

THE WEATHER HADN'T BEEN KIND. COLD northeast winds were cranking over Cape Cod, and most days they blew in cloudy skies and rain — all the wrong conditions for sight-fishing. Still, we had an offer from Capt. Jim Ellis to try some flats on the bay side, and we were anxious to take him up on it. We had been forced to cancel once already, but the weatherman reported that a break was headed our way. We were keeping our fingers crossed.

During the night before our trip, the rain stopped; the wind went to the south, and with the shift the skies began to clear. Before sunup my friend Phil Farnsworth and I were on the road. We met Ellis off Route 6 and followed him to over to Barnstable Harbor. We quickly stored our tackle, food and drinks, and within five minutes we were on our way.

As the darkness began to lift, we could see birds working low over the water. Ellis steered us closer, and soon it was apparent that the calm water was dotted with telltale ripples

Bayside

A wide-angle photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, a sandy beach with some dry, brown grass and a small pile of white foam or snow is visible. A large, light-colored, curved object, possibly a boat hull or a large piece of equipment, is partially submerged in the water. The water is calm, reflecting the sky. In the background, there are marshy flats and a distant shoreline under a clear sky.

of feeding stripers — in fact, bass were sucking down sand eels everywhere. Backing off the throttle, we eased up to the fish. It didn't matter which way we cast, we were in the action. After a few moments we released our first couple of bass, and it didn't take long for us to hook four or five more fish apiece. Granted, we weren't sight-fishing yet, but it was good way to start the day.

The morning sun arched higher, and the tide began to flood, so we decided it was time to head to the flats. We were

Bass

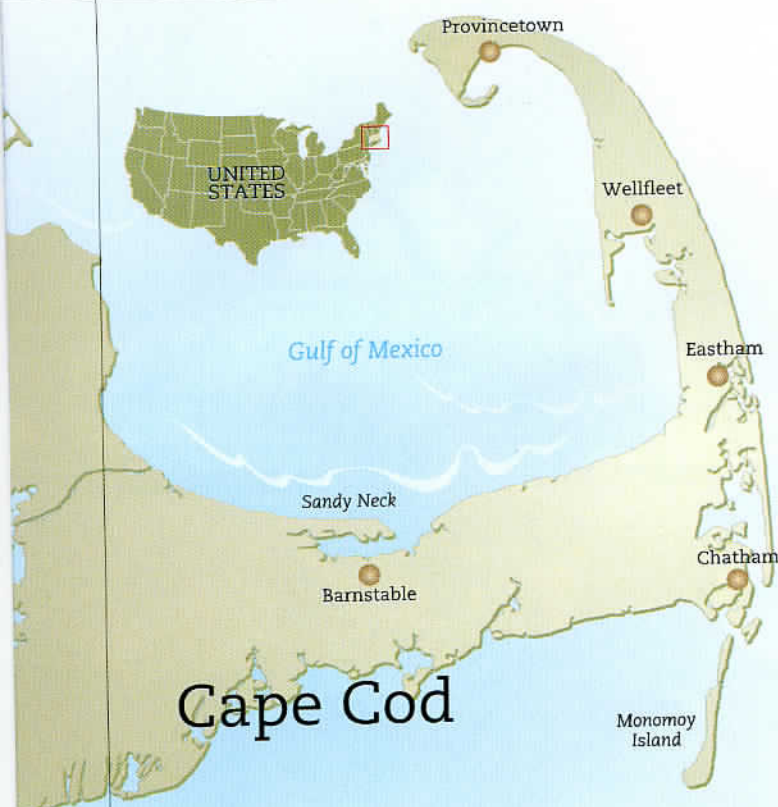
Cape Cod's Bayside Flats Offer
Shallow Minded Anglers an Early
Season Striper Fix
By Ed Mitchell



ED MITCHELL



MARSHALL WATERS



Flats Tackle and Flies

The same basic flats gear that's used on the Atlantic side of the cape works on the bay side. I recommend an 8-weight rod with a reel capable of holding at least 200 yards of backing. I would suggest, however, that you bring at least two different fly lines — a floater and an intermediate. At the beginning of the flood or the end of the ebb, a floating line works great. During the deeper stages of the tide, I use a clear intermediate because stripers on the flats usually prefer a fly close to the bottom and often ignore anything traveling overhead.

As for flies, sand eel patterns are a must, and you should bring a selection of sizes. On these flats many of the sand eels are tiny and best matched with flies in sizes 2 and 4. You will see some that are 4 inches or longer, and the bigger bass key in on these larger eels. I prefer flies in pale-green over white, but since many of the larger sand eels are tan with a touch of pink I carry some in that color scheme, too. For Steve Farrar's Dowel Stick Sand Eel pattern, turn to page 38 in "Fly Tier's Bench." I also recommend that you bring along shrimp and crab flies as well. Below are some patterns developed by local tier Dave Skok that

have proved highly effective on the bay side.

