

# STRIPED

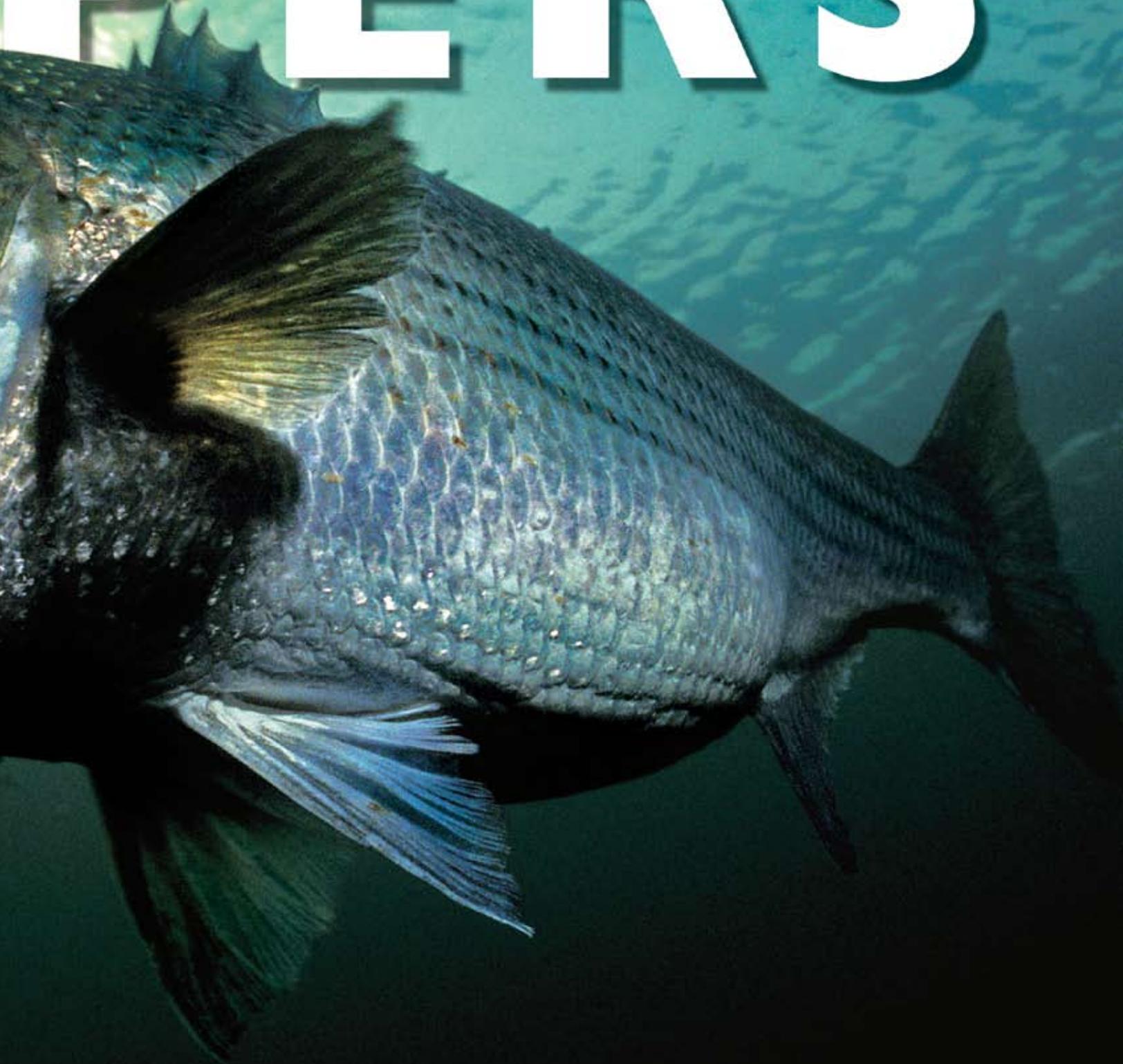


*Predatory sportfish prowl New Hampshire's coastal waters during seasonal migration*

BY KEVIN SULLIVAN

***A**s the sun dips below the shoreline treetops, I arrive at the confluence of the Piscataqua River and Little Bay. Another long summer day on the job has ended, and I'm doing what I love most – fishing! I pass beneath the General Sullivan Bridge and throttle up to race to my current “honey hole,” just 50 yards from shore. Intent on striped bass, I position the bow of my boat up-tide in the eddy of a moored lobster boat. I kill the engine, and the sounds of rushing water and gulls fill my ears. The drift begins and the depth sounder indicates 20 feet, 15 feet, then 10 feet...*

