

STRIPERS WEST

In a few years California will be celebrating its "Striped Bass Centennial"—but there will be tears in the champagne when they think about the 60 years it took West Coast anglers to discover they were there.

DAN BLANTON

IF ONE WERE TO POLL Northeastern and Northwestern saltwater anglers to determine which gamefish was their favorite, undoubtedly the striped bass would top the list. While there are certainly stronger, larger and more exciting fish to be had, none are more readily available to the average angler than the striper; and few species take an artificial more eagerly or provide such superlative sport for the light-tackle fraternity. Today, a large and ever-growing portion of the following is the saltwater fly rodder.

Striped bass were introduced into California waters in 1879, and in less than 20 years a million pounds of bass per year were being marketed by commercial netters. In 1935 the sportfishing value of the striped bass was fully realized and all commercial harvesting of the species was stopped. Since that time, "Old Linesides" has been held in the highest regard by Western anglers.

The Bays and Bass of San Francisco

Where once there were just a handful of fly fishermen working these waters, there are now hundreds of "salt chucks" who are enjoying fabulous fishing in relative solitude. These additional anglers have emerged during the last decade as a result of improved techniques and the pioneering of new productive areas—including word-of-mouth and outdoor columns. They have been enjoying tremendous success, taking stripers that average 10 to 12 pounds and, each season from early June until late November, hundreds are taken in the 15–30-pound class. We are fortunate, for in these waters the fly fisher can hold his own with any other angler, regardless of the tackle or methods used. During the season, if the fly rodders aren't taking them, then chances are no one is!

The bay system is vast, with many miles of shoreline dotted with flats, coves, estuaries and man-made struc-

tures that provide superb fly-fishing for striped bass. A great deal of this water has been sampled by the fly angler and many productive areas are known. Yet, there are still acres of potentially good water that have not been explored.

One of the most productive areas for the fly-rod striper addict is the San Francisco Bay water along its western banks, from the Bay Bridge south to the San Mateo Bridge. I have spent nearly 15 years casting flies to stripers that ravage baitfish populations along these shores, which stretch for nearly 20 miles. This is my favorite beat, particularly the regions of the San Francisco International Airport! There are two good marinas with launch ramps to service anglers—one is the Oyster Point Marina in South San Francisco, and the other is the Coyote Point Marina in San Mateo. I find the brine between these two harbors, a distance of about six miles, extremely productive.

Across the Bay to the east are miles of fertile water from San Leandro to the Berkeley Marina and north to the Richmond Harbor. This area abounds with pilings, creeks, channels and flats that shelter both baitfish and feeding stripers. Many fly casters ply these areas with great success.

To the north of the San Francisco Bay Bridge are other bountiful areas that are frequented by the marine fly fisher. Richardson Bay is productive at times, and farther up the Marin coast is the well-known San Rafael Bridge hot spot. Small boats are launched from shore there, and the bridge structure holds the bass taken by fly casters.

Continuing up the bay you'll find the China Basin area and the fertile Marin and Sisters islands. From there, across the bay to the east, are countless productive flats, islands, deep channels, and man-made structures—all within the San Pablo Bay region, stretching from the San Rafael Bridge north to the mouth of the



Casting to man-made structures in the San Francisco Bay area for lurking stripers can produce fish like the 25-pounder below which the author has just gaffed for Harry Wilson. Photos by Bill Rhodes.

