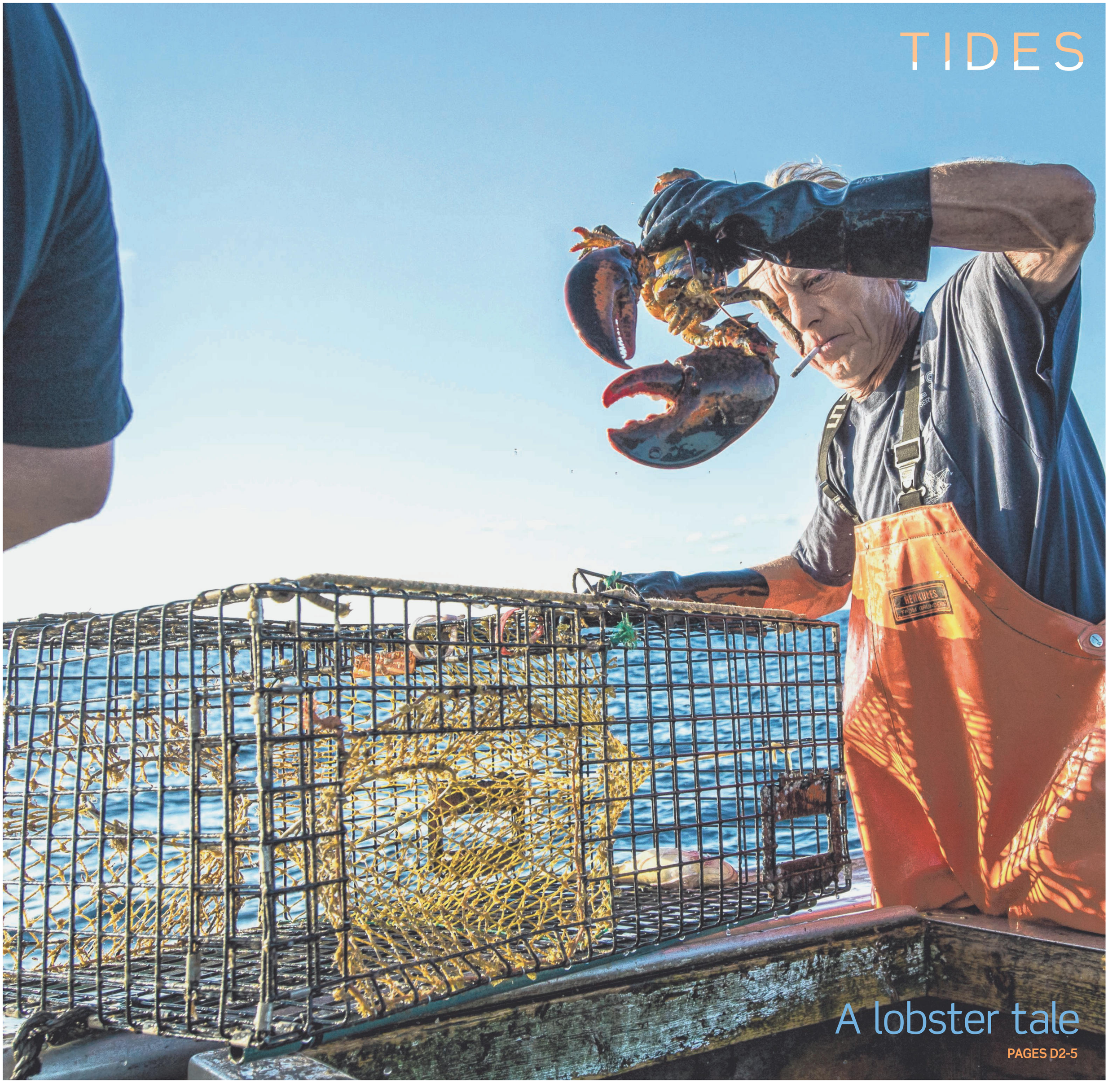
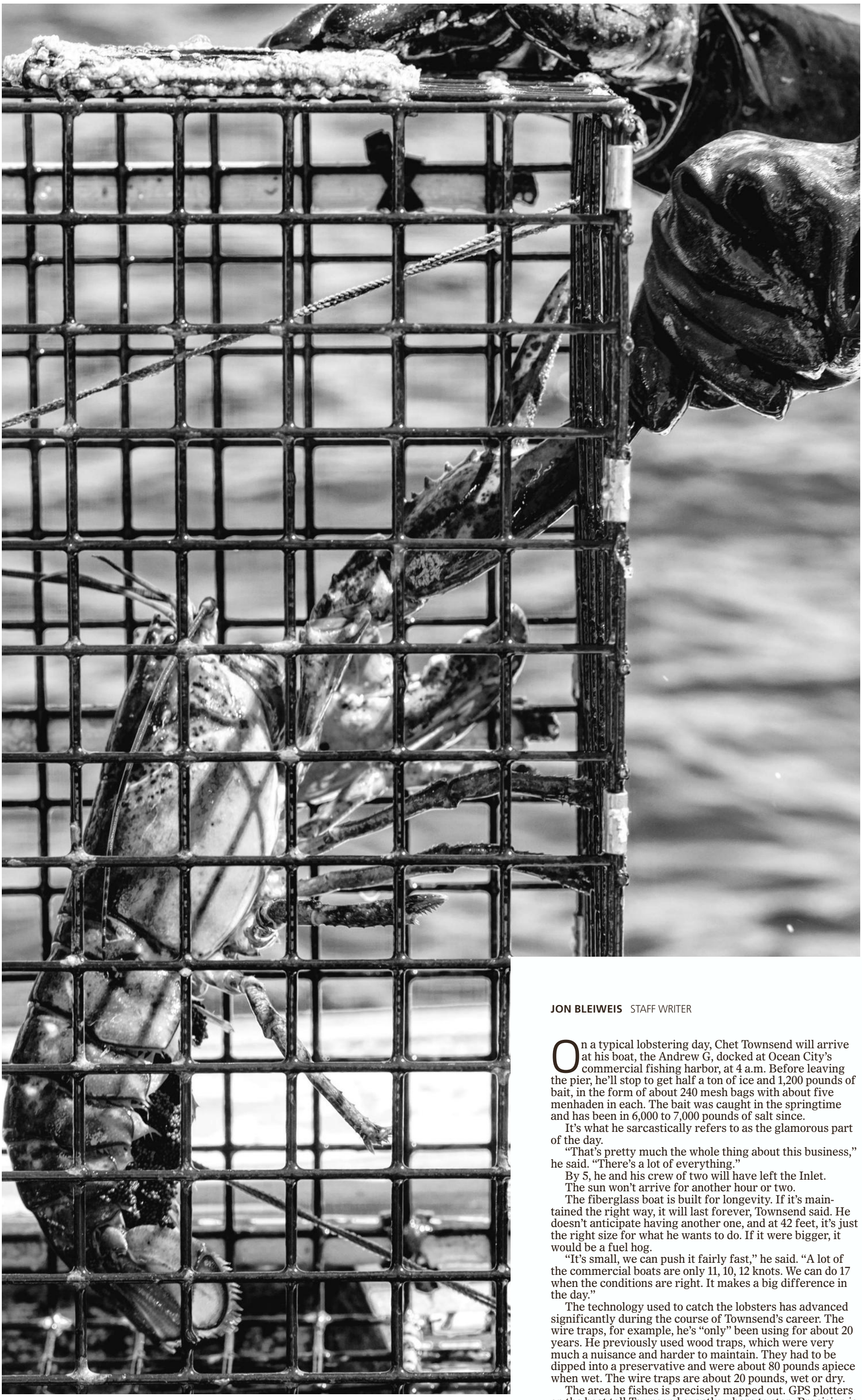
TIDES



