

## » DINGHY ANGLER

Words and pictures by Jim Clohessy

# SMALL-BOAT FEVER!

It's that time of the year when the boldest and bravest dinghy anglers head to Cork for the annual Small Boats Festival. *Skua* and the Clohessy brothers are on a charge!



And they're off! Competitors in the 2008 Cork Small Boats Festival set out in search of species.

**A**t the presentation evening last year, a Welsh angler peered over a pint of Murphy's at me and winked: "Only 51 weeks left to go!" I laughed with him and admired his optimism! Apart from organising some of the administration, it was the start of September before Seán and I realised that the event was nearly on top of us! It's hard for us to build-up confidence for the event. The entry list is impressive. More or less the top 20 boats from last year's event are travelling again. In total, the fleet will be 32 dinghies, the vast majority of which will be arriving from the UK. All of these guys are serious anglers and they have one thing in mind – joining the exclusive club of Cork Small Boats Festival winners.

An event like this take a fair amount of organising. The UK boats travel with Stena Line ferries and Anglers' World Travel makes their travel arrangements. Knowing what it's like organising a weekend away I can only imagine what it's like to arrange a trip lasting nearly two weeks for most, and three weeks for some. We are shocked out of our complacency with the arrival of the first boats almost three weeks before the event!

To be fair, we have been fishing this event for 11 years so we have a fair idea what's required. You cannot hope to do well without good bait so we begin our quest with a frenzy of bait gathering that would put any professional to shame. Seán concentrates on our tyres and begins collect as many peeler crabs as possible. I concentrate on rags and just about wear the tines off my fork while digging! We choose the best tides and find a good selection of worms in various sizes. Our rags are placed in the bait fridge in shallow trays lined with coral sand. We place the worms in these trays, without overcrowding, with a little seawater. In the cold refridgerator they will happily survive for well over a month.

The crabs are a different matter. Hard peelers are kept in a box and given regular baths in seawater in order to encourage them to pop their shells. The 'poppers', crabs that are well into peeling, are placed into the fridge, as this seems to slow down the process. It's a daily task to check the crabs. Poppers that will not survive until fishing time are peeled and frozen down in tin foil. If we are struggling for bait they will be better than nothing,



That'll do nicely! A tidy ballan clocks up another species.



Rob McClean's dragonette adds to Skua's tally.

but hopefully we will not have to use them until later in the winter when the cod hopefully show. Other than crab and rags we will use a fair amount of frozen squid. We will use some lugs but, to be honest, we will not depend on it in the surrounds of Cork Harbour. Mackerel, the staple bait, have been plentiful so we will hope to catch these on the day.

Fishing practice is something that doesn't come naturally to us. It's very hard to be excited about the prospect of catching a corkwing wrasse or silver eel. There's little adrenaline rush associated with poor cod! Still, each of these mini-species will have to be caught and to perform we will have to check out some of our marks to see if they are fishing well. We realised with a couple of weeks to go that there are many fish that we have not fished for since the event last year! We have had a strange year. The weather has not been kind; this year we have caught more bass than cod and more mullet than wrasse. Our first session chasing rays feels strange, and it's clear to us that thornback rays are in serious trouble in Cork Harbour. Bull huss, once a rarity within the harbour are plentiful; have they replaced the commercially oppressed rays?

Regular readers will know that Seán and I normally fish from our Warrior 175, *Skua*, as a two-man team. A few years ago we decided to run with a crew of three during the festival. It became apparent to us that the winning boats nearly all had three crewmembers. In this event an angler can use up to two rods at one time so there's a definite benefit when fishing at anchor. As we are part of the organising team for the festival a third man onboard is also a great help when it comes to sorting bait, tackle and the boat. Rob McClean from Dublin has been our third rod for a number of years now and is an integral part of Team *Skua*. Close to the event Rob travelled down from Dublin for a practice session so we could all become accustomed to each other on the boat again. At first it was strange and overcrowded, but we were soon used to the set-up and it began to feel like a team again.

