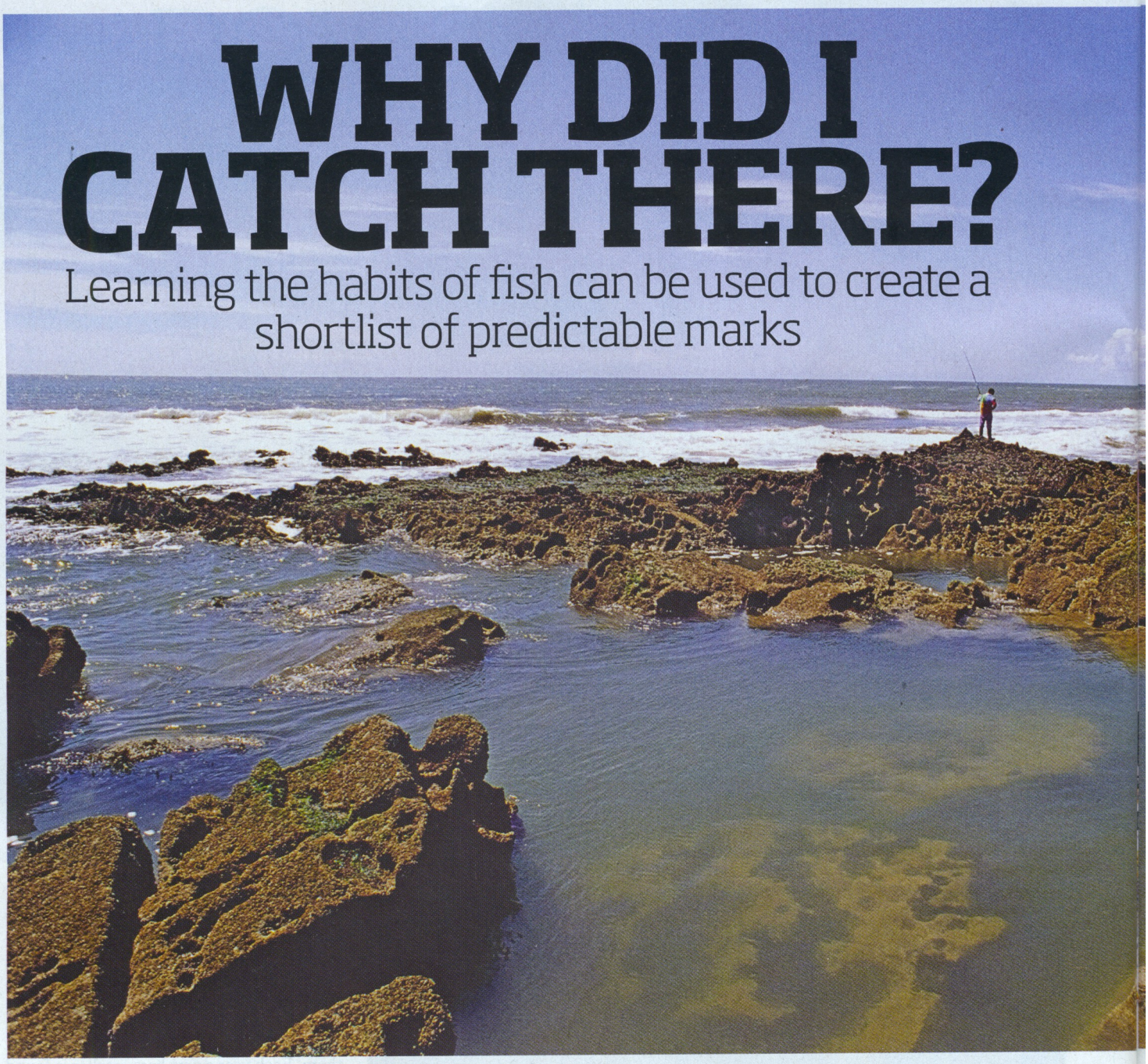
WHY DID I CATCH THERE?

Learning the habits of fish can be used to create a shortlist of predictable marks



Words and photography by **Clive Hodges**

I'VE BEEN FISHING FOR MORE THAN 40 years and learning throughout that period. Early on it was all about selecting the right tackle and rigs. Choice of venue is a major factor, as are stage of tide, weather, time of year, and casting distance or boat location.

If you develop the obsession to the degree that I and a few others have, you find yourself spending a huge amount of time addressing the key question: "Why did I catch a particular fish in a certain location on a particular stage in and size of tide?" Whenever I talk to other fanatical sea anglers, I am looking to work out the answer to the 'why' question. We might be discussing a type of undersea terrain where the fish are present for an hour or two on the flood tide. Why are they there? What 'structure' is helping them to find their food? Why do they move off the mark, and where might they go? Even if you only get part of the answer, it can help you to speculate about other, similar marks.

FINDING FOOD

For example, if you know that bass are feeding on shellfish, use your knowledge of tides and structure to work out where the food might be gathering below the surface.

I know a sandy beach with patches of stones lower than the level of the sand, and loose shellfish get trapped in the nooks and crannies between the stones. Getting your bait on these stones often produces a fish when there is about 18 inches of water covering them. Clearly, the bass know where to find the loose shellfish on this beach.

In a similar way out in the boat, there is a reef mark where I catch small cuckoo wrasse and poor cod. There are also small ballans and pout there. When I started lure fishing I figured here was a mark the bass were sure to visit. So already I had worked out why they might be there. When I had learnt more about lure selection and fishing techniques, I was able to find bass on this mark tight to the seabed. For reasons I've not yet figured out, they prefer one particular direction and size of tide, but I'm confident that when they're feeding they are eating small fish.