# P E R S





©ETHAN GORDON PHOTO

*Each spring thousands of blueback herring and alewife, collectively known as river herring, migrate up N.H.'s coastal rivers to spawn. Stripers follow in hot pursuit, gorging themselves where the herring congregate below the dams.*

“We’re approaching the ridge; drop your line,” I shout to my friend Matt. He eases thumb pressure off the spool and his baited harbor pollock swims away from the boat. The rod tip bounces as the pollock tugs toward the safety of the bottom. In an instant, his line starts spooling out rapidly, which is my cue. “Count to three, then set the hook.”

This is Matt’s first striped bass trip in New Hampshire, but, being an avid angler, he executes the hook set perfectly. Fish on! I know from the squealing drag and the bend in the rod, it’s a big one. After a few minutes fight and maneuvering around lobster traps, the silver flash of the fish is visible in the water alongside the boat. Then the fish dives – it hasn’t given up and is determined to win. In the end, the striped bass is netted, lifted into the boat; just as we thought, he’s a big fish at 46 inches. Its long migration from the south will come to an end on Matt’s dinner plate.

### **MOVEABLE FEAST**

Residents and tourists are not the only flocks that amass along New Hampshire’s cool, crisp Atlantic

coast each summer. Their arrival is preceded by large migratory schools of fish, including the striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) that fills angler’s dreams. Striped bass inhabit east coast waters from Florida to Canada, and many exhibit an annual migration pattern. The journey that moves these fish northward into New Hampshire’s waters from May to October begins each spring to our south.

Reproduction of striped bass occurs consistently in a limited number of coastal rivers; virtually the entire population of stocks along the east coast are spawned in a few specific locations. Those that frequent New Hampshire most likely originate in Chesapeake Bay, though fish from the Hudson River and Delaware systems also regularly return here in the summer months.

In April and early May, adult fish of reproductive age depart the salt-laden sea and swim upstream to the head of tide or even further into freshwater, where their eggs will be released and, hopefully, fertilized. They enter into the world in brackish or fresh water, move into the estuaries as they mature, leave to inhabit the saltwater ocean, and then return to their natal stream – a reproductive strategy termed anadromous. Juvenile striped bass spend their first few years (2 to 4) near the place of their birth before embarking on a future of repeated seasonal migrations.

Once spawning activity has completed, the adult fish return to the sea and continue their travels northeast in search of cold waters and food. Unlike many other migratory fish, striped bass come to N.H. waters not to spawn, but rather to feed on other species making similar migrations. Ahead of the large schools of stripers in New England, it is common to find schools of Atlantic menhaden, Atlantic herring, Atlantic mackerel, American eels and river herring. Predatory striped bass are fiercely piscivorous (fish-eating) and will devour almost any smaller fish. When they are hungry and prey fish are unavailable, invertebrates like lobsters, crabs and worms suffice.

### **CRASH AND REBOUND**

Striped bass have been an extremely important resource to New Englanders, both recreationally and commercially, but their abundance has varied greatly over time. While recreational anglers target striped bass primarily with fishing rod and tackle, commercial harvesters employ gill nets, pound nets, hook and line, haul seines and trawls. Commercial striped bass landings in the U.S. peaked at nearly 15 million pounds in the 1970s; from that point onward, however, the number of landings quickly declined until the mid-1980s.

Before the 1970s, management of striped bass was *continued on page 12*

## STRIPER FISHING BASICS

Fishing for striped bass along New Hampshire's seacoast can be an unforgettable experience. Many anglers fish from shore at coastal beaches and state parks. For this, a "surfcaster" rod is essential. These rods are 7 to 9 feet long, allowing saltwater anglers to cast beyond the waves, as well as being strong enough to haul in a trophy striper. The timing of your trip can affect your success. Each trip should begin by checking the time of both the high and low tide (listed in the *N.H. Saltwater Fishing Digest*, available at [www.fishnh.com](http://www.fishnh.com)). Next, choose a starting location, but be flexible; stop at any access point where you see flocks of diving sea birds, which are the most likely indicator of a fish-feeding frenzy.

