

Surfcasting the Vineyard

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When the conditions are right, Wasque Point can have some of the most incredible bluefish blitzes you'll ever get a chance to cast a plug into.

Photo by George Clondas

The island of Martha's Vineyard offers a lifetime of surfcasting opportunity – here's a guide to get you started.

By Matt Malowski

Whether we are motivated by the hunt or the end result, the camaraderie or the solitude, the relaxation found in a beautiful setting or the excitement of hooking into a giant fish with two feet planted firmly on shore, for those who identify ourselves as “surfcasters” rather than “fishermen,” fishing from shore is more than just a pastime. Surfcasting is a passion, and for some, it can be better described as a way of life.

Whatever your motivation or level of experience, if you have a passion for surfcasting, you owe it to yourself to explore the quintessential New England island of Martha's Vineyard, where the lifestyle of the surfcaster is ingrained in the local culture. With its distinctive topography and diverse shorelines planted off the coast of Cape Cod, Massachusetts and surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the Vineyard offers opportunities for all types of fishermen at all levels of experience.

The Topography

Martha's Vineyard is an 87-square-mile patch of sand and rock shaped roughly like a giant triangle. Surfcasters have been drawn to the Vineyard for many years by both the fish that migrate past its shores and the endless variety of terrain. On one side of the island there are beautiful sandy beaches that seem endless, while only a few miles away, one would be awed by the massive boulders and miles of rocky shoreline. One side of the island is constantly changing

under the relentless pounding of the Atlantic's surf, while the other is calm and flat, and on a calm summer day could be mistaken for the flats of the Florida Keys.

What I love most about the topography of the Vineyard is that the land can cater to my changing moods and my desire for a challenge. I've been fishing Martha's Vineyard since I was an early teenager and guiding professionally for the past six years, and I learn a new piece of shoreline or area each year. Not only am I learning new areas, but areas that I've come to know like the back of my hand will change completely because of a major winter storm that alters the shoreline, dumping enough stone and sand to fill Gillette Stadium or cutting a new breachway leading into one of the many ponds along the southern side of the island.

The island provides locations for every style of surfcaster, whether you don the wetsuit and search for that perfect picnic-table boulder, have the ultimate 4x4 beach

buggy that is rigged for a year long trek through Alaska, or you grab the light-tackle rod and stalk the flats for cruising strippers, the island has a spot for you and it will not disappoint.

The Spots

The Vineyard's shorelines have been photographed, filmed and written about for years. In the world of fishing, and specifically surfcasting, it has been both glorified in the press and veiled in secrecy. No doubt the publishing of this article will incite both grief and gratitude from some of my colleagues and island residents, as the island's locals struggle with the balance between attracting tourism and protecting the beauty, solitude and fantastic fishing.

An inherent problem with access on the island results from its appeal to the world's wealthy and elite. On the Vineyard, they can buy a beautiful stretch of shoreline, nearly guaranteeing them solitude and privacy. Much of the coast on Martha's



Off the north shore of Martha's Vineyard, you can fish the waters of the infamous Dogfish Bar.

Aerial photos by James Fraser/fishinglogcalendars.com

Vineyard is owned by private homeowners who have year-round caretakers that keep a vigilant eye on the property. As a result, some of the best fishing areas are extremely difficult to access. It's not that one cannot fish a particular beach, it is that one cannot get access to that beach without having to trek several miles through either beach or woods. Luckily, there are still some kind souls who allow the caretakers to give permission to island residents to fish or hunt on their land. The good and bad is that the fishing becomes not "what" you know, but "who" you know. If you know the right people, or hire a local guide who has been granted access, you can have access to some beautiful areas where you quite possibly will be the only person fishing.

Luckily for the visiting fisherman or summer resident, there are some not-for-profit organizations that have bought large

acres of land and coastline and made access more easily attainable. Organizations such as The Trustees of Reservation (thetrustees.org) and The Land Bank (thelandbank.org) own properties that are open to the public. Find these organizations on the Internet, research their properties, and consider membership. On some of these properties, hunting and fishing is permitted, while others are deemed sanctuaries and fishing equipment is not allowed.

