
August 24, 2006

The Hudson, and the Lure of Blue Claws

By [COREY KILGANNON](#)

NYACK, N.Y. — Seventy years ago, Bob Gabrielson scooped blue-claw crabs out of the Hudson River with a long net or a wire pull-up trap and sold them in town for a dollar a dozen.

These days, townspeople still buy them, now lining up in his driveway to pay \$20 for a dozen blue-claw crabs, some spanning up to 14 inches. But his main clientele is not local.

“Now we sell them to Maryland, of all places,” he said recently, mentioning a state famous for its crabs. “The guy who picks them up says they haven’t seen crabs this big down there in 40 years.” As he spoke, he was sorting the day’s catch — hundreds of scuttling, snapping crabs tangled in bunches — into wooden bushel baskets.

Mr. Gabrielson rarely goes out on the river now. He’s 76 and has bad knees. Instead, his son, Bob Gabrielson Jr., 49, takes a small crew out on the Gabrielsons’ work boat to empty the traps they have kept for decades in the Tappan Zee section of the Hudson, even before the Tappan Zee Bridge was completed in 1955.

Back then, scores of commercial fishermen pulled shad, striped bass, crabs, eels, sturgeon and herring out of the Hudson. Now the Gabrielsons are among the few remaining commercial fishermen working on the river.

“We’re the last of a dying breed, and when we stop, it’s all over,” said the younger Mr. Gabrielson.

The Hudson is not exactly known for its blue-claw crabs, but they’re there, and lately they seem to be bigger and healthier than ever. Some fishermen say it’s the cleaner water, though scientists still warn about high levels of mercury and PCB’s, or the milder winters, which allow more young crabs to survive into spring, growing large by late summer. Or maybe it’s a favorable brine mixture in the Hudson, which has salt water mixed in with fresh all the way north to Troy.

Whatever it is, the shells of almost every crab the Gabrielsons shake out of their wire traps these days are a good five inches wide, making them legal to keep.

The elder Mr. Gabrielson said he did not want to identify his Maryland buyer because “I don’t want to put him in a position of having to explain down to his buyers down there why he’s buying New York crabs to serve in Maryland.”

Crab harvests in Maryland have been on the decline for several years, but they have begun to rebound, especially this season, said Robert H. Evans, a commercial crabber from Shady Side, Md.

Mr. Evans, who has been crabbing for more than 30 years, is president of the Anne Arundel County Watermen's Association and a board member of the Maryland Watermen's Association.

"You wouldn't think we'd have to buy crabs from you New Yorkers, but I'll tell you what: I'd put ours up against your New York crabs in a taste test any day," he said.

One recent afternoon the younger Mr. Gabrielson and two workers headed down from the Nyack town dock to empty traps set near the Tappan Zee Bridge. Drivers whizzed by as the burly crabbers, in yellow deck skins, pulled their catch from the water.

Then they emptied a set of nearby traps they called the Rosie set. The men name their traps based on their locations, and these happened to be placed in waters just off Rosie O'Donnell's house.

It was hot and humid and darkening to the east, where black clouds were bundled up over Westchester.

A stiff breeze blew from the south, and Mr. Gabrielson steered up river, bounding on the rolling chop toward Upper Nyack. The 23-foot work boat — with no shelter and scant seating — was loaded with several bushels of crabs and covered in brown slime from the traps.

Mr. Gabrielson and his two workers stood and leaned forward into the wind and the hard bounce of the boat until it neared a tall section of Palisades cliffs known as Hook Mountain. The sky was gray and growling, and rain turned the cliffs a charcoal color.

The boat slowed, and the men began looking for a little buoy tied to the string of their traps resting at the bottom. The buoy is intentionally difficult to spot, to reduce the chances of curious or devious boaters finding and pulling up the traps.

They emptied the Hook Mountain set and began looking for the Jeff set, so named, Mr. Gabrielson explained, "because the guy who owns that house right there, his name is Jeff."

Suddenly, lightning flashed over Sleepy Hollow accompanied by a crack of thunder, but Mr. Gabrielson was looking for the next set and never even turned his head.

The traps, or pots, are wire boxes with one-way entrance holes, strung together in groups of 10 and baited with bunker fish. The traps are emptied twice a week since there is only enough bait for the crabs to munch on for about four days.

"After that, the crabs will start attacking each other," Mr. Gabrielson said. "You'll find a lot of them with their claws ripped off."

He found the set. The bow man, Michael Barksdale, 46, a sanitation worker from Congers, N.Y., grabbed the buoy and began pulling up the line. Ian Raywid, the first mate, took each trap and shook out the crabs — usually a dozen per trap — into long, shallow bins.

Then Mr. Gabrielson took the empty traps, jammed two bunker fish into the bait slot of each one,

and stacked them neatly along the port gunwale. When all 10 were emptied and stacked, they were carefully dropped, one by one, down to the bottom in a line.

Despite the steady streaks of lightning overhead, Mr. Gabrielson did not seem the least bit nervous as he gunned the boat for the Nyack town dock. At the dock, his father was talking about how he used to catch shad in the spring and crabs from June to October. To make ends meet during the winter, he would prepare taxes, do some paving and asphalt work and hunt.

“I fed my family by trapping muskrat, mink, fox and rabbit around here and selling the pelts,” he said. He praised environmentalists for helping to clean up the Hudson but said the catch limits that they helped enact had ruined commercial fishing on the river.

A man who looked about his age pulled up in a pickup truck, and Mr. Gabrielson greeted him: “They told me you were dead.” The man laughed, and they talked about their forthcoming knee replacements and about how the fluke were biting.

“I hear they’re getting bigger,” Mr. Gabrielson said. “Rubberlips’s father told me.”

Mr. Gabrielson is a well-known figure in Nyack.

“Me, my wife, my son, my grandson and my great-grandson were all born in Nyack Hospital,” he said.

In fact, he finds himself with more local customers than he can satisfy, and he sometimes has to turn people away. After all, he has to save some crabs for Maryland — and for himself.

“I’ll take a few and put them in a tank I have, so they shed,” he said, “and then I got myself some softshell crabs.”

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)