A lobster tale

PAGES D2-5

TIDES



Maryland blue crabs?
Check.

Chesapeake oysters?
Yep.

But Delmarva lobsters?
We've got them, too, actually.

Here's the inside scoop on who's catching them, where they're being fished and who's eating them

JON BLEIWEIS STAFF WRITER

On a typical lobstering day, Chet Townsend will arrive at his boat, the Andrew G, docked at Ocean City's commercial fishing harbor, at 4 a.m. Before leaving the pier, he'll stop to get half a ton of ice and 1,200 pounds of bait, in the form of about 240 mesh bags with about five menhaden in each. The bait was caught in the springtime and has been in 6,000 to 7,000 pounds of salt since.

It's what he sarcastically refers to as the glamorous part of the day.

"That's pretty much the whole thing about this business," he said. "There's a lot of everything."

By 5, he and his crew of two will have left the Inlet.

The sun won't arrive for another hour or two.

The fiberglass boat is built for longevity. If it's maintained the right way, it will last forever, Townsend said. He doesn't anticipate having another one, and at 42 feet, it's just the right size for what he wants to do. If it were bigger, it would be a fuel hog.

"It's small, we can push it fairly fast," he said. "A lot of the commercial boats are only 11, 10, 12 knots. We can do 17 when the conditions are right. It makes a big difference in the day."

The technology used to catch the lobsters has advanced significantly during the course of Townsend's career. The wire traps, for example, he's "only" been using for about 20 years. He previously used wood traps, which were very much a nuisance and harder to maintain. They had to be dipped into a preservative and were about 80 pounds apiece when wet. The wire traps are about 20 pounds, wet or dry.

The area he fishes is precisely mapped out. GPS plotters on the boat tell Townsend exactly where to stop. Precision is key, and Townsend is able to put pots right where he wants them. If he's even 100 yards off in the vast Atlantic Ocean, the entire rig would be empty, he said.

"99.9 percent of the bottom out here is desert. There's only very small parts where rocks, coral, some sort of structure that holds the sea bass and lobster on (are), and you've got to be right on," he said. "You can't be close."

The crustacean count

Lobsters on Delmarva? They're here.

