

## September 2008: Meditations on Squid

A long time fan of calamari, I recently got the chance to personally act on the "eat local" mantra by catching my own squid in Rockport Harbor. The experience was an arcane one, memorable for both its beauty and weirdness.

One new moon evening my husband and I met up with two of his co-workers who had been regularly fishing--"jigging" is the proper term--for squid since the schools had begun to come into the harbor in July. The squid are apparently attracted to lights, and one street light in the parking lot of the Harbor Park shines on a section of water just below the wharf. We took up our posts there, armed with five rods, a bucket, and a box of squid jigs that looked like long, colorful little fish.

The four of us were by no means alone on this night. Several Asian families, at least one of which was Filipino, were stationed along both sides of the wharf. They had come from Belfast, Waldoboro, Wiscasset, and beyond, and were serious about their squid jigging. One man had his own portable lamp that he shone into the water as he fished off in his own section of the wharf. While the children ran about in crazy blinking sneakers singing, "Mami's got a fish! Mami's got a fish!" until boredom reduced them, literally, to tears, their parents reeled in one after another of the strange, translucent creatures. While we were fishing to eat, it seemed they were fishing, at least in part, to sell--one woman informed us that squid goes for \$6.99 a pound.

So we cast in our lines, let them sink to the bottom, and then stood around jerking the rod tips up and down to make our lures seem like tantalizing prey for a hungry, non-discriminating squid. In no time at all, everyone around us began reeling in squid, one after another. Then my husband caught one. Since childhood I have considered myself a fishing jinx, and so resigned myself to spending the evening serenely jigging a line up and down in the harbor. That was okay with me, because while doing so I could fully enjoy the beautiful evening and the strange camaraderie of our fellow jiggers.

I had never before seen squid "in the wild," either--I think the only squid I'd seen in action were on the Discovery Channel's repeated shows on giant squid. Their shadowy bodies moving gracefully in and out of the pool of light just below the surface of the murky water were distraction enough. Until I actually hooked one. Of course, jinx that I am, just as I began to reel it in, it got off, falling back into the water with an embarrassing splash. This happened to me four times (and to no

one else, I might add), each squid feeling heavier than the one before. I was sure a freak giant squid was going to be next; I envisioned myself helplessly watching its six-foot body splash back into the water while everyone else on the wharf expressed their sympathy for "the big one that got away."

We arrived on a rising tide, which is supposed to be the best time to catch squid. Jupiter shone low and bright in the southern sky, and outside the range of parking lot lights, the Milky Way and all the late summer constellations sparkled in a perfectly clear sky above the still harbor. Occasionally a boat would glide silently by, its running lights colorful mimics of stars. It was one of those unusually warm, breathtaking evenings that make you feel summer is still in full swing. Overhead I could hear the chirps of migrating songbirds invisibly wending their way south. A pair of squeaking bats flitted by, perhaps chasing insects drawn to the same lights that attracted the squid to our little corner of the wharf.

We could sometimes see the long brownish shapes of squid in small schools below us in the water, some about a foot long, others smaller. The small ones, a friendly older man told us, were the females. For a while, too, some kind of sea worm slowly wriggled around our lines, plainly visible in the light. The squid weren't interested in it as food, so the untouched worm just undulated near the surface, reminding us of those "squirmin' Herman" toys we had as children.

When reeled up into the light, the translucent squid shimmered, their bodies iridescent. Sometimes they would expel water as they left their natural element and hit the air. In the bucket, their skin was a pretty, mottled brown, almost like a trout's. With their big eyes and the strange tentacles around their beaks, they reminded us of one of the aliens in "Star Wars." This thought was revisited at one point when a guy came down to the wharf to check his boat and announced to us that he'd seen four UFOs from his house a few minutes ago. Perhaps these squid were indeed aliens being summoned by the mother ship. Without ray guns or phasers, however, their best defense was to spray that infamous black squid ink all over the nearest target, usually someone's face. I had at least had the good sense to wear a black sweatshirt.

The man fishing next to us told us these were "longfin squid." They school in the harbor every summer into the first half of September, he said, until the bluefish begin running. Then the squid leave for deeper waters, because bluefish eat "everything in sight." According to NOAA's Northeast Fisheries Science Center, longfin inshore squid spend the summer into late fall inshore, and then migrate

to the warmer waters of the continental shelf through winter and spring. These are creatures that truly do know the secrets of the deep. When I eat them later, I will think about how they represent a sort of ocean sacrament tying us to the watery origins of all life--a more savory sacrament, grilled with garlic and olive oil, than any communion wafer.

As it grew late and the tide turned, I finally managed to reel in one (good-sized) squid before we called it a night. I added it to the pile in the bucket and did a little squid jig of joy at having managed to catch my first fish in years. Well, actually, I still haven't caught a fish in years, because the squid is not a fish but a mollusk, a cephalopod, related to cuttlefish and octopus. But as we drove home I did feel a primal joy at having caught at least a small portion of tomorrow night's dinner, a joy that wasn't at all diminished as my husband and I stood over the kitchen sink at midnight, splattered with squid ink, cleaning out the night's catch.

**Written by Kristen Lindquist**



101 Mount Battie Street, Camden, Maine 04843

ph. 207.236.7091 fax 207.236.0612

email: [kristenl@coastalmountains.org](mailto:kristenl@coastalmountains.org)