

# The Birdwatchers

Top anglers become adept at identifying aquatic birds and learning how to read their behavior. It's time you followed their lead.

by Tom Keer



*A raucous flock of gulls working the surf line is an obvious sign that predators are forcing baitfish into the shallows, but birds can offer subtler clues to the presence of game fish if you know what to look for.*

It doesn't require a degree in ornithology to figure out that a bunch of terns or gulls dive-bombing the water means that predatory fish are driving bait to the surface. If that sort of activity doesn't scream "get there now!" you might want to take a refresher course in Fishing 101.

Yet there are many less-obvious types of bird behavior that can point the way to fish—or lead you astray. The ability to "read the birds" is part of becoming a master fisherman, so we asked several such experts to list some examples of how birds and bird activity can help improve your success and even save the day.

## Different Dive-Bombers

Andy Bonzagni of Concord Outfitters in Concord, Massachusetts, fishes the coast of New Hampshire and northern Massa-

chusetts. Dive-bombing terns sometimes put him on fish, while other times they just drive him crazy. "I'm always cautious when I see dive-bombing birds," he says. "Unless I see a sign that shows me there are fish under them, such as the heads, backs or tails of fish breaking the water or lots of splashing, I'll pull out my binoculars and watch for a while. I look to see if the birds are concentrated or spread out. If spread out, they're usually feeding on scattered bait, particularly if the water is shallow. However, if the birds are concentrated there's usually a school of game fish below that has pushed the bait into a ball."

At this point Bonzagni moves slowly upcurrent or upwind of the activity to get a closer look, so as not to run over the fish. "I avoid the run-and-

gun method," he says. "Racing around spooks the fish."

## Sit and Win

Birds that are simply sitting on the water don't usually spark the interest of fishermen, but they do deserve your attention. I remember fishing in Boston Harbor on a calm August morning, when I spotted a few hundred gulls and cormorants apparently resting on the water near Georges Island. Even though they didn't seem to be doing anything special, I moved in for a closer look. In the open water between the sitting birds, I noticed the subtle swirls of feeding fish. A school of stripers had pushed a huge school of silversides to the surface and were feeding just below them. There was so much bait that the gulls could simply dip their



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## CATCHING FISH

beaks into the water to grab a meal, and the cormorants didn't need to dive. Some signs are easy to miss, but taking a few moments to check out those sitting birds paid big dividends.

Boston-based Capt. Mike Bartlett also watches birds a lot, but is leery of those flying high in the sky. "High-flying birds are looking for bait, not actively feeding," he says. "When they locate bait, they drop towards the surface to position themselves to feed. The lower the bird is to the water, the closer it is to the baitfish."

Bartlett makes a mental note of bird flight paths, too. "Birds that are flying high in the sky may be traveling between roosting and feeding sites. I note which direction the birds are coming from, as well as where they are going. This gives me an idea of where I might fish earlier the next day."

### Lucky Ducks

Long-time Rhode Island guide and author Ken Abrames watches all birds on the water, but he pays careful attention to sea ducks, including cormorants. "I watch cormorants a lot," said Abrames. "When they make quick, repeated dives, I know they're feeding on a concentrated school of baitfish, and a tight pod of bait usually means that bigger fish are in the area. However, when 30 or 40 seconds pass between the birds' descent and the time they resurface, they're looking hard to find a meal, and so I move on."

"Cormorants don't have oil glands like other species of sea ducks, and

they'll sink like a rock if they don't dry off," Abrames adds. "If they're sitting on a beach or a jetty with their wings stretched out, they're drying off from a swim and probably just finished feeding. You'd be wise to fish that area earlier in the tide the next day."

Abrames also notes that different species of sea ducks show a preference for certain types of prey, which can help you choose the right fly or lure. "Mergansers like to feed on silversides, sand eels and shrimp, king eiders follow squid and surf scoters target crabs. Watch the ducks, and you'll know what bait or pattern to use."

### Terns for the Best

Capt. Dan Wood of Connecticut Woods and Waters, a fishing outfitter, frequently encounters birds in the rips and around the coastal islands. "I watch terns the most," Wood says. "Tern behavior tells me how much bait is in the water and what species are around. When the birds hover close to the water and keep picking, they're on a school of small, tightly packed bait, such as bay anchovies or silversides. When they drop every 30 seconds or so, there's some bait around, but it's not concentrated."

Wood also looks at how much water a tern covers between dives. "Terns moving quickly, as if they're in a race, often means there are fast fish underneath them. Those fast fish could be school bluefin tuna, bonito, false albacore or skipjacks, so I'll position my boat far ahead of their flight path in order to intercept them. Slow-moving terns that

*Cormorants are often ignored by fishermen, but the pros know to keep a close eye on them.*



Knud Nielsen/Stockphoto.com

are hugging the water are usually over striped bass or bluefish, and I can work them more closely.”

Capt. John Pirie fishes the waters off Cape Ann, Massachusetts, for bluefin tuna. He points out that the presence of gulls means that the bluefin have been keeping the baitfish balled up near the surface for long periods, which is good news for anglers who like to cast for tuna. It’s a good idea to stick around if you see gulls sitting on the water in a tight group, as another blitz may erupt once the tuna corral the bait again and drive them to the surface.

If Pirie only sees terns in the area, he knows the tuna are feeding sporadically on small bait and may be on the move. A group of terns flying in a straight line may be shadowing a school of tuna below the surface. To fish them, Pirie will position his boat well ahead of the lead tern and cast a fast-sinking jig or spoon in its path. The trick is to time the cast so the lure sinks anywhere from 10 to 20 feet before the terns—and the tuna—reach the spot where the lure entered the water.

Off South County, Rhode Island, charter skipper Mitch Chagnon looks for gannets to lead him to big stripers in the late fall, when these large graceful seabirds often prey on migrating sea herring. Gannets feed on big baits by dive-bombing on them, and the height of their dives indicates the depth of the bait. If the gannets are diving close to the water, the herring and bass are close to the surface and can be taken on topwater plugs and shallow-swimming lures. On the other hand, if the gannets are diving from a height of 100 feet or more, trolling deep with wire line or vertical jigging will probably be more productive.

Another large bird that can prove helpful in locating big stripers and bluefish is the osprey. Osprey love big baitfish, especially adult menhaden. If you see an osprey hovering, watch it closely, as the bird may be pointing the way to a school of pogies, and that often means big stripers and bluefish are in the vicinity. At the very least,


the bird can lead you to baitfish for the day’s outing. ▀

*Tom Keer writes about fish and fishing from his home in Wellfleet, Massachusetts.*

*At right: Master fish-spotters, osprey can point the way to schools of menhaden.*



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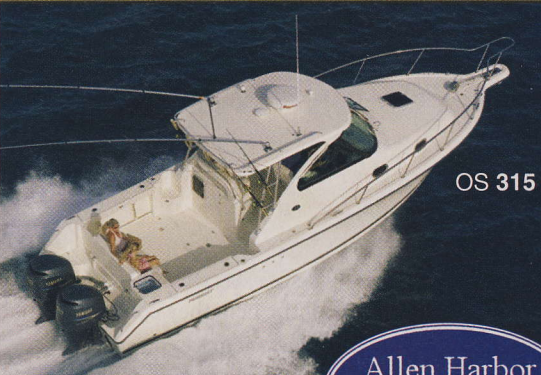


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