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SUMMER IS A CELEBRATION OF THE OUTDOORS—A TIME WHEN MANY OF OUR WAKING MOMENTS, AND SOME OF OUR SLEEPING ONES, ARE SPENT UNDER THE SUN AND STARS. HAVING FRIENDS AND FAMILY OVER FOR A MEMORABLE AL FRESCO FEAST WITH THE FRESHEST FOODS AND THE MOST REFRESHING WINES, OR PERHAPS GATHERING WITH THOUSANDS OF OTHERS TO ENJOY THE ANNUAL RITUALS OF TEAM COMPETITION—THESE ARE CLASSIC PURSUITS OF HAPPINESS DURING THE WARM MONTHS. BUT SO ARE THE MORE INDIVIDUALISTIC SPORTS THAT MAY PUSH THE ENVELOPE OF ADVENTURE AND EXCITEMENT. IT'S ALL PART OF THE GLORIOUS CELEBRATION.





ON A
LINE
AND A
PRAYER.

EXTREME FISHING

REGULAR FISHING IS FOR SISSIES. SKISHING IS THE TICKET. PUT ON A WETSUIT, STRAP A BAG OF LIVE EELS TO YOUR BELT, GRAB YOUR KNIFE, AND SWIM A FEW HUNDRED YARDS INTO THE ROILING OCEAN AT SUNSET. NOW YOU'RE TALKING...

BY JESSICA SPEART PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK LAVECCHIA

SUITED UP LIKE SOME KIND OF GONZO FROGMEN, MELNYK AND FRIENDS USUALLY WADE INTO THE WATER AROUND SUNSET, AND THEN DISAPPEAR FROM VIEW AS THEY MAKE THEIR WAY INTO THE COLD OCEAN.



PAUL MELNYK METHODICALLY LAYS OUT HIS GEAR. IT TAKES HIM a full hour to make sure everything is in place. There is the wetsuit, next his flippers, neoprene gloves, and a large knife, along with a set of pliers, a compass, mirror, flashlight, whistle, strong snips, and rope. Most of the items are placed in a utility belt, after which Melnyk dons a one-piece black skin suit and booties with the reverence of a gladiator dressing for combat. Only then does he drive off in his pickup as the sun begins to set.

It's dark by the time Melnyk arrives at his destination, a stretch of road running adjacent to Ditch Plains beach. Parking, he gathers his things and sets off like a Navy Seal in the dark, stumbling over rocks, refusing to use his flashlight, not wanting to give his presence away. The journey is a quarter of a mile, or 957 paces. Melnyk knows this, having counted every one of them.

He finally reaches his destination, a place he refers to as Bird Shit Rock. Melnyk pulls on his wetsuit, a hood, and neoprene gloves. He attaches the utility belt, making sure that it's firmly in place. Then he grips the flippers and slips into 50-degree water, battling his way through the breakers before disappearing from sight. Melnyk is not a frogman but a Skisher, and large striped bass are his prey.

SKISHING (*noun*)

AN EXTREME GONZO SPORT DEVELOPED IN MONTAUK. SKISHING IS PART FISHING, PART SWIMMING, AND SOME DAREDEVIL SKIING. YES, YOU'VE GOT TO BE A LITTLE CRAZY.





SKISHING'S EVOLUTIONARY LADDER THAT'S WHERE YOU'LL FIND JACK YEE... ON THE FIRST RUNG. HE WAS THE FIRST TO DO IT MANO A PESCADO.

Skishing is a form of gonzo fishing that involves an equal amount of swimming. It can be added to the list of extreme sports.

"I was going to call it swishing but that didn't sound quite right," jokes Melnyk.

A fair bit of water skiing is involved, so Melnyk settled on the term "skishing." A Skisher floats on his back in a wetsuit, rod tucked under the arm, and kicks his way 300 yards offshore. Once there, he balances on his butt and drifts with the current while casting live eels for striped bass. After being carried out a half-mile or so, he swims back and starts the process again.

The sport is a Montauk phenomenon and practiced only by a few fanatics that many would label "crazies." For one thing, Melnyk skishes at night. For another, a Skisher is dressed like a seal and smells like an eel. Bass like eels. Sharks like bass and seals. You get the picture.

Like all great inventions, skishing came to fruition in baby steps. "You've gotta meet Jack, my mentor. He set me on my path to discovery," Melnyk states.

It's hard to say no to Melnyk. He stands 5' 11", weighs 220 pounds, has a serious buzz cut and arms the size of ham hocks. One arm bears an enormous tattoo of a skeleton in a

shredded wetsuit flaunting the bones of a trophy-size bass. The skeleton displays the same bad boy grin that's plastered on Melnyk's face.

The local rod and reel crowd hangs out at Paulie's Tackle Shop, where fishing legend Jack Yee can be found. Now 70 years old, Yee came to Montauk in 1963 to fish. He hatched the idea of catching fish using a wetsuit out in the water after three guys in waders walked in front of him one day and broke his line as he tried to land a striped bass. He considered he'd been "mugged," and was determined not to let it happen again. Donning a wetsuit, he began to swim out to barely submerged rocks. He discovered Weakfish Rock 200-yards off the point, where he bagged a 35-pound bass while standing on the flattop boulder. The rest is history.

"I figured why compete with all the jerks on shore when I could swim out to the rocks? That's where big bass hang out," Yee explains.