At rocky outcroppings like Rye Ledge, a trip timed around low tide can allow you to make your way further from shore and closer to the breaking fish. In contrast, when fishing from a sandy beach like North Hampton State Park, high tides bring the predatory fish closer to you. Don't forget – many fish are nocturnal feeders, meaning that your best opportunity may be during sunset and the nighttime hours. Fishing at night also allows you to work your way along a beach without the crowds.

Popular baits for stripers include artificial lures like swim baits, surface poppers and bucktail jigs. Think about the old adage from fly-fishing, "Match the hatch." Here, you are not matching flying insects, but migrating schools of fish. During the late spring months, a mackerel pattern is ideal; retrieve or troll it quickly to match the intense swimming behavior of the real fish. If you fish near the mouths of rivers or in Great Bay mid-summer, try a silver pattern with a black spot near the head to mimic a passing herring or Atlantic menhaden.

Local bait shops also have ample supplies of frozen herring, Atlantic mackerel or live eels. Strips or chunks of frozen fish are referred to as "chunk bait." Inserting the hook through the skin or around the backbone will help keep your bait on the hook, especially when a fish makes its initial glancing strike.

When fishing from a boat, the technique changes slightly. You can quickly patrol many different "hot spots" and reap the bounty of less accessible locations. If you can be on the water at dawn, try it! In the early morning

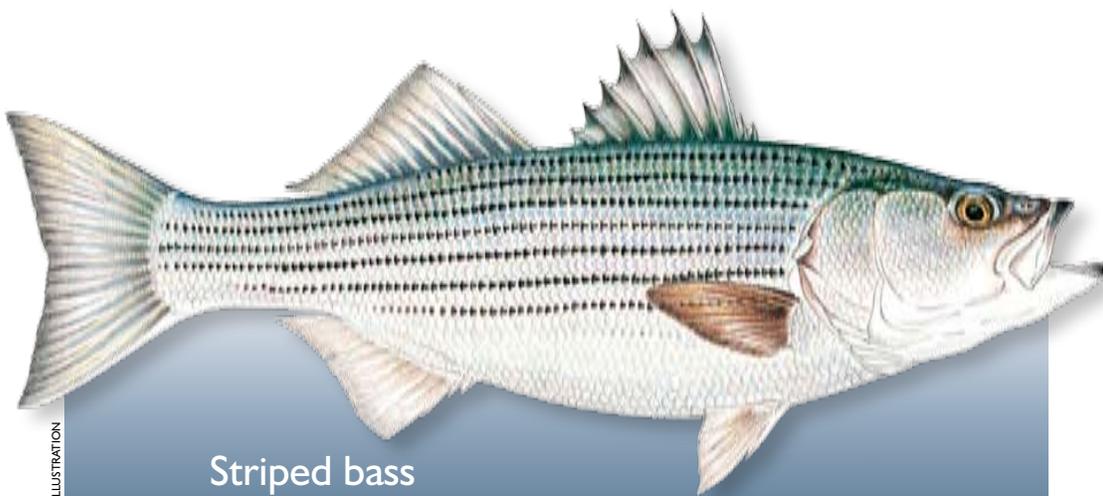


© ETHAN GORDON PHOTO

**What a catch! Live bait is irresistible to predatory striped bass; fishing is best from dusk to early morning.**

hours, boating traffic is still light and feeding activity is heavy. On a day with relatively little wind, scan the calm surface and look for frequent swirls and tail slaps breaking the stillness. You can also guide your boat parallel to the shoreline and watch the horizon for diving birds.

When you've found the feeding schools, move your boat within 50 yards or so. If trolling swimming lures or tubes, try to pass the bait within a few feet of the breaking fish and be ready to slow and set the hooks. If you're using live bait (Atlantic mackerel, pollock, herring, eels), maintain your distance, but get within casting range. Try to put the bait within swimming distance or, if using a bobber, place yourself upwind and let it drift across the school. Chunk bait is fished in a similar pattern; you may need to cast several times and retrieve it slowly through the school. When no schools are visible, look for underwater humps or ridges. Predatory striped bass can be sneaky and will position themselves just behind large rocks or rises in the seafloor to lie in wait for unsuspecting baitfish. Anglers can use the current to fish as the boat drifts along the rise, or anchor a short distance behind the obstacle and retrieve the bait or lure above it. – K.S.



**Striped bass**  
(*Morone saxatilis*)

Stripers are fiercely piscivorous (fish eating) predators. While they dine on most of the smaller fish they encounter, some favorite menu items include alewives, Atlantic herring and American eels. Feeding most actively

from dusk to dawn, the striped bass will often frequent the wash of breaking waves and prey on crabs, lobsters and clams that become vulnerable in the turbulent water.



