

At best, you get a couple of dozen shots a year at really **BIG STRIPERS.**

Half of those opportunities are coming up.

The author's methods work. His neighbor, Mark Alpert, caught this 40-inch striper from a Connecticut beach last October.



The odds of hooking a huge striper improve when the right tide comes at dawn or dusk, or during the night. In the author's experience, the best autumn tide is one before first light.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS
BY ED MITCHELL

Big Bass

FROM THE BEACH

HAVE YOU EVER HOOKED A BIG STRIPED BASS—ONE OF 20 POUNDS OR MORE—from the beach? If the answer's yes, you already know it's quite a rush: the power, the sheer weight, the sight of that shovel-shaped tail slapping the surf. If your answer is no, sit back and read on; I'm going to help you change that.

Plenty has already been written about the fundamentals of how to catch a big bass on a fly rod. I'll assume that you have already heard about the benefits of larger flies, the need for sharp hooks and strong knots, and so on. That frees us to focus on one critical aspect of the hunt for big bass: where and when to find them. Although no one can say with 100 percent certainty where and when big bass will show up, I think that what I am about to tell you can go a long way toward swinging the odds in your favor.



You'll need two things to follow this discussion. First, get a comprehensive tide book (or software), one that has not only the times of high and low tides, but the phases of the moon and the height of each tide as well. If you need a suggestion, I recommend *The Eldridge Tide Book*. Second, you should have detailed charts of your favorite piece of coastline. Got them? Then let's go.

WHEN TO HUNT FOR BIG BASS

Given the pressures of the workaday world, the single biggest challenge most anglers face is planning their time on the water wisely. If you're satisfied with schoolie bass, that's not very hard to do. But when you yearn for a striper longer than a yardstick, you'd best put on your thinking cap. The way to begin is

by identifying which months have the best fishing for big bass along your part of the coast.

Season

A big bass could latch on to your fly just about any time of year, but far and away the best times to catch a jumbo striper from shore are during the annual spring and fall migrations. Each of these periods is roughly six weeks long, but those six weeks aren't equally good. In both the spring and the fall, your best chance for a big striper comes near the end of the migratory surge. Big bass are the last to leave the spawning grounds, and therefore the last members of their tribe to hit the coastal highway. As a result, the biggest fish are not mixed in with the first surge of stripers that shoots up the coast in the spring.

You need to do a lot of homework before experiencing this moment. But the instant you feel "the power, the sheer weight" of a jumbo striper, all the work is justified.



Large stripers, those which have attained 10 or more years, make up only about 5 percent of the population. They are precious fish; release them quickly and with care.



And because of their tolerance for cold water, big bass are also the last ones to head south in the fall.

So what we really have is a roughly month-long window of opportunity in the spring and another month-long window in the fall. In southern New England, that means from late May to late June and again from late October to late November. If you fish farther north or south, you have to adjust those dates. In New Jersey, for instance, the best autumn fishing for oversize stripers happens from early November into early December; up in Maine, the fall big-bass season runs from early September into early October.

The Moons of Migration

At this point we have our hunt for big bass narrowed down to two 30-day seasons. Now let's try to take it one step further. Within each month-long window there are peak periods, times when the odds tip in your favor. Striped bass seem most active around the stronger tides of the new and full moons. Therefore, fishing during these moon tides increases your odds of meeting up with a big, hungry bass.

Open your tide book to the months in question and mark the day of each of those migration moons. (In the Eldridge book you'll find the phases of the moon listed in the back, often on page 233.) For example, in southern New England you would check off the last moon of May (new or full) and the two moons (new and full) of June, followed by the last moon of October and the two moons of November. Remember, as I mentioned before, you have to adjust this region by region. If you are fishing in Maine, I suggest the two moons of September and maybe the first moon of October. On the outer beaches of Cape Cod during the fall, I would pick the last moon of September and both moons of October, while on the south shore of Long Island I would opt for the moons of November. Farther south at Sandy Hook, New Jersey, the migration arrives later, and I would pick the two moons of November and the first moon of December.

The next step is to note that each moon coincides with at least six days on which the tides are above normal in height. Circle these days in your tide book. You now have defined approx-

imately 36 prime days (18 in the spring and 18 in the fall) to meet up with a trophy bass. But you're not done yet. If any moon does not have above-normal tides, that moon is in apogee. Apogee moons are those that occur when the moon is at its maximum distance from the earth. Unfortunately, an apogee-moon tide is really no stronger than a quarter-moon tide. And therefore I suggest that you cross that moon off the list. My guess is that you will lose at least one of the six moons you checked off, thereby reducing your prime-day total to 30.

