

My Bayfaring Adventures

By *Monica Allard Cox*

I have put the Coastweeks calendar of events together for several years now, and each time I do, I find events that I would love to attend, but, like probably so many others, I never get around to it.

So this year, when I got an e-mail from my mother suggesting that she, my sister, and I go on one of the Save The Bay lecture cruises, I couldn't turn it down. We opted to learn about "Taking Better Bay Photographs" with photographer Richard Benjamin.

I had taken an extensive photo course a few years earlier, and though I only had a point-and-shoot camera, I took diligent notes on F-stops and apertures in the hopes that I would some day purchase a more elaborate one. But my husband and I bought a house instead, so the evening of our cruise, clutching my simple digital camera, I thought at least I would enjoy a boat ride, even if I didn't capture any spectacular photos.

Cruising with Save The Bay

The group of us boarded the *Alletta Morris*, found seats, and many people started fiddling with their cameras, which, to my untrained eyes, seemed quite professional. Some of us started taking pictures right away. As we set off, I halfheartedly snapped a few shots of small sailboats passing by, knowing they would probably appear as small white spots in a big blue Bay.

As I was deleting them upon review, I heard Benjamin say, over the sound of the boat motor and the waves, "The good photos you see are not what I call drive-by shootings."

I didn't take it personally.

He spoke about overriding the camera's automatic light meter depending on the effects of the sun. We approached a lighthouse, cameras snapping. The light at that moment and angle, he said, was flat, diffuse—and boring. At least I wasn't the only person who had jumped the gun. We circled the lighthouse to see different effects of light, and he pointed out that a small boat that was about to pass the lighthouse would add interest to photos we might "make."

Satiated, we headed up the Bay to Providence Harbor, passing a couple of rusty-looking tankers as he added, "Even something as mundane as a tanker will look nice with the right kind of light." Indeed, the sunset cast a glow on the side of one of the ships, highlighting what might have been a Russian name. More snapping.

On the other side of the harbor, he helpfully pointed out tugboats gleaming in a golden light for us to try our luck with. I recognized them as Providence Steamboat tugs, and held my little camera out as far as I could to capture a few shots.

The *Alletta Morris* drove under the new arch of the Inter-



Richard Benjamin (right) teaches the art of making better photographs.

state 195 bridge and turned around. We headed to the Pomham Rocks Lighthouse where we again circled in search of the best prospect. As we came around the northern side of the lighthouse, the last pink glints of sunset reflected in the windows. "There's the shot," I thought. We slowly came around to the front of the lighthouse, where some birds flew by. Benjamin thought the birds would add interest to the photos, but the light wasn't great. I couldn't agree more. I felt reborn.

We returned to the Save The Bay center, where Benjamin treated us to a slideshow of some of his Bay images. One slide showed an almost unnaturally large moon rising over the Point Judith Lighthouse. I wondered if the moon had been enhanced to make it appear larger. But no, Benjamin said a photographer could capture this shot only once or twice a year. He had taken (or made) the picture one October, the day before the full moon, which he said made for perfect balance of sun and moon at sunset. He determined his timing with the help of a website that offers the azimuth of the sun and moon. The best day to capture the moon at sunrise, he added, is the day after the full moon.

He also checks *AccuWeather.com* to ascertain what the cloud cover will be on a given day, to see whether it's worthwhile to venture out. He then told us to "get off the beaten path" for the best shots—though he admitted that has gotten him at least one parking ticket and an admonition from the police.

Another trade secret was revealed in a picture of lightning, which he said some people attributed to a lucky shot. He said that using a tripod, he watched for telltale signs that lightning would strike, then kept the shutter open for 15 seconds per shot. Of the dozen or so photos he took, two captured the moment of the lightning strike.

Benjamin uses a digital camera, which he likes for keeping him from having to spend time in the darkroom. He said that digital photography also allows photographers to more closely capture what they saw. Of one lighthouse photo, he described how he used a tripod to expose for the fore-

ground, then for the sky, then using Photoshop, combined the two.

"After taking the picture there's so much you can do to make the picture better," he said, enthusiastically revealing his last sleight of hand. He demonstrated various Photoshop techniques on one of the photos he took during our cruise, which looked remarkably similar to one of mine (never mind that he said he didn't have high expectations of the photos he took that night). Using the "lasso" tool, he dragged the cursor to outline and select an area of the image, and adjusted its saturation, selecting the "feathering" option so the changes blended naturally. Suddenly, dramatic streaks of color illuminated the sky.

At the end of the presentation, one audience member asked him, "What would Ansel Adams think?"

He replied that Adams, who was a musician, once said, "The negative is the score, the print is the performance." Benjamin compared manipulating digital images to manipulating negatives, something he said Adams spent untold hours doing. "I have no doubt he would embrace digital photography."

Trawling with Rhode Island Sea Grant

My other Coastweeks boat ride was aboard the URI fisheries vessel, the *Cap'n Bert*, for the commercial fishing trawl that the Rhode Island Sea Grant Fisheries Extension Program offers every year. This year, Dave Beutel, fisheries extension specialist, invited me for the Friday morning trip. I brought my husband along.

The other participants on that particular trip were preponderantly male, and after most of us had climbed aboard, Tom Puckett, the captain, telling us the *Cap'n Bert* had once been used for drug running (though apparently not successfully), lifted the cover to the engine to show us how large it was. He compared it to three Camry engines. My husband instructed me to take a photo of it for his dad.

