

By Jamie Tunnell

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Generations of watermen have haul-seined off Ocracoke for mullet in the fall season. When a combination of a cold front and a northeast wind come through, the mullet migrate south right off the beach. Local fishermen start dory fishing about mid-October in hopes of catching the mullet blow that will travel through these local waters.

A Fall Catch:



(Photo by Jamie Tunnell)

This is hard work, not to be mistaken for an easy haul and big cash. There are long hours, high costs and expenses, and a hit or miss season. They also have to deal with the rules and regulations of Marine Fisheries

Dory fishing is still an active method in eastern North Carolina, but commercial fishermen in nearby Bogue Banks and Ocracoke are seeing the end of a tradition if it is not passed on. Simple haul seine nets, that are pulled in by hand, were used by Native Americans centuries ago and the process has evolved to use trucks and tractors for the pull in and dory boats to take the net out.

According to the NC Fisheries, “the harvest proportion of annual landings has dwindled since 1972 and fluctuated greatly since 1992. Landings by beach seines occur almost entirely in October and November. Extremely poor landings in 1996 and 1999 were probably the result of fall hurricanes and strong weather conditions, which have a particularly profound effect on stop net harvest because of its limited fishing season.

Landings from the other, smaller, seine fishery are harvested in ocean waters (< 3 mi.), primarily in Carteret, Dare, and Hyde counties. Typically, monofilament gill nets (200-300 yards) are used to intercept ocean schooling striped mullets and are hauled onto the beach as functional seines. Ninety-two percent of the striped mullet landings in this fishery occur in October and November during the fall spawning migration. Outside of October and November, much of this seine fishery targets other species.”

The dory boat is a flat-bottomed boat with a high bow and high sides, usually less than 20 feet long. Originally, dories were carried on large boats out into the water and then launched. In most coastal communities, dories are launched from the beach.

An Ocracoke Dory:



(Photo by Jamie Tunnell)

With this type of fishing, hundreds of yards of netting are sent out into the ocean with a dory and then either pulled back in or set. There are two methods of dory fishing. The set-net method uses a dory to get the net out into the ocean, but may stay set up three or four days. To pull in the nets, about a dozen men are needed to haul in the catch, sometimes over 50,000 pounds in one day.

Locally, it is more common for fishermen to use a different method where the nets are pulled back in by a truck whose condition is of less concern, due to the saltwater that has already contributed to a little rust on. A dory is released into the ocean off of a trailer and one or two fishermen jump in as it meets the waves to lower the motor. While one end of their net is attached to the shore, they head straight out towards the outer bar, sometimes

using up to 800 yards of net. They circle back towards the north perpendicular to the shore and then head back. They can immediately begin pulling their net in with the truck, an entire process that is only about 30 minutes. Then, they can spend hours picking out the mullet. Mullet is the main target catch, but this method of fishing can also be done for rockfish and trout. One positive of dory fishing is the low by catch - what you are going after is at least 90% of what you haul in.

Instead of using the heavy haul-seine nets, most of the commercial fishing community has switched to gill nets, a lighter monofilament net with less upkeep.

It's a few hours of fast and furious, but the pay can be worth it. One of the biggest catches this fall that was hauled into the Ocracoke Fish House was 25,000 pounds. They are after the mullet roe, but the male mullet can bring in a good price if sold on the bait market.

Wade Austin, son Colby, and Erick O'Neal were part of the biggest catch of the season this fall:



(Photo by Jamie Tunnell)

After unloading the nets, they rush off to the fish house to separate the male and female mullet:



(Photo by Jamie Tunnell)

While commercial fishermen fight regulations and the decline of the fishery, the recent attention to saving the local fishermen and establishing working waterfronts has helped boost their cause. The market for roe mullet has declined in recent years, and due to other factors such as the inability of fishermen to make a living off the water, and rising expenses, this fishery has been reduced significantly. People that wander up on the haul seine process on the Ocracoke beach in the fall walk up on a rare experience; a treasure that not everyone gets to witness.

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