

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

A friend and I were outside, in short sleeve shirts, for fifteen minutes chatting beside my car as I was leaving for home over the Christmas holidays. The unusual thing is the fact that it was midnight, December 26 and neither of us was even chilly!

There probably will be some sort of payback or compensation on the cold, wintry side of the ledger coming up sometime in the near future. However, if by chance this is going to be one of those "non winters" like the region experienced during the 1980s, where coastal estuaries and even lakes within ten miles of the coast don't freeze, there are a few viable fishing options available right now, with more developing as spring approaches. Depending on temperatures, schoolie striper fishing on the Thames River should remain good to excellent throughout most of the month.

What happens is that as bitter winter temperatures drive water temperatures to rock bottom, well into the low 30s F on the surface, temperatures actually rise as one goes deeper, to somewhere around 39 degrees F on the bottom.

Water reaches its maximum density at 39 degrees F so that during the winter, deep lakes and this river have a thermal stratification that is the opposite of the summer, with the less dense cold water starting on top, sometimes in the solid state of ice, then warming and becoming more dense as the deepest waters are reached, which are at 39 degrees F. This is the reason water freezes from the top down, because water both above and below this maximum density level of 39 F is less dense and, therefore, remains on top of this super dense layer that settles to the bottom of the river during the winter months.

Prior to the river's reaching its wintertime maximum low temperature levels, the bass remain fairly active and can be found often in large schools of actively feeding stripers in the upper river throughout the early winter, from December through February most years.

As air temperatures reach wintertime lows and begin dragging water temps down, the striper activity levels also drop with the water temperature. However, the fishing never completely stops in the Thames River, unless ice forms so that anglers literally can't cast into Norwich Harbor from boat or the shore.

Based on the fact that as of New Year's weekend, water temperatures were still in the mid-40s and the bass were feeding well, odds are this month will probably see fairly decent fishing, unless of course the inevitable deep freeze hits the region as it usually does in late January or February. It all depends on the prevailing temperatures.

Even during cold winters, as long as ice doesn't drive anglers off the harbor, the fishing remains pretty good during the first couple of weeks of February before slowing to seasonal low levels towards the end of the month and into March. This

fishery is basic and simple.

The pattern is that the fish move upriver and pile up in Norwich Harbor as the tide comes in, and they spread out and drop downriver to the Pequot bridge and for a short distance below during the ebb tide.

These bass are predominately school-sized stripers from 12 to 22 inches, with occasional fish from 30 inches to as much as 30 pounds that are caught around the edges at a rate of about one decent fish per fifty to one hundred small fish. As temperatures drop, these fish begin to stack higher, school tighter and become more difficult to catch. The key to consistent success, particularly on the larger fish, is to fish after dark and watch the weather.



Ivan Rosseau, a friend who came to fish the river from Quebec, Canada poses with one of dozens of stripers we caught as the sun set one winter afternoon last season. Fishing gets better as the sun fades and any time of day will be better during the ebb tide and a dropping barometer.

As I have said many times in many articles in recent years, fish, all fish, including overwintering Thames River striped bass are more active and easier to catch when the barometric pressure is dropping and very difficult to catch when it's rising, particularly during dead-of-winter cold spells. In a nut shell, the pressure drops and the river's bass hit well as storms approach. After the storm passes, the pressure rises and the bass shut off like a huge kill switch under cold, usually windy, blue sky (or as I call them "blue bird") conditions.

A couple of days ago (which was around Christmastime) my buddy Eric Covino and two others fished an ebbing tide on an overcast, dropping-pressure afternoon. They caught and released 197 stripers with the top-end fish in the mid-twenty-inch range.

A few years ago Eric and I fished the river during the approach of a miserable Canadian high pressure system with numbing 20 degree temps driven to torturous levels by a 20 mph wind. As

we ran to the deep channel near the center of Norwich Harbor, where we'd left a bunch of active fish (out of which Eric caught a 25-pounder) a few days earlier during a snow storm and the opposite pressure conditions, Eric said, "Darn, my depth finder isn't working or we have 40 feet of stripers under the boat." (The river is about 44 feet deep at that tidal stage where we were.)

As he was playing with the connections to his faithful work horse Lowrance, I peered over the side of the boat into the water and saw a dark cloud of bass shimmering about four feet below the hull. I tossed a Fin-S fish into the huge school of fish and caught a 16-inch within seconds.

For the next four hours neither of us had anything other than hundreds of body bumps into our lines and lures, but not a single bite. Our fingers were numb, faces so stiff we could barely enunciate our words clearly, despite the fact it was the warmest part of that frigid, late February afternoon.

This time of year, if possible, fish the river ...with the approach of bad weather and a dropping barometric pressure.

I owed this magazine an article, fishing was horrible despite the fact that we'd probably dragged our jigs and swimming plugs through a million fish! (Consider drifting multiple times through twenty to forty-foot thick, hundred plus long schools of stripers so densely packed they gray-lined on the depth finder, making it look like solid bottom.)

I finally said, "Eric, let's get out of here; we are wasting our time."

He said, as always, "One more drift."

Sure, no problem. But, like a dummy, instead of packing up my gear, I dropped my jig to the bottom to pass the ten cold minutes that remained for this horrible outing and felt a tap, a real bite, for the first time in hours.

I didn't want to catch a fish then because I'd be "kidnapped without a ransom note" for at least another hour, because my partner, one of the best fishermen I know, was getting skunked and like all of us he didn't like it at all. I didn't set the hook, hoping on hope that fish would spit my lure.

At the end of the drift, that darn fifteen-inch was still there. As I knew, Eric ran up for "one more drift" that turned into ten, so I was a prisoner 'til dark. Neither of us caught another fish.

This time of year, if possible, fish the river during a dropping tide, during warm spells, after mild winter rains and thaws, or at night, but above all with the approach of bad weather and a dropping barometric pressure. Fishing techniques are as basic as the timing.

The most productive method of catching stripers in the river was mastered by Captain Al Anderson, of the charter boat Prowler from Galilee, Rhode Island, trolling spreader rigs with small tube lures with 20-pound test wire line.

I hate trolling heavy stuff like that despite how well it works. We prefer to drift down

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