Once all the passengers had boarded, Beutel explained to us Galilee's significance as a commercial fishing port. He said that in 2004, Galilee was 19th nationally in ex-vessel prices at \$30 million—down from among the top 10 due to a decline in the lobster catch, which is the most valuable. New Bedford, he said, is

the number one port in the country, with \$170 million in fish products landed last year.

Due to Rhode Island's geographic location—south of Cape Cod and with the Gulf Stream's clockwise movement—both mid-Atlantic and New England species are found here (the same is true for New Bedford).

Unfurling a model of the *Cap'n Bert's* trawl net, Beutel told us that bottom trawling is responsible for catching most of the fish eaten in America. He explained that the top of the net extends farther forward than the bottom to take advantage of fish behavior—winter flounder give up when being chased by the net and are scooped in the bottom. Pollock, haddock, whiting, butterfish, and fluke swim up when they get scared and are trapped by the top.

"This is the most regulated piece of gear there is," he said, and proceeded to describe just some of the dizzying array of management measures commercial fish-



Barbara Somers (background photo) and David Beutel (inset), both Sea Grant fisheries extension specialists, lead a fishing trawl trip for Coastweeks 2006.

ermen have to know and contend with. The New England Fisheries Management Council on Groundfish requires a 6.5-inch mesh size on the cod end (the very end of the net), and 6 inches everywhere else. Summer flounder (fluke) is a mid-Atlantic species, and managed by the Mid-Atlantic Fisheries Management Council, which requires a 5.5-inch cod-end mesh size. However, in Rhode Island, if the daily landing limit for fluke goes below 100 pounds, the 5.5-inch limit no longer applies. “The logic really escapes me, because it doesn’t reduce bycatch, it increases bycatch,” he said.

It gets more complicated. He told us if trawlers are targeting scup, they may use a 4.5-inch cod-end mesh size, but are only allowed to land 50 pounds of fluke. Daily landing limits go out to fishermen by e-mail and can go from 150 pounds to zero in a few days.

Beutel also pointed out the trawl doors on the *Cap’n Bert*, which sink and spread the net, and aid in “herding” fish into it. While these doors weigh 300 pounds, he said on larger trawlers they can weight up to 2,000 pounds.

And with that, we were off to do a truncated version—at a more reasonable hour—of commercial trawling. While commercial fishermen tow for about an hour in state waters, we would be towing for 45 minutes. As we headed south, we amused ourselves by trying to identify landmarks from the water. One person asked if we were passing Beavertail. No, said Barbara Somers—also a fisheries extension specialist working with Beutel on the trip—that was Dutch Island. I wasn’t any better—I knew at some point I would be passing my own office, a building I’ve worked in for 10 years, but I couldn’t tell when or where.

As we went south of the Jamestown Bridge, it was clear we weren’t cruising on the *Bay Queen*. Rain started to fall, and the boat lurched in what were, to me, rough waters. Fortunately, a dose of Dramamine eliminated both my queasiness and my discomfort at wearing soaking wet jeans.

I soon felt well enough to inspect some of the catch—some fluke, several crabs, a couple undersized lobsters, and a few huge quahogs. I’ve boiled lobster myself several times, but I wasn’t prepared for seeing skate, which looked like they had cute faces, with eyes and a mouth on their white underside, doing what appeared to me to be gasping for air. Though this defied even what little I know about fish biology, I pointed to the most hapless one and, embarrassed, asked Somers to throw it back. She told me I wouldn’t make a very good fisherman, but added that skate are pretty hardy and would most likely live through being hauled out and thrown back. I didn’t ask whether her stepping on them or using a shovel to pitch them off the back of the deck factored into the survival equation; I knew I’d be back lubbering land soon enough.

Other participants had none of my squeamishness. One woman smiled for pictures while hoisting a large electric ray—only safely held by the tail—that could discharge 220 volts into an unsuspecting victim.

Beutel collected half a basket of fluke, and showed us how bleeding the fish (piercing the fish at the heart, throwing them in a bucket of water, and allowing them to release their blood) would make for sushi-grade fish. He said that when landing limits are low, going through that process would give fishermen a higher profit. As it was, he said, that half basket was about half the day’s limit for fluke, which is why ours was the only trawler any of us saw out that morning.

By the end of the trip, one woman had a supply of small squid for bait, while another participant, Mike Murgo, had gathered a number of crabs that he was planning to steam with a little hot pepper or, if his family requested, work into a spaghetti sauce. He said he came on the trip “just to appreciate the fishing industry” and compared the experience to visiting a farm: “like any farming industry, though this is a wild catch, the little guy gets the short end of the price.” Tom Dorazio, another participant, was impressed by the experience, but added, “I thought it was somewhat brutal—the weather—it’s a lot of work.”

I had to concur. Though I had done no sorting, weighing, slicing, or shoveling, and while our two guides were planning on leading two more public trawls the following day, I went home, peeled off my wet clothing, and took a nap.

Coastweeks is the annual celebration of the coast that takes place each September and October. This year, Coastweeks in Rhode Island was the largest ever, offering over 50 events, including beach cleanups, kayaking lessons, guided walks, and, of course, boat trips. To receive the calendar of events, contact Jean Gallo at (401) 874-6842 or jgallo@gso.uri.edu, or visit seagrant.gso.uri.edu/Coastweeks. Coastweeks in Rhode Island is coordinated by Rhode Island Sea Grant and funded by the R.I. Coastal Resources Management Council.

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