Up-Island

The less densely populated southwest section of Martha's Vineyard that includes the towns of West Tisbury, Chilmark (and Menemsha) and Aquinnah (Gay Head) is known to locals as "Up-Island." These towns are important to the surfcaster because they host the beaches of Lobsterville, Philbin, Lucy Vincent, Quansoo, and the infamous

Squibnocket. In addition, areas such as Menemsha Jetty, Great Rock Bight and Long Point are located Up-Island and make for great fishing. These areas are vast and could take a lifetime to learn. The intimate coves and points that dot and line the coast make fishing Up-Island a worthy challenge.

Anyone who has fished the island even once has probably heard of Squibnocket, or "Squibby." Squibnocket Bight is a large area, covering roughly 2 to 3 miles of beach. There are many holes, points and hundreds of boulders that make up this section of coast. This area changes quite drastically from year to year. Perhaps a bunch of sand was washed in from winter storms that covered what was once a very rocky section of shore, or filled in what was once a deep drop-off only a few yards from shore. But no matter how much that

section of beach changes, one constant is the surf. Squibby is not only popular for fishermen, it also attracts the island's most devout surfers.

Squibby is a great place to fish because of the big surf and miles of white water. Once you pull onto the road that leads to the Squibnocket parking lot, I recommend that you have the windows in your vehicle down. If you hear the waves crashing on the beach, you know you are in for some interesting fishing. As you pull into the parking lot, you immediately come face-to-face with the "awesomeness" of the Atlantic and see the potential for the striped bass of a lifetime. There is good reason why Squibnocket has produced more Martha's Vineyard Striped Bass and Bluefish Derby winners than any other Vineyard location.

The topography of Squibnocket has changed quite a bit in recent years, and what

was once a great spot at Squibby may no longer be. Forget what you may already know about the area and fish it as though you're doing so for the first time. There is no spot at Squibnocket that can't produce a quality fish, but there are a few things that will increase your odds. Try these tips for fishing the entire stretch of beach from Squibnocket to Gay Head. The topography is relatively similar along this stretch, with the exception that Gay Head has a stronger current at times.

Fish the white water. White water is a striped bass magnet. Try timing your casts so that your plug or eel is just following behind the wash.

Avoid setting camp. It's easy to find what looks like a great spot. Perhaps that outcropping of boulders looks fishy, but there are hundreds of spots that look just like the one you found. Often times I've been plugging a spot





Fishing from beneath Gay Head Light on a clear day, you can see Cuttyhunk Island.

times I've been plugging a spot for an hour only to see someone position himself 30 yards from me on another set of rocks and hook up instantly. I rarely set my sights on a specific area unless I know that the area produced the night before, and I'll make more than a dozen stops along a mile stretch of beach – which reminds me, pack light. Take only what you need.

Look for anomalies. Squibnocket, Philbin Beach and Gay Head have plenty of spots along the beach where something looks as though it doesn't belong. Perhaps it's a lonely boulder the size of a house,

or an immediate change in contour like the mussel bed at Squibby, or where the dirty water meets clean, clear water on the Lobsterville side of Gay Head (honestly, on some days it looks like a black and white cookie you'd buy at the bakery).

Don't get discouraged. Hit the same spots on the way back to your truck. That spot that appeared to be desolate on the way out could now be holding a school of a hundred bass.

The North Shore

The most frustrating aspect to fishing the

northern side of the Vineyard is not the fishing, it's the access. The North Shore runs from West Chop to Menemsha, and it's lined with large parcels of private property that make access difficult. What's worse, if you do find a spot to get onto the beach, you will probably not be walking far. The North Shore is lined with bowling-ball-sized rocks, otherwise known as ankle busters. In spite of these difficulties, and perhaps because of them, I love fishing the North Shore. It is prime bass habitat, and it is one of the most challenging areas to fish. My friends and I have broken off

more fish there than we've landed. It is a tough spot to fish because you have tons of rock and boulders, mixed with deep water and strong current.

