

Salty

Don't wait until Labor Day to start chasing stripers in the Northeast. Estuaries and salt ponds offer great early-season action.

BY TOM KEER



Spring

For most fly fishers in the Northeast, striper season doesn't start until the spring hatches on the trout streams are over. Since the main slug of migratory fish works its way up the coastline from south to north, arriving in New England in late May or June, the assumption is that saltwater action just doesn't heat up until those "summer fish" arrive. But for those who feel the lure of the salt during those first warm days of spring, there's a well-kept secret: great striper fishing in estuaries and salt ponds kicks off well before the crowds head down to the beach. >>>>



In the early-season, stripers chase bait into estuaries. And when a falling tide draws the bait out of creeks, such as this one, the bass lie in wait and feed aggressively.

BARRY & CATHY BECK INSET: STEVE WALBURN

Feature Facts

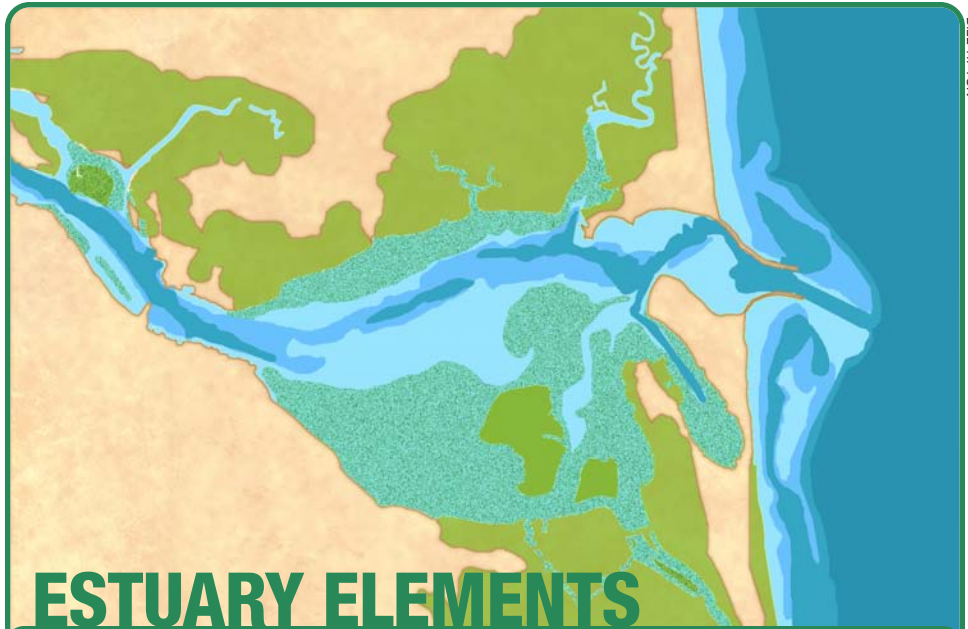
Estuaries and salt ponds are some of the sweetest saltwater fishing spots. Although they are seldom far from the crashing surf, strong tidal rips, or surging rocks, these areas are protected by land and by trees that minimize the impact from the wind. Better yet, freshwater fishermen feel at home on estuaries and salt ponds, as they are reminded of their home trout waters.

Estuaries form at the mouths of rivers, where they meet the ocean. The best estuaries are complex systems of multiple channels, islands, and flats that create tidal currents and will hold big bass. Two of the better-known Northeastern estuaries—and striped fisheries—are the mouths of the Merrimack and Connecticut Rivers, where great volumes of fresh water meet the sea.

Other river-like waterways have little or no fresh water at all, but are created by tidal action. These “salt-water estuaries”—such as Sandwich Creek, on Cape Cod—are usually far smaller in size and scope than their big-river counterparts. Oftentimes, spits of land form labyrinths of river branches. Some are very complex, whereas others involve just a couple of channels. On low tides, many saltwater estuaries have extremely shallow water and they can be quite muddy. The structure of every estuary is unique and that’s one of the things that makes exploring and fishing them so much fun.

A salt pond is, aptly enough, a pond of saltwater. At some point, these ponds connect with the sea. Like estuaries, each salt pond’s size and features are different. Ninigret Pond in Rhode Island is a small, intimate fishery, while others, such as Block Island’s Great Salt Pond or Martha’s Vineyard’s Menemsha Pond, would take several hours to walk around. Freshwater may enter the ponds at different points, but there usually is not a high concentration of sweet water.

