



Tom Richardson

Mike Laptew prepares to enter the familiar waters off Cuttyhunk, Massachusetts, where he has filmed stripers up to 50 pounds on the boulder-strewn bottom.

Shooting to Thrill

Former spearfisherman turned videographer Mike Laptew is focused on giving his audience a unique look at life below the surface and a greater appreciation of the Northeast's vibrant and often mysterious marine environment.

by Tom Richardson

photographs by Mike Laptew



Above: Laptew captured this blue-claw crab hiding among the rocks along a stretch of the Rhode Island coast.

Right: Laptew's videos provide stunning footage of migratory schools of game fish, such as these school striped bass.

As I followed Mike Laptew's dome of white hair along the rugged eastern shore of Rhode Island's Beavertail Point, I was pretty sure I had hit upon a new weight-loss fad. Clad in black, skintight neoprene and lugging a 20-pound weight belt, snorkel mask, dive buoy and three-foot-long fins, I could feel the pounds melting off me with every precarious step. I was soaked in sweat and sucking wind, but Laptew pressed on, scooting over the sloping granite ledges with impressive agility, especially considering that he was toting a 25-pound video camera in addition to all of his dive gear.

After 100 yards of this torture, we stopped beside a narrow fissure where the ocean lapped at the weed-fringed rocks. I

was desperate to enter the cool, green water, but first I had to endure an agonizing 10-minute struggle with my mask, fins and belt while Laptew laughed at my contortions. Finally, I wallowed into the sea and began my introductory foray into the underwater realm of the Northeast.

It's a place Laptew—also known as the Diving Fisherman—knows well, having snorkeled, dived and fished these waters since he was a kid, growing up in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, just outside Providence. In fact, many of his formative saltwater experiences took place at his uncle's summer home in Jamestown, a few miles from where we had just entered the water. Roughly half a century of aquatic adventure has passed, and the 55-year-old Laptew now finds himself ranked among the Northeast's pre-

mier underwater videographers. To date he has produced six videos aimed at fishermen seeking greater knowledge of their quarries' habits and habitat, as well as a fish-eye view of the region's marine environment. He has also produced several short documentaries, and his footage has appeared on *60 Minutes*, numerous fishing TV shows and websites and in the International Game Fish Association museum.

What makes Laptew's work unique in the crowded world of fishing videos is their blend of how-to information and natural history. In *Stripers in Paradise*, Laptew's second retail video, he takes the viewer on a tour of the most famous fishing spots in the Northeast, explaining why each is a magnet for game fish. The video offers plenty of fishing action, but

Laptew balances this familiar fare with underwater sequences that provide a fascinating look at the marine environment and the creatures that call it home. "I discovered from showing my early video clips at fishing seminars that fishermen wanted to know more about what was going on under the surface," Laptew recalls in his distinctive Rhode Island accent. "It was like I was scratching a particular itch of these anglers, and I knew I had found a niche."

It was this realization that prompted Laptew to leave his longtime job as a marketing manager with Pitney Bowes 11 years ago, at the age of 44, and dive headfirst into full-time filming and production. Completely self-taught in the art and science of underwater videography, he invested in high-tech video equipment

and began renting space at a local editing studio. Within a year he released his first video, *Striper Magic*, which he filmed, wrote, edited and even narrated. He also took it upon himself to market the product, which meant making the rounds of the region's tackle shops and fishing outfitters.

A posterboy for self-sufficiency—and occasional self-micromanagement—Laptew now produces his videos in the darkened basement of his home in North Kingston, Rhode Island, which he has turned into a full-blown digital editing suite. Some spouses might have grumbled over such a move, but Laptew maintains that Donna, his wife of 29 years, has been nothing but supportive. "I couldn't do what I'm doing without her," he says. "She's even gone so far as to help



As the most popular game fish in the Northeast, striped bass steal the spotlight in the majority of Laptew's videos.

lug around my gear and stand in as sound technician.”

An ardent conservationist, Laptew is an active member of the Rhode Island environmental group Save The Bay, which named him its Volunteer of the Year in 1994 for a video he produced on the ecosystem of Narragansett Bay. He also serves on the advisory board of the Recreational Fishing Association, a national angler-advocacy group for which he helped produce an eye-opening video on destructive commercial-fishing practices.

From overfishing to pollution to habitat degradation, Laptew is passionate about all issues affecting the marine environment. But that's really no surprise given his almost boyish fascination with the sea, which started with an early exposure to fishing. “I got involved in surf fishing when I was knee-high,” he recalls. “Dad, grandpa—everyone fished. At my uncle's place in Jamestown I would swim, fish, dive. That's where it all came together for me.”

A huge fan of the 1950s TV show *Sea Hunt*, the young Laptew took an early interest in spearfishing and has fond memories of chasing eels with a homemade gig in the local salt ponds. The challenge of hunting fish with a spear eventually led him to join the ranks of competitive breath-hold spearfishermen when he was 22. He got good at the game, and in 1979 won the title of North Atlantic

Champion in a four-event match held by the Underwater Society of America.

In breath-hold spearfishing, divers eschew the use of compressed air and the bulky equipment that comes with it. Instead, they hold their breath, sometimes for up to four minutes, to be stealthier, more mobile and more at one with the marine environment. The sport can be dangerous, especially when competitors push the envelope to pursue a prize-winning fish or investigate a hard-to-reach spot. “If everything's going perfectly dive after dive after dive, you get into a zone, almost a Zen-like state in which you feel as if you could stay down there forever. That's when you can get into trouble,” explains Laptew, who has lost several friends to diving accidents.