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JACK YEE PORTRAIT—DOUG YOUNG. MELNYK WITH STRIPED BASS COURTESY OF PAUL.



Melnyk agrees with the philosophy. He'd grown tired of fishing on beaches with frantic casters queuing up three deep along the surf line. The two men became friends and Yee shared his knowledge. Soon, Melnyk wore a wetsuit and swam to rocks that landlocked surf casters couldn't reach. He accidentally discovered skishing one night while on Weakfish Rock. Melnyk was fighting a 30-pound striper when a large wave knocked him off and he found himself being towed by the fish.

"I was pulled all around and had absolutely

no control," he recalled. What he did have was buoyancy and a penchant for adventure. Placing the rod between his legs, Melnyk sat back, lifted his flippers and went for the ride of his life. He had so much fun that after landing the fish, he unhooked it and kissed the sucker on the lips.

"THE TRICK IS TO GET OVER THE FACT THAT YOU CAN BE EATEN BY A SHARK OR DROWN. AFTER THAT, SKISHING IS VERY COMFORTABLE."

no control," he recalled.

"I told him, now go get your mother," he relays with a grin. It's become a ritual ever since. Skishing isn't all fun and games. There are some who have nearly lost their lives practicing the sport. Melnyk's skishing partner, Atilla Ozturk, is one of them. Built like a fireplug, he's the perfect match for Melnyk. Ozturk is cool, calm, and collected while Melnyk is the human equivalent of a high voltage wire. Even so, both men are thrill-seeking Type A personalities.

Ozturk's taste for adventure was put to the test when he hooked a 40-pound bass while on his back, lost his balance and found himself being pulled face down into the water. He couldn't breathe and felt like he was drowning. Things got worse when his leg cramped up. He finally managed to right himself only to find he

was being towed out to sea with Melnyk nowhere in sight. He had a choice to make—cut the line and lose the fish, or fight to the bitter end, hoping the cramp would go away.

"You can't panic and you have to be very confident in yourself," Ozturk says. A half-hour later, Ozturk had not only managed to stay alive; he also landed the exhausted fish. There have been other instances when the surf hit him so hard that his wetsuit blew open and the fishing rod was torn from his hands.

Melnyk has been hit in the head with a rock,

nearly run down by a boat, slammed on the beach by waves, and stabbed in the butt by the bayonet-sharp dorsal fins of bass. Both men have been tossed by wild-bronco-like currents, emerging scratched-up and bloody. Then there was the time they got lost in the fog without a compass. They heard the waves breaking one way but saw them rolling another. The two swam as hard as they could for an hour before finding their way back to shore. Others have had to depend on sheer luck. One Skisher got caught in a rip and was carried toward Block Island. He was alone in the dark for 10 hours before a commercial fishing vessel finally happened along and picked him up.

"The trick is to get over the fact that you can be eaten by a shark or drown. After that, skishing is very comfortable," asserts Melnyk. So what do these guys think about while floating around like corks in the dark? "Death," Ozturk deadpans.

On the plus side, there are moonless nights when the sky and sea become one except for a thick trail of blue-green light in the water. Referred to as "fire," it's phosphorescent algae

ON THE WATER DON A WETSUIT, FLOAT ON YOUR BACK, TUCK YOUR ROD UNDER YOUR ARM, AND KICK OUT ABOUT 300 YARDS. THEN BALANCE YOURSELF ON YOUR BUTT AND DRIFT WITH THE CURRENT CASTING A LINE OF EELS FOR STRIPED BASS... THAT'S SKISHING.

WHY DO THEY DO IT? BECAUSE OUT THERE, THEY GET AWAY FROM THE CROWDS OF FISHERMEN, AND CLOSER TO WHERE THE BIG BASS HANG OUT.





OR CONSIDER THIS

Wading out in the ocean to find fish a little too extreme for you? Maybe you'd like a little help finding the fish. Check out lifishingreports.com. The site breaks the Island into regions and even allows for comments. Real people catching real fish and telling you what lure and what bait they used to reel in the slimy rascals. Nothing extreme about it. In fact, it's downright friendly.

that dapple the waves and cling to the Skishers' wetsuits. At times like this the sport seems magical.

Full-fledged skishing may end in the winter but its aficionados don't stop extreme fishing. Instead, they find another way in which to channel their lunacy. They wait for a hurricane or Nor'easter to roll in and push the fish near shore. Then they go fishing on slippery, wet rocks under the Lighthouse, facing 20-foot waves and deadly riptides. It's a sport that requires special shoes with spikes and is even more dangerous than skishing.

Neither of these sports is much appreciated by the local surfcasters. They're a secretive and paranoid group that don't like crowds and have threatened outsiders that encroach on "their" section of beach. So tight-knit are surfcasters that a pecking order has evolved based on experience, talent and zip code.

At the bottom of the heap are Googens, the sorry-sort-of sods who don't know much of anything. They can be spotted by their beach chairs and their coolers—and the fact that they catch hardly any fish. Nobody wants them around. Next up the rung are Wabbits. They fish every little spot and try to discreetly shadow the pros. At the top are the Sharpies, the crème-de-la-crème that can almost sniff out where the fish are. The very best Sharpies skish. It's one of the reasons surfcasters hate them.

"They feel like we're stealing their fish while they're stuck on the shore," Melnyk explains. "It makes them insane."

That doesn't bother Skishers at all.

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