

Cape Cod Stripers

Story and Photos by Christopher J. Hagert



Flycasting for striped bass near Lewis Bay

We met captain Ron Murphy of the *Stray Cat* at the Hyannis Harbor at noon. “Today should be a good day for stripers,” the captain said. “We caught half a dozen over 35 inches on the fly yesterday.” That was just what we needed to hear, given the unseasonably warm temperatures of low 90s for Cape Cod in early June, and the fact that it was a little early in the season for fishing the rips for big stripers. Still, we remained hopeful that the captain could put us on some fish. After a couple of unproductive spots, Captain Ron drifted over a wreck somewhere in Nantucket Sound, handed me a 10-weight fly rod with his specialty parachute-squid fly on the leader, and instructed me to “strip-strip-release.”



Lewis Bay

After only a few seconds of stripping line in short bursts, a 32-inch striper chomped down on the fly and bolted about 75 feet behind the boat. “Fish on!” was sounded by Brendan, the mate and captain’s son, and the reel started singing. The angry fish at the end of the line gave a hard fight for several minutes, often breaking the surface. “Definitely a keeper!” Brendan said after he scooped the thrashing fish into the boat and measured it, ending our first of many striper encounters that afternoon.

They call them rockfish or *rocks* in tidewater Maryland and Virginia, and stripers or just plain bass up in New England, all terms referring to the striped bass that cruise the waters along the Atlantic coastline from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico. And it’s no secret that Cape Cod, a 60-mile-long, elbow-shaped peninsula on the east coast of Massachusetts, is known for its striper fishing. The Cape boasts 600 miles of picturesque shoreline crisscrossed by tidal creeks and ponds. To the north is Cape Cod Bay, and to the south are the islands of Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard and the Nantucket Sound. Just off the coast to the east is the Atlantic Ocean. These bodies of water are teeming with many species of baitfish, which attract large numbers of striped bass and bluefish. This area, much like our own Chesapeake Bay, is considered one of the most important breeding grounds for the striped bass on the Eastern Seaboard and holds some huge stripers and blues.

Over the course of a five-hour afternoon, our group caught at least 10 rockfish on both fly rod and spinning rod, and almost as many bluefish. Two stripers of 28 inches or larger per person may be harvested in Massachusetts, and only one or two of the stripers we caught on the *Stray Cat* were smaller than that legal limit. They were quickly released. The largest rock we caught was almost 40 inches in length and was considered to be quite a bruiser. For most of the day, we motored around parts of



Catch of the day on the *Stray Cat*

Common saltwater flies for stripers and blues on the Cape (parachute squid at top)



Nantucket Sound where underwater structures harbored a good number of fish. The fly of choice was Captain Ron’s parachute-squid fly. By stripping or jigging this particular fly in the right places, we had great success with both blues and stripers. Many of the charter boats in the area use this pattern, or variations thereof. (Instructions for tying the parachute-squid can be found at www.straycatfishing.com.)

Although there was a good bit of action on the *Stray Cat* and Captain Ron did his utmost to put us on fish during a time when the Nantucket Sound was significantly warmer than is typically that time of year, I had found out a few years ago that there can be a lot more excitement in the rips – especially with a fly rod. Tide rips, generally speaking, are formed during certain phases of the tide when swift-moving

currents flow into and over shoals and sandbars. In these areas, the cold water from the Atlantic hits the warmer water of the flats, and the result is a choppy soup of baitfish and rough water where predator fish congregate in large numbers.

The conditions on the day we booked with the *Stray Cat* weren’t conducive to fishing tide rips for one reason or another, but in June several years before, a guide from Edgartown on Martha’s Vineyard took us out to the rips, and the action was non-stop. It was windy and raining and cold, and the rip was exploding with activity. All manner of striper food – baitfish, squid, eels etc. – were trapped in the black, churning rip. Schools of stripers and blues in a full-on feeding frenzy were chasing the bait to the surface of the water where circling seagulls dive-bombed from above. It was



Author with a schoolie striper just after dark

quite a sight. Practically every time we flipped our sand-crab fly into the foamy rip, we pulled in a beast of a striper or bluefish after one heck of a fight.

The strategy was simple – we’d flick about 10 feet of line and leader into the water from the stern of the boat, feed 30 to 40 feet into the chop, and brace ourselves. The floating crab would bob in the turbulent swirl for a few seconds, and then all of a sudden it would disappear and the line would stretch taut. Our hearts would skip a beat, and if we were able to stay somewhat composed, we’d set the hook with a strip or two. Then the reel would sing, line would fly off the spool and through the guides, and the reel handle would spin crazily in knuckle-busting rotations. When at last the reel would slow down and we’d had the chance to regain our faculties, we could concentrate on hauling those silver missiles to the boat. That day, we must have caught 25 to 30 heavy stripers and blues in that fashion in just a few hours, and by the end of the day, our knuckles were bruised and swollen and our forearms were spent. It was just one of those days where the weather and the tides and all other conditions seemed to gel perfectly.

By no means is all striper fishing on Cape Cod and the islands done by charter

boat. In fact, for those with a decent understanding of the tides, some of the best striper fishing can be had by wading or boating the flats, or simply by surfcasting from the shoreline. We were given a few tips (and a handful of flies) from the *Stray Cat’s* mate, who himself was an avid flats fly fisherman. Brendan said the flats around the Monomoy Islands in the Brewster and Chatham townships at the “elbow” of the Cape are very popular with fly-rodders, as is Barnstable Harbor on the north side of the Cape.

A 9-weight fly rod with 9-weight floating or intermediate line is a fairly common outfit for stripers, and the Clouser minnow, in several sizes and colors, is the key fly – especially in white-on-white and white-on-chartreuse. Other fly patterns to keep in the fly box include deceivers, shrimp, sand eels, crabs, squid and blood-worms. Stripers and blues are typically most active when the tide is moving – either a couple hours before or after a low or high tide – because the current moves the bait-fish around which in turn attracts the predator fish. There’s usually little feeding activity at slack tide, so plan accordingly.

During this trip, we were not able to book a flats trip, despite our last-minute efforts to do so, as we hadn’t made plans

early enough. Early June is evidently prime season for flats fishing on Cape Cod, and some fly and light-tackle guides are booked six months in advance, according to a gentleman we spoke to at Fishing The Cape, the only Orvis-endorsed flyshop on Cape Cod. There are loads of bait-and-tackle shops on the Cape, but only Fishing The Cape in East Harwich and a shop called Goose Hummock in Orleans cater to fly-fishers. Guides can be booked through either outfit.

We were told that early June is prime season because it’s when the rockfish from the Chesapeake Bay migrate to northern waters. In mid-summer, flats fishing slows down, but it can pick up again in early fall when the stripers migrate back down south. Even though we weren’t able to hit the flats with a guide, we caught a number of what New Englanders call “schoolies” (i.e. bass under the legal limit) out of a canoe in the 16-inch to 24-inch range on Clousers of various colors. If you know where to look for them, there are a lot of options for the fly-rodder in search of stripers and blues on Cape Cod.

There’s plenty to keep a fly fisherman busy on the Cape, and it’s a nice place to take the family as well. The Cape is dotted with quaint New England villages to explore, and the islands of Nantucket and Martha’s Vineyard are only a ferry ride away. The seafood is fantastic, and in June the weather is usually mild and breezy. So if you’re looking for some of the best striper fishing on the East Coast, pack the kids and a fly rod and head for the Cape.

Christopher J. Hagert and his wife live in the Charlottesville area. They enjoy fly-fishing, traveling and bird hunting with their English setter, Belle.