Occasionally you may see combinations of estuaries and salt ponds, such as the one at the mouth of Cape Cod’s Bass River.



BILL TILTON

ESTUARY ELEMENTS

Big-river estuaries, such as the Merrimack River in Massachusetts (shown here), offer many features that redirect tidal current flow to create fish-holding seams. As the tide rises, stripers follow bait onto flats and mussel bars and into coves and creek mouths. When the tide begins to fall, the big fish set up in areas where bait will be focused by the current—along the edges of the flats, in the rips created by mussel bars and islands, and the mouths of coves and creeks. As the tide rises or falls, the fish are constantly repositioning, so you should, too.

At the southern reach lies the open ocean, at the northern reach is a salt pond, and connecting the two is an estuary. Small wonder it’s named the Bass River.

Appetizer Menu

Historically, stripers arrive in New England when the lilacs are in bloom. They first hit the beaches that are adjacent to estuaries and salt ponds, and then they follow the bait into those areas. You’ll find them trickling into Rhode Island in early-to mid-April, and into Massachusetts and Connecticut shortly after that. Early season in New Hampshire and Maine is mid-to-late May. The bass are usually a week or two behind the bait.

Alewives and herring arrive in Southern New England on the big moons in early March. They migrate into the estuaries and the salt ponds from late March through May to spawn. Alewives and herring spawn in 55- to 59-degree water, and they favor coastal rivers, slow-moving brackish water, or fresh water. An estuary or salt pond that has a freshwater stream is

Sand bars can create strong currents by funneling the flow of an incoming or outgoing tide. There are usually plenty of fish in these rips, but you must wade carefully for the sandy bottom is rarely stable.

likely to have a herring run. Silversides arrive shortly after the herring, moving from the deeper Continental Shelf water into the shallows in mid-March to spawn. They favor intertidal zones, particularly sandy areas, such as the mouths and lower stretches of estuaries and salt ponds.

Bait in estuaries and salt ponds is fairly consistent, but there are some nuances. Not every estuary or salt pond supports an alewife population. Others have a rich mud basin, ideal for strong worm hatches. Part of the fun of plying these waters is figuring out the baitfish patterns. As with freshwater fishing, matching the “hatch” is critical.

Whereas summer striper fishing is a dawn, dusk, and dead-of-night affair, daytime fishing is usually very productive in the early season. The bass don't migrate in one large school. Instead, they start to trickle in, and the migration builds consistently. Fresh fish are covered in sea lice, and they can be aggressive and quite easy to catch. In short order, however, the baitfish spread out, and so do the fish. During these times, the fishing becomes more challenging, particularly if there are several species of baitfish and the fish are focused on just one. This scenario should sound pretty familiar to trout anglers. Gradually, as the sunlight intensifies and the water temperatures rise, school after school of fresh fish follow bait from the beaches and into the estuaries and salt ponds.

Moving Water

Before you head out on the water, spend some time studying nautical charts. Then, visit your local estuaries and salt ponds at low tide. Whereas there's nothing to see but featureless water at high tide, low tide reveals sand or mud flats, channels, coves, and recesses in the banks, bars, and riffles. All of these structures form currents and seams that hold baitfish. If you watch the tide ebb and flood, you'll see where the current stream forms an edge or a recess, and those are likely places to find fish. Rising tides spread out baitfish and also predators, and dropping tides concentrate baitfish and also predators. Therefore, for your first outings, you might want to start fishing the dropping tides.

Tide heights vary throughout the Northeast. In New Jersey, the tidal variations may be a couple of feet, whereas in Massachusetts they will be up to a dozen feet or so. Factor in delays to the flows from your tide chart. It takes time for the water to move from the ocean into the rivers and ponds, and the tides can be as much as three hours later than those in the open ocean. Check with your local tackle shop for the best ways to estimate upriver tides.

Lucky for us, stripers and other game fish move predictably in estuaries and salt ponds. They enter both kinds of water on the rising tides, and they exit during outgoing tides. Smaller rivers and ponds hold fish only during mid-through high tide because they lose much of their water at low tide. Larger bodies of water can support fish through all tides if there are deep channels or



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bowls. But always keep in mind that the majority of fish movement in rivers and ponds occurs on a running tide.