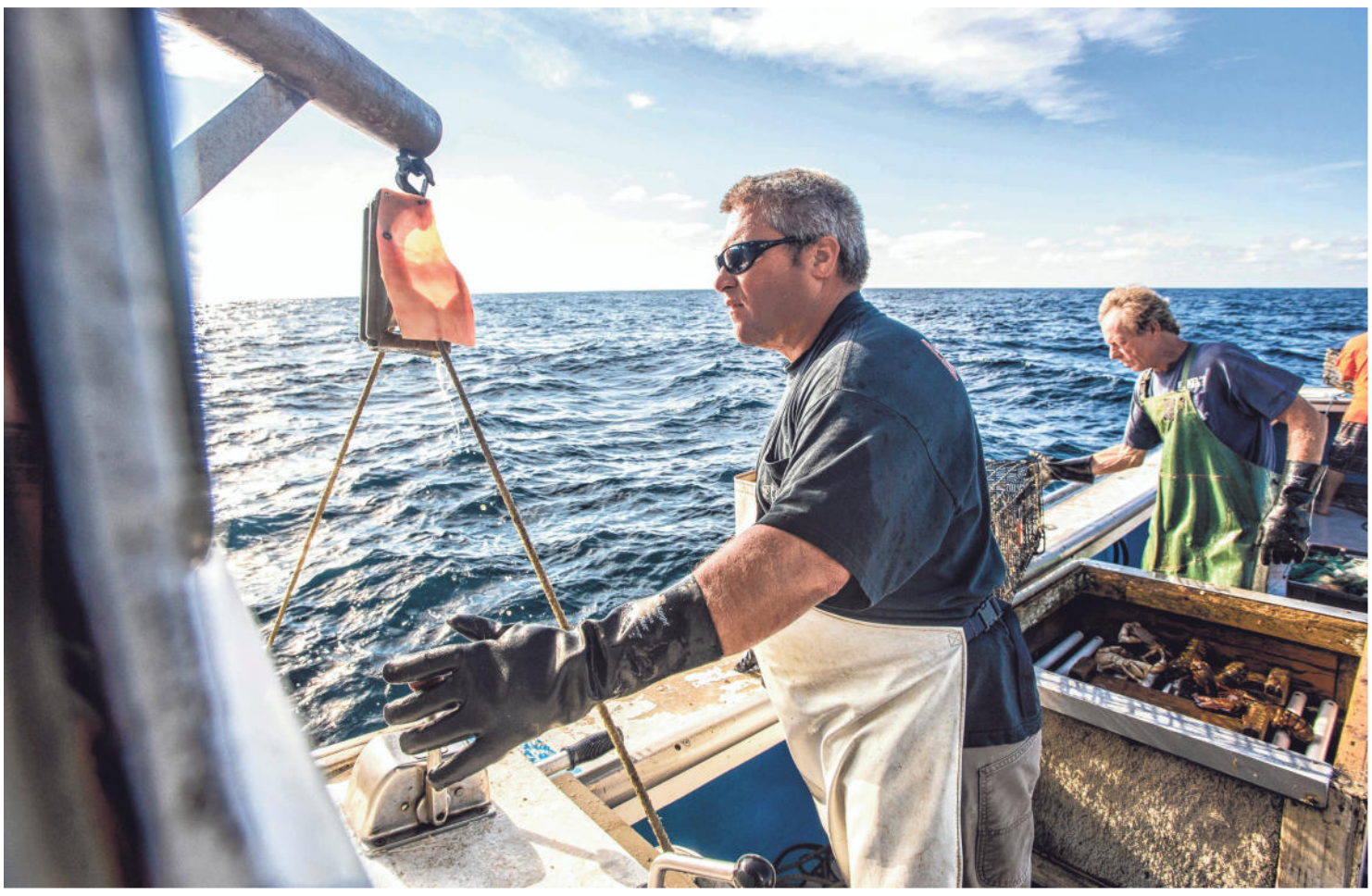
They are certainly not as plentiful as up in Maine, where 84 percent of American Lobster landings occurred in 2012, according to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission. A region known as "Southern New England," which encompasses nine states from Massachusetts to North Carolina, made for about 3 percent of lobster landings in 2012.

According to a 2009 commission report, 10 percent of the lobsters landed in the Southern New England region were in New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Virginia, in descending order, from 1981 to 2007. Those four states collect no landings data for American Lobster, the report states.

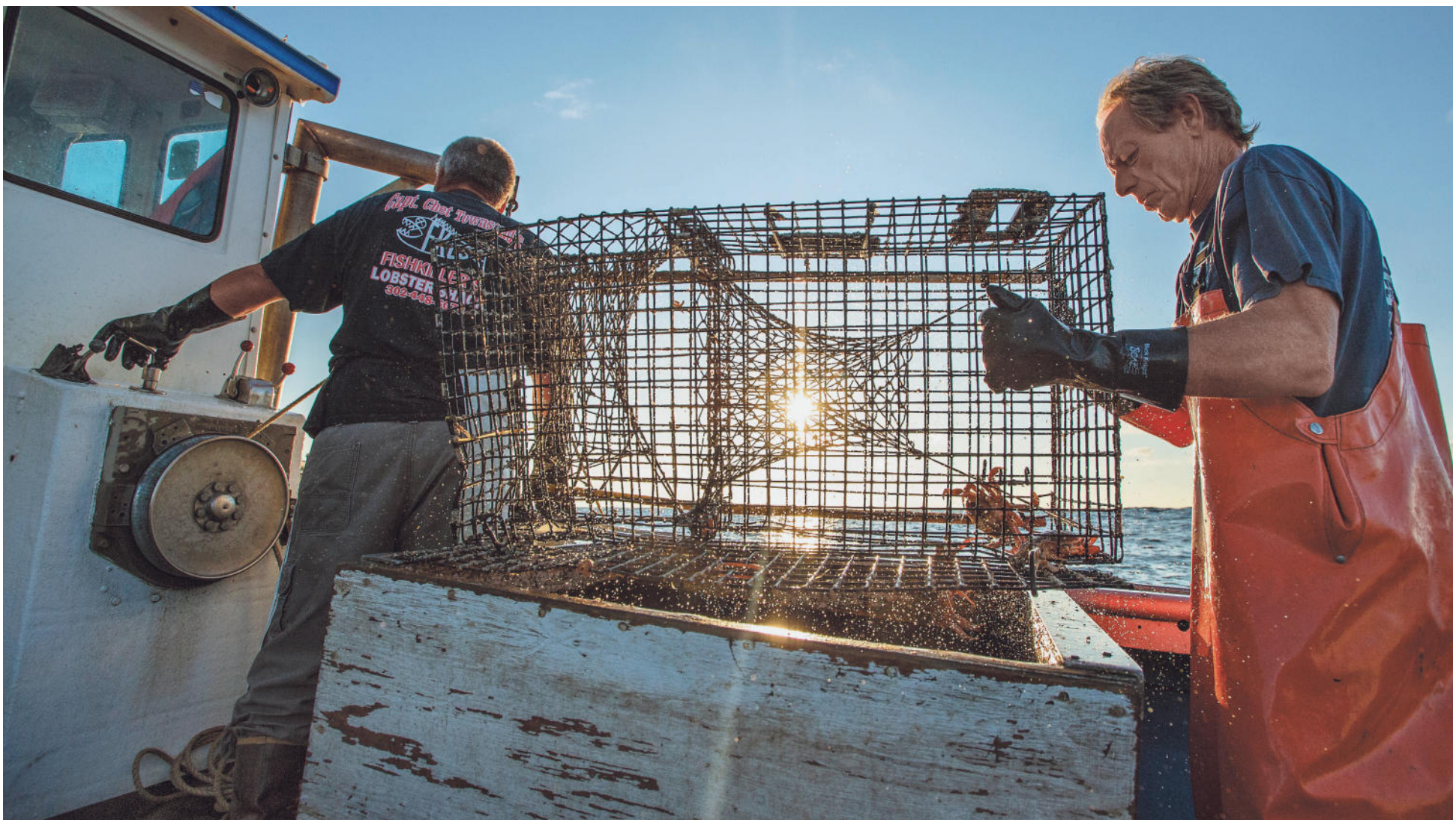
But they're there. And they're caught. And they're eaten.

