



The *Hidden Stripers* of Summer

Beat the heat and the crowds by chasing Southern freshwater striped bass on cool, shady streams.

ARTICLE & PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETE ELKINS

Fishing for freshwater stripers in the South usually means dredging a big impoundment with lead core or an integrated shooting head, bombing weighted flies down to the fish holding near the bottom of the thermocline. Sure, those methods produce, but the process can be tedious and can seem more like work than fun. However, for those few anglers who search for the South's hidden summer stripers—driven by high water temperatures into the upper reaches of a lake's headwaters—things are very different.

The Search for Cool

Think of it as trout fishing on speed. A typical midsummer morning in these secret spots begins with a dawn launch of a canoe, johnboat, pontoon boat, or even a float tube. In most cases, *launch* is a deceptively simple term. More likely putting a boat in on these waters requires a sweaty scramble through a poison ivy-rich, rod-grabbing jungle down a red clay bank, as you try not to think about water moccasins or timber rattlers. But once you're on the water, the unpleasant part is over. There the magic begins.

The ambient air temp is often in the 90s even at dawn. Yet, the water is cold and runs clear and fast past limestone ledges and riffles. Long, deep pools shaded by sycamores and catalpas provide perfect holding water for striped bass >>

seeking to escape the heat. Fallen trees are abundant, sometimes requiring you to drag your craft over or around them, but these obstructions also form current breaks and eddies that attract stripers. By midday, the sun is scorching on impoundments downstream. But on the shady streams, everything is indeed cool. Only the fishing is hot.

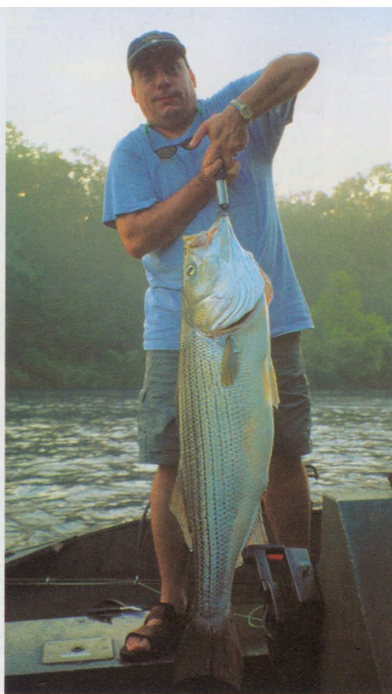
On a normal day fishing in a coldwater tributary with reasonably clear water conditions, a good fly fisherman can expect anywhere from six to 20 strikes. The fish average five to 10 pounds, but there's always the possibility that you'll lay into a striper in the 20-pound class. Occasionally, these small waters produce even larger fish (see the photo at right), but many of the truly big females over 30 pounds are taken by locals using live shad. Fortunately, most of the live-shad guys stick to the larger rivers.

Tackle and Tactics

Casting for small-river stripers is completely different from fishing impoundments, and it took me several trips to make the adjustment. Normally, I fished with a clear intermediate line and the object was to make the longest possible cast into a melee of gulls diving to pick up threadfin shad driven to the surface by stripers. But on these little waters, short, controlled casts and presentations are the key, and you must deal with the current to get a fly to the fish.

Compromise is the name of the game for rod selection. Given the need for short casts with large flies into sometimes-cramped quarters, the ideal rod would be a 6- to 8-foot 9-weight (such as the G.Loomis CrossCurrent), but that's a pretty specialized rod. Thus, I use a standard 9-foot 9-weight. The name of the game is to control the fish and release it as soon as possible to avoid overstressing it in the warm water, so you want to be able to really put the screws to a fish without fear. Since you're not going to allow long runs, you don't really need a large-arbor reel with 300 yards of backing. Any decent saltwater reel will perform fine.

Except for the deeper pools, summer striper rivers and creeks are shallow enough to wade; in fact, the best approach combines floating and wading. So you don't need a fast-sinking line. Floating lines are perfect because almost every strike will be within a foot or so of the surface. Most will be visible, sometimes dramatically so.



On a hot August day on the Chattahoochee River along the Alabama-Georgia border, Joel Daniel landed this 43-pound striper on an 8-weight rod.

Think about overlining your rod by at least one, maybe even two line weights. The heavier and shorter the front taper, the quicker it will load with a short line.