The hunting skills honed through spearfishing continue to serve him well as a videographer, since both pursuits require an intimate knowledge of fish behavior and ocean dynamics. Keeping tabs on the fishing scene also helps, and Laptew relies heavily on a network of top guides, charter captains and sportfishermen who are on the water every day. When he learns of a hot bite somewhere along the coast, he's out the door with camera and wetsuit in hand. He also schedules many his dives based on his knowledge of fish migratory patterns and historical records, which is why most Octobers find him in the waters off Cuttyhunk, Massachusetts, a perennial

waystation for big stripers during the fall run. His numerous trips to the island have been rewarded with incredible footage of stripers in the 50-pound range prowling the famous boulder-strewn bottom.

On a typical outing, Laptew begins by regulating his breathing and making a few short recon dives to warm up and get a sense of the territory and conditions. “It takes at least 15 minutes to get into a rhythm and stretch your lungs a bit,” he explains, adding that he typically holds his breath for a minute to a minute and a half per dive. At that rate he can dive all day without taxing himself, he says.

Unburdened by cumbersome air tanks and hoses, he's able to canvas the area quickly, maneuvering along ledges, kelp beds, boulder fields and rock gullies—places he terms “underwater game trails”—using the prevailing current to carry him along. When he encounters something of interest, such as a school of predators herding baitfish against the shore, he shifts into stealth mode, slipping behind a boulder or a kelp bed to blend in with the surroundings while he films the event. The fish will usually stay in the area as long as he doesn't make any quick or threatening movements, and he can often make repeated dives on the same spot without significantly disturbing their behavior.

The idea of gliding stealthily along a stretch of rocky bottom amid dozens of happily feeding stripers was the driving



When hunting for fish to film, Laptew follows the natural contour lines created by weed-covered boulders and ledges.



Tautog, such as this hefty “white-chinner,” are a common sight on many dives, especially those around wrecks and rock piles.



On a typical dive Laptew holds his breath for up to 90 seconds as he descends to the bottom and tries to blend in with the rocks and kelp.



Northeast waters sometimes offer a surprising variety of marine life and vibrant colors that rival a Caribbean reef.

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force behind my dive lesson with Laptew. However, as we began our drift along Beavertail Point in 10 to 20 feet of water, I saw that I was not going to achieve this sense of harmony with the underwater world—at least not on my first try. First of all, I couldn't see more than three feet below the surface, even in full sunlight. Since my only previous snorkeling experiences have taken place in the Caribbean, where I could see the bottom (or any sharks) from a distance of 30 feet, I began to get a little spooked, especially when it seemed as if my guide might never return from his first descent into the gloomy green depths. Bobbing alone on the swells, I was casting longing glances toward dry land when Laptew popped to the surface and cleared his snorkel tube with a blast of air. "Lots of tautog down there," he gasped. "Go ahead and take a look."

I took a deep breath and tipped down. The weight belt and long fins made my descent almost effortless, and soon I was swimming through fronds of olive kelp anchored to the jumble of granite boulders. Darting among the vegetation were dozens of colorful harbor pollock and cunner. I was just beginning to get a sense of what Laptew calls the "lush underwater gardens of the Northeast" when my body began reminding me of its need for oxygen. Lungs burning, I kicked frantically toward the light and emerged, gasping for air. I was dismayed to learn I had been down less than 30 seconds, but at least I

had gained a new appreciation for Laptew's diving skills, which allow him to capture the kind of remarkable action footage seen in his videos.

Getting a usable five-second clip of quick-moving fish in murky water isn't easy, even with the best video camera and lights, and Laptew estimates that he shoots over 80 hours of footage to make a single video. That translates into 50 or 60 dive sessions per season, followed by many long hours of editing. "Fish don't follow a storyboard," he says. "That's why I always have to be ready to shoot the unexpected. I have to be opportunistic. I'll go out and shoot a whole bunch of footage. When I get back to the studio, the footage I've gathered during my dives often dictates the nature of the video. It kind of comes together over time."

Laptew's filming challenges include the notoriously unpredictable weather and poor visibility of northern waters, plus the short season, as well as equipment headaches—leaky housings, camera failures and computer meltdowns. Yet when he manages to capture a "money shot," such as a 30-pound striper ghosting through a boulder field, a school of bonito tearing through a pod of bay anchovies or a fluke darting off the bottom to devour a squid, it's all worth the effort.

These were the types of scenes I was hoping to witness during our dive off Beavertail. However, it didn't seem likely

given my woeful lack of lung capacity. "Don't worry," Laptew told me after my series of wimpy half-minute dives yielded little more than fleeting glimpses of small tautog and more cunner. "You're nervous. You're hyperventilating. It takes some getting used to before you learn to relax and stretch your lungs a bit."

I doubted that any amount of lung-stretching would help me hold my breath for the length of time it takes to film a school of stripers corralling and attacking peanut bunker in the surf, as Laptew has. However, after a few more dives I was rewarded with a fleeting glimpse of some bluefish and, yes, even a small bass that regarded me with suspicion before disappearing with a flick of its tail.

By the end of our short drift along the rocky Beavertail shoreline, I was tired but exhilarated. My "bottom time" may have been limited, but at least I had seen some fish and gotten a taste of the magical place Mike Laptew knows like a second home. I couldn't wait to go back. ▀

Tom Richardson is Offshore's editor. Mike Laptew's videos can be purchased at many bait-and-tackle stores, as well as through Bass Pro Shops (www.bassproshops.com) and Laptew's own website (www.laptewproductions.com). His site also offers video clips, stories, interesting links and a schedule of upcoming seminars.