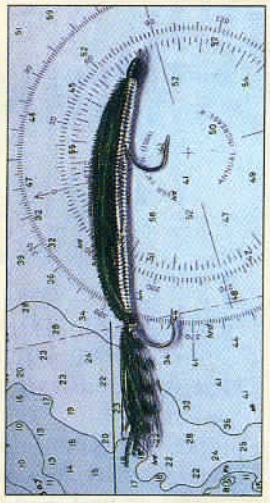
Sand Eels



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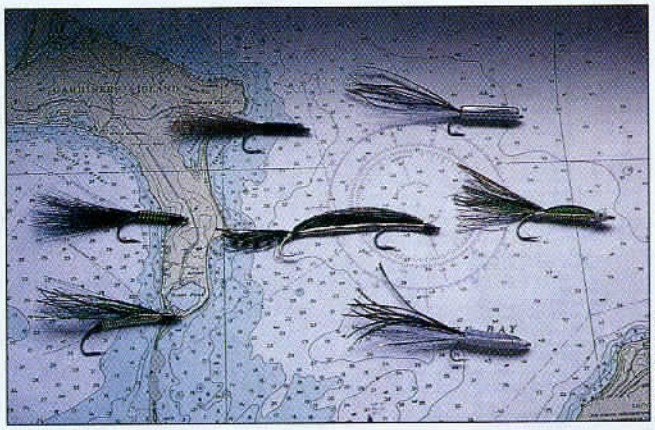
Killing patterns to imitate the foods bluefish and stripers eat near shore



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WITH THE INCOMING tide a fog came over the deep water before me. The rushing waters of the inlet pulled steadily at my feet where the channel swung tight to the beach and the bottom dropped away quickly. Within several yards of shore, the water was more than 15 feet deep, yet the surface was deceptively smooth. I had to wade carefully.

In the distance I saw a small patch of water covered with dimples, as if it were somehow raining over only an isolated spot. The patch moved ever so slowly uptide toward me, and as it neared, I stopped casting to take a closer look. Just beneath the surface was a dark, tightly packed school of small fish. I saw occasional flashes of silver as the fish twisted and turned in the current. They were sand eels, and clearly they were feeding. The school progressed another 30 feet above me, before turning and dropping back. I bent over and watched them as they raced by, this time aided by the moving water. Once they moved below a short distance, the sand eels swung back into the tide and started the whole process again.

The presence of sand eels is always a hopeful sign to North Atlantic coast fly rodders. Many gamefish, including bluefish, stripers, and bonito, love to eat sand eels (they're never far from the little creatures), and sand eels are easy to match with a fly. Unlike many other marine baitfish, such as menhaden and herring, sand eels are small, slender, and narrow. Their basic body shape and size is perfectly suited to a dressed hook. I caught my first fly-rod stripers because of the presence of sand eels, and I have loved the little baitfish for it ever since.

That's No Eel

SAND EELS, SOMETIMES CALLED sand lances, are not eels at all. Instead, they are fish of the genus *Ammodytes*, whose elongated shape, long dorsal and anal fin give it an eel-like appearance. There are two species in the waters of the northwest Atlantic: *Ammodytes dubius* and *Ammodytes americanus*. Both are extremely valuable members of our marine ecosystem, supplying a rich food source for both larger fish and birds. *Ammodytes dubius* is strictly an offshore species, and as such is only of passing interest to the fly rodder. *Ammodytes americanus*, on the other hand, is a common resident of our estuaries and coastline and is found in the deep waters off the continental shelf.

A sand eel is a slim yet attractive fish. Its head is slightly long for its body, and it has a decidedly pointed snout and large eyes. Its back is dark, varying in color from olive to brown to bluish-green. In contrast

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Live sand eels (right) attract stripers, bluefish, and bonito into coastal areas such as the waters around Martha's Vinyard (left). The patterns above are (top row, left to right) Tabory Basic Eel, Tabory Floating Eel; (middle row, left to right) Percy Sand Eel, Church Tandem Sand Eel, Harris Eel; (bottom row, left to right) Easy Eel, Tabory Sinking Sand Eel. The pattern inset at left is a Church Tandem Sand Eel.

Sand Eels

Basic Sand Eel

by Lou Tabory

HOOK: #2/0 to #3/0 3XL.
THREAD: Dark gray.
BODY: Black wool tightly wound, over lead if desired.
HEAD: Gray thread.
TAIL: Brown bucktail, 1 1/2 inches long.

Harris Sand Eel

by Bill Hubbard

HOOK: #2 to #6 8XL ring-eye, or lash the shank from one hook to another.
THREAD: White.
BODY: 3/16 silver mylar tubing over lead wire.
WING: Three strands of pearl Flashabou on each side and six strands of olive bucktail on top; extend both to tail and tie down.
THROAT (optional): Scarlet hackle tied in beard style.
HEAD: Coated with clear cement.
EYES: Epoxy plastic eyes or paint.

its flanks are the brightest silver with a beautiful iridescent sheen, and its belly is white. Its dorsal fin is long and continues nearly the entire length of the back, stopping just short of the tail; a long anal fin travels as far back.

