

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

May is a transitional month between spring and summer. For this reason, there are a number of fairly significant environmental changes that take place between the first of this month and Memorial Day that are directly related to weather patterns, which equate to temperature.

Late April into the early part of May is a great time for striped bass enthusiasts, especially those anglers that like to go out and rack up large catch-and-release statistics with schoolie bass. There are a large number of striped bass that over-winter in various locations between Boston Harbor and the Hudson River. Most of these fish are immature fish that average 16 to 24 inches, with a few larger adults in the mix. As soon as water temperatures rise into the 40's and low 50's, they begin feeding on whatever is around wherever they happen to be residing to make up for those long, lean times of winter. By May, anglers along the Connecticut coast are all into stripers in places ranging from warm water discharges and rapidly warming salt ponds to coastal rivers.

Early to mid-May brings worm spawn activity in many coastal estuaries, which creates short-term but very exciting and challenging fisheries. These events begin shaping up in any place that harbors the yellow-jawed clam worms that swarm in such tremendous numbers once water temperatures approach the 62 to 65 degree F mark. Fish for these fish with light tackle and 3.5 inch Slug-Go's or worm flies fished with fly gear, off bobbers, or behind larger soft plastics for the best results.

By the end of the month, the first coastal migrants begin to move through the area to jump-start striped bass fishing for the remainder of the summer and fall.

Early in May, the mouths of large coastal rivers are concentration areas due to the variety of food that is available. The best places to look for stripers, especially larger fish, is any place that has some sort of spawning runs of alewives or blueback herring (river herring). In larger rivers, obstacles to upstream migration, anything such as riffles, rapids, dams, etc. that slows the stripers' upstream movement, will create excellent fishing spots in the process.

Under current Connecticut regulations, river herring cannot be caught or retained, even for bait, so this once-important live bait source is no longer an option for anglers to utilize. In fact, most of the other states in southern New England have passed or soon will pass similar restrictions to protect waning populations of these fish, so anglers will need to experiment with new lures and ways of fishing them. Bass chase herring right into their natal streams, which can create some unique and interesting short-term fisheries wherever spawning runs are found. Depending on the river system, herring-run activity will peak sometime between early April and mid-May. Every year the earliest run of alewives takes place at Bride Brook, which flows into Long Island Sound through Rocky Neck State Park in Lyme, starting in late March or early April. At some time during this significant run, you can bet there will be some striped bass cruising the area around where this stream flows into the Sound, looking for an easy meal. Savvy anglers will take advantage by throwing

large herring-like plugs or soft plastics around the mouth of Bride Brook when rising tides bring the waves of spawning alewives into the brook.

Slightly later in the month, the Greenville Dam on the Thames River perks up, beginning the second or third week of April or the first of May, depending on water temps and herring spawning runs, and dies out abruptly by the end of the month. However, the Connecticut River, which supports a waning population of blueback herring, doesn't start perking up with big herring-munching stripers until early May. Snow melt from the north keeps river temps cool, thus delaying runs in "the big river" that will take place much earlier in smaller, warmer flowing waters. Herring and shad remain in the Connecticut through early June most years when water temperatures spike, driving both bass and their prey back out to the cooler waters of Long Island Sound.

For the past couple of years, schools of hickory shad, which are legal to use as hook baits, and a few adult menhaden have been creating some interesting fishing opportunities for large stripers in the lower, rather than upper Connecticut River during May and June. Early in May, casting large herring-like plugs and jumbo surface lures at the base of dams and major obstructions to upstream movement of bass, such as the Enfield Rapids on the Connecticut River, is a great way to catch big stripers from shore or small boats. These larger herring-chasing fish create top notch, but short term fisheries below the Greenville Dam on the Thames River and the Derby Dam on the Housatonic this month, fisheries that will end abruptly as water temperatures rise beyond the 70s as early summer weather regimes take over the region.

Herring (and shad) tend to pulse up river with the incoming tide around dusk, so the stripers generally follow. For this reason, as a rule of thumb for the best odds of hooking into a large river-run striper, try to fish a given spot at dusk or dawn when the tide is around high slack and into the ebb.

Blackfish, though inshore and abundant in Connecticut waters, are closed to fishing during the month of May through June 15, same thing with scup, which will also begin chomping on fluke baits along the beaches by mid-May. The scup (porgy) season is closed in Connecticut waters until June 1, so essentially, the only options for marine anglers during this transition period are stripers and fluke,

with a few scattered reports of bluefish catches beginning sometime early in May. Blues are not usually worth targeting until June or July.