Stripers are not leader shy, so don't bother with light tippets. My standard set up features a four- to five-foot butt section (usually 40- to 50-pound monofilament), followed by two feet of 30-pound mono, and then 18 inches to two feet of 20-pound fluorocarbon. When you're fishing woody streamside cover, use a shorter leader. If the fish are holding at the tail of a long pool in clear water, go a bit longer.

Of course, having the perfect rod, reel, and line means nothing unless you get the fly to the fish. Stripers can be almost anywhere in these small waters, especially under ideal overcast, low-light conditions. Stay alert, wear good polarized glasses, and scan the water just like you would on a bonefish flat. It's unusual to see large numbers of baitfish, but you may see an occasional swirl, often very subtle, which always requires at least a cast or two.

Most of the time, you'll want to employ the standard up-and-across trout tactics, except that the fly is a heavily dressed 3/0 Flashtail Whistler. I like to let the fly swing with the current while imparting an occasional "bump" with my stripping hand to animate the pattern. Strikes on the swing are not subtle—most are pretty hard thuds—and a quick strip-strike will seal the deal. Once you're hooked up, play the fish aggressively using a low rod angle to avoid overhanging tree limbs and to steer the fish away from underwater obstacles. Unlike impoundment stripers, these small-water fish have an instinct for cover, so expect to lose some fish. Since submerged wood is abundant in most of these waters, some stripers are going to take you into bad places.

Where to Find Them

Striped bass are negatively phototropic, avoiding bright light almost as much as walleyes, and they prefer nocturnal feeding. A perfect day is overcast, cloudy, misty, or even rainy. Fortunately, stripers in moving water aren't quite as averse to

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When the sun begins to climb, small-stream stripers head for shady areas beneath overhanging trees. Note the uncrowded angling conditions on this southern headwater of a large reservoir.

Finding the Fish

Alabama's Coosa River system is one of the most productive striped fisheries in the South, and Weiss Lake, the northernmost lake in the Coosa chain, features a reproducing striped population, a rare situation in fresh water. But Coosa stripers tend to average 5 to 10 pounds, with some in the teens and a few 20-pounders. Anything above that is worth shouting about.

By contrast, the average striper in Georgia's Chattahoochee River system is much larger, some reaching well into the 40s. Fishing with guide Kent Edmonds last August, Joel Daniel caught a 43-pound striper on the Chattahoochee below West Point Lake. The big female striper—which shattered the existing fly-rod record for the lake downstream—took a 3/0 chartreuse-and-white Deceiver and was released in good condition beside the boat. Some Tennessee and South Carolina river systems also have these larger fish.

There are a few guides who specialize in fly-fishing for summer stripers (see below), but it's mostly a do-it-yourself deal. You don't have to be a genius to find these waters, though. All it takes is a talk with your state's freshwater fisheries staff to locate lakes or large rivers with fishable striper numbers; the South is rich with such waters. Next, dig out a DeLorme or county atlas, and do a detailed map reconnaissance. Follow the map exercise with some windshield time, checking bridges and other access points for the waters of interest.

Timing is important. Generally, stripers migrate toward cooler tributaries once lake temps exceed 70 degrees. In general, the summer fishery runs from late May through the first of September, although there is some variation throughout the South, with start and finish dates compressing as one moves north. Even in hot Alabama and Georgia, peak results are in July and August.

River-Striper Guides

Chances are, if there are stripers in a river, the guides at the nearby fly shop know how to catch them. But here are two guys who have built reputations on this obscure sport.

Kent Edmonds (La Grange, GA):

(706) 883-7700; www.flyfishga.com.

Jay Clementi, Game Fair Ltd. (Nashville, TN):

(615) 353-0602; www.gamefairltd.com.

www.americanangler.com

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light as those in stillwater environments.

However, by late morning on a bright summer day, even current-dwelling stripers are no longer aggressively prowling. Early in the morning or late in the afternoon, a feeding striper could be almost anywhere. It's not unusual to catch them midpool or even right beside your boat. As the sun rises, concentrate on shaded spots near otherwise prime holding areas, such as the heads or tails of pools and current breaks around downed trees. Shade draws and concentrates the fish, creating challenging casting targets, which can produce some of the biggest stripers of the day.