Weather

Besides adjusting according to region, you need to adjust your fishing schedule around the weather. As a rule, warmer than normal weather makes for a longer season by kick-starting fishing earlier in the year and delaying the stripers' return to the south in the fall. A slightly cooler than normal spring delays good beach fishing by a week. An even colder spring may set beach action back two weeks or more—as many anglers discovered this year. At the other end of the season, a cold fall means the fishing starts and ends

earlier than usual. A warm fall causes the reverse. And so the weather pattern in each season can influence whether you should fish earlier or later during the month-long window.

Furthermore, in either spring or fall, the approach of a strong storm can trigger a brief but memorable blitz. In the spring these are likely to be thunderstorms; in the fall they're apt to be Nor'easters. Naturally, in both cases your personal safety is item one, so use common sense.

Time of Day

It's common knowledge that beach-bound anglers do better with big bass during low-light conditions. During the 30 prime days you identified in your tide book, you should concentrate on dusk, dawn, or night fishing. (When possible, of course. In the real world, you must often base your decision on when you're free to go fishing.) When all other things are equal, it has been my experience that dusk is a bit better than dawn in the spring. In the fall, dawn is without a doubt the better of the two.

For night fishing during the spring migration, late-night tides—those that occur between 11 P.M. and 1 A.M.—are, according to my experience, superior. In the late fall, that doesn't seem to be the case; at this time of year tides in early evening or just prior to first light seem to have the edge.

Is a new moon or full moon more productive at night? I think the answer depends on the depth of the water you intend to fish. Shore-based anglers typically work relatively shallow water. Here, a new moon is best. In these locations the light from a full moon penetrates a fair percentage of the water column and seems to discourage big bass from aggressively feeding. Over deeper water, the light from a full moon does not reach the fish, and therefore is not a problem.

WHERE TO LOOK

Now you have a good idea when to fish; all that remains is to decide where. So break out the charts. It is a cruel fact of life that quality and quantity rarely go hand in hand, and striped fishing is no exception. A place where you regularly

hook schoolies is usually not a place to catch bruiser bass. Focusing on big bass usually means forgoing the steady action supplied by smaller bass. This is a bitter pill to swallow; many anglers can't bring themselves to do it. That's understandable. But if big bass are your game, you've got to take the medicine.

The Hunting Grounds

Avoid extremely shallow or very warm water. Concentrate your efforts on windy, exposed locations with some depth or at least deep water nearby. These are more likely to hold large stripers. Very often, the migration of big striped bass is closely coordinated with the migration of key forage fish, and large bass are frequently found where schools of migratory bait tend to congregate. Two types of shoreline areas perfectly fit this requirement. An inlet or river mouth, along with its adjoining beaches, is one of them. The other one is a point of land.

With your charts open, circle the various inlets and points within driving range. Now look back to your tide

(Continued on page 74)

SPEAKING UP FOR BIGGER BASS

If you want more big bass in your life, you're going to have to speak up. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission's (ASMFC) Striped Bass Management Board is deciding on management goals for the future of this important species. The document that will contain these goals is called Amendment Six to the Striped Bass Management Plan. One possible direction for this plan would be to work toward increasing the number of larger bass in the population.

At the moment, striped stocks are almost entirely made up of the 1993 and 1996 year classes. That means the bulk of the fish you encounter are roughly between 22 and 28 inches in length and weigh no more than 8 pounds. The number of bass 10 years old and older is a relatively small component of the total population, on the order of 5 percent or so. I think it was once 24 percent or thereabouts.

If you live in a coastal state, contact the head of your state's fisheries department and request that he or she push for the big-bass objective. As I see it, we need the ASMFC Management Board to do three things. First, we must reduce the harvest of bigger bass. Second, we must ensure that the 1993 year class is not heavily harvested. After all, those stripers are our only hope for the immediate future.

Third, the Striped Bass Management Board, and the ASMFC in general, have to change their ways. Since day one they have managed each species in a vacuum, as if marine creatures were in no way interdependent. It is high time for the ASMFC to face the fact that predator species can remain healthy and robust only if forage is adequate. That might sound obvious, but don't expect fisheries-management people to agree. Old ways, even those that have consistently failed, die hard.

Given that striped bass are highly opportunistic, capable of chewing on a great many things, some managers will argue that bass always have something to eat. But common sense dictates that the type of forage plays a critical role in how rapidly bass pack on the pounds. Stripers forced to scrounge a living off the bottom, eating things such as lady crabs and baby flounder, are unlikely to bulk up, whereas bass surrounded by oily, schooling bait such as menhaden are apt to grow like wildfire. If we are to have more heavy-weight bass we must reduce the commercial harvest of essential forage fish. Otherwise, the best we can ever hope to see is a lot of long, lean stripers.

—Ed Mitchell

Big Bass from the Beach

(Continued from page 41)

book, and look up the time of tide for these spots during the prime days we discussed. Pay particular attention to how the times of the tides relate to dusk, dawn, or night. At inlets and river mouths you probably want an ebbing flow, but remember that the current may actually start one, two, or even three hours after the time of high tide. The right tide for a point of land is hard to generalize. Some fish better on the flood, some on the ebb. But whatever you pick, once again note how the time of the tide compares to the light level.

