

Flounder a lesson in nature's diversity



JOE FITZGERALD CHASING PISCES

It was a quiet summer morning years ago on a family vacation. I had woken early and wandered

down to a wharf with my fishing rod. As I waited for everyone else to wake up, I dangled my line over the edge and watched perch and sculpin swim around it. Then I baited my hook with a periwinkle. Instantly fish darted in, taking bites. But they were so small they couldn't get caught on the hook.

After a few moments of this distraction, some movement caught my eye further out, past the wharf pilings. Puffs of sand were moving toward my bait. An outline of something finally took shape, and I saw what was causing the disturbance. I let the hook drop to the bottom and watched breathlessly as it disappeared under the undulating wave of a flounder.

I pulled up and set the hook, and the graceful pancake turned into a fluttering flapjack. Only about 3½ metres of line had come off my spool, but it took a minute or two to bring the fish onto the wharf. The unique animal flapped at my feet like a stingray. Its back was sandy brown and its

belly was gleaming white, and the two eyes on top of its head belied the fact that its mouth opened sideways.

Flounder are members of a large family of fish generally called flatfish. Probably the best known is halibut, but they also include sole, turbot, and plaice.

Flounder are common all around Nova Scotia's coastlines and estuaries, and most likely to be found around sandy bottoms, salt marshes and mudflats.

They are easy to catch, good to eat, and offer a great look at the diversity of adaptation in nature.

To find some flounder this summer, I went to Eastern Passage, just off the boardwalk at Fisherman's Cove. Tall grasses rustled in the warm August wind as high tide covered a broad expanse of sandy bottom. I was using an ultra-light rod and a six-pound test line, with mussels for bait rigged on small trout hooks.

About a foot up from the hook, I clipped a split shot weight and cast out. I let the weight sink to the bottom and waited for a few minutes. Then I slowly reeled in.

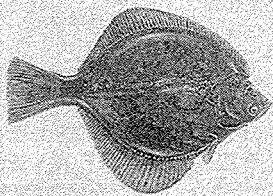
Detecting tiny taps on the line, I stopped reeling. When I began again there was a heavier pull and then the frenzied twitch of the rod.

It was a medium-sized flounder, the first of many that day. I released it and stared in awe as this master of camouflage vanished before my

eyes, once again melding into the sand.

Joe Fitzgerald is a freelance writer living in Halifax.

FLOUNDER FACTS



● There are two major species of flounder found in Nova Scotia waters: summer flounder and winter flounder. Summer flounder are most commonly caught by recreational fishermen. Winter flounder are lighter in colour, and sometimes called witch flounder.

● Flounder start out like other fish when in the larval stage, but as they mature, one eye begins to migrate and they flatten out sideways. One side turns white, which the flounder settles on, while the side with its eyes turns colour to match the seafloor, most commonly sandy brown.

● Flatfish have small mouths, and do not strike hard. Keeping a hand on the line can make it easier to detect bites. The same tackle you would use for brook trout is effective for flounder. If casting from shore, leave the bale on your reel open while the line sinks, so your presentation does not arc back towards you.

● Flounder are active hunters and moving your presentation slowly will attract strikes more readily than just letting it sit on bottom. A plain hook with bait such as clams, mussels, periwinkles is as effective as anything.

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