Americanus spawns widely over the North Atlantic, covering thousands of miles from Cape Hatteras in the south, northward to the Canadian Maritime provinces. Offshore it reaches a maximum length of nine inches, but inshore, where anglers most often encounter them, *americanus* is only occasionally greater than six inches; more commonly the baitfish are 4 1/4 inches or less.

Locality plays a role, too. In Long Island Sound, a short fly of two to three inches is accurate. Studies have failed to find *americanus* of greater than three years of age in those waters. Apparently the Sound is not conducive to older adults. In fact, three-fourths of the population is one year or younger.

Farther north, along the open Atlantic Coast of the Cape and up to Maine, *americanus* reaches six years of age. Consequently the sand eels there are on average larger by about a full inch. Fly rodders should carry patterns at least four inches long; five- or six-inch flies are also useful if you are fishing in an area with larger sand eels.

The seasons also have some minor effect on the size of the sand eels. Late in the summer the general population at any location will be slightly longer than in the previous spring.

Sand eels prefer to travel in large schools. They feed primarily on plankton and spend much of their time relatively high in the water column. Research has shown some deep bottom feeding for small snails and small clams, but it is likely that this occurs only during times of scarce plankton.

Studies in European waters of a close relative, *Ammodytes marinus*, found that this sand eel feeds only in daylight. Conversely, other studies done in American waters found that, offshore, *americanus* can feed around the clock. Yet it is probable that sand eels are primarily sight feeders and that night activity is limited. As evening approaches on the coast, schools of sand eels literally bury themselves in the sand, often very close to the water's edge, as a defense against such predators as striped bass. As a result, sand eels avoid areas of hard or rocky bottom, where they cannot burrow at a moment's notice. Bottoms of soft mud or sand are a must for sand eels. Just prior to daybreak, the sand eels emerge from the bottom and form schools to undertake the day's feeding.

ED MITCHELL PHOTOS

Any estuary or river mouth or beach with a sand or mud bottom is a potential sand-eel location where larger gamefish can go to feed. Late evening and at night, especially during the warmer months, are excellent times to fish sand-eel imitations for stripers (left), bluefish, and other gamefish.

Sand-eel spawning starts in autumn, peaks by December, and ends by February. Each prolific female can carry 2,000 to 14,000 eggs, depending on its size. Hatching takes place from December to March, just prior to the first plankton bloom of the year. *Americanus* populations, like many of our marine fish, seem to go through periods of boom and bust. For example, in Long Island Sound 1965 and 1966, as well as 1978 and 1979, were years of high population. Yet from 1971 to 1974 and again from 1980 to 1983 there were marked declines. These cycles are not fully understood; there are many factors that might play a role, including predation, local water conditions, winter weather, and variations in water salinity.

Fly Patterns

SALTWATER FLY RODDERS along the northeast coast have long understood the value of a good sand-eel fly. Yet because this type of fly fishing is still developing and just beginning to attract a large number of anglers, patterns have developed slowly. One of the first widely used sand-eel flies was Bub Church's Tandem Sand Eel. It can be found in Kenneth Bay's 1972 book, *Salt Water Flies*. The release two years later of Lefty Kreh's book *Fly Fishing in Salt Water* marked a growing momentum in what Joe Brooks called the sport of "willow wanding the salt." Since then, a number of

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SINKING SAND EEL

by Lou Tabory

HOOK: Mustad 92608 stainless #2 to #4/0.

BODY: Lead wire covered with mylar tubing. Tie peacock herl down over the tubing and coat both with cement. Form a silicone sealant body by hand. Coat your hands with Vaseline before shaping the sealant.

TAIL: Silver mylar strips, white bucktail topped with peacock herl long enough to extend forward over the mylar tubing.

Sand Eels . . .

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sand-eel flies both old and new have come to light. And Lefty's latest book, *Salt Water Fly Patterns*, is another great help to coastal anglers.

I've listed six of the most common sand-eel patterns. Also included is a seventh fly, which I have named the Easy Eel. I hesitate to call it my own pattern, since I am sure that many other anglers have tied something similar. The key to a successful sand-eel pattern is to tie it slim or sparse. The basic color scheme varies, but it is most often based on the natural with a dark top and brighter sides. Flies intended for night fishing should be all black. The average hook size is #1/0, and most anglers prefer stainless hooks. I have caught fish on #8 to #3/0 sand-eel patterns.

The recipe for Bub Church's Sand Eel has been published in two versions. The first used badger hackle as a wing, and the second substituted peacock herl. Either way the fly catches fish, and the tandem approach allows you to make a long fly. If the fly has any shortcomings, they would be that it is a bit more time consuming to tie and both wing materials are fragile.