On our first day on the water the memories flooded back about last year's match where we finished third

Strangely, plaice are more common than cod this year.



overall. We couldn't be anything but happy with our finish, but we had to dig out two very good day's angling after what can only be described as a nightmare start. It looked rather nightmarish after our first practice as well because the harbour was not fishing well. We put it down to the abundance of fresh water after the prolonged and intense rain that we endured for August and the start of September. Still, if we were struggling we could only assume that the other crews would struggle as well. Certainly that would be the case with the UK-based boats, but we always have a concern about some of the Irish-based crews that we knew were putting in long hours of practice.

The competition format is simple. The main event is a three-day species hunt. The winners will be the boat that has caught the most species over three days of angling. The fourth day is a specimen hunt where boats target the biggest of six nominated species. The fourth day is really an easy day after the hectic species hunt. The event is very much weather-dependent. The competition proper used to start on Monday but over recent years we have started on Sunday due to the weather conditions. The availability of a spare day is certainly welcome for

the organisers. It was plain to see from the long-range forecast that a settled patch of weather was coming to an end. We would have to start the competition on Sunday and we would be lucky to put three reasonable days together for the species hunt.

Nearly all boats launched on practice day, Saturday, from Lower Aghada. We were among the relaxed throng of jeeps, trailers and anglers milling around the slipway at 8.30am in the morning. The banter was excellent as we met with crews that we had not seen since last year's event. The general consensus from crews that had been fishing all the previous week was that the harbour was beginning to awake from the deluge of fresh water and the fishing, though hard going, was improving.

The fish were there but it was taking a long time to catch them. We launched the freshly waxed and sparkling *Skua* and headed to sea for our first practice session at match tempo. By the time we touched back down at the slipway at six o'clock that evening we knew more about the places where we would not be fishing rather than where we would be fishing, it was that poor!

### Match Day One

After the check-in and briefing, held in Trabolgan Holiday Centre, we headed home to prepare the remainder of the gear and to formulate some sort of a plan for the first day. After a couple of pints of anaesthetic we retired for the night. All too soon my alarm announced that it was 7am. I leapt out of bed and we all began the morning ritual of bait, clothing, lunch and coffee. It was a beautiful morning, perfect weather for fishing. We arrived to set-up the notice board, expecting to be the first on the scene, but there were at least 12 boats in the water already. These guys are keen! By 8.30am all of the fleet was in the water! Each day we declare if there are to be any restrictions on travel. We consult with some of the more experienced and level headed crews and if a restriction is deemed necessary it's decided before we head to sea. On this bright Sunday morning there was no restriction necessary as the sea and forecast were benign.

At 9am the call went out over the VHF and 32 boats headed for sea at full throttle. It was obvious that the boats wanted to go to sea in order to catch the 'outside' species. As we sped from the harbour I looked over the competitors: *Uptide Girl* has won the event more than any other boat. There's *Screaming Reels* – fresh from victory in the Rosslare Small Boats this year; *Beastmaster* – last year's winners and runners-up the year before; *BassHunter* – past winners, always competitive and *Reefer* – best boat this year in the Rosie's Angling Club, a local club well used to fishing species hunts. A competitive bunch indeed!

The majority of the fleet headed for the Ling Rocks and began the task of mounting a species count. This competition is fished to 'real' fish sizes, so every boat has to catch decent-sized fish, always being mindful that weight will decide the outcome should boats be

*Skua* heads off on Day One of the competition.



Thornbacks are there during practice, but prove hard to come by in the competition.

equal on species at the end. It was a hectic day. The forecast hinted that we might not have another chance to fish outside the harbour, so we needed to catch all the outside species. The day melted into a blur of angling, as species after species were caught and it felt like we had only been fishing for a couple of hours when we had to head back to the slipway for the 5pm finish.