Sand Shrimp

HOOK: #6 to #2 TMC 911S or Mustad 34011

THREAD: 3/0 Monocord, tan

LEAD EYES: Extra-small or small



cruising along the front side of Sandy Neck when I saw a large patch of dark water. I asked Ellis if it was a rock shoal. As we approached the off-color water, the answer became clear: It wasn't rocks — it was the largest pod of sand eels I had ever seen in open water during the day. Passing them, we realized why so many stripers frequent the Cape Cod flats.

RUNNING FLAT OUT

Flats, particularly the red-hot ones behind barrier beaches like Sandy Neck and Monomoy, are produced by the prevailing long-shore currents. These currents form coastal conveyor belts, transporting and depositing enormous quantities of sand, plankton and nutrients. The nutrient-dense water draws forage in the form of millions of sand eels, which in turn attract the striped bass.

We motored close to a beautiful white-sand beach where Ellis threw the boat into neutral and directed our attention to a dry channel that wound its way up and across the flat. He called it a guzzle, noting that stripers would begin swimming up it as soon as it filled with water.

We immediately spotted a few stripers milling around the mouth of the guzzle waiting for the tide to change. These early birds proved to be very aggressive, taking any fly placed near them and giving us multiple hookups. When the tide poured into this narrow channel, it quickly became a small river, and

lead eyes (painted cream or tan)

ANTENNAE: Two peccary fibers

ROSTRUM: Badger underfur

LEGS: Three or four amber/gold Sili-Legs

EYES: Black plastic mono eyes, medium

SHELLBACK/TAIL: Cream or tan Swiss Straw

RIB: Clear mono, fine

BODY: A blend of amber and cream Angora goat, dubbed and picked out and trimmed to a shrimplike taper



Mole Crab

HOOK: #2 Tiemco 800S or Mustad Signature C68S SS

THREAD: Clear mono, fine

EYES: Small or medium lead dumbbell eyes (painted cream or tan), tied in midshank

EGGSACK: Tuft of orange marabou

RUBBER LEGS: Three or four amber/gold Sili-Legs

LEGS: Grizzly and orange saddle hackles, wound together and trimmed on the hook-point side

UNDERBELLY/TELSON: Speckled tan Suedeskin or Bugskin

CARAPACE 1: Tan (or cream or gray) wool, tapered

BODY: Dubbed tan (or cream or gray) wool

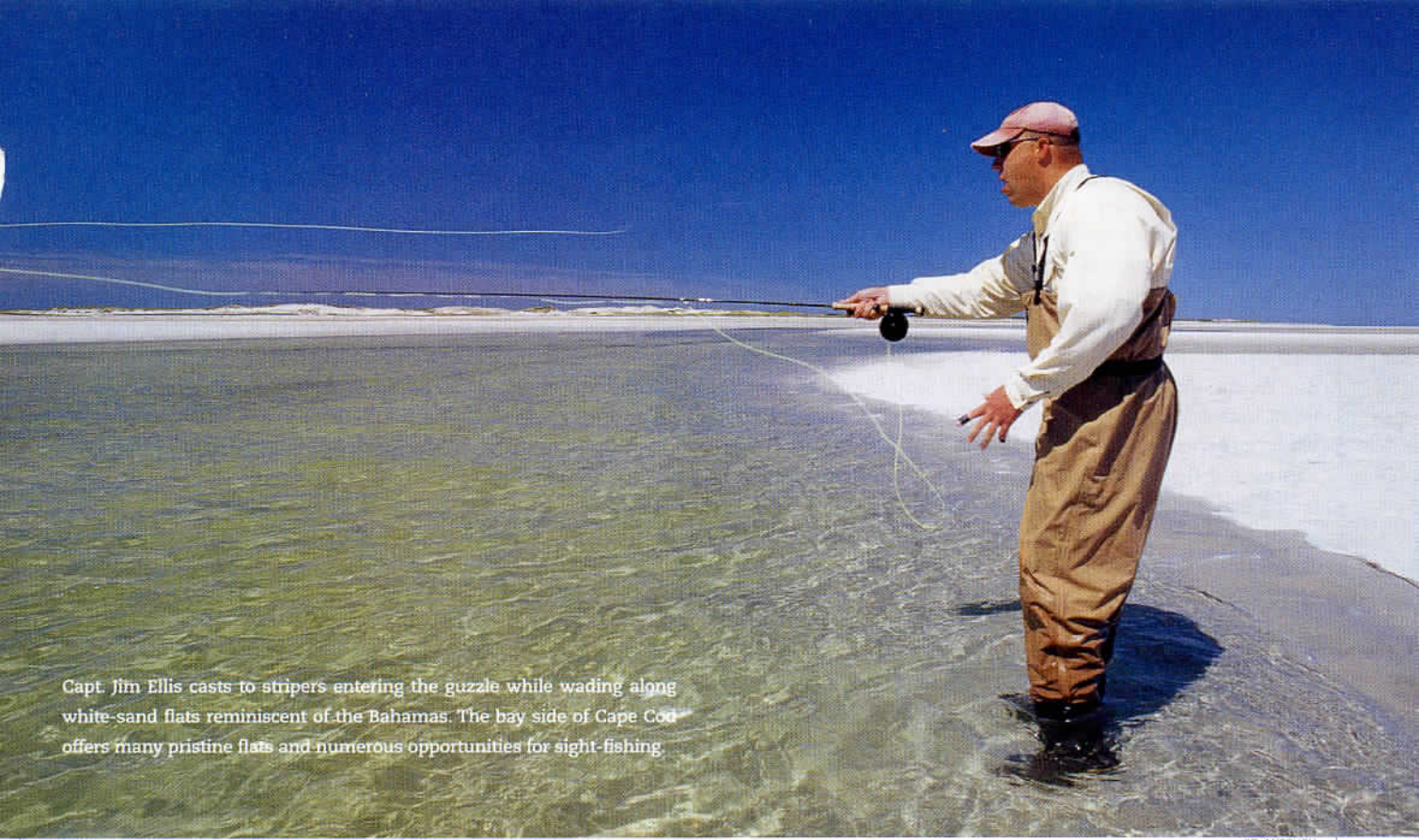
CARAPACE 2: Tan (or cream or gray) wool, tapered



