

WATCHING FOR BLACKFISH.

HOW CAPE COD FOLKS MAKE A BIT OF SPENDING MONEY IN THE FALL.

GLOUCESTER, Mass., Sept. 17.—Recent storms along the coast have driven great numbers of dogfish ashore. They strew the beaches in all directions. At the time of the August storm it was supposed that their presence in the harbors was due to mackerel, which they were pursuing. The mackerel have been elsewhere for several weeks, and, as the dogfish still linger, that supposition falls to the ground to account for their having been swept on the beaches within a few days. Fishermen who are coming into port report having seen large numbers of the killer whale off the Massachusetts coast. As the dogfish are a prey of the killer whale, there is no doubt that they have been driven ashore when pursued, rather than pursuing.

Interest now naturally turns to the movements of the killer whale. Whenever that species of fish abounds in quantities off this coast, it is safe to take it for granted that it is in search of food, and that the food is not far distant. The dogfish is of little use to anybody, and its presence on the beaches is simply a nuisance. If the appearance of the dogfish, however, is to be followed by the stranding of blackfish on the beaches, as often happens, every fisherman from Gloucester to Nantucket will at once become interested.

There is good reason to suppose that the blackfish are near the shore. The dogfish is their natural food, as well as the food of the killer whale. The blackfish eat the dogfish, and when the killer whale catches the blackfish it as good as secures whatever there may be of nutriment in the dogfish also, so that it has everything to gain and nothing to lose when the blackfish falls its prey.

Blackfish which come ashore in this vicinity are wholly unlike the blackfish known to people around New-York. It is not sought for eating, although fishermen make what they call "dainty cakes" of its brain, nor is it to be caught with a hook and line. When it is in its native element, indeed, fishermen pay very little attention to it, not considering its yield worth the trouble of taking it into a boat. It is only when it is driven on the beaches that it becomes valuable. In such circumstances a fisherman who understands his business can extract oil from the blackfish running in value from \$5 to \$10 a fish.

It is essentially an oil fish, but has never been regarded as rich enough in oil to justify fitting out vessels for the purpose of catching it. Whalers regard it as very small gain in their business, and the ordinary fisherman is not prepared to go into extracting oil from fish as a means of livelihood. He has been educated in another line, which he is content to follow. There is a vague tradition that many years ago Cape Cod whalers coming across a school of blackfish on the way out, or returning with a light catch from a voyage and finding blackfish in their path, occasionally gave chase. As a rule, however, the whalers held the blackfish in too little esteem to consider them worth going after. They were satisfied to leave to those who might stay at home all the chance that might come along for taking profit out of the annual yield of blackfish along the beaches.

Probably there has never been a year in which blackfish have not been washed up along Cape Cod and Nantucket. In 1875, 119 of them were driven ashore at Dennis, on Cape Cod, in one day. They are enormous fish, averaging from 15 to 18 feet in length, with specimens running as high as 25 feet in length. The weight of a blackfish 15 feet long is from 800 to 1,000 pounds, and the average yield from a fish of that size is five barrels of oil, the yield in oil varying from ten gallons to ten barrels. It is dark in color and is classed with ordinary whale oil. The blubber of the fish is from one to four inches thick and nearly white. A fine quality of machine oil is yielded from the jaws of the blackfish and is known in the trade as porpoise jaw oil.

Whenever there are any signs that blackfish are about the people along the Cape Cod shore become very much interested. They watch the water intently for the appearance of the fish as it is chased toward shore by the killer whale, and very often boats are sent out to assist the whale in driving the blackfish on the beaches. The fish swim in large schools, making little commotion at the surface, but coming up often. They spurt a jet three or four feet high and emit a deep, snorting sound when they reach the surface. At times they remain in sight several minutes. They appear to be usually sluggish in movement, but when frightened or when driven ashore they become remarkably lively.

The small boats that go out from shore to drive them in contain men armed with harpoons,

and plenty of clubs are carried along. The boats range themselves so that the fish cannot move seaward without being headed off, and as fast as possible they close in upon their victims. It is very seldom that a pursuit of blackfish in which any number of boats takes part fails to land the fish on the beach. As soon as this is done the men jump from the boat, carrying their clubs and harpoons, and stab and beat the fish until they become quiet, when they drag them up on the beach and proceed to cut them up for the oil that is in them. It is a very exciting time for any settlement when a school of blackfish has been landed.

Since the appearance of the blackfish is usually heralded in some way, such as by the beaching of dogfish, the people almost always are prepared in advance for a catch. The signs of the coming of the blackfish are already abundant and this is the time of year when the largest catches have been made. News may be expected almost any day from somewhere along Cape Cod that schools of blackfish have been landed, and this will mean a good handful of spending money for several weeks to everybody who may take part in the captures.