



The author landed this 40-inch striper on a 6-weight rod by applying proper fighting technique (and giving chase when necessary). Although 6-weights are more suitable for fish under 10 pounds, the modern saltwater six can hold its own even with bruisers like this.

COURTESY ED MITCHELL



The Salty Six

A 6-weight may seem a little light for salt water, but sturdy modern designs mean that one of these finely tuned rods now deserves a place in your quiver.

by Ed Mitchell

The morning had gone well. We'd spent it sight-casting for striped bass in the back of a cove, and although the fish weren't monsters, they were fun and challenging, ranging from 24 to 28 inches. By late morning, however, the tide and the action had waned. So I slid the oars into the water and rowed us out toward the mouth of the cove in the hope of finding another bite.

Minutes later we drifted over a basin of waist-deep water, where we'd caught several stripers the day before. I drew in the oars and released the anchor rope. My buddy, Phil, and I stood up to scan the water. Zilch.

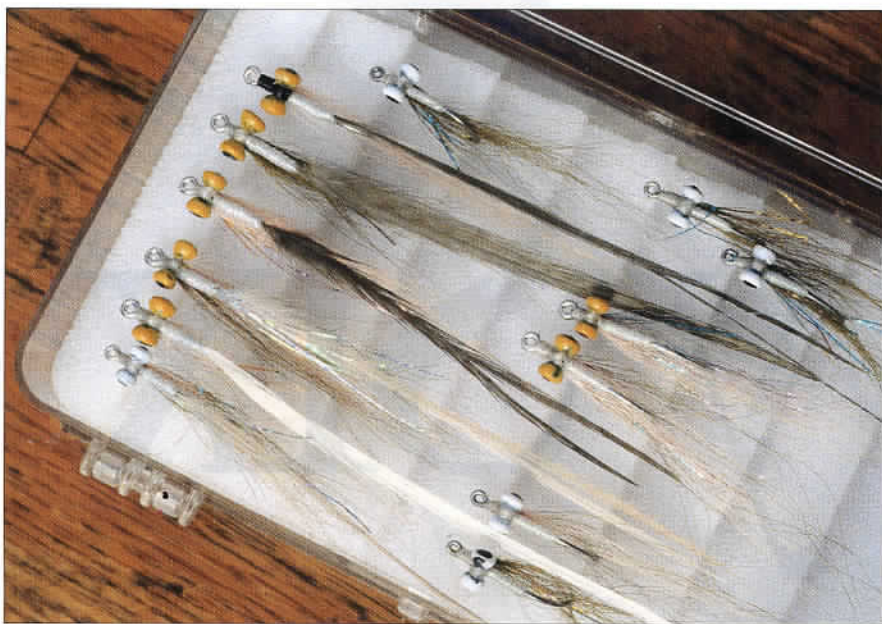
After several minutes of searching, I sat down and reluctantly started to dip the oars back in the water when I spied a dorsal fin zigzagging toward me, flashing like a mirror in the sun. As the bass drew closer, I dropped some feathers ahead of it, let them settle, and started to strip. The fin submerged, and a bow wake bore down on the fly.

"Phil, yank the anchor," I shouted, as the reel screamed. "Row!"

Phil leapt to the oars as the striper charged toward a neighboring flat. On the far side ran

a deep, swift channel, and if this bad boy reached it ... sayonara.

Phil rowed over to the flat, and I jumped ship. Now on foot and able to apply maximum pressure, I stopped the beast in its tracks. Reeling fast, I moved forward to close the gap as the fish



Lighter rods require lighter flies. Try tying baitfish patterns on smaller hooks, sizes 2 to 6, and leaving off the epoxy to reduce weight. They will be easier to cast and minimize foul ups

slowly circled, staring at me with its saucer-size eyes. One more move, and at last I gripped a striper of 40-plus inches—caught on a 6-weight fly rod.

Now, I don't make a habit of hunting huge fish on super-light tackle; this was purely an accident. When big bass are a likely bet, hand me my trusty 10-weight. But with that said, for the last two years I have been having a blast fishing for school-size bass and blues with a 6-weight. And those experiences, along with the occasional big fish, have proved that, when used properly, a "salty six" is not only an effective tool, it is also pure excitement.

Saltwater Sixes

Don't confuse a saltwater 6-weight with its freshwater counterpart. It is a different smoke all together. Werner Catsman, general manager of Scott Rods, put it this way: "Our saltwater six weight is not just a souped up freshwater rod. We designed it with saltwater tapers, thicker walls, and a wider diameter. It's built to do the job." The same could be said of most major rod manufacturers that now offer 6-weights for the salt.

Freshwater sixes are typically designed to cast short to moderate distances and have the soft action necessary to protect lighter tippets. A saltwater 6-weight has a good deal more backbone and is capable of casting the entire fly line. It also is equipped with a fighting butt, larger guides, and corrosion-proof hardware.