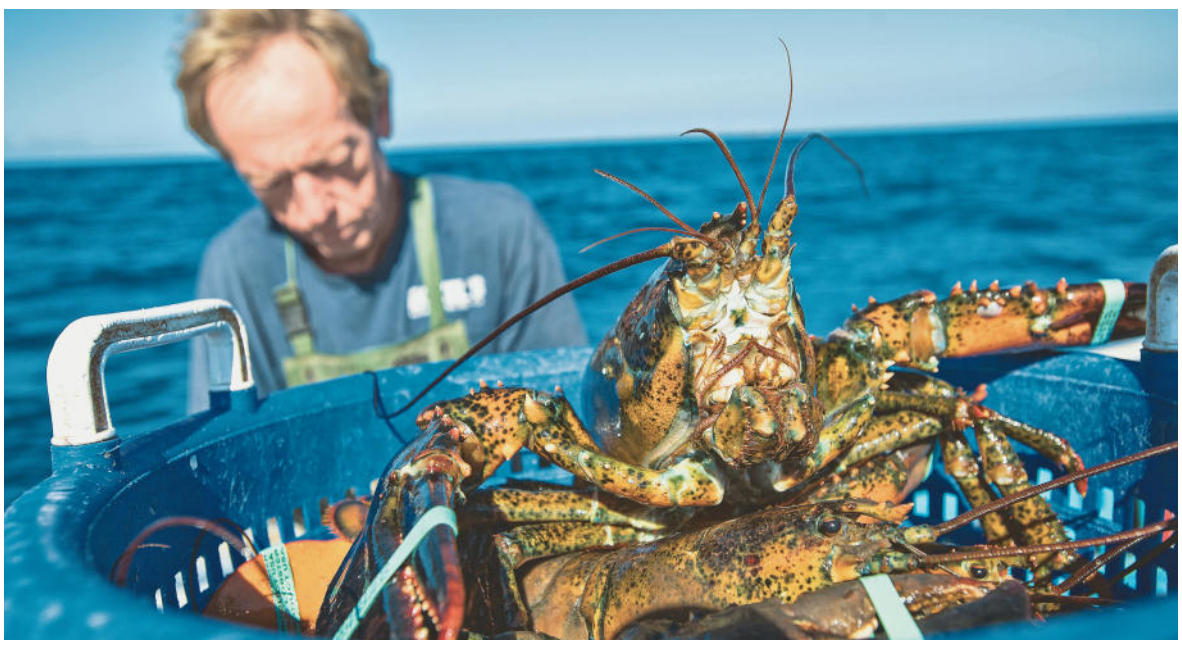
The people who catch the lobsters are few and far

TIDES



Captain Chet Townsend, owner of the Andrew G, pulls in pots on the hauler. One by one, the pots emerge to the surface and are pulled onto the boat. Each pot is emptied by Sonny Layton, right, then slid to the back of the boat, rebaited with the menhaden bags and lined up by another member of the crew. When the last of the 20 cages is emptied and the bouy at the other end is pulled in, the boat is repositioned and the line of pots is pushed overboard one by one. Below, Layton empties crabs into a large wooden bin to be separated.





Lobsters are banded and piled into a basket by waterman Sonny Layton aboard the 42-foot commercial fishing boat Andrew G, owned by Chet Townsend. Crab claws and lobsters are harvested, but Townsend's main income comes from sea bass.

All photos in this section, unless otherwise noted, were taken by Staff Photographer Laura Emmons who, along with reporter Jon Bleiweis, spent 12 hours aboard the Andrew G for this project.

between on Delmarva. Unlike in the Northeast, where thousands of boaters catch lobster on a regular basis, Townsend said he is the only one in Delaware and one of only three in Ocean City who do so.

"It's very difficult to make a living lobstering here," he said.

The logic is fairly reasonable: lobsters aren't nearly as plentiful. That's because lobsters prefer cooler waters. According to a 1998 study by the Zoology Department and Center for Marine Biology at the University of New Hampshire, lobsters tend to avoid water temperatures below 5 degrees C and above 18 degrees C, and prefer a temperature of 15.9 degrees C.

But Townsend has been involved in the fishing business for nearly 40 years, and he's in it for the long haul.