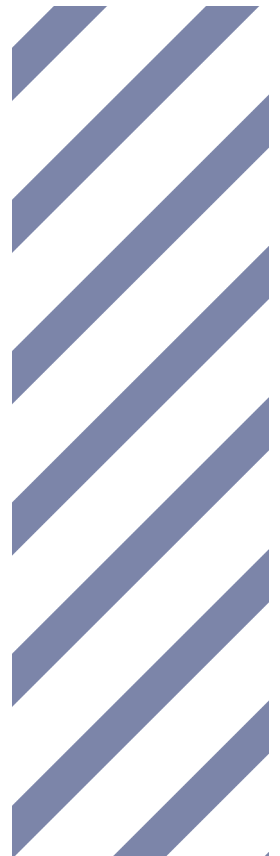
At the weigh-in there are some impressive counts with Liverpooldians *Quattro* leading the way with 16 species. *Uptide Girl*, clinical as usual, have 15 while a good number of boats, including ourselves are chasing closely with 14 species.

### Match Day Two

The weather forecast showed a deteriorating situation for Day Two. It was due to blow-up later in the day. It's a tough call, but after consultation a half-day restriction was called. All boats would have to be inside Roche's Point by lunchtime. The aim is to give the competitors as much unrestricted fishing as possible while doing so in safety. It matters little to ourselves, as even though we have not caught a cod – a cod for God's sake! – we planned to fish within the harbour all day. Some of the fleet used the time to try for species that they had not caught outside yesterday.

We spent the day chasing some tougher species and despite the disappointment of a couple of undersized species, we still manage to add six to our overall total. True to the forecast the weather had taken a turn for the worse, making for tough conditions at the slipway, but the fleet mucked in to ensure that there were no problems.

We are surprised to find ourselves leading the field with 20 species. The nearest boats are on 18. Some boats had managed to catch 11 species. There was an interested crowd in the Guileen Arms that evening to study the results. It's clear to see that while *Skua* leads the field we have only a few species to realistically fish for on Day Three. The winners are going to be any one of the top eight boats.



## SPONSORS

The organisers would like to thank the following sponsors for their generosity, without which the event could not take place:

Bord Fáilte, Stena Line, Anglers' World, Bella Vista Angling, Trabolgan Holiday Centre, Irish Angler



Despite the conditions, there's no panic on the slipway when recovering the boats.



Team *Skua* look pleased to have won – well, they have been trying for 11 years!

### Match Day Three

Team *Skua* is not going down without a fight! We hatched our plan and headed to sea. The conditions are such that fishing will be restricted to within the harbour. At times there were gusts of over 40mph, making for tough fishing conditions. When we managed to add two species we began to feel that we had a chance. We eeked out a third and wondered if we'd done enough. At 23 species the nearest boat to us will have to catch five species and increase their weight to beat us. Conditions will not make this an easy prospect, but we can only wait and hope.

At the weigh-in it was clear that the other boats had struggled to catch. After the last boat has weighed-in I checked the computer system to confirm the results. In first place was *Skua* on 23 species and in second was *Screaming Reels* on 22, an excellent charge on the last day, but *Skua* also retained weight advantage.

### The Aftermath

The weather turned very poor for the final day of the event. This is a specimen hunt and a separate competition. Despite the conditions – winds touched gale force at times – there were some fine fish caught with the best bass hitting the scales at 8lb. Such is the beauty of fishing in Cork Harbour. Depending on the wind direction it's possible to fish in conditions that would see most events cancelled.

The presentation evening, held in Trabolgan, was a

boisterous affair with the usual craic and post mortems being carried out in various corners of the bar! We were relieved as much as delighted with our win. We have joined the club we have won the Cork Small Boats Festival. Each festival after this one will be different; there will never be the same pressure. The UK competitors didn't mind too much that an Irish boat had won the event for the first time. After all, it had only taken us 11 years to achieve the victory!

The Cork Small Boats Festival is a unique event in the Irish angling calendar. There were 30 species of fish caught over the competition days. This does not include baitfish such as mackerel or launce and the mini-species must be over 200 millimetres. Most of the normal species must be 300 millimetres, real sizes for real fishing. Four specimen fish were caught during the event as well. The atmosphere is second-to-none, with a camaraderie that has to be admired. The competition is open to all dinghy anglers around the island. As my Welsh buddy said again this year: "Fifty-one weeks to prepare. Roll on next year!"