

Packery Channel packs in nice catch

By David Sikes

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CORPUS CHRISTI — Three weeks ago it was trout on the north side. Then jacks and smacks at the end. This past week, tarpon and redfish provided Packery thrills at the Coastal Bend's newest set of rocks.

And I've heard more recent stories suggesting that kingfish may have arrived.

Before all this, I'd made a deal with Bob "Snags Masters" Weist, a jetty regular widely known as one of the better rock hoppers with conventional tackle. He knows Packery well. As prime fishing season approached, Weist promised to notify me when the jetty turned on.

That call came last Friday the 13th, and as luck would have it I could get away after a quick early morning trip to Port Aransas. And as usual I had rods and tackle with me in the truck.

But before making my way eastward down Zahn Road to the hard packed sand of Packery's north jetty I had a really important stop to make. The beach parking sticker on my windshield was dated 2010.

Some of you may recall that last year, while researching a story on the Packery jetties, I had overlooked this detail. Unfortunately my oversight was not overlooked by the city's beach patrol.

The fine was \$150 for not having a \$12 sticker.

I pleaded my case with the city attorney and she was kind enough to reduce my sentence. I think the final cost was about half the original sticker shock.

I'm not sure they're quite so understanding with second offenders.

So I confidently rolled to a stop near the granite blocks with my new parking sticker at around 9 a.m. I could see a fair number of anglers scattered along the railed jetty. What I didn't see were many arched fishing rods straining above those anglers.

Perhaps I'd missed the bite.

Weist's report that morning included the always welcomed news that several tarpon had been hooked, though none were landed. By the time I arrived, at least two of those silver kings had stretched the fly line of Perry Detore, another jetty regular with

an eye for tarpon and the skill to target them with a fly rod.

Water clarity was good and floating weed was light, but the surfing was better than the fishing. I think winds were expected to shift from south to north at some point during the day.

I had not visited this jetty in a while. And I was surprised to find an extremely slippery layer of algae on the easternmost stretch of the flattop. Generally I expect the slick stuff to subside after winter on the jetties in Port Aransas, which I'm more familiar with.

You might not expect algae to be a major problem at Packery because of the way it's built. The giant granite blocks are capped with a level layer of smooth concrete. I'm telling you it's like a neighborhood sidewalk, except with metal handrails that run along each edge for the entire length.

If not for the handrail I might have fallen. I believe I have a solution that could prevent a nasty, trip-ending spill.

For years, jetty anglers relied on golf shoes for solid footing. But when golf courses across the country began prohibiting metal spikes on their links, the supply of shoes ran out.

Some anglers with foresight hoarded several pairs for the future. Others scoured garage sales for the less than stylish relics. It was not uncommon to hear the clacketyclack of sure footed jetty anglers sporting the nerdiest of two-tone saddle oxfords on the rocks at Port A.

I had a pair of cleated sandals instead. And I collected a quart-sized Ziploc bag of replacement cleats when I learned of the country club rule. But over time the spikes on my sandals rusted in place and then wore flat.

Proper footwear on the jetty is liberating, not to mention much much safer. This is no place for flip flops or bare feet, though Weist goes shoeless often.

I'd become a victim of my own negligence. The result was that I lost the confidence to tread where I wanted to tread on the rocks, especially nearest the water. This is important if you want to land fish with light tackle. Hoisting a heavy fish five or six feet onto the jetty cap often will lose or damage your catch, or break a rod.

The solution comes from a company called Korkers (www.korkers.com), which specializes mostly in technical wade boots for river fly fishing. The Korkers Swift Sandals seems to be the footwear of choice on local jetties now. But this style has been discontinued, though I found it for sale through several online retailers in addition to Korkers.com. Just Google it. They come with interchangeable soles, so you don't have to wear down your metal studs when walking on non-slippery surfaces. The removable soles also allow you to replace a worn pair of soles without buying a new pair of shoes. Locals seem to prefer the Studded Kling-On Rubber Sole, which features a pavement-gripping rubber surface embedded with 13 small pointed metal spikes for penetrating a thin layer of algae. The Korkers HyJack Water Shoe might be

the better choice for rock hopping and traversing the slick stuff. This style looks more like a traditional, lace-up, athletic shoe, but also comes with interchangeable soles. If you chose the HyJack, consider the Studded Rubber Sole (FA3040) with larger more aggressive carbide spikes. Footing is the last thing I want to worry about when a manic tarpon lifts from the surface and rattles its armor in an attempt to shake free of my hook.

Back at Packery's north jetty, rough waves threatened to soak the anglers fishing from the end. The usually productive Weist seemed to be losing interest, while Detore was audibly contemplating a move to the channel's south side. I decided to go first.

And just about the time I neared the beach where my ticket-less truck was parked, Weist called my cellphone to report Detore had just jumped a five-footer. Detore's battle with the silver king didn't last long, ending in the usual way by no fault of the angler. Tarpon are tough to hook and even more difficult to retrieve within reach, especially on the rocks.

I was committed to the south side, which is accessible by taking Whitecap Boulevard off Park Road 22 on the Island toward the beach, then hanging a left on Windward Drive, which'll lead you to the sand.

When I arrived, a single angler stood on the rocks about halfway down. It was a young fly angler named Don Alcala, a fine fly caster who soon will be a Federation of Fly Fishers certified casting instructor.

My pace quickened toward him when Alcala's line tightened and his arm lifted an arched rod above his head.

"Whatcha got Don," I asked when I got near.

"Spanish mackerel," he replied. "Pretty good one, I think."

It was.

I fired a soft plastic southward into the gulf. And just as the lure approached the outer edge of a submerged apron of granite a fish interrupted my retrieve with authority. It was about a 22-inch redfish.

Several casts later another redfish pounced on the bait. And then another.

By now, Weist, Detore and several other lure chunkers had arrived. And rods began to bend. At first they were all redfish, but I believe the sharp gill plates of Spanish mackerel sliced through several of Alcala's leaders.

Then a couple of Texas A&M-Corpus Christi students, David Dyer and Sean Barber, found a spot nearby along the rail. They had natural bait, mostly mullet I think. Within minutes both were hooked up. And the crowd grew bigger, as the bite improved.

For at least the next two hours, the jetty was joyful. Hardly a moment passed without someone either landing, stringing, releasing or fighting a redfish. Double and triple hookups were common. Even Detore abandoned his tarpon fly for something better suited for reds. Soon he had a fish on.

At some point that morning, I'm certain the fishing got better than the surfing.

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