"I said I've been doing this long enough I should be retired," he said. "Instead, I'm just tired."

Early fascination, lifelong career

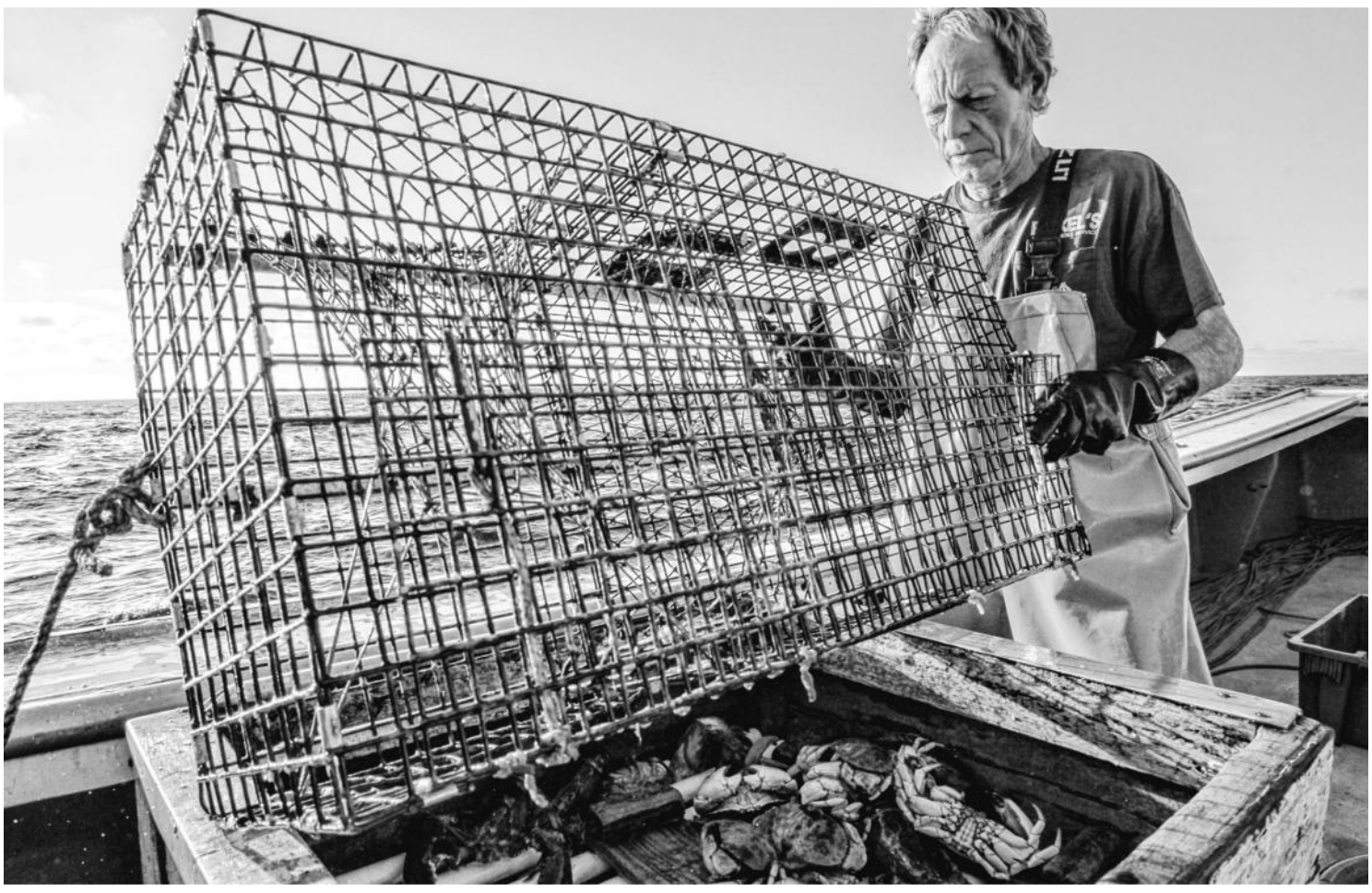
The idea of local lobsters has always fascinated Townsend.

When he was 12 years old, it was time for him to find a summer job. His neighbor told him he could tag along on his charter boat and he would teach him. When the boat's mate broke his arm two weeks later, Townsend took over.