These last features entail design considerations that further separate saltwater from freshwater rods. "A saltwater six carries heavier guides and heavier hardware," says Sage rod designer Jerry Siem. "So we take that extra

weight into account when designing the rod so it will "recover" (cast) properly. The saltwater six also has to be more durable and develop higher line speed than its freshwater cousin."

My rod is an older Scott STS, and I love it, but many rod manufacturers now build 6-weights for the brine. I have not cast them all and can't tell you how they stack up. However, I have caught stripers on the saltwater version of Sage's TCR 6-weight, and like my Scott, this rod is light in the hand yet able to fire off gobs of line. I have also sight-fished for stripers with St. Croix's Legend Elite 10-foot 6-weight. It is a fine-casting rod as well, and I found the extra length a bonus in picking up and mending line. Assuming the rest of the 6-weight market supplies additional variety, regardless of your casting style or budget, there is a salty six out there just for you.

Where 6-Weights Shine

Common sense tells you that a 6-weight has limitations. You can't ask them to lift chunky critters out of the depths, nor can you pry big fish out of a rip. I don't use a 6-weight where fish have to be steered away from sharp obstacles, such as pilings and bridge abutments. And if the wind is howling, or when big, heavy flies are the right medicine, I opt for beefier tackle and leave the 6-weight at home.

Six weights perform best in shallow, protected bays and coves, flats, salt ponds, lagoons, tidal creeks, and some coastal rivers where the fish are typically 10 pounds or less. All told, that's quite a bit of angling. And given their light weight, these rods also make long sessions of blind casting a breeze, although that is not their strongest suit.












A saltwater six is primarily a sight-fishing tool, permitting you to make delicate presentations that fool even spooky fish. I know from experience that they work on northeastern flats, so I asked Miami-based *SFF* columnist Chico Fernandez how sixes fare in southern salt waters. "Six-weights are my favorite weight rod for

THE 6-WEIGHT WHIPPIN'

When fishing a 6-weight in shallow water, you don't have to fight fish straight up and down, but you still have to stop fish from burning across the horizon. Having taught saltwater fly-fishing for years, I know that many anglers do not understand how to properly pressure a strong fish even with a 10-weight fly rod. Obviously a 6-weight is going to compound the challenge. Instead of stopping a fish with proper technique after one or two runs, the fish may make four or more. Now that fish is totally exhausted and difficult to release alive.

Here's the problem. Some anglers bend the rod into a J, essentially fighting a fish off the upper third of the blank. This method may work with a very small fish, but a big fish is going to give you serious trouble. You must bend the rod through the middle; that's where the power of the rod lies.

Try the following exercise. Hold a fly rod at your side waist high with the tip pointed directly at the tippet tied to a fixed object, preferably a spring scale. Reel up any slack. Now pinch the line to the grip and, without bending your wrist, lift the rod up using your bicep. Note the parabolic shape the rod takes. When done correctly, a 10-weight rod quickly generates 2 to 3 pounds of pressure, and 4 or 5 in the hands of an expert. A 6-weight saltwater fly rod can't match those numbers, but it can create 1 to 1.25 pounds of force. That may not sound like a lot, but for fish less than 10 pounds, a steady pound of pull is a workout indeed. —E. M.

	Make	Rod Line	Model	Length	Weight (oz.)	Pieces	MSRP
	*Albright	EXS SRS	906-4SW	9'	4.3	4	\$425
	St. Croix	Legend Elite	E906-4SW	9'	3.6	4	\$520
	St. Croix	Legend Ultra	U906-4SW	9'	3.6	4	\$310
	Orvis	T3	906-4	9'	4.25	4	\$625
	Sage	TCR	691-4	9'	3.63	4	\$710
	Sage	Xi2	690-4	9'	3.88	4	\$620
	Abel	FF	906-4	9'	N/A	4	\$490
	Scott	S3s	906-4	9'	3.8	4	\$490
	Temple Fork Outfitters	XTiCr	06 90	9'	4.8	4	\$250
	Thomas & Thomas	Helix	906S-4	9'	4.31	4	\$635
	Thomas & Thomas	Horizon II	906S-4	9'	4.42	4	\$635

*Also available in 3-piece for \$395

tailing bones or redfish with small flies and on super calm days," he says, noting that on some heavily pressured waters in South Florida, a 6-weight is the only way to fool educated fish.

Lines, Leaders, and Flies

Six-weight rods have long been popular in fresh water; therefore, not all 6-weight fly lines are made with salt water in mind. Thirty-foot, weight-forward tapers may be fine for trout fishing, but you want at least a 40-foot taper in the brine. And opt for lines incorporating the latest coatings intended to increase distance. A floating line and a clear intermediate should suffice, but I also like to pack a spool with a sinking line. There are times in shallow water when you need to deliver the fly right to the bottom. In the early spring and late fall, for example, striped bass stay low, and you either deliver the goods right in their face or you don't get a bite.

