



Simple streamer flies like this one tied by the author work well on rock (striped bass) in the Chesapeake Bay.

IT WAS A CRISP FALL DAY when Sandy and Norm Bartlett launched their boat in the waters of the Chesapeake Bay in their quest for some salt water fly fishing. In a short run from their launching point, they approached a small island in the bay, cut the motor and started to cast as they drifted in toward the stump strewn shores. Once there, they saw pods of bait fish scattered over the surface.

Norm's wife, Sandy, a capable fisherman, but more used to spinning than a fly rod, used a light outfit with a surface popping plug. Norm used his fly rod with a home-made salt-water popping bug tied to the light mono tippet. Throughout the afternoon, striped bass (or rock bass as they're called there) would appear on the surface chasing schools of bait fish over the surface. This was when the fishing became so fast that it was a visual montage of seeing scattered schools, casting, hooking and playing fish, and getting the school strippers off the hook and getting back to the action again.

The final score back at the dock? Norm and Sandy had kept a dozen and a half rock in the two to four pound range while throwing back an equal number. It is also interesting to note that Norm with his fly rod caught two-thirds of the fish. Norm, defensive about his wife's fishing prowess, claims modestly that this was only because he made Sandy take all her fish off the hook herself—a task that doesn't overjoy her.

The Chesapeake Bay is a fly rodder's paradise. It is laced with islands and inlets, bays and bars, cuts and guts, grass—and striped bass. But it is a vast paradise. It measures some 185 miles long from its headwaters from the mighty Susquehanna in northeast Maryland to the broad 20 mile wide mouth in lower Virginia. Its total surface area cover 3,237 square miles—roughly distributed equally between the states of Maryland and Virginia. And this vast fishing playground is readily available to fly fishermen from the nearby states of Delaware, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.

The problem with fishing the Chesapeake with the light wand is that the striped bass, or rock as they are locally known, are not evenly distributed over all the waters of the bay. To the anglers from other states, and the novices wishing to get into salt water fly fishing, the problem is first where to find the fish. To answer this, and to provide a fun-filled introduction to salt water fly fishing in the Chesapeake, I would suggest the spot where Norm and his wife, Sandy, took their rock—Poplar Island.

Poplar Island is really a chain of several islands. It used to be a single large island but time and tide have eroded away the soil to make small guts or inlets between parts of the island and to divide it up. The island can be easily found by any boater on Maryland's eastern shore and launching ramps and boat liveries at several areas make for ample access to this rock hot spot. An added plus is that it is located in the Tilghman Island—Eastern Bay area that is such hot spot for fall strippers. Poplar Island is like the bullseye in a target of bay light-tackle fishing.



Light tackle spin fishermen and fly rodgers frequent the water around Poplar Island during the later summer and fall months. Here, a New Jersey angler fishes the western side of the island. Note the stumps and trees in the water. Fishing is better here than on the eastern side of the island.

CHESAPEAKE BAY'S POPULAR POPLAR ISLAND

Rock caught by the author on the fly rod while fishing at Poplar Island. Note the small blonde type flies that work well for this type of fishing.



But like any fishing spot, it is not excellent all of the time. Norm and I traveled to Poplar Island the weekend after he and Sandy had done so well. We launched Norm's boat at the same place—Knapps Narrows—on Rte. 33, and in the process met a fellow fly rodger. Fly rodgers in this section of the country are a friendly lot—there are so few of us in the Bay area—and we immediately struck up a conversation. He was coming back from Poplar Island and had several nice rock in his ice chest, all taken on the fly rod. This hurried us up and soon we were speeding out on the open bay waters headed northwest toward the island.

We arrived at a good time. An outgoing tide was rushing water through the inlets between the islands and over the bars and grassy bottom that border the islands. Approaching the island from the bay side we cut the motor far from the bank and then drifted into the shore where we knew the rock should be. The bay side of the island is best because of the deeper waters near the island that drop off from the shallow sandy shores where the bait fish congregate. This gives the strippers protection through ready access to the bay while still providing them with a steady supply of food in the bait fish that populate the waters surrounding the island.