Merkin Hackle Crab (Lady Calico Crab — purple)

HOOK: 2/0 TMC 811S

THREAD: Flat-Waxed Nylon, burgundy



Capt. Jim Ellis casts to stripers entering the gizzard while wading along white-sand flats reminiscent of the Bahamas. The bay side of Cape Cod offers many pristine flats and numerous opportunities for sight-fishing.

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EYES: Medium or large lead dumbbell eyes painted cream
CLAWS: Tuft of cream marabou, with a pair of purple saddle hackles and a pair of neck hackles (ginger variant) on top tied splayed
BODY: One purple rhea feather and one large ginger-variant neck hackle wrapped, followed by alternating bands of cream and rust Swiss Straw, tied figure-eight style, trimmed to a crab shape
LEGS: Three pairs of Sili-Legs (two amber/gold and one purple grizzly)



Merkin Hackle Crab (Lady Calico Crab — orange)

HOOK: 2/0 TMC 811S
THREAD: Flat-Waxed Nylon, shell pink
EYES: Medium or large lead dumbbell eyes painted cream
CLAWS: Tuft of cream marabou,

with two pairs of grizzly neck hackles (bleached ginger and orange) on top, tied splayed
BODY: Pearl-orange sparkle braid with a palmered orange rhea feather, followed by alternating bands of cream and orange sparkle yarn, tied figure-eight style, then combed out and trimmed to a crab shape
LEGS: Two pairs of brown grizzly Sili-Legs

Burrowing Sand Eel

HOOK: #1 Eagle Claws 254SS or Mustad Signature C68S SS
THREAD: Clear mono, fine
TAIL: Ginger-over-white ostrich herl with gold Sparkleflash in between, whipped into a loop with white 3/0 Monocord

BODY: Small pearl E-Z Body tubing, banded tan and olive with permanent marking pens and coated with Softex or Soft Body glue

EYES: 2.5EY gold prismatic
LEAD EYES: Small lead dumbbell (painted tan if desired)
OUTRIGGERS: 12- or 16-pound Mason
Note: After whipping the ostrich/flash bundle together, leave one of the 3/0 Monocord tag ends to pull the bundle through the E-Z Body tubing with a bobbin threader.

Pheasant Phlounder

HOOK: #2 Tiemco 811S or 800S
THREAD: 3/0 Monocord, brown or tan
EYES: Small or medium lead dumbbell eyes, tied in one-third of the way down the shank from the hook eye
FIRST WING: Cream or tan coyote guard hairs from the belly or tail, pushed down to have a flattened appearance
FIRST COLLAR: Two mottled grayish-blue pheasant feathers followed by a third pheasant feather of a brownish coloration, the first being the smallest of the three feathers, tied in back of the lead eyes and wrapped. The fibers should be gathered and tied in a "beard" style so that all the fibers are on the hook-point side of the shank.
SECOND WING: Brown or tan coyote guard hairs from the belly or tail, pushed down to have a flattened appearance
SECOND COLLAR: A brown marabou-like pheasant feather, followed by a smaller, golden-brown pheasant feather, tied in front of the lead eyes and wrapped — the fibers should be gathered and tied in a "beard" style so that all the fibers are on the hook-point side of the shank.
Note: Any pheasant feather or other plumage may be used so long as it comes close to the natural coloration of a juvenile flatfish.

