Strong currents associated with full- and new-moon tides can alter the feeding patterns of fish.

Chapter 1

Playing the Tides

How tide determines where and when fish will feed.

Few things influence the feeding patterns of inshore fish as strongly as tide. Serious fishermen live by the tides, which flush out and replenish a body of water with oxygen, nutrients, bait and game fish. Experience and careful observation have taught them where their favorite target species will feed during various stages of the tide, and they can predict with impressive accuracy where these fish will relocate when subjected to higher or lower tides. For these pros, catching fish becomes a matter of setting up at the right spots during the right stages of a tide.

Timing the tide was the key to success on a recent trip to western Long Island Sound off Norwalk, Connecticut. I had joined Rick Mola, owner of Fisherman's World Tackle Center in South Norwalk, to diamond-jig for the big bluefish that invade the region during late fall and early winter. Because the moon was full, Mola knew that the final stages of the outgoing tide would be prime for jigging the ledges and humps we planned to fish. This tide stage happened to occur late in the afternoon.

We left the dock at noon, despite Mola's prediction that the fish wouldn't show up until the final hour or so of daylight. We didn't mark a single fish on the depthsounder for most of the afternoon, but then, during the final hour of that big, eight-foot outgoing tide, the area came alive with countless ten- to 15-pound blues!

Tides play an important role in the lives of game fish by flushing out and replenishing oxygen, nutrients and baitfish in a body of water.

Spring and Neap Tides

Tide, it should be noted, is the vertical rise and fall of the water level, and should not be confused with current (the horizontal flow of water), although the two are inextricably linked. Tides are the result of the gravitation and centrifugal forces exerted by the moon as it rotatesaround the earth and, to a smaller degree, the sun. When the moon and sun are in alignment, their combined gravitational force increases the range of the tides. These are known as "spring tides," and they occur around the full and new moons. Spring tides yield the highest high tides and lowest low tides within the monthly cycle. In contrast, when the moon and sun are at right angles to each other, their gravitational forces counteract each other and reduce the tidal range. These are called "neap tides," and they occur during the moon's first and third quarters.

If the moon was stationary and did not rotate around the earth, we would have two high tides and two low tides precisely every 24 hours. However, since the moon does rotate around the earth, and appears over the same place on earth approximately 50 minutes later each day, we see two high tides and two low tides every 24 hours and 50 minutes. This is why a specific tide stage is approximately 50 minutes later each day. For instance, if you discovered that the beginning of an incoming tide at sunrise was ideal for producing seatrout over a certain grass flat, the exact tidal stage would occur roughly 50 minutes later with each passing day.

Outside Influences

It should be noted that tides also are affected by the topography of the coast. That's why tides can vary by 15 minutes or more at different spots along the same stretch of coastline. Other factors can affect the tide and its impact on fishing. For example, an outgoing tide in an estuary can be slowed to some degree by a strong opposing wind. The wind can actually overpower the tide and prevent the water from leaving the system. In this case, if you were waiting on the final hour of an outgoing tide to concentrate fish in the feeder creeks or channels, you just might discover that the wind was holding back enough water to keep them spread throughout the shallows.

Conversely, a hard wind blowing in the same direction as the outgoing tide can force water out of an estuary at a faster pace. If you didn't factor this in, you could arrive at your hot spot and find that you missed the best stage of the tide. In very shallow estuaries or flats, you might not find any water at all!

The speed at which the tide rises and falls is not constant, and neither is the velocity of a tidal current as it enters and leaves a particular area. The rise or fall of the water begins and ends gradually, and peaks in the middle of the cycle. This means that an area will experience stronger tidal currents during the middle of the tide as opposed to the beginning and end.

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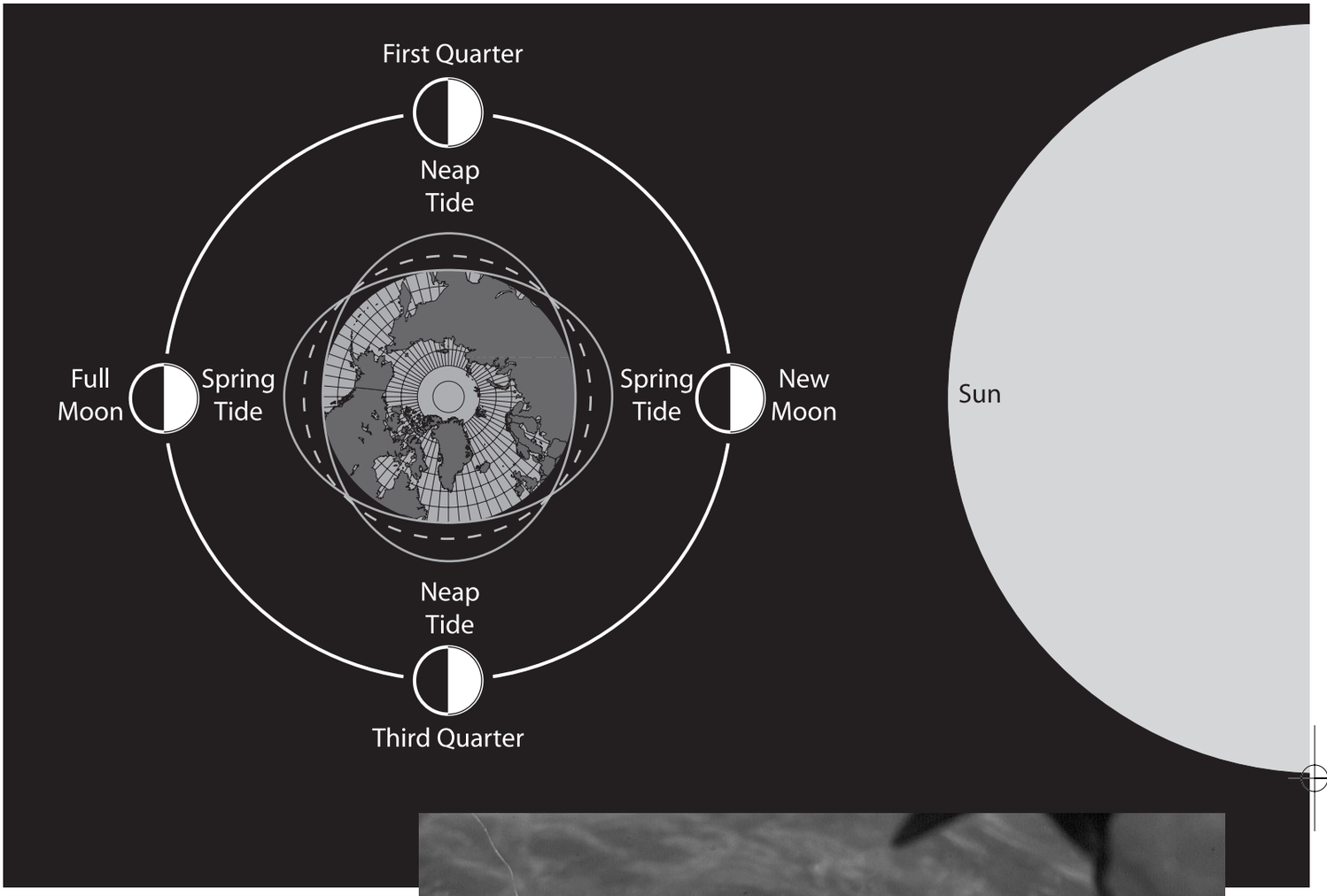
Tide and Location