With a floating line, I use a 9-foot leader tapered to a 10-pound tippet. With a clear intermediate, I do the same but shorten things up to 7 or 8 feet. And with a sinking line I use a straight 5-foot section of 10- or 12-pound test, which is usually all I need.

You must also match a 6-weight to the proper fly. I rely on patterns in sizes 2 through 6, and occasionally I'll chuck a size 1.

These smaller irons hold fish very well (I landed the aforementioned big striper on one) and are perfect for matching juvenile forage fish, shrimps, worms, and other small prey. Yes, you can launch a 1/0 Deceiver, but consider the following. A 1/0 Deceiver with a small epoxy head tips the scales at about 16 grains. I tie a Deceiver almost as long on a size 2 hook. Sans epoxy, it is a svelte 9 grains, is smoother to cast, and achieves greater distance.

Be very careful with weighted flies, especially if you use a 200-grain Teeny-type sinking line. Remember, the first 30 feet of a standard 6-weight line is 160 grains, so the rod is already overloaded. A fully dressed 1/0 Clouser, for instance, would add another 30 grains. That's too much weight. A size 4 Clouser is just half that.

Let me offer a few more tips on fishing 6-weights. Never set the hook with the rod tip; it's far too light. Set the hook with the line. Similarly, some casters are in the habit of driving a saltwater fly rod pretty hard. Back off a bit here. Pushing a 6-weight won't get you any more distance, and accuracy suffers. If you need more distance, try lengthening your casting stroke. Nor can a 6-weight take the rough handling a 10-weight is capable of enduring. So

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take your time doing normal operations, such as stringing the rod up, and be sure to place it in the tube when not in use.

When on the water, these 6-weights seem to do just fine secured horizontally under the gunwale. But in a vertical rod holder their light weight makes them more prone to bouncing around.

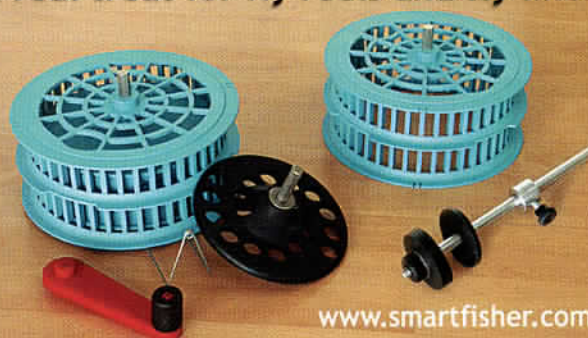
A **saltwater six** is a sight-fishing gem, permitting you to make delicate presentations that fool even spooky fish.

Secure them well. When I'm fishing from shore and driving from spot to spot, I put rods in a roof rack on my Jeep. Under way, the tip of a 10-weight doesn't sway much, but the six's tip can whip about wildly in a crosswind. So when traveling any distance on the highway, I prefer to put the six inside the truck. Lastly, compared with its larger counterparts, the first stripping guide on a 6-weight is relatively small and may have trouble passing tangles. So avoid heavy tippets; a strong fish charging off could flatten a guide.

All that said, modern components and manufacturing techniques have made the 6-weight a viable and versatile part of today's saltwater rod quiver. Used in their proper context and treated with respect, a salty six can only add to the fly fisherman's eternal quest to always match a great rod to a great fish. ■

Ed Mitchell is the author of Fly Rodding Estuaries (2003 Stackpole Books). He lives and writes in Wethersfield, Connecticut.

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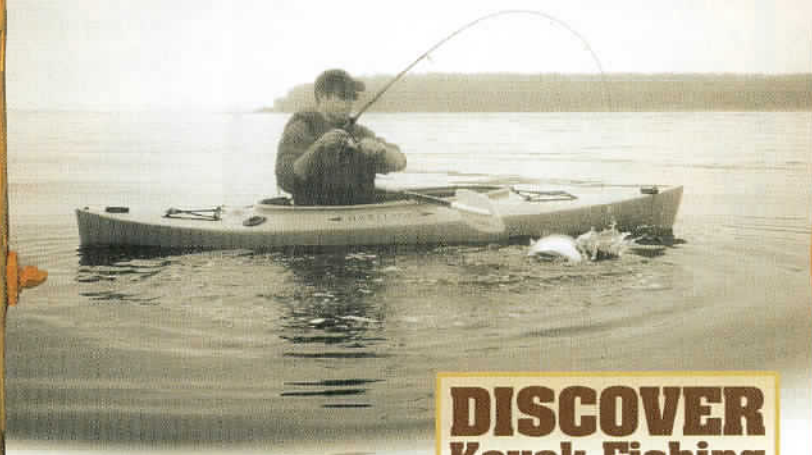
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David Gonville reels in another five-pound bluefish on Narragansett Bay. Photo: David Hadden