To fish the North Shore you will have to gain access through some public spots, like Great Rock Bight in Chilmark, which is owned by Land Bank property. The Land Bank's website provides directions, uses for the land, and acreage. One thing to note about fishing the North Shore is that it's typically a better nighttime or early-morning fishery. The daytime bluefishing can be good, especially closer to Tashmo

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Access Maps and Info

The Trustees of Reservation
www.thetrustees.org

The Martha's Vineyard Land Bank
www.mvlandbank.com

Tackle Shops

Larry's Tackle Shop 258 Upper Main Street Edgartown, MA (508) 627-5088 larrystackle.com	Dick's Bait and Tackle 108 New York Av. Oak Bluffs, MA (508) 693-7669	Coop's Bait and Tackle 147 W. Tisbury Road Edgartown, MA (508) 627-3909 coopsbaitandtackle.com
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Shore Guides

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Livinit Guide Service
(508) 274-0320
mvfishing.com

Janet Messineo
(508) 693-3360
vineyardsurfcaster.com

traffic and bathers, the North Shore is better left for after-hours. Also, because of the really rocky terrain, lures such as heavy rubber shads, bucktails and soft-plastic baits rigged on jigheads will easily get hung up. There are some sandy sections, but most of the time you'll be fishing boulder fields, mussel beds, and very rocky bottoms. Eels will usually out-fish any other bait or lure going. But if you're stubborn like I am and enjoy fishing lures, go for it. Cast a Hogy, a

Danny-style plug or a plastic swimmer like a Bomber or a Redfin, but be careful not to let your lure get hung up, and if your buddy has eels, expect to get out-fished.

Chappaquiddick and Norton Point

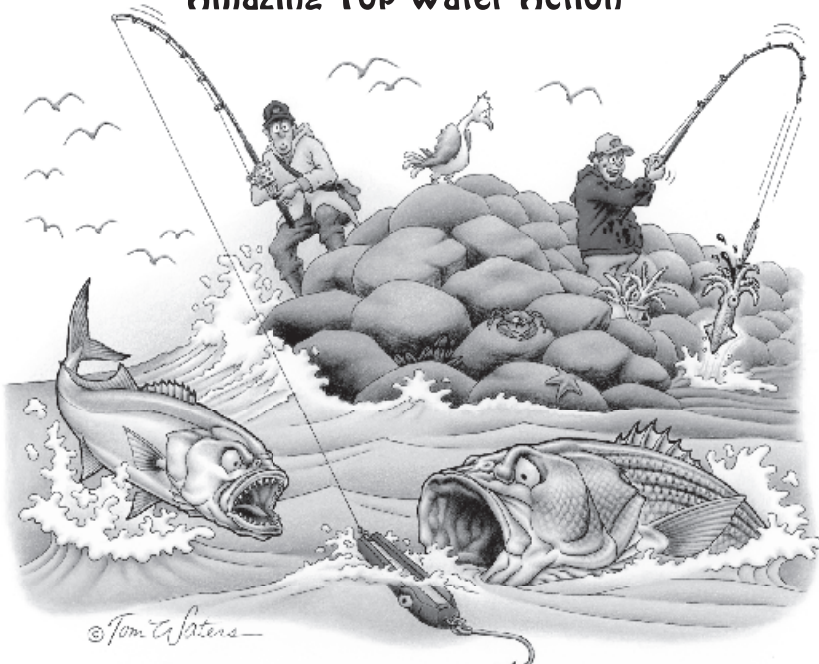
Chappaquiddick and Norton Point are nothing but sand, sand and even more sand. At first glance it looks like a vast, empty desert, and I often wonder why



Keeper-sized stripers are plentiful in Vineyard waters in May.

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If you can find legal access, there are many great jetties all around the island of Martha's Vineyard

anything would be swimming around this part of Martha's Vineyard. Yet, I absolutely love Chappy. To date, most of my biggest fish and my most cherished memories of catching a hundred fish or more in a night have come from Chappaquiddick and Norton Point.

Chappaquiddick is a tiny island off the southeastern tip of Martha's Vineyard. In fact, the only way to get to Chappy is to take the On Time ferry out of Edgartown. The On Time ferry is a timeless vessel that transports no more than three vehicles at a time, less than a hundred yards across Edgartown Harbor. From there, you are instantly reminded by the multitude of bumper stickers and road signs that you're on Chappy. Drive 25 miles per hour, even if it's difficult because you know the biggest bluefish and/or bass blitz is happening off of Wasque Point and you are missing it! Well, slow down. The roads are barely big enough for two cars to drive on, and if you miss one blitz, you can be sure that Wasque will produce again, and again and again.