Recently some fishing friends shared some information about a shore mark that had turned up fish for them. They worked out what the bass were feeding on and where they stationed

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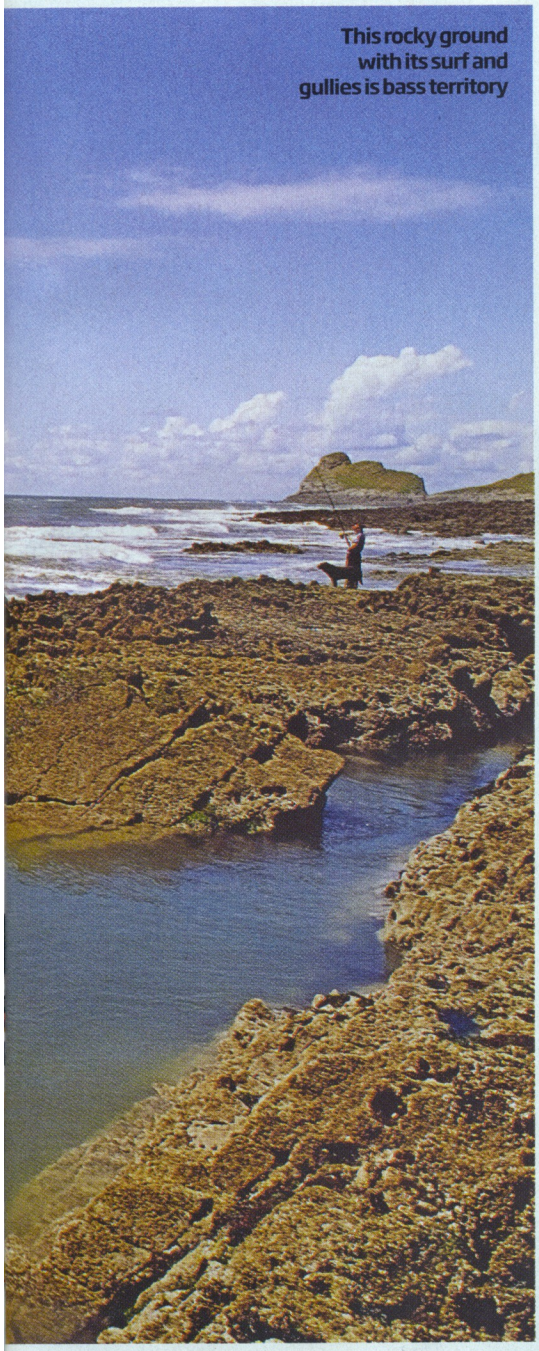

This rocky ground with its surf and gullies is bass territory

Clive took this 8lb 8oz beauty from a proven mark

themselves to pick up the food.

I had a look at the ground at low water and spotted the features that were diverting the current and I could pick out spots that might hold the fish during the ebb.

When people share snippets of information I try to glean as much detail as I can. If the captor of a good fish doesn't reveal the actual mark, they may share the stage of tide, casting distance, bait and end-tackle. Any of these details can still be useful information.

BLANK TRIP

A blank trip can sometimes provide important information. On a particular boat mark on a neap tide in falling light I can catch rays and dogfish on that combination, but no bass. But on a spring tide in the same circumstances I will catch bass, no rays and very few dogs. Why are the bass there only on springs? My guess is that the greater movement in the tidal stream helps to condense the shoals of food fish tight to a rock face that sits across the tide.

This last particular mark has been turning up bass for 35 years and was one of the first places I found that could produce them with any predictability. I've since found similar structure that holds bass in the same general area at different stages of the tide, indicating that the bass move from spot to spot throughout the tide.

With the knowledge I have amassed over the years, a key piece of information for me nowadays is that others are catching fish. For example, if I hear of local boats catching bass in March, I know that my early-season marks should also turn up fish. If someone had a decent bass on a beach in, say, the Brighton area in November, I'll know which of my shore marks is likely to turn up a fish on the given size of tide.

MAKE NOTES

A great thing about BASS as a society is the sharing of information like this on the Members Only forum. I use this resource to learn more about lures, and I'm working on a theory around lure selection and size of bass and sharing notes with other members whose passion matches my own. I envy new members who have easy access to years of forum discussion, which provides many pointers to help improve their fishing.

Information can be readily shared without disclosing the names of specific marks. I have a shortlist of key shore and boat marks that fish well for me. Although I seldom see others on these marks, I am confident that, at some point, they have been the secret marks of others. My main driver is that I don't want to risk sharing information that could end up with someone who would keep every fish caught and eventually destroy the mark. I don't want other people to give me the specifics of their best spots, because I love the challenge of working out new marks for myself. It allows me to keep an open mind, and once I'm convinced that I've worked out a mark for myself, each fish caught there is all the more appreciated.

So next time you hook a decent bass make specific notes about the time of year, size of tide and time on the tide. Then set to work to try to figure out why your fish was there. Once you have your theory, try to repeat things on future trips. If you get repeat catches you can then look for other locations that may give similar catches. Over time you'll have a collection of marks so that if one can't be fished, you can easily move to another.

After 40 years I am still learning about new locations and new techniques, and as long as there are bass left in the sea I'll be out there trying to hunt them down.

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Finding 'structure' is the key for shore and boat anglers