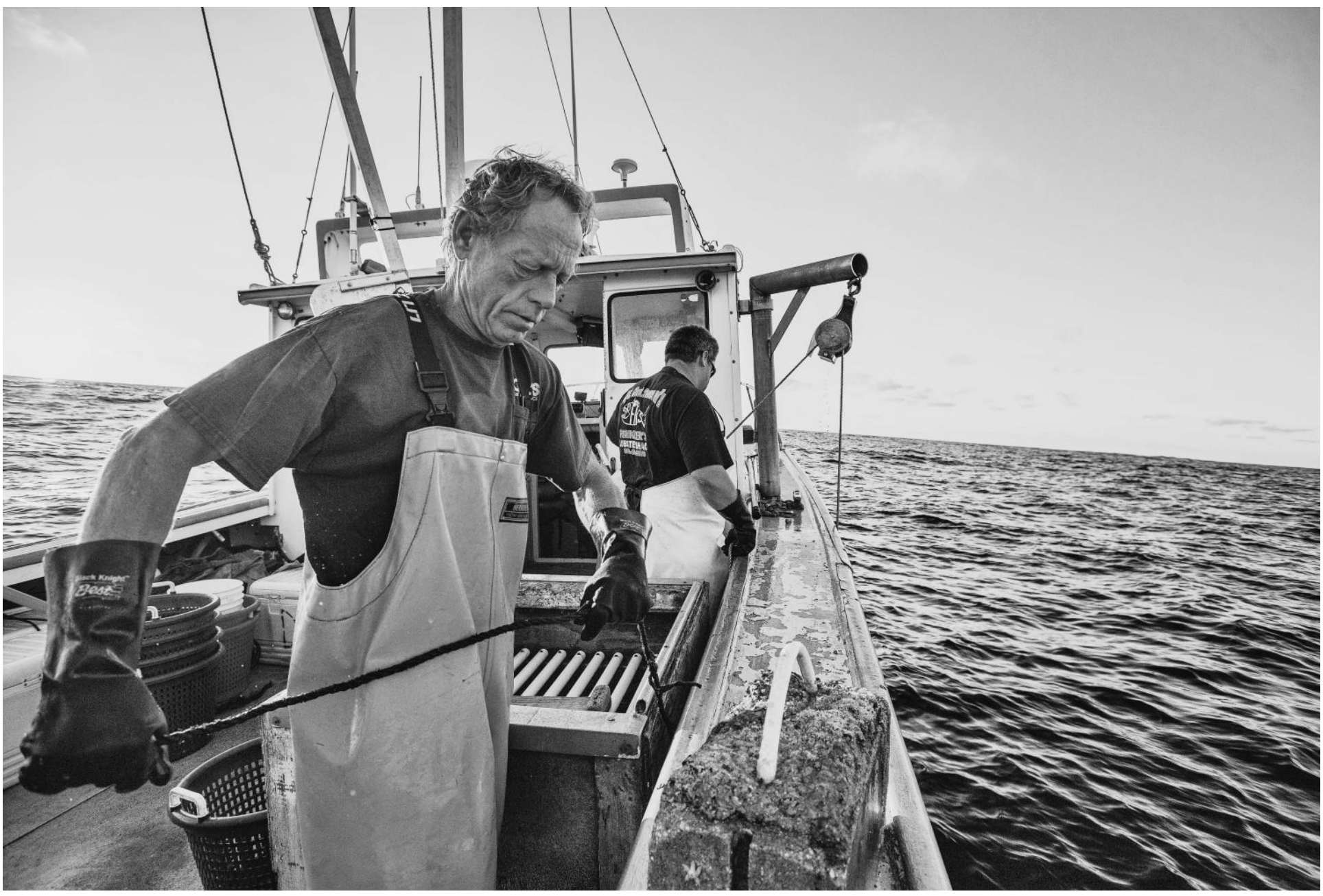
He would continue to work on charter boats through high school and learned about commercial trips, which he realized he liked more.

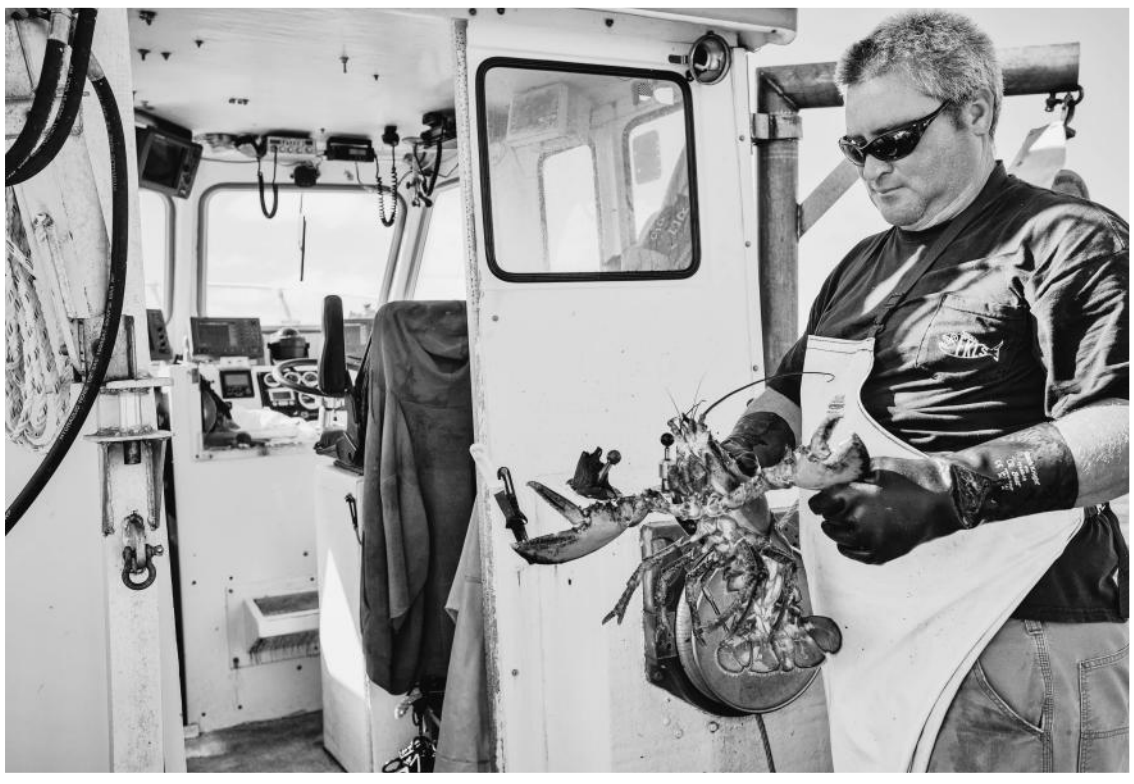
Continued on Next Page

TIDES



Waterman Sonny Layton, right, empties a pot of crabs into a large wooden bin. Below, he moves a concrete block attached to the trap line, as the first traps of the day are pulled in on the hauler. The hauler is stopped when the trap is close enough to be brought aboard, then restarted to retrieve the next trap.





