

The Art of Lobster Hunting

by *Gene Peterson - Atlantic Diver*

The Atlantic Lobster, *Homarus americanus*, is the most sought after diver delicacy found on the shipwrecks of New Jersey. The wreck diver's seafood shopping list can vary from a wide range of fish from scallops, mussels, crabs and clams, but the claws and tail of the Atlantic Lobster remain the most desirable entree.

The New Jersey coastal waters are naturally flat, sandy bottom free of relief with the exception of a few rare projections of rock offshore. All other objects of relief are the result of natural disasters, human error or were purposefully placed in specific locations to create artificial habitats or reefs. These unnatural habitats attract a wide variety of marine life. Crustaceans and fish seek shelter in these structures, which serve as an oasis from predation by larger species. In the shadows and innumerable crevices of these structures, lobsters can molt and mate in a relatively protected environment. Only one in ten lobster larvae survive their first year of life, floating among other plankton forms. When they finally sink to the bottom, the features of these artificial reefs make a welcome habitat for these juvenile crustaceans. There they feed on small mollusks, fish, less formidable crustaceans and even other lobster.

The nickname bug has been given to the lobster by divers due to its resemblance to a steroid inflated, roach-like cousin. Bugs can catch, crush and shred with their two claws known distinctively as the crusher and the shredder. These claws are self defining in their respective shape and function. It is interesting to note and to consider the power and potential peril of mishandling these tempered pinchers. The power of a large eight - pound lobster crushing soda bottles and cans with an awesome crusher claw is a site to behold. Soft - tissue humans wince at the mere thought of their bone crushing mandibles snapping and crimping down on a misplaced digit.

Endless mishandling stories of lobster-diver encounters serve as a warning to future hunters. One unfortunate diver had a lobster crush his dive mask when he unwarily poked his head into a hole. Another equally misfortunate diver had a lobster reach through his mesh capture bag and hold onto the anchor line as the diver swam to the surface. He

abandoned the bag and his dinner to make a safe ascent. Other noteworthy pinching stories involve painful digit crunching.

Lobsters Preferred Habitat

In addition to nooks and crannies that reef habitat provides, lobsters inhabit any low sandy or muddy area with a roof. They dig in and mark their home with debris they bulldoze out of these holes. An alert hunter will look for burrowing areas marked with darker mud, discarded mollusk shells and bones littering the hole. These crustaceans can migrate or remain in that home year round if there is an abundance of food. A home in a paint can is more like a summer home, whereas a shipwreck with thick mussel growth will be a more permanent fortress.

Lobsters are known to occupy holes with alternate escape routes. They are wary of predators and scan underwater movement and motion with their sensitive antenna, while tirelessly searching for food. They are surprisingly quick, clutching at unsuspecting fish at the right moment or scurrying back into their holes as an adversary approaches.

Their behavior is instinctual. They make the march offshore in the fall where they dig into the deeper shelf-waters. In the late spring, lobsters return to their summer habitat where there they feed, molt and mate in a protected environment.

Knowing the terrain is advantageous. Divers who have previously caught lobsters in a wreck will enjoy equal fortune by returning to the same spots. Lobster habitually return to the same area, after one lobster is caught, another of similar size will soon take its place. They tend to replenish the offshore side of the structure as they march back from the depths.

Preparing for the Hunt

An important consideration for lobster hunters is choosing a dive location where they can dive within their comfort level. Equally important is having the proper safety gear and redundancy for any dive. Adequate gas is a must. You will breathe a lot of gas during the heat of the hunt.

Bug hunting requires a few basic pieces of equipment. Since lobsters hide from the sunlight in darkened crevices, a good light is the most important tool. Attach the light to your harness D-ring so you can work with both hands. Bright, hot-white HID or eLED lantern lights are preferred and provide a wide view and allow unrestricted movement. Red lens lights are rarely used and offer limited advantages. You only need to see the location of a potential home briefly and a bright wide beam will allow you to scan a larger area.

Being nimble is important and the ability to react and move freely increases potential success. Dive clean. Canister lights with a hand mount, arm slates, compasses and computers can all cramp a "lobster draw", the ability to plunge your hand deep into a hole.

A large mesh bag will allow you to bag your bug easily. Serious hunters choose the half nylon-half mesh bags to reduce drag and to ease the sliding of the bug into the bag. A current legal gauge should be attached to the bag for easy reference. These can be made by cutting a properly sized length of aluminum or plastic.

