

# CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

During April, there are two marine fishing options that are viable along the Connecticut coast. The winter flounder season opens up on April Fool's Day, and like a fool, I try to catch those darn fish every spring and generally either totally fail or with great effort manage to catch a couple of legal-sized 12-inchers for supper. The current 10 fish per day creel limit is a moot point because I haven't come close to limiting out on this species in a couple of decades.

The other major option is spring-run stripers, which many anglers, me included, think is about as much fun a person can have with his clothes on and a fishing rod in his hands. The exact times and dates when these fish turn on will vary with the prevailing weather and springtime temperature regimes. Once things begin clicking, these fisheries migrate northward with the immature and non-spawning stripers that are exiting the Hudson River and later on, Chesapeake Bay. At some point, migratory stripers combine with smaller, more discreet local populations of over-wintering stripers that hang around warm water discharges and natural wintering areas such as the Thames River, Connecticut and Housatonic Rivers, to create some fabulous fishing action.

When water flow rates, water temperature and other physical factors are "right", striper fishing can be excellent for both schoolies and medium to large "herring chasers" during the month of April. Winter populations in the Housey and Connecticut Rivers are smaller and tend to winter in protected back waters, coves and around warm water discharges, while the Thames River population is huge, numbering in the tens of thousands, so the hot spring bite here usually begins a couple of weeks before the rest of the state.

My friends and I start looking for the Thames to turn on beginning in late March or early April, depending on prevailing weather and temperature regimes. At 40 degrees or so, during March most years, snow and ice melt occurs, an event that causes the thousands of fish that winter in the upper river, primarily between Norwich Harbor and the Mohegan Sun Casino, to begin dropping downriver towards the Sound.

During this time period, the stripers often suspend over the cold bottom waters, which are at or around 39 degrees F, which is the maximum density of water. On the fish finder, the picture looks like a layer cake, with a five-to eight-foot band of bass holding that same distance, maybe more off the bottom. These fish have not yet begun to feed consistently into the shallows, which are cooled every evening during this period of temperature change between winter and spring. In fact, they can be fairly difficult to catch with any consistency during this narrow window of time before spring conditions take over.

Literally, as soon as temperatures in the shallows of this unique river reach and surpass 50 degrees F, the fun begins. All the major coves and shoals along the sides of the river channel come alive with stripers as they move out of the deeper waters onto the rapidly warming "flats" during the first two or three weeks of April.



***Both shots of the 42 inch plus, 30 pound class striper from the upper Thames River, with a Salmo Skinner in its mouth. The shot with the box shows a variety of herring clone hard plugs that all have the potential to catch herring chasing stripers. I won a third place photo award for the close up photo in the New England Outdoor Writers Association photo contest this year. I called the photo "An Eye for an Eye"***

This is when fishing reports sound more like fantasies, as anglers talk about catching and releasing over 100 fish per outing, which is really not that difficult to do when conditions are right. Major flooding can put a damper on fishing for a day or so, especially in the Connecticut and Housatonic Rivers, which have a much greater net downstream flow rate than the Thames. The best fishing will occur during breaks in the weather that bring mild temperatures, preferably under overcast skies, dropping barometric pressures (which precede spring storm systems), an ebbing tide, and if possible, the low light conditions around dusk or dawn for the best "catching". This time of year, when temperature is very important, bluebird skies and cold north winds that typically blow in behind spring storms can create very difficult and challenging fishing conditions, even for these schoolies that literally fill the river this time of year.

Anglers catch stripers from shore at access points from the town property on the east half of the Greenville Pool down to Norwich. Below the harbor, there is good access along Route 12 from Stoddard Wharf south to Buoy 27 and at a few hard-to-describe locations between there and the I-95 bridge. Look for the best early fishing in the shoals of middle reaches of the river. Remember that the western half of the Greenville Pool (immediately below the dam) is closed to fishing from the island at its mouth to mid-point on the dam due to the fish elevator located on the western side of this popular fishing spot.

Boat fishermen can launch in Norwich,

Montville, or under the I-95 bridge in Groton and cast the edges of the channel and into the shallows to effectively locate schools of fish that move up and down river with the prevailing tide. Avoid running over schools under power or they will be spooked and possibly driven out of a given area. Drift through the fish and then skirt well around the school before drifting back through them. Electric trolling motors help. However, the best tactic is to cast into the fish from the side and totally avoid running through the fish under power of any sort if possible.

I prefer to use 3-to 4-inch soft plastic lures such as Slug-Go's, Fin-S Fish, Salt Shakers, Storm Minnows, Cocohoe's and other single-hook lures or "swim jigs" for the schoolies. The idea is to minimize damage to both fish and the fisherman, who may potentially have to unhook large numbers of these fish during the course of a successful trip. This is also a time when fly flickers are in their glory. The guys with those long rods with the short casts can rack up large catch-and-release totals from a boat once a concentration of bass has been located. I like white bunny fur, though literally any fairly large streamer pattern will catch fish.

Schoolie fishing in the Thames and later on in the other major rivers throughout the region can be the fastest and most consistent action anglers may experience every year. The spring schoolie period is a great opportunity to teach a youngster how to cast a lure or fly, sharpen your own skills and experiment with new gear and rigging techniques. There are some larger fish around. Over the years, on many occasions we've had foot-long schoolies chased and occasionally grabbed by monsters that either overwintered with the juveniles or have moved into the river behind spawning runs of river herring. When the action from the little guys is fast and furious, we often keep rods rigged up with large lures and wing them for the first few casts at each new fishing spot in order to draw hits from any larger fish that may be in the area. It's a technique that doesn't always work, but has over the years has accounted for a fair number of 30-inch plus stripers.

Early-run, spawning alewives (or what is left of these waning populations) move into the waters of Long Island Sound long before anyone sees them up in their historical spawning areas, often miles up inside coastal streams and major rivers, which support runs in their tributaries. Alewife and blueback herring runs get revved up from mid-April through the first half of May most years here in Connecticut. When they are peaking, this source of bait draws big herring-feeding striped bass for miles upriver, right to the mouths of the smaller spawning streams where the herring are headed. Herring runs in coastal streams such as Bride Brook, which runs through Rocky Neck State Park directly into the Sound in Old Lyme, support the earliest alewife run I am aware of in this state, with fish often showing up during late March. Spawning streams in the upper Thames, Connecticut, Housatonic and other rivers see alewives anywhere from two weeks to a month or more after the first spawning herring enter Bride Brook. When they

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