Captain Chet Townsend, owner of the Andrew G, holds a large lobster collected during a day of pulling in pots in an area known as The Fingers. At right, a sea bass is sorted into a basket aboard the 42-foot commercial fishing boat.

Continued from Page 3

When he first got into commercial fishing, he didn't do much lobstering. He'd go out on a small wooden boat on Saturdays and catch lobsters with very few pots. It was a hobby back then, he said. In 1994, he bought a boat and started on his own. From there, it simply grew.

Now, he goes out a few days a week to check his pots and see what comes up. Sea bass and stone crabs carry him through the year. Lobster, he said, is a bonus.

"Put it all together, you make a year out of it," he said. "If you had just the bass, it would be difficult. If you just had the lobster, it would be impossible."

Pot pulling

On a recent trip, Townsend traveled about 22 miles off the coast of the Ocean City Inlet to an area known as The Fingers, to see what had ended up inside his pots. Unlike in Maine, where boaters can look every couple of days at most and expect a bounty, Townsend waits 10 to 14 days to check on a given set of pots, with the hope that something is inside.

At each stop, he or a mate will grab a buoy from the water that is connected to a concrete block and a string of 20 of those black wire pots that lay on the ocean floor. Townsend steps aside from the controls of the boat and takes control of a motorized system called a pot hauler. One by one, the pots emerge to the surface and are pulled onto the boat.

As the pots arrive, he and his crew open them up, empty their contents — a lobster or a few, perhaps a sea bass, or nothing at all — and slide them to the other end of the boat to be replenished with bait before tossing them back into the ocean. If lobsters were inside, this is the point at which their claws would be banded shut and they would end up in one of nine large coolers filled with ice.

"The name of the game is to pull a lot of pots," Townsend said. "You accumulate something after awhile."

The process is rather repetitive. During the course of the day, Townsend and his crew made 25 stops in the loop, each just a few minutes from the other. That's 500 pots in one day's work.

And the loop is one of seven Townsend has set up on the ocean floor.

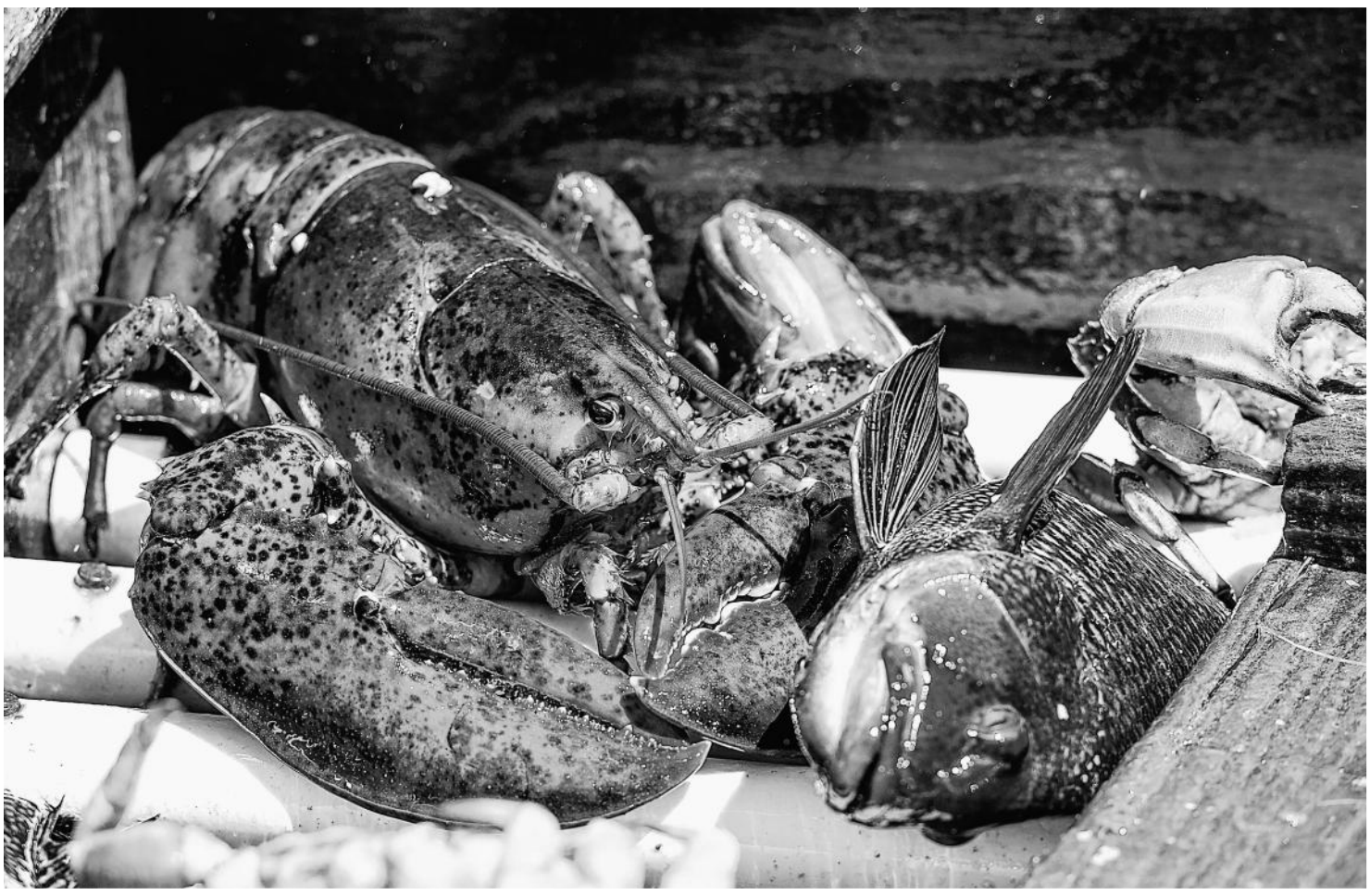
To put that into perspective, when he first started lobstering, he had 180 pots total.