Lobstering Techniques

Timing the hunt season is important if a diver plans to capture dinner. Hunt too early in the season and you will find lots of ling cod and ocean pouts occupying those holes. If too late in the season, the lobsters may have moved off or have already been bagged by another diver.

Dive hunters should be aware of unnecessary movement and practice controlled underwater advances. This is where lobstering becomes an art. Successful lobster dives command a stealthy approach, fully focused on the diver's own movements, anticipating the prey and exploring continuously from hole to hole. Avoid shining light directly into the eyes of lobster, this will force them back into their hiding place and out of reach.

Over-analyzing suspected homes can lead to escapes or a tug of war where the lobster pins itself into a hole with its powerful tail. When this happens, the diver may get grabbed by the lobster or the lobster may give up a claw and escape. Some divers reach in crevices without hesitation. If this technique is used, be prepared to sometimes pull out sleepy eel pouts or red hake lounging in previously occupied lobster homes.

When making the move to grab a lobster don't hesitate and move with full intent. You have to surprise them to catch them. The less warning, the more likely you are to pull out a bug without any challenges. Finding the courage to stick your hand into a dark hole with two snapping claws is an adrenaline rush. Reach high above the claws and grab the carapace. Once you get your hand on the lobster, twist and pull. If there is any struggle, let go for a second, regain your grip and continue to pull. When it's out and in your hand keep it away from body parts and equipment like your mask and regulator hose.

Missing or making a false grab will result in a quick escape or a pinched finger. If you miss, the lobster will likely retreat deep in a hole or long pipe, where it will remain for the balance of your dive time. Spending the balance of your dive trying to out fox a veteran foe is fruitless. I have watched divers sit outside a deep pipe or boiler peering into the abyss of a black hole waiting while a monster shuffles a few feet teasingly out of reach. Waving a light, banging on the wreck and tossing a smaller hostage lobster in the hole are vain endeavors. The big ones will back further away, you will get a headache from banging, or get to watch a cannibalistic struggle. Lobsters don't get that big by rolling on their back and begging uncle. Move on if you miss. There are others to catch. At the end of the dive try that spot again but this time do not hesitate to reach far and quickly.

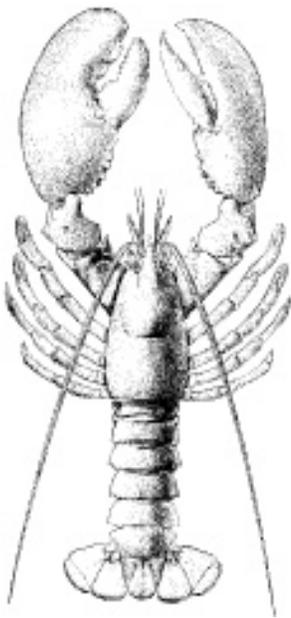
Lobster hunters must know the difference between a male and female. The females have a broader tail with soft appendages to hold eggs. If there are eggs (purple reddish berries) under the tail, carefully put her back in her home. Some breeding females have V shaped notches cut in the tail and must also be released even if they do not have eggs. If a lobster has no berries and is not V-notched, measure the length of the carapace. During the early summer months lobsters will be molting and are most vulnerable to predators. If you capture one of these softies you should put them back safely in their home where they will not become a fish meal. There are federal and state laws governing minimum and maximum lengths and divers must know the current size limits for the hunting area. If the bug is legal, open your bag just enough to slip the bug in tail first. Lobsters swim backward and will try to slip out if you open the bag too far.

If you are catching lobsters, keep hunting. Smaller ones can be exchanged for

larger ones when the possession limit has been reached. Be aware the bigger bugs will crush the little ones. Serious divers carry two bags to keep them separated. When divers get their catch on the boat, measurements should be taken again. It is easy to make a mistake underwater and little damage will be done if short lobsters are put back in the water right away.

Bug hunting is an exciting and a long enjoyed diving pastime. Properly equip yourself, follow the current laws and utilization of successful bugging techniques will provide you with many dinners. If all else fails, dive at night. Lobsters are nocturnal feeders. They wander around in the dark hunting for prey and a new home. Your cooler could be that new home.

Bug Hunting Tips



- * Know the laws, limits and have proper permits.
- * Only two claws are allowed per lobster body.
- * Measure and re-measure to be sure.
- * No gigs, spears, gaffs or mechanical devices are legal for capture.
- * Keep your lobster on ice or submerged at depth below the thermocline to keep them fresh.
- * Drain excess water in your cooler frequently, lobsters will drown in fresh water.
- * Band your lobster to protect yourself, other lobsters and most importantly the cook.

Good Hunting!



The author and his freshly caught dinner.