During the spring, inlets and river mouths usually outproduce points. In the fall, however, things are different. Typically, forage schools first show in the inlets and river mouths. After a time they move to the adjacent beaches, and then they stage off the points before finally migrating away from shore. Try to follow along.

Mass for Big Bass?

Unfortunately, big stripers are not equally distributed along the Atlantic coast. Like it or not, choosing the

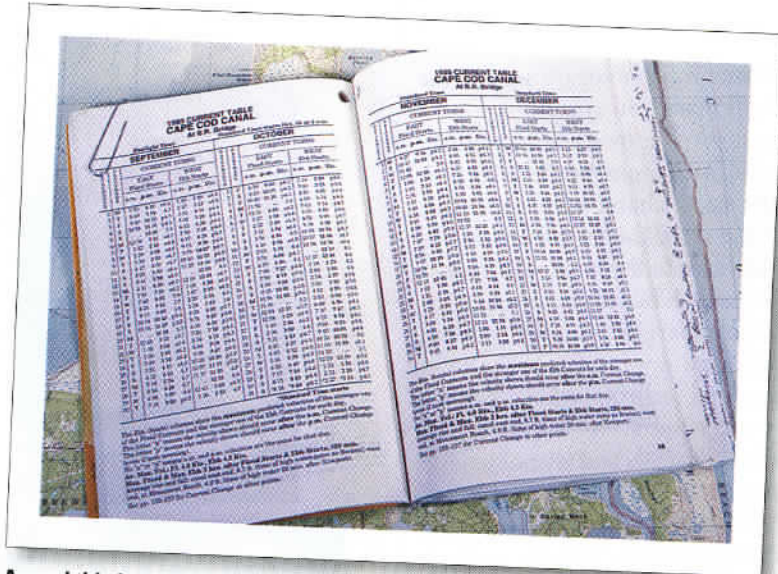
state in which you plan to fish may determine your chances of hooking a truly big bass.

Several years ago the ASMFC began estimating the size of striped stocks using a mathematical model called a Virtual Population Analysis, or VPA. This VPA calculates the number of fish in various age groups. It also estimates the number of fish of various ages that were landed in each state. If you look at those numbers, you immediately see that anglers in some states did far better than anglers in other states.

A PLAN OF ATTACK FOR AUTUMN STRIPERS

- Identify the month-long window when big bass migrate through the area you intend to fish. Up in Maine, jumbo stripers may pass through in September; along the New Jersey shore, they might not show up until early December.
- Find the new and full moons during that 30-day window. In your tide book, determine which moons are accompanied by tides that are higher or lower than normal in the area you plan to fish. Rule out a new or full moon in apogee, since it won't produce higher-than-average tides.
- Study detailed charts of the coastline where you want to fish. Mark the inlets, estuaries, and points; bait tends to congregate at these spots. The ideal spots have deeper water nearby.
- Using your tide book, find when higher-than-normal tides will occur at night or just before dawn at the places you marked on your charts. Those times at those spots offer your best chances of hooking a big striper.
- Plan your trip and make sure that all your gear is in order. Be sure to have fresh, strong leaders and big flies with very sharp hooks.
- Keep an eye on the weather. A north wind makes for low surf and often brings bait and predators close to the beach. An approaching storm can trigger a feeding binge.

ILLUSTRATION: LARRY LARGAY



A good tide book—one that includes the phases of the moon and the heights of the tides—will tell you when to hunt trophy stripers. Detailed charts will help you to determine where.

The VPA counts bass according to age, not length. Let's assume that big bass are at least 10 years old. In years when forage is highly abundant, such a fish might weigh 30 pounds, but in lean years a 10-year-old might weigh less than 20.

In 1998, according to the VPA, recreational anglers in Massachusetts landed 93,532 bass age 10 and older. (Please note that this number includes fish released.) By comparison, Connecticut's recreational anglers landed 18,408, and Rhode Island's anglers got 11,823. New Hampshire scored 2,545 stripers at least 10 years old, and anglers in Maine got 1,504. Get the picture?

Does any other place look good for big bass? Surprise, surprise: Maryland, the state that has screamed for years that it catches so few large bass that it has to have a lower creel size than the rest of the coast. For the record, in 1998 Maryland's recreational anglers landed 21,999 bass age 10 and older. That's more than Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Maine combined.

Any chance the VPA is off? Sure, but even if those numbers are only half right, when it comes to big bass from the beach, Massachusetts is the land of milk and honey.



Ed Mitchell is the author of *Fly Rodding the Coast* (Stackpole Books), a book every inshore fly fisherman should read. He's also an ardent CCA member. At the moment, Ed is working on another book, also to be published by Stackpole; the working title is *Fly Fishing the Saltwater Shoreline*.