"It's a lot of pots. It's a lot of everything," he said. "If you see it all, this is ridiculous."

At the end of the day, Townsend estimated he had caught about 400 pounds worth of lobster to bring back to land.

"At the end of the day when actually you do end up making a catch, there's a good feeling of satisfaction about that,

TIDES



A lobster, sea bass and crabs wait to be sorted aboard the Andrew G, owned by Chet Townsend. "Put it all together, you make a year out of it," he says. "If you had just the bass, it would be difficult. If you just had the lobster, it would be impossible." Below, customers head to Capt. Chet Townsend's Fishkiller's Lobster Shack in Dagsboro during the shack's last week of the season.

STAFF PHOTO BY JOE LAMBERTI

especially when you figure how long I've been doing it," he said. "Today we made it look a lot easier than it is."

Examining the bounty

After the 12-hour boat trip, the day wasn't over just yet. He had 400 pounds of lobster to deal with.

Once the boat was cleaned off and docked, Townsend loaded his haul onto his truck and drove it to his home near Dagsboro, about half an hour from the pier. There, he met his brother, Wes, who caught about 360 pounds of lobster himself that day, and it was time to unload and evaluate their bounty.

First, they sorted the lobsters based on their shells. Like crabs, the shells of lobsters molt, though their shells harden at a slower pace — sometimes it takes a month or longer for their shells to harden again, Chet Townsend said. The harder the lobster's shell, the more ready it is for the market.

They also have to make sure they don't have any female lobsters with eggs. If that's the case, they must return the lobster to the water.

"It turns into a $2,500 lobster, if you're caught with it," said Wes Townsend, noting the state fine for keeping a pregnant lobster.

After each lobster is weighed, it gets a tag with the weight written on it, thereby saving time with customers looking to buy fresh lobsters. Once the tag is applied, the lobster goes into one of several temperature-controlled tanks, with the water set to a chilly 42 degrees.

It ended up being after 9 o'clock before Chet Townsend was able to go inside his house for the night.

"Madness, mayhem and mayonnaise"

Townsend doesn't just catch the lobsters. He sells them, as well, whether it be by the crustacean or through a number of dishes at his shack, Fishkiller's Lobster Shack, located east of Dagsboro. He wrapped up his sixth season at the shack on Labor Day weekend.

When he's not selling lobsters at the shack, he'll sell them to local restaurants. He continues to sell them from his home until he runs out. September and October are prime months to be catching lobsters, he said.

Lobsters that will be used for lobster salad at Fishkiller's on a given Thursday, Friday or Saturday — the days the shack is open — are prepared early in the morning before the shack opens at 11 a.m.

Tails and claws are separated and iced, then steamed and picked to make the shack's top-selling lobster roll, among other dishes. Some of the bodies are saved to make soup stock. The lobster salad recipe is one Townsend has made for years, well before he first opened the shack. The key is how the lobster meat is cut, he said.

"It sounds kind of ridiculous, but the way it's chopped, the size of the pieces, is very important to get the right texture, and it's all very painstakingly done," he said.

He'll end up making 200 pounds of lobster salad in a given weekend. With a quarter pound of lobster salad — the equivalent of meat from a 1.5-pound lobster — in each sandwich, there's a lot of mayonnaise flying around the kitchen.

"Madness, mayhem and mayonnaise," he said. "That's the motto around here."

While the traditional lobster roll is served on a split top bun, like a hot dog, Townsend serves his sandwich on a croissant; something lighter and what he calls "less bready" so the lobster comes through better.

Lisa Dello of Fort Lauderdale, Florida, a recent customer at Fishkillers, expressed an appreciation for what Townsend does and provides. She's glad to know where the lobster came from and what happened to it from the moment it was caught.

"To have something that's so fresh like this and have the guy make it every day and knowing that his heart is into it even makes it taste better," she said.

A regular customer is lumber salesman Donald Fountain of Salisbury.

"These are all local people. He spends money with my business. That's the way the world works," he said. "I'd much rather have it staying in the community."

No end in sight

Townsend, 51, said he doesn't know when — or if — he'll stop lobstering. Some days, he wants to quit tomorrow. Other days, he wants to keep going until the day he dies. Either way, he believes he's in too deep to get out, at this point.

A lack of younger people coming through a proverbial pipeline into the business concerns him. He's seen many boats try to make it on lobster alone, but no one has made it for long.

"I like to see the industry stay strong and keep having fresh, local seafood available to the public," he said. "It kind of limits my exit strategy if I don't have someone coming up who could buy me out."

But if a burgeoning lobsterman is going to emerge any time soon, it will involve overcoming a steep learning curve, he said. Despite being better at it and having more knowledge than when he first started, there are now hours of paperwork each week and more regulations to abide by.

"The way the regulations have changed, it's a whole entirely different business than it was when I first got into it," he said. "That freedom I liked so much about the beginning of it, it's gone. There's none of that."

On Twitter @JonBleiweis

"I said I've been doing this long enough I should be retired. Instead, I'm just tired."

CAPT. CHET TOWNSEND

ONLINE

Watch a video from the Andrew G at **DelmarvaNow.com.**