Fluke move in from the offshore wintering areas (where they are picked over by deep water trawlers all winter long) early in May and first appear along the Rhode Island Beaches around the Point Judith area at this time. From there they move south and west down the coast, entering Long Island Sound from the eastern end and also around the tip of Montauk Point about the same time every spring. Depending on the regulations in Rhode Island and New York, which were not set as of this writing, Connecticut anglers often experience their first fluke successes across the Sound in the Peconic Bay area or along Rhode Island's south shore beaches.

Fluke are in the region when squid move inshore to spawn every spring. The squid create a great fishery for striped bass later in May around offshore reefs and up inside coastal bays at this time. The Race is always producing some decent stripers that show up right around May 20 each spring, and squid is their primary prey. Squid are a fluke's favorite prey species, so anglers can also count on there being some fluke feeding on squid below the same schools the bass will be hammering on this month.

The only problem appears to be that when the squid first show in commercial nets, even though the fluke are there and being caught by draggers, for some reason they are difficult to hook on rod and reel. This is due, in part, to the fact that many anglers don't think of fluke fishing this early and also that the fish are a little deeper

than many fluke fishermen prefer to fish. This is a problem that doesn't last very long. Once anglers start looking for their first fluke of the year, the reports begin coming in to area shops and build up from that point.

Last year there were a fair number of large six-pound or better fish caught throughout the region, along with large numbers of throw-backs in the 16 to just under keeper-size of 17.5 or 18 inches, depending on the waters being fished. During most of the summer, anglers were catching and releasing anywhere from eight to a dozen or more shorts for every 18-inch keeper they could put in the live well. If those just-short fluke from 2006 have survived the rigors of winter and heavy offshore dragging pressure, there should be a few more keepers around this season, but we won't know until later on this month.

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Captain John Planetta with a decent schoolie he caught in the lower Connecticut River last spring. Fish like this and much larger were chasing hickory shad and bunker around the mouth of the "big river".

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Fluke were not even a sure option in Connecticut waters during May until just before these words were typed. As of this writing, a DEP press release indicated that the state's proposal for fluke regulatory changes was passed as an emergency declaration and became official as of April 2, 2007. Count on the fluke regs in the tri-state (CT, RI and NY) area all to be changed for the summer of 2007, so check for updates before fishing.

Connecticut regulations for summer flounder (fluke) were changed to a creel limit of five fish per day (from six during 2006), minimum length 18 inches (same as 2006), and an open season that runs from April 30 through September 5, both dates included in the open season (the 2006 season was open from April 30 through December 31). Bottom line, Connecticut anglers lost one fish in their creels, which is a moot point, being most fishermen weren't limiting out last year to begin with.

These changes were necessary in order for the state of Connecticut to be in compliance with the fluke management plan, because Connecticut's recreational fishermen, like sport fishermen in the other New England states, over-fished their allotted quota in 2006, as they have, pretty much, forever.

This is why the recreational limits have been constantly ratcheted down throughout the region over the past decade. It's been necessary in order for states



Jim Cummings of Center Sports, holds up a late spring striper he caught off Fishers Island. We were fishing shallow and catching fish like this, those dredging the depths of the Race were taking 20-pound plus fish at the same time of year.

to be in compliance with the requirements of the fluke management plan.

If the recreational quota is over-fished, the following year's estimated catch must be reduced by that amount, which has put fluke fishing states in a never


ending downward spiral as far as the number of fish they can take and an escalating spiral when it comes to minimum size.

At this point, as both a biologist and sport fisherman, I firmly believe that 18 inches is actually a tad beyond the point where a minimum length will actually do anything to conserve fluke. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this large size limit, which anglers dealt with last year, might possibly kill, via delayed mortality due to deep, hooked fish, as many, if not more, fish than it actually "conserves".


Anglers who are concerned about this resource should not fish a "dead stick", because that is just what it is. An unmanned fishing rod that is left unattended to drift for long periods of time tends to allow even smaller fluke, swimming deeply, to swallow baits, resulting in dead or severely damaged fish. To be assured of the fact that most fish will be hooked in areas where removal and release will do minimal damage to what probably will be short fluke, set the hook as soon as a solid tap is felt and take your chances on missing a few of the smaller fish. The bigger fluke, keeper-size fish, which have much larger mouths, are generally hooked, even with a quick hook set.

In my opinion, I believe that for the past few seasons, recreational anglers have essentially been saving fish for the deep-water, commercial winter trawl fisheries to pick over and take. The draggers catch whatever is in the net, regardless of size, pick out the prime fish and throw the rest back dead or dying, a terrible waste of a resource.


Anyone who doesn't believe that the dilemma our oceans are in is a serious matter should read the April edition of *National Geographic*, which is dedicated to the commercial over-harvest of our ocean's fisheries. This issue will make any fisherman sick in the pit of his or her stomach.



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