We started blind casting the waters of one of the southernmost islands after anchoring near an inlet. Other small-boat fishermen worked spinning outfits along the shore on both sides of us, but nobody was catching anything. No bait fish showed on the surface. No swirls of breaking rock appeared to rejuvenate our spirits and flagging energy. Then I made a cast just like dozens before it and hooked a small rock. It hit the white bucktail streamer hard, swirled just below the surface in the fast waters of the running tide, ran around a grassy knoll and started to run out some line. Its spirit was willing, but it was just too small to take out much fly line and soon came to the boat.

With this encouragement we fished harder and soon Norm got into a rock of two pounds or so—about the same size as mine. When we finally quit, we had a few rock apiece plus a

C. Boyd Pfeiffer



Norm Bartlett casting while fishing for rock (striped bass) at Poplar Island on the eastern shore side of the Chesapeake Bay.

small weakfish that I caught fishing over a shallow, grassy bottom. The bait fish or breaking rock never materialized on that trip but we did do better than the spin-casters that day, who to the best of our knowledge, caught nothing.

Other trips, both before and after this one, convinced us that a trip resulting in only a few rock is more the exception than the rule. I have been there when scattered rock in the three to six pound range broke water and poppers all afternoon and evening long. The rock are small—in the two to four pound range—but provide plenty of action for the fly rodder from the summer through fall months.

Poppers—large and small—also work well for rock when they are chasing bait fish and breaking on the surface.



Tackle for Poplar Island is much like that used for most saltwater fishing. A nine-foot rod capable of taking a wf-9 or -10 line and a sturdy but inexpensive reel are all that is needed. A lighter outfit could be used for playing and landing the fish, but the heavy line will cope better with the winds that sometimes arise on the bay and the #1 to 2/0 flies that must be cast into those winds. A nine foot tapered leader with a tippet of 8- or 10-pound test tied to a simple saltwater streamer completes the outfit. Both flies and poppers can be used. Norm Bartlett frequently uses a long graceful popping bug of his own design with an attractive scale finish and tied on a special cadmium-plated hook. In fact, it has proved to be so good that he is now marketing it locally for the convenience of other fly fishermen. White and yellow flies in sizes 1 to 2/0 seem best for this area as well as much of the Chesapeake Bay. The important thing in fishing for school strippers is to match the size of the fly to the size of the bait fish. Short-wing streamers like the blond patterns seems to do best.

While the Poplar Island area is a popular one for the experienced fly fisherman on the salt, its real advantage is for the fly fisherman in the mid-Atlantic area just starting to fish salt water. It is a known area, easily reached from Easton, Maryland on the eastern shore, and readily located on maps. It is also available for anglers from the surrounding five states with a minimum of driving time over good roads. Fished at the times suggested—from June until late October—it can be guaranteed to be one of the surest spots in the bay for taking rock on light tackle. An added advantage is that the beginner, once having caught fish here at a known location, can expand his fishing to the nearby areas of Eastern Bay and the Tilghman Island area. Experience will have been gained at Poplar Island, experience which can be used in these new areas which are equally good in the late summer and fall months. Unlike fresh water fishing, where cover for fish is more obvious, saltwater fly fishing involves locating fish in vast expanse of flat water. This involves knowledge of bottoms, grass beds, bars, and the use of depth finders and considerable skill and experience. All this the beginner does not have. Poplar Island and similar spots in the salt provide notable exceptions and make it easy to get started.

For the angler wishing to find Poplar Island on a map, it is located on Maryland's eastern shore about 20 miles south of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. It is a little above Tilghman's Island and a little below the mouth of Eastern Bay. To reach it, Baltimore, Washington and Annapolis residents can pick up Route 50, follow it across the Bay Bridge to Easton and then follow Route 33 to launching ramps at either Wittman or Knapps Narrows. Fly rodders from New Jersey and eastern Pennsylvania can follow route 40 or interstate 95 to Maryland and then pick up numerous roads to take them to Easton where 33 can be picked up. Anglers from Virginia and points south can take the Chesapeake Bay Bridge—Tunnel, at Norfolk, follow route 13 to Salisbury, and then pick up route 50 to Easton. Boats are available at Knapp's Narrows, which separates the mainland from Tilghman Island, and a free public launching ramp is located off Maryland Route 33 at Wittman, Maryland.