During one of my first summer explorations, a friend and I caught some nice fish under heavy overcast skies. Then, like Kipling's dawn, the sun came up like thunder. My impoundment experiences told me that we might as well paddle through to our takeout spot because the fishing was over. That's when something heavy swirled under some overhanging trees in a large, distinct shade patch. Has to be a spot or large-mouth, I thought while tightening my loop enough to deliver a white-and-green



Monster Flies

Flies for summer stripers need to be large. Occasional stained water and swift currents demand a fly that announces its presence. Shadlike colors are best, with an emphasis on predominantly white, topped with chartreuse, olive, green, blue, or lavender. Except when there is bright sun and crystalline water conditions, lots of flash is a good thing. Dan Blanton's Flashtails are highly effective, as are Deceivers, Clousers, and Whistlers. If I had to choose one fly, it would be a Whistler tied Blanton-style on an Eagle Claw 413 inverted hook. For swift water, I like to use a red che-

nille collar and 10 to 12 wraps of lead; for shallower, slower water, try a chartreuse collar and six to eight wraps.

Summer stripers will crush a big topwater lure, such as a Zara Spook but are much harder to take on topwater flies. The reason is again one of size. It's hard to cast a fly large enough to draw strikes like conventional lures do. Gurglers and Crease Flies are just not effective in moving water. Big 3/0 to 5/0 "skipping bug" type poppers will work at times (hence, the need for an overlined rod), but your casting shoulder will not thank you afterwards.—P. E.

DAVID KLAUSMEYER

Flashtail Whistler

Hook: Eagle Claw 413, sizes 1/0 through 3/0.

Thread: Red Danville flat-waxed.

Eyes: Large or extra large silver bead chain.

Underbody: 8 to 10 wraps of .30 lead wire.

Tail: White bucktail; 20 to 30 strands of pearl or silver Flashabou extending two to three inches beyond bucktail; 15 to 20 strands Krystal Flash along each side.

Body: Red medium or large chenille.

Hackle: Two or three large and webby saddle hackles, white or chartreuse.

Note: You can tie Whistlers full or sparse, and in varied colors. The most productive colors in Southeast rivers and streams imitate threadfin shad. Stick with a white underbody topped with olive hues. Use pearl or rainbow Krystal Flash for the sides and topping. Olive Fluorofiber makes an excellent topping variation. I like to layer the flash tail, with silver or pearl on the bottom and darker greens, lavenders or blue on top. Apply Flexament along the flash tail for an inch or so from the tie-in point to avoid fouling.


Whistler far back into the shade. The strike came even before I made the first strip. For the next few hours, it seemed that every striper in the stream had migrated to the shaded areas, and every one was willing to hit a fly that swam into the darkness.

Pools hold a lot of stripers, and in many instances, the fish are very specific about where they hold. They almost always concentrate at the top or bottom, though rarely both on the same day. In either case, you'll get most strikes to either side of the stream, not in the middle. The tails of pools make for easier presentations because you're less likely to spook fish during the approach. Those at the heads of pools are more exposed to boat noise as you approach them across shallow riffles and rocks. After you've fished a specific stream enough to learn which pools hold fish, it's a good idea to beach your boat well above the riffles and then wade within casting range.

Even for fish holding in the tail areas, I like to quietly beach the boat well above the bottom of the pool so that, water depth permitting, I can wade to the likely target area. It's also easy to spook these lower fish

by getting too close to them while focusing upon the area just above the riffle lip. Big stripers rarely hold right at the top of the riffles. More often, they will be in water two to four feet deep several yards above the point where the current actually forms the riffles.

The next most likely place you'll get a striper strike is below a large tree extending well out into the current. Stripers, like spotted bass, invariably hold just downcurrent of the tree, but often very close to the end of the tree. Don't ignore the large eddy created by the tree's main trunk closer to the shoreline. I never pass up a cast or two back into that area as the boat passes the tree.

Chasing shady stripers in these hidden streams isn't a pursuit for everyone. Getting to the fish isn't easy. You'll be wet, scratched here and there, and maybe have a few mosquito bites. But there won't be any crowds. The only company will be belted kingfishers, yellow-breasted chats, a few raccoons, a whitetail or two, and some of the wildest striped-bass fly action in the South. 

Pete Elkins is the author of Catching Freshwater Striped Bass (EPM Publications). He lives with his wife in Alabama.