For Lou Tabory's Floating Sand Eel I substitute balsa-wood for the surfboard foam Tabory uses. The balsa-wood works well and is easier to find. My favorite color for this fly is all black; it can be a deadly pattern over shallow beaches at night.

Bub Church's Sand Eel

HOOK: #2 to #1/0; same front and back.
THREAD: Red or black.
BODY: Hooks in tandem using 30-pound mono or wire; mylar tubing; average body length is four inches.
WING: Badger hackle or peacock herl tied down both hooks.
TAIL: Grizzly hackle tips.
THROAT (optional): Peacock sword strands.

Tabory's Floating Sand Eel

HOOK: Mustad 92608 stainless, #2/0 (remember to straighten the bend before tying).
BODY: 1/4- to 3/8-inch square of surfboard foam nearly the length of the hook shank. Epoxy it onto the hook and coat it with epoxy before painting.
TAIL: Mylar strands, bucktail, and peacock herl extending back about the length of the hook shank.

Percy's Sand Eel

HOOK: #2 to #2/0 stainless.
BODY: Individual insulated telephone wire wound on tightly (or substitute

similar fly-tying materials).
RIB: Fine silver wire.
TAIL: Two to three inches of straight bucktail.

The Easy Eel

HOOK: #1/0 to #3/0 stainless.
THREAD: Olive or black.
BODY: Lead wire covered with silver mylar tubing (or white chenille; black for night fishing).
WING: Sparse black FisHair over a few strands of Crystal Flash.

Where and When

While sand eels can be found both inshore and offshore, it is the former that interests most fly rodders. Begin looking for activity around June in New England. Farther south and near power plants that release warm water the season starts sooner.

Once the action begins, it generally continues through the summer. Any estuary or river mouth or beach with a sand or mud bottom is a potential sand-eel location. Short of actually seeing schools, there are a number of common clues that can help you locate sand eels. Terns driving hard at dawn and dusk is number one in my book. If they seem to be catching something small and hard to see, suspect sand eels. Gulls digging at the water's edge during a retreating tide is another possible sign. Sunrise and sunset are the prime times. Dig with your hands right where the birds are most active. You will probably come up with a handful of sand eels.

A third way I find places with sand eels is to ask local surfcasters where they have the most action on their "teaser" or "Red Gill." They use these on droppers in front of larger plugs to take fish that are feeding on sand eels. If the fish are hitting the smaller artificials, fly rodders are likely to be in business, too.

Another indicator is rarely seen, but if you can find it, you will enjoy some fantastic fishing. When sand-eel populations are heavy along a shallow beach, stripers can come in with a rising night tide and dig for them with their blunt snounts. I have seen hundreds of bass with their tails and backs out of water, rooting like bonefish. At times like this you can wade right over to them and every cast can bring a quick response. Last July Phil Farnsworth and I came upon such a situation. We hooked and released over 60 schoolie stripers, with half a dozen fish weighing near 15 pounds, before the dawn pushed them out. It was a night we will never forget.

Fishing Sand-eel Flies

Once you are reasonably certain you have located sand eels, the next step is to determine when the predators will likely show to meet them. Striped bass and bluefish are well aware that sand eels move into shallow water at dusk to bed down. This is a vulnerable moment for the eels, because if they fail to pick a spot and burrow in quickly, the gamefish will herd them against the shoreline. The same is true just prior to dawn as the sand eels emerge. These are the best times to cast flies; the fish will be close to shore and likely to show themselves with swirls. Dawn has the edge in most locations.

If the sand eels are thick, you may have trouble getting a strike. Switching to a sinking line often helps, because it gets your fly under the sand eels to where the fish can more easily spot it. Night fishing, especially during the warmest months, is always a good idea. If the water over which you plan to fish is less than 15 feet deep and the night is calm, a floating fly can be deadly. Both bluefish and stripers have excellent overhead vision and can quickly find your offering.

The best retrieve during any of these times is what I will call the "hand-over-hand" method. Instead of stripping the fly back in the conventional manner, after I cast I place the rod high under my casting arm. Then I reach forward with either hand, grasp the line just short of the stripping guide, and pull down slowly while bringing the other hand up. The idea is to produce a slow, steady, and continuous retrieve.

The hand-over-hand method has several advantages. It produces a more natural swimming motion. Sometimes it is the only way to get a strike. And when you are night fishing, stripers will lightly pick up your fly and continue swimming toward you. If the motion of the fly is continuous, your contact with the fly is continuous. You can feel the change in resistance no matter how small. Also, you can hook a fish quickly and solidly by simply pulling on the line. It's a direct hit. Remember to keep the rod parallel to the water or pointed slightly down at all times during the retrieve. A final advantage to this method is not for sand-eel flies, yet it bears mentioning. Some fish, like blues, small tuna, and barracuda, love to take fast-moving artificials. The hand-over-hand method makes moving a fly at top speed relatively easy.

Ed Mitchell, of West Hartford, Connecticut, is an artist, a college professor, and an avid saltwater fly fisherman.