For the angler wishing a long weekend, lodging is located nearby, most notably at Capt. Levin Harrison's Chesapeake House on Tilghman Island, where both board and lodging for fishermen is available. Harrison and his sons captain party boats in the area and are a wealth of information to the visiting angler. They are all interested in fostering the sport of fly rodding and are most helpful in providing up-to-the-minute striper fishing information. Poplar Island is not the only place in the Chesapeake Bay to catch striped bass, but for my money, it is the best place to start.

See this issue's "Casting About" department, p. 34, for detailed information on the best striped bass fishing on the northeast Atlantic coast, as compiled by author Boyd Pfeiffer.

EAST COAST STRIPED BASS ACTION SURVEY FOR FLY RODDERS

Compiled by C. Boyd Pfeiffer

Massachusetts Excellent striped bass fishing at Plymouth Bay at Plymouth. Fly fishing for school strippers popular here using saltwater flies and saltwater popping bugs. Boats available at Plymouth and Duxbury.

Rhode Island Narragansett Bay best bet for fly rodders. School strippers appear here and in rivers in May. Good fishing continues thru fall. Area around Barrington and Bristol on Rt. 114 good for fly rodders. Wading possible near Bristol, boats available at both areas.



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Connecticut Whole coastal area good for school strippers from May thru October. Spots for light tackle fly fishing most anywhere. Good spots to try are mouths of rivers and estuaries. Try mouth of Connecticut River at Saybrook and mouth of Thames at New London and Groton. Both top water popping bugs and saltwater flies work equally well.

New York Fly rodding for strippers from boats around Long Island. Strippers large in this area—heavy fly tackle and sinking lines with large streamers best bet.

New Jersey Barnegat Bay and Great Bay good choices for fly rodders. Heavy fly tackle necessary, not for size of school strippers but for frequent wind conditions. Both popping bugs and saltwater streamers good choices. Boat rentals and ramps in area. As in many salt water bays, look for birds working bait fish. Frequently striped bass will be in the bait driving them to the surface. Fishing good spring thru summer.

Tide-water marsh banks all along New Jersey coast are also good for fly rodding. These marsh banks in brackish water drop off sharply, with striped bass hanging in close to the undercut banks. Top-water popping bugs that make a lot of noise and commotion best choice here. Depending upon abundance of roads and boat liveries in any area, marsh banks can be fished either from shore or boat. Long casts not necessary—use tackle only big enough to throw the needed saltwater popper. Brackish water largemouth bass in same area are an added bonus.

Delaware Many marsh banks and tidal rivers make Delaware fishing similar to that of New Jersey (see above). Best single spot for strippers at Indian River Inlet and Indian River Bay. Launch ramps, boats and camping facilities all available in area. Fishing good spring thru fall.

Maryland Best fly rod striped bass fishing in Chesapeake Bay—not on ocean front. For beginners to this area, see accompanying articles for specific tips and information. Other good areas are the Choptank and Susquehanna Rivers. Best fishing in both rivers in spring and fall. Choptank fishing requires fast boat to get to breaking schools before they go down. Susquehanna River at head of Bay is shallow, rocky, and requires a small but seaworthy boat. Susquehanna waters can rise and become dangerous as water is released thru Conowingo Dam near Pennsylvania border. Use heavy rod-and-line combination to match wind conditions that frequently arise. Flies in 1-2/0 size best; popping bugs very good.

NOTE

In all of the above case, be sure to check locally for laws and regulations concerning license requirements, size and creel limits of fish. This is particularly important in tidal, marsh and estuary areas where **fresh water regulations** may apply.

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