You'll also find that fish hold in particular areas on a predictable basis. Mosquito ditches that drain into the ponds and estuaries on a dropping tide pull baitfish into the main current. The water hollows out holes in the basin and concentrates bait. Current seams form around bridge abutments, sand spits, bars, rock pilings, channels, and mussel beds. Stripers will hold below them in the slower water and intercept the baitfish as they sweep them, like trout in a stream.

Study the terrain. When the water is moving, look for seams around bars, channels, or mussel beds that are adjacent to deeper water. Move slowly and watch carefully for patterns. An easy first step is to watch for birds working the seams. Terns are likely to be picking up silversides, whereas gulls—particularly herring gulls or migratory gannets—will key in on herring.

If you don't see any birds, watch the water. Silversides spray out of the water when a predator is beneath them. Alewives and

herring move into shallow water and create a circular spawning motion. You'll see some of these disturbances on the water's surface. Look for V-wakes left by cruising fish or for dimples or rings left by bass inhaling silversides.

Stripers will stay on an edge for as long as they can. For instance, they'll follow a sand bar up until it ends; where do they go after that? They'll move to the next edge. Look to see what feature logically comes next, given how the tide is moving. If it is a cove the fish will move into the cove; if an inshore island adds structure, go there. As the tide rises or falls, you'll need to continue to reposition, always looking for an edge of deeper water and the structure that provides a current seam. As the tide rises, many fish move into shallower water. You'll find them moving up onto flats (such as Joppa Flats at the mouth of the Merrimack), cruising the banks, and nosing into coves.

As the tide drops and the water drains, reverse your steps. If the wind remains constant, you oftentimes find that the fish simply reverse their steps. But as the tide drops, the fish will come out of the coves, off the flats, and drop back in to the deeper channel water. Fish farther away from the shoreline and stay away from the banks.

Fly Color

Saltponds and estuaries can be murky. Storms, heavy rainfall, consistent wind, or big tides can turn them cloudy in a hurry. The fish are used to such murkiness, and they will often find the bait regardless of water clarity. Many anglers switch to brighter colors or flashy patterns—which work on smaller, aggressive fish—but these bright colors are not necessary. Topwater flies that move water, such as hair-head sliders or big foam poppers, attract attention through movement.

If the water hasn't been stirred up by the weather or the tides, it will be generally clear. You'll have an opportunity to study your terrain. What you'll find is either a sandy bottom; a dark, muddy

bottom; and in some reaches, eel or marsh grass beds. A variety of light and dark brown patterns, as well as flies with a greenish tint will take fish consistently. Vary the size and length based on the baitfish that are present.

Because of the different types of bait in these waters, you'll go through a lot of patterns before you figure out which one the fish want consistently. Flatwings, in a variety of colors, are my favorite flies for imitating small baitfish. Bigger RLS alewife flatwings for larger baitfish are also excellent. Clousers, Deceivers, Surf Candies and other standard fare will all catch their share of fish.

Start by fishing a multiple fly rig, and let the fish tell you what they want. To make a dropper rig, tie a five-turn surgeon's knot and leave a long tag end and tie your fly on the tag end. I fish a minimum of two flies, but mostly three; my friend Kenney Abrames fishes five. Experiment until you find what is working. Several years ago, I watched Abrames work a Rhode Island salt pond with a four-fly



KAYAKS

A hard-chined, ocean kayak is the perfect craft for most salt-pond fishing. These watercraft are good for smaller river systems but can be downright dangerous in larger estuaries, such as the Connecticut or the Merrimack. They are quiet boats, very easy to paddle with the light winds and some of the softer currents. You can paddle for a while and if there is a spot that you'd like to prospect from shore, you can pull the boat up onto land or tether it to your waist as you walk.—T. K.

dropper rig. He consistently took a single bass on a General Practitioner shrimp pattern. After a few repetitions, he cut off his menhaden and silverside imitations, added additional shrimp flies, and was soon landing three fish at a time. He kept on a Razzle Dazzle as the point fly in the event that a big bass was lurking. On that particularly night, a 23-pounder was the prize.



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