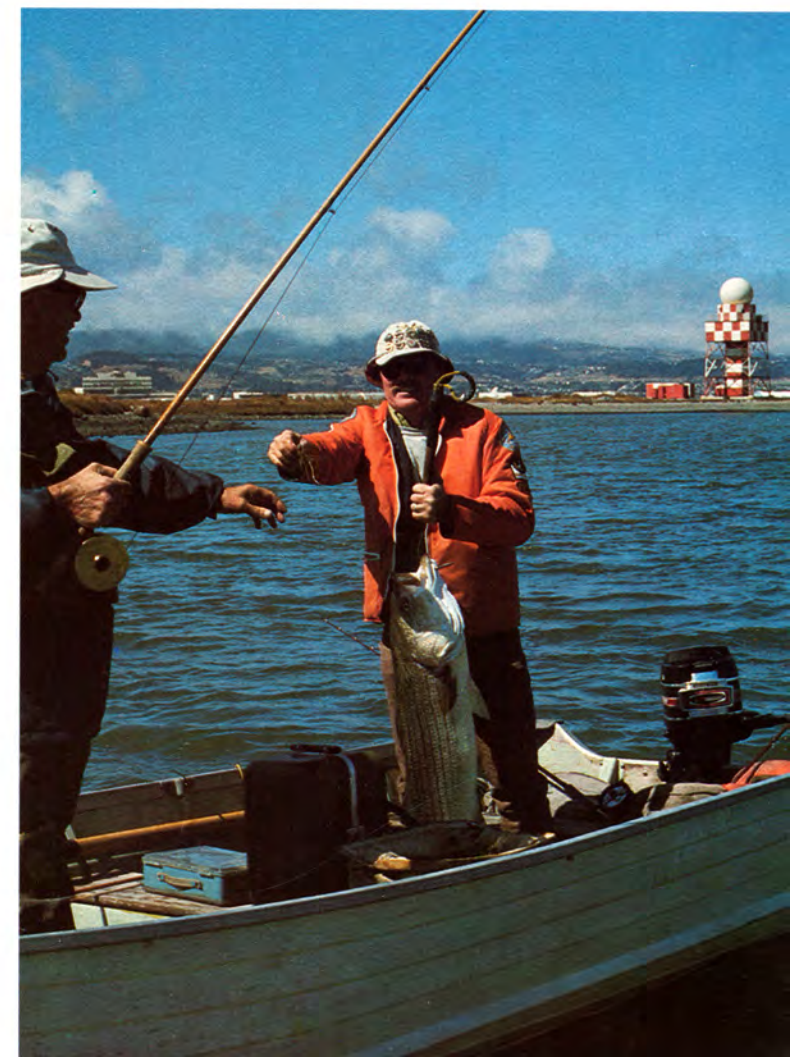
Sacramento River. There are several marinas along these shores, and fishing maps listing them are available at most sport and bait shops.

Techniques for Bay Bass

Admittedly, the newcomer to the flats of San Francisco Bay and her adjoining waters will be somewhat awed by their vastness, and the prime question will be where to start casting? Not all areas within the boundaries mentioned attract good populations of stripers. There are lots of unproductive flats and the following techniques will assist the beginner to eventually locate fish.

The quickest way to get results is to cast your flies to the man-made structure that has been implanted in the bay bottom. These structures consist of old pilings supporting piers, a pump house, airport landing lights, radar shacks and untold other fabrications, and are the foundation of the food chain which attracts the roving schools of stripers. Bass will be found lurking near the bases of these offshore piles, prowling for hapless baitfishes; work your flies near the barnacle-encrusted supports and you'll receive arm-jolting strikes you'll hardly believe!

It should be evident now that a boat is the surest way to reach the fishing grounds. A boat from 12 to 18 feet



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in length, and powered from 10 hp to moderate-size inboard or outboard motors are nearly required for really good fishing. The aluminum car-toppers from 12 to 14 feet long are great.

Fishing Structure

Anchor your boat up-tide from the structure, preferably with the wind to your back. The cast is made by dropping the fly near the bases of the pilings; the artificial is then allowed to sink deep before starting a fast pull-pause retrieve, imparting one- to two-foot-long



Drifting and casting over the flats near the San Francisco Airport can be an effective late-season tactic in spite of occasional overhead distractions.

strokes. You can expect a strike at any time during the first five or six feet, but a bass will often stalk the fly right to the boat, engulfing it as you execute a pick-up roll cast. Dense structures seem to be the most productive, but single pilings or bridge supports of concrete produce extremely well too. Casting parallel to a row of pilings and allowing the current to sweep your fly across the face of a structure is also fruitful. In any case, getting the feathers deep is important to success!

It is difficult to land large structure stripers and much pressure is required to turn them from the razorlike barnacles. Break-offs and cut-offs will be frequent unless proper knots and leaders are used. The *Bimini-Twist*

system is best (see *Practical Fishing Knots* by Lefty Kreh and Mark Sosin), allowing one to stay within the accepted 15-pound fly-tippet class.

Casting on the Flats.

Drifting flats devoid of man-made structures can be extremely productive too. However, it will take some time to learn which are the producers. Usually, those flats that have been filled and now have a manufactured shoreline will be deeper and more rewarding than the shallow, non-filled areas. This is not always true, but, it is a good rule-of-thumb. Drifting a flat within a cast of shore, and using the wind, tides or an electric motor for propulsion while blind-casting, is the fastest way to locate a feeding school of bass. After the first strike, anchor the craft and work the area until the fish leave. Keep watching for working birds, boils or the wakes made by cruising bass. Make several drifts, each time moving farther from shore until contact is made. The use of a drag chain while drifting will help control your drift speed and boat sway. Most flats vary from three to eight feet deep and sinking lines and flies work best.

