

Outstanding Chesapeake fall rockfish keeps the worm turning

by Tom Tatum For Digital First Media (The Boyertown Area Times, 8 Nov 2018)

Worm. It's a nickname that stuck after little sixyear-old Drew Payne started collecting earthworms for his fishing ventures as a child on Maryland's Western Shore. Decades ago he tended his own modest worm farm and was so dedicated to his wormy passion that his young buddies simply began calling him "Worm." Then, when his father joined the chorus, "Worm" became a moniker that would endure for a lifetime. Now 51 years of age and buoyed by 30 years experience navigating the fertile waters of the Chesapeake's western shore, Captain Worm's expertise is renowned among those who chase the coveted rockfish out of Chesapeake Beach, MD.

It should come as no surprise that Payne chose to christen his initial charter boat the "Worm." Years later, when Payne contracted the construction of a significantly more spacious charter boat, the Big Worm arrived on the scene in 2017. A 52-foot Millenium Marine brand boat with a broad 16-foot beam and certified to carry up to 49 passengers are credentials that easily rank the Big Worm among the burliest vessels now prowling the rockfish rich waters of the Chesapeake Bay.

So on a brisk sunsoaked morning late last month, I eagerly report to the Big Worm's dock for a fall rockfish foray where I'm greeted by Payne and mate Josh Lowery. Joined by fellow outdoor writers Harry Guyer of Loysburg and Doyle Dietz of Orwigsburg as well as Bedford's Dana Troutman, we all look forward to a successful and productive day on the water.

With mate Lowery at the ready, Payne fires up the 900 Scanyon single diesel engine a few ticks before nine that morning. At dead low tide and with a substantial northwest wind, Payne guides his sturdy vessel through the shallow harbor, a delicate dance that he performs without running aground before turning into the wind-driven whitecaps of the Middle Bay.

After a modest seven mile trek from the marina, we soon arrive at the fishing grounds on the western side of the channel and within spitting distance of the famed Calvert Cliffs. Lowery makes quick work of rigging the gear and setting out the lines. Today we will eschew the popular planer boards in favor of eight deck rods. For bait we'll forsake the earthworms of Payne's childhood and opt, instead, for Hula Chutes and Rubber Bugs, now the captain's lures of choice. Each line boasts two baits with a 25 foot leader for the lighter lure and a 20 foot leader for the heavier one. Lowery feeds out from 60 to 100 feet of line with different in-line weights to minimize tangles. Trolling in around 31 feet of 61 degree water at about 2.5 to 3.2 mph it doesn't take long for the morning's first rockfish to strike.

It's just past 9:30 when I crank in our first catch of the day, a little guy that doesn't measure up to the 19-inch legal minimum, so Lowery quickly releases it. Our outing takes place on the morning of Oct. 24 during a season that runs through Dec. 15 where, as Payne explains, regulations permit two fish of at least 19 inches in length per angler per day. Incidentally, for the uninformed, the fish that Marylanders call rockfish are universally known outside the Free State as striped bass. Also referred to as rock, stripers, and linesiders, these prized game fish, by any other name, are ferocious fighters and excellent table fare.

In any case, my first throwback signals an onslaught of action. While Payne is marking plenty of fish on his depth finder, thick hordes of gulls feeding on the surface also indicate large numbers of rockfish below voraciously shredding through ample schools of peanut bunker, a favored baitfish. As the gulls keep busy snapping up fragments of wounded bunker, our team of anglers stays occupied during that first flurry of hungry rockfish with numerous simultaneous hookups. Mate Lowery earns his tip money while feverishly untangling fouled lines, unhooking and releasing undersized fish, and keeping the baits in the water.

By the time the action slows around ten o'clock, three nice keepers reside in our cooler.

It isn't long before another striper school cruises through, keeping our rods bending with another steady flurry of mostly undersized fish including a number of double headers. On a typical trip, the Big Worm will host from 12 to 18 anglers at a time, so with just four anglers on board, we all enjoy plenty of elbow room. It isn't long before we run into some larger rockfish, again with multiple simultaneous hookups. Lowery mans the net and hoists the larger fish over the rail. Photo ops ensue as more hefty keepers are added to the morning's totals. Lowery is getting a hectic workout, but it's a job he clearly loves to do. And, with so much non-stop fishing action, Payne routinely abandons the helm and reports to the stern to lend his mate a hand.

Before noon we've already collected our nine fish boat limit (two rockfish per angler along with one additional for the captain and mate combined). Pool fish honors go to Dietz with a rock that stretches to about 32 inches. By the time Payne points the Big Worm back toward the docks, we've caught over 60 rockfish all told; that's an average of 15 fish apiece over the course of just three hours of fishing. It's been an incredibly eventful morning and, at long last, Lowery can relax and take a breath. Guyer savors a puff on his pipe and pauses to declare, "Best rockfish trip ever!" It's a pronouncement that will get no argument from the rest of us.

It's been a great day on the water, but for Captain Worm, such success has been consistent all season long. "We've pretty much been limiting out every trip," he smiles. "We fish eight days a week. That's 220 trips each year with two each day, mornings from 6:00 a.m. to noon and evenings from 1:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m." While rockfish fishing out of Chesapeake Beach represents Payne's bread and butter business, in a few weeks the Worm will turn south to Virginia Beach and the port which will become Payne's late season base of operations. There he'll fish for sea bass, flounder, and tilefish until the first of the year.

But it's not too late to book a trip for rockfish as a spectacular fall striper run remains strong in the Chesapeake. For more info check out www.wormcharters.com or call 410-4744428. And for more on Calvert County's outdoors opportunities, go to <https://www.choosecalvert.com/>.