The velocity of a tidal current also increases as water is forced through shallow or narrow passages, such as



bars or inets. This can influence where fish will take up station to feed. For example, if snook typically stack up along the jetties to forage on bait washing out of an inlet or pass during the calmer stages of an outgoing tide, the peak of the tide might prompt these same fish to relocate along the deep side of a ledge or around the backside of the jetties, where eddies form and trap bait and the current is not as strong. Fish will seek out spots where they can lie in wait to ambush prey without having to fight the full velocity of the current.

Conversely, a higher volume of water moving into an area enables bait and game fish to spread out over the shallows or into heavy vegetation, making them a challenge to reach by

Flats fish such as bonefish often take advantage of the high tide by working deep into the mangroves, where they can feed without being threatened by predators, including anglers!

boat or with a bait or lure. Certain pockets, ledges and bars that usually hold fish during the milder, incoming stages of a neap tide could possibly be void of them during high spring tides.

What all this means to fishermen is that it's critical to take note of the specific feeding stations of game fish during various stages of a tide. For example, had my Norwalk bluefish trip taken place one week earlier, when six-foot tides were the norm, the prime time for fishing the ledges would have been during the middle of the outgoing tide. Depending on the stage of the tide and the velocity of the tidal current, it's common for fish to drop back, move aside or retreat to deeper holes to counter swift-moving water. Spring tides present even more of a challenge, since the increased volume of water tends to broaden the playing field.

Tides also affect the feeding patterns of offshore game fish. Wahoo are notorious for feeding heavily around the final stages of an outgoing tide and initial stages of an incoming tide.

Offshore Tides

Tides also affect action with offshore species. For example, bottom fishing for grouper and snapper excels when the tide creates a moderately strong current, which moves bait and promotes effective chumming. This can be caused by a tide change in some areas. We know that a full or new moon tide tends to produce stronger currents, which can influence bottom fishing. In many cases, a moderate to strong flow of water often requires more weight to hold bottom and more thought on how to chum effectively over structure, yet the fishing can be sensational. Also, I've experienced many instances when weaker tides have resulted in minimal water flow, which has slowed the fishing.

When king mackerel chase bait along the beaches, tides have a major influence on where they'll be. For example, at certain times of the year, the tide line or rips that are formed by outgoing inshore water meeting clean ocean water are patrolled by big king mackerel, as well as Spanish mackerel, tarpon, cobia, bull redfish and jack crevalle. These fish are seeking the bait carried out with the tide. Anglers fish along these tide lines and rips as they progress offshore from the inlet or pass, and again as they approach the channels ahead of clean, incoming ocean water.

Throughout South Florida, the Bahamas and other areas where deep water lies close to shore, wahoo tend to feed heavily during the last hour of the outgoing tide and first hour of the incoming tide. Therefore, serious wahoo anglers plan their arrival at certain hot spots during these stages of the tide, regardless of whether it's 7:00 a.m. or 3:00 p.m.

Not long ago, a few friends and I set forth to catch wahoo off Boca Raton, Florida. With the last hour of the outgoing tide occurring around 1:00 p.m., the captain elected not to concentrate on wahoo until then. Instead, we trolled well offshore for dolphin before returning to the wahoo grounds a little after noon. As anticipated, the bite was on and we ended up boating a hefty 'hoo.

Understanding how tides influence the various species you fish for isn't a quick process. It has taken some of the best guides years to get a solid grip on where the fish will be on a certain tide stage and how other factors such as barometric pressure, cold fronts, wind and major tide swings influence their movements and behavior. There's no substitute for noting the tide stage and location when you uncover good fishing, as well as the weather. In time, you'll have a valuable playbook that will tell you where to fish throughout the day. When you have a handle on the tides, catching fish becomes a lot easier!