished setting the spread of boat rods than fish began to hit with such regularity that several times all four anglers were fighting fish at the same time. Even with the level-wind reels loaded with 65-pound test Power Pro line almost all the fish produced a good fight, including the throw backs. Between 9:45 and 11:50 the

limit catches and the boat fish were in the cooler from the 45 that had been boated, but the action continued when 18 more fish — including a half-dozen "keepers" — were caught while clearing lines.

That evening over dinner at the Chesapeake Beach Resort & Spa restaurant three of the anglers decided to stay an extra day, but opted for the more relaxing atmosphere to found fishing the Patuxent River out of Solomons, MD. Captain Robbie Robinson, who operates the 42-foot Miss Regina II, is a native of Solomons and has fished the Patuxent and Bay his entire life — as has his mate Wally Talbert.

Robinson specializes in light-tackle fishing on the Patuxent, which offers protection from adverse weather and is low key compared to fishing on the Bay. River fishing begins May 15, meaning the trophy season is closed. "They may not be monsters, but they're legal and they're nice fish," Robinson said of the average rockfish in the Pattuxent. His assessment proved true when a 22-inch rockfish took lunker honors.

No matter which option anglers choose for a fall rockfish charter trip, the results could be the stuff of which legends are made.

(Dietz is a member of the Pennsylvania Outdoor Writer's Association)

IF YOU GO

To book a rockfish fishing trip on the Chesapeake Bay with Captain Drew Payne of Big Worm Charters call (401) 474-4428 or visit <http://www.wormcharters.com>.

To book a rockfish fishing trip on the Patuxent River with Captain Robbie Robinson of Miss Regina II Charters call (301) 672-0383 or visit www.facebook.com/pages/Miss-Regina-II-Charter-Fishing-Boat.

For information about lodging packages for anglers at Chesapeake Beach Resort & Spa call (410) 257-5596 or visit www.chesapeakebeachresortspa.com.

For information about Calvert County, MD., call (410) 535-4583 or visit www.choosecalvert.com.