*alewife (river herring)*



*Atlantic herring*



*American eel*



The N.H. Department of Environmental Services recently issued a fish consumption advisory for striped bass because of PCB levels. Children and pregnant women should not eat striped bass, and others should limit consumption to one meal a month.

generally carried out by individual states, with each setting its own season dates, fishing locations and size and bag limits. Rapidly declining stocks of striped bass drew the increased involvement of the Atlantic States Marine

Fisheries Commission (ASMFC), established in 1942 to help the 15 Atlantic coast states work together on responsible stewardship of marine resources.

In 1981, the ASMFC adopted the Striped Bass Fisheries Management Plan, a coast-wide plan for migratory stocks of striped bass calling for actions such as minimum size limits and spawning area closures. This measure was soon followed by the federal Striped Bass Conservation Act in 1984, which helped to further reduce harvest levels in most states. From 1984 to 1995, strict regulations of striped bass were widely supported by both fishermen and scientists, and a few states completely

*Striped bass are one of the most highly prized sportfish for New Hampshire saltwater anglers, and their recovery is often referred to as one of the most successful fisheries management programs in recent history.*

ceased all harvest of striped bass of any size, both recreationally and commercially. These joint efforts proved to be necessary – and effective – for the future of striped bass. In 1995, the Commission declared the Atlantic coastal striped bass stocks fully recovered.

In New Hampshire, it is still unlawful to harvest striped bass commercially or sell any harvested striped bass. The recreational fishery continues to flourish, however. Fish and Game has conducted creel surveys of recreational anglers since 1979. Beginning in 1997, these data collection efforts have been combined with those of the National Marine Fisheries Service. Fish and Game staff visit local boat ramps, fishing piers and marinas to ask anglers about their daily fishing trips, annual fish-

ing effort and obtain the precise length and weights of fish being kept. Some two to three thousand anglers are interviewed each year. Last year alone, it was estimated that anglers made almost 350,000 saltwater fishing trips in New Hampshire. The estimated recreational catch of striped bass by New Hampshire anglers has risen from a low point of fewer than 1,000 fish in the early 1980s to more than 580,000 fish in 2006!

Last year did not fit the pattern. In 2008, the recreational catch of striped bass for New Hampshire anglers was lower than expected. Biologists still do not know why the presence of striped bass in our waters was so limited, though there are indications that above-normal levels of bait to the south of New Hampshire, as well as slightly colder than usual water temperatures, may have kept the fish from coming this far north last year.

#### FLOURISHING FISHERY

Annual variations in population abundance, like the 2008 occurrence, demonstrate the importance of the data that the Fish and Game Department collects each year. These efforts, which help sustain high levels of striped bass and other species, will be further improved once the new federal saltwater angler registry goes into effect in January of 2010 and begins yielding data.

Striped bass are one of the most highly prized sportfish for New Hampshire saltwater anglers, and their recovery is often referred to as one of the most successful fisheries management programs in recent history. The health of the fishery has been helped by reduced pollution levels, increasing angler awareness, more precise data collection and participation by Fish and Game staff on interstate fisheries management committees like the ASMFC. With the continued increase in population numbers, the legal size for striped bass has been lowered over time in New Hampshire; this year anglers are permitted to keep two striped bass a day that are greater than 28 inches, but only one of the two fish can be above 40 inches. Thanks to this flourishing fishery, anglers can look forward to targeting striped bass on New Hampshire's seacoast for many years to come. **W**

*Kevin Sullivan is a N.H. Fish and Game Department marine biologist. Whenever possible, he begins and ends his day on the water fishing, under the water diving, or just making saltwater memories with friends.*

*Where better to find a "rockfish" (striped bass) than along a rock jetty, like this one at Hampton Beach State Park.*



©NHFG / VICTOR YOUNG PHOTO

*New Hampshire Wildlife Journal is your best source for fishing, hunting, wildlife and conservation information in the state.*

# DID YOU ENJOY READING THIS ARTICLE?

Every issue of N.H. Wildlife Journal includes stunning wildlife photography, in-depth features and "how-to" articles – plus Naturalist's Notebook, Warden's Watch and no advertising.



So what are you  
waiting for?  
Subscribe today!

[www.wildnh.com/pubs/wj-magazine.html](http://www.wildnh.com/pubs/wj-magazine.html)