WATCHING THESE BASS CIRCLING JUST BEYOND MY ROD TIP, I COULDN'T HELP THINKING THAT THIS HAD TO BE SOME OF THE FINEST SIGHT-FISHING ANYWHERE.

as it grew, stripers swam around our feet to follow the current. The gin-clear water and the stark-white bottom made these fish highly visible. All we had to do to catch them was walk the banks of the guzzle and cast to them. It was like sight-fishing trout in a stream.

As the guzzle widened, the bass fanned out in all directions, making things a bit more challenging. Ellis suggested we wade over to an adjacent flat that was almost completely exposed. A shallow basin roughly 60 feet across sat at the center of that sandbar, forming the area where the tide would enter. We set up on either side of the depression and waited. The water began to rush in and a small school of fish came up on the flat, hugging the center of the basin in the deepest part. Once again, these first fish readily took our flies, and almost any well-placed cast drew an immediate response. While the tide continued to rise, more and more fish arrived until the basin looked like a heavily stocked pond. At the peak of our fishing here, at least 20 nice-sized striped bass cruised within easy casting range.

VIRGIN TERRITORY AND GIANT TIDES

Watching these bass circling just beyond my rod tip, I couldn't help thinking that this had to be some of the finest sight-fishing anywhere. Sure, Monomoy gets all the attention

because those ocean-side flats are fantastic and well-known, but the fishing we experienced on the bay side of Cape Cod is equally good if not better. We fished around Barnstable Harbor, but there are many more shorelines yet to be explored, with additional shallow-water opportunities on the Brewster Flats and along Sunken Meadow Beach. Wellfleet Harbor is another gold mine, with prime real estate from unspoiled Jeremy Point right around to Lieutenant Island. Farther north, there are even more fishable areas in Truro and Provincetown Harbor.

The major difference in sight-fishing the bay-side flats of Cape Cod and the ocean side is the tidal range. The Atlantic side of the Cape has moderate-sized tides. For instance, the outside beaches at Chatham have an average tidal range of 6.7 feet, and Monomoy Point averages only 3.7 feet. That's nothing compared with the bay-side tides. Barnstable Harbor's tidal range averages near 9 feet, and Wellfleet Harbor's averages 10 feet — on the days around the full moon these can climb to 12 feet or more. These big tidal ranges have a positive effect on the fishing — they produce current. And while the currents run, stripers feed more aggressively than the fish on the ocean-side flats.

Because of the massive tidal changes, bay-side flats ebb and flood rapidly. A range of 12 feet in six hours means the

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Early spring on the flats means hundreds of sand eels — and when they show up, so do the bass, creating an ideal sight-fishing situation.

tide is rising on average 6 inches every 15 minutes, but this assumes that the tide comes in at a uniform rate. Actually, the tide runs slowly for a time and then suddenly surges. Both wading anglers and boaters must use caution when fishing the bay-side flats, and I strongly recommend that you hire a guide.

Gradually, the entire flat we were on flooded, scattering the stripers in all directions and making fishing difficult. We had to concentrate our efforts either on fish coming straight at us or on those crossing our line of sight. Casting at fish heading away or circling was a waste of time because they were nearly impossible to fool. Eventually the water deepened to

the point that we had to go back to the boat, but by then the fish had lockjaw anyway. Once again, all we had to do was pull up and head to another flat just starting to go under.

I wanted to take some photographs, so I ditched my rod in the boat and asked Ellis to get his. He quickly obliged. Together we walked along the water's edge until he spotted several stripers swimming down the beach toward us. They were out about 25 feet pushing a school of sand eels. He cast to them. Two fish immediately followed his fly, and a few more strips convinced one of them to eat. Ellis fought the fish as I snapped a few pictures. Looking back I could see that Phil was hooked up, too. Now that is what I call good fishing. 

Bayside Guides

Capt. R. Andrew Cummings, 508-349-0819,
www.outercapewaterman.com

Scott Dietrich (Kayak guide), 508-375-9000,
www.greatmarshkayaktours.com

Capt. Jim Ellis, 508-362-9108,
jre147@msn.com

Capt. Todd Fedeles, 508-420-1543

Capt. Steve Moore, 508-631-7506,
www.slamdancecharters.com

Capt. Terry Nugent,
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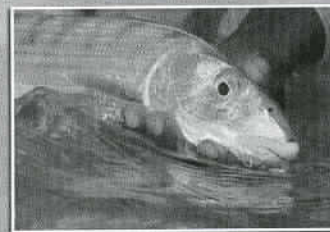
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