What I love most about Chappy is that it is the closest I will come to having a boat on the beach. I mean that I can drive my truck on the beach, thanks to The Trustees of Reservation, which supplies memberships and oversand vehicle permits. My truck is one of those buggies rigged for Alaska. I have half of a tackle

shop in the back of my truck and a rod rack large enough to hold a 120-quart cooler and 12 rods, plus the rod rack on my cap. Why I need all those rod holders, I don't know, but it drives my wife crazy because she knows I won't rest until I have enough rods and reels to fill every one of those tubes and racks.

What makes Chappy a great fishery is the tide. Tide is everything at Chappy, and if you don't learn the tides and which spot produces on which tide, you'll end up enjoying a very beautiful and scenic trip to the beach, but you probably won't catch much. Now, because this is fishing, and fishing is most definitely made up of more theories than laws, the "rules" of the tides are not set in stone. The easiest way to understand the tide is to know that you usually want an incoming (east) tide when fishing along East Beach, which includes Dike Bridge, the Jetties, the Cape Poge Lighthouse and the Gut. When fishing the southern part of Chappy, and this includes Wasque Point, Norton Point and the Cut (the channel that now connects the Atlantic Ocean to Katama Bay), you typically want an outgoing (west) tide. What is consistent with both of these tides is the strength, especially at Wasque Point. Actually, what makes Wasque so appealing to so many surfcasters is that it is one of the few rare places where a

current rip line butts right up against the beach. The current averages six knots, and with the rip line extending several miles out to sea, this makes for great fishing and bad swimming. Wasque Point has made it

is feasible and probable to achieve a grand slam (catching a striped bass, bluefish, bonito, and false albacore) without having to move more than a few yards. For the surfcaster, this is important, as we do not

Lodging and Food

Black Dog Tavern (Vineyard Haven Harbor) is open early, so you can grab a two-egg "Woofers" breakfast sandwich and get back on the water.

Nancy's Restaurant (Oak Bluffs) is the best place for nightlife, great food and drinks, while looking over Oak Bluffs Harbor.

Linda Jean's (Oak Bluffs) offers daily specials that keep the place packed, so arrive early and to grab a table near the window.

The Wharf (Edgartown) offers fine-dining entrees accompanied by your favorite beer and sports on TV.

Dock Street Café (Edgartown) is the local's hidden gem and definitely a fisherman's establishment.

Among the Flowers Café (Edgartown) has reasonable prices, good food, outside seating and a great view of Edgartown Harbor.

The Bite (Chilmark) is purely take-out, but there's no place better to grab a bite and watch the sunset.

Lodging

The Vineyard offers a wide range of bed-and-breakfasts, inns, hotels, private home rentals, and even a campground. For more info, contact:

Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce
(800) 505-4815 - MVY.com

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Chappy



2- to 4-ounce Bucktails



Darter Plugs



Bottle Plugs



Bottle Darter Plugs



Long-Casting Topwaters (Line Stretcher/Pencil Popper)




Metal Lures (Kastmasters/Deadly Dicks)

have the luxury to troll or move around as the boat anglers do. Unless you are fishing East Beach, most of us find Chappy to be primarily a place to fish plugs. Most of the time, the current is too strong to hold bottom, and the water is often filled with weed. Also, distance tends to be a factor. There are times where the fish are practically on the beach, but there are many times when a 4-ounce lure and a 12-foot surf rod won't reach the fish.

Fishing Chappy is not easy. Timing is everything, and the spot that was producing large numbers of fish one day (or night), could easily be a wasteland the next. Because there is not much in the way of structure, these fish are moving around and pushing bait up and down the coast. Usually, once you find them, it stays good for a few nights and then you have to find them again. Pay attention to your tides and hone in on

the times when you did well, as Chappy fish follow a fairly regular pattern.

Getting Here

The Island of Martha's Vineyard can be reached by sea or by air. Ferries leave from Woods Hole, Falmouth, Hyannis and New Bedford, Massachusetts. There are also ferries from Quonset Point, Rhode Island and Montauk, New York. Most of the fishing techniques you've used off-island will work on-island as well, but it can still help you out a great deal to talk to the locals and visit the local tackle shops. They're good people and more than willing to lend a hand, even if you are wearing a Yankees hat like me. Remember, it's an island – the whole place is surrounded by fish. If you are a surfcaster, then you'll be at home on the Vineyard. 

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