Tides

The tides are important to the bay fly rodder, and certain ones enhance the fishing while others will deliver only mediocre results. It has been my experience that the "neap" tides (quarter-moon stages causing little water exchange between high and low tides) are the best ones for the flats angler. They occur every two weeks, and planning your trips around them is best. Moving water is usually better than slack, with peak current flow producing the best bite period.

The Rivers and Fly-Rod Stripers

The Sacramento, American, and Feather rivers in northern California are productive waters for the striped bass fly fisher, from mid-April through July. Using large, weighted black flies, carried by high-density or lead-core shooting heads, anglers work the mouths of the American and Feather rivers at their confluences with the Sacramento. Here, stripers congregate for spawning and they are taken mostly at night in the a.m. hours. The supports of bridges that cross these rivers are good places to work your flies. The artificial is cast across the current, allowed to plummet down, and then retrieved slowly as it swings around. The take will usually be more subtle than the strikes of bay bass.

Two world-record fly-caught stripers were taken from this region, a 40-pounder by Cal Guin in 1972 and a 24-pound 12-ounce bass by Al Perryman in 1973. The Perryman record still holds for 6-pound fly-tippet. Both fish were taken on black flies at night.

The Umpqua River, the famed steelhead stream of Oregon, is the undisputed home of record fly-rod stripers, for currently all but one world-record striped bass came from this watercourse or its tributary, the Smith River. They are: 10-pound-tippet class—64 lbs., 8 ozs., taken by Beryl E. Bliss; 15-pound-tippet class—51 lbs.,

8 ozs., taken by Gary L. Dyer; and the 12-pound-tippet record of 40 lbs., 4 ozs., boated by Dick Wadsworth. These records still hold and are obviously impressive.

In the spring of the year from mid-May until mid-June, most of the fly-fishing takes place in the Smith River, from its confluence with the Umpqua upstream about seven miles. Huge spawning fish swim these waters, and because the river is fairly shallow, standard high-density sinking lines are sufficient.

Again, a boat is almost an absolute necessity in order to get into fish consistently. Gary Dyer, one who spends more time on the Umpqua than anyone I know, suggests drifting or spot anchoring, while casting to the grass banks and cuts along the river's edge. Areas that have pilings should be worked extra carefully. This is another blind-casting situation for the most part, with action not as fast as San Francisco Bay fishing, but the bass are generally big bruisers and are a lot stronger than California stripers.

As the season progresses into June, the action moves down river into the Umpqua around the Reedsport and Gardiner area. Most fishing is done below the Highway 101 bridge. Here again, casting large white bucktail flies, with blue topping and red throats, and tied on 3/0 or 4/0 hooks, to grass banks, particularly at the points of islands, is most productive. Poppers will take fish on the Umpqua system, but unweighted sinking flies will produce consistently better.

Tackle and Flies

Tackle requirements for the Western striped-bass fly fisherman are generally the same, regardless of locale. Rods should be capable of casting the #10-11-weight lines needed to carry the bulky, weighted flies needed for bay waters. Also, the rods need butt-strength for horsing in big fish and punching feather-dusters into the teeth of a sometimes howling wind.

Shooting-head systems are the choice of the majority of Western saltwater fly casters. Using large-diameter mono shooting line or one of the level shooting lines, they attach shooting heads—ranging from floaters to lead-cores, depending on the conditions. A simple system might include one floating head, one high-density and one lead-core shooting head, all weighing from 330 to 380 grains each. More complex systems can be made by adding other densities. Nearly all striper fishing with flies on the Pacific Coast is done with sinking lines and large weighted flies.

The flies used are typically large, full-bodied creations that simulate a variety of baitfish and crustaceans, such as crabs, shrimp, anchovies, smelt and herring. Large black eel patterns produce well both day and night. Stripers can be size-conscious, and length rather than color can be a determining factor.

The striped-bass fishery of the West is extremely good, and in most cases, it is holding its level of quality. Thousands enjoy pursuing "Old Linesides" each season, and the marine fly rodder, whether a newcomer or veteran, will be hard-pressed to find a more worthy gamefish, more readily available—and eager to inhale your fly. ➤



Some of the author's favorite striper flies (from top): White Whistler, Lefty's Deceiver, Yellow Whistler R.G., Sar-Mul-Mac and a Bay Dredger. These big feather-dusters can be cast most easily with shooting-head systems from a stable casting position, as demonstrated below by Mark Sosin. The lower photo is by the author.



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