

CONNECTICUT FISHING REPORT

by Bob Sampson Jr.

February! What the heck do you do in February if you are a marine angler?

There are two fun options; go to sportsman's shows or fish the Thames River for its over-wintering striped bass.

Area shows are the Eastern Fishing and Outdoor Exposition at the DCU Center, Worcester, Mass, February 7-10; The Hunting and Fishing Expo at the Hartford Expo Center, February 14-17; and the Hunting Fishing Show in Springfield, The Eastern State's grounds, February 21-24. These shows are essentially the same faces in different places. Of the trio, the Expo in Worcester may have a higher percentage of factory reps; the Springfield show has small, local vendors, and Hartford falls some where in-between.

Shows are great places to book the hunting or fishing trip of a lifetime, check out the latest tackle, guns, bows and gadgets, find a great buy on a new toy, or stock up on your favorite lures. All of them have seminars from regional and national writers, TV personalities, guides and charter fishermen. I will be doing a couple of seminars on Sunday in Worcester this year. The 12:30 seminar is on the effects of weather on fishing and the 3:30 seminar is a talk on emerging fisheries for walleye, pike and muskellunge here in the Northeast.

Striper fishing in the Thames River is a very weather-dependent phenomenon, though regardless of what transpires on land, the fish will be stacked like cord wood in the upper river for the winter. The normal fishing pattern for winter bass in this unique and often very productive fishery is simple. As the tide pushes upriver, the fish move with it and stack up in Norwich Harbor as far as the deep hole where the Shetucket River enters the harbor.

As the tide drops, the fish move downriver with it, often at a surprisingly fast pace. The bass usually don't drop down much below the Pequot Bridge, though heavy snow-melting rains may push them downriver much farther or disperse schools, creating some very slow, challenging fishing conditions at times.

Most of the time this accordion-like up and downriver pattern holds as true as the tides. When stripers are stacked up in the harbor, they are literally "stacked up" in schools so dense that they often gray-line on a fish finder, so they may look like the bottom. It is common to see more than 20 feet of fish under the boat. However, despite the fact that there may be many thousands of fish in multiple, large, densely-packed schools at this time of year, their metabolic rates are low, so they are not actively feeding and seeking out forage like they do during the spring, summer and fall seasons. There is no food source that could support the densities of fish that are present in

the upper Thames River during the winter months.

They do strike artificial lures and bait, some days much better than others. Considering the numbers of fish in this river, only a small percentage is active and catchable on any given day.

The DEP did a food study a few years back and found isopods, other invertebrates, and some fish (probably smelt, white perch, and small stripers) in their stomach content samples. I know for a fact that at times the larger bass in the population eat the little guys, because more than once we've had small, 12-inchers grabbed or chased by jumbo linesiders



Eric Covino plays a schoolie striper in the "fleet" of boats that develops each weekend in Norwich Harbor to fish for over wintering stripers.

over the years. This over-wintering striper population is dominated by immature, juvenile stripers, according to Littoral Society Tag returns. My own high school science classes have contributed to this effort by tagging over 300 stripers in the past six or seven years, with 22 returns. However, the vast majority of Thames River tagged stripers (over 4,000) have been placed by Captain Al Anderson who runs the charter boat *Prowler* out of Rhode Island during the summer. Captain Al does some winter striper charters from a small boat and takes "busman's holidays" to pursue his passion, tagging striped bass, on the huge wintering population in the Thames. Due to the incredible numbers of stripers available in this river, if only a small percentage of them are actively taking lures, the "catching" can be incredible. Hundred-fish outings are not uncommon, when conditions are right and the fish are cooperative. But on the other hand, when conditions are not favorable, during the influx of winter high pressure systems or meltdown situations, these fish can be difficult to hook.

During February, if the region receives one of those warming mid-rains, the fish may be turned on by the influx of warmer water, as long as there's not too much of it. If, on the

other hand, that rainfall melts a covering of snow, which may suddenly drive water temperatures down, the bass are often turned off. The chilling effect of this sudden, large inflow of cold, snowmelt water, can turn them off not only due to temperature changes, but changes in salinity as well.

Between Christmas and New Year, which is generally a great time to catch large numbers of these fish, a couple of friends and I got absolutely "skunked". We didn't hook a single fish on the day following a heavy rain that melted most of the snow that had covered Connecticut prior to the holidays. We had nearly 20 feet of stripers under the boat most of the day, but they were not taking the jigs or swimming lures we trolled, cast, or drifted through them. One of my friends, who was trolling with a "mini-spreader rig" in another boat, was hooking up, while the other three or four boats, myself included were pretty much doing nothing.

I didn't even bring my little trolling rig with me that day, thinking the overcast skies, dropping barometric pressure and lack of pressure would make for a great trip. I'd forgotten about how much of a negative effect snowmelt can have on these fish and paid the price in embarrassment as a result. That was the first skunking I've taken on the Thames River in many, many years, more than a decade.

Most of the time, 3/8 to one ounce triangular-shaped jig heads with short, four-inch Zoom Flukes, Fin-S Fish or twister tails sunk down into these fish will draw frequent strikes and run up a catch and release total of many tens of fish during an average trip. My buddy Eric Covino of Playing Hookie Charters, one of the few local winter striper charter operations in the area, normally expects 20 to 50 fish per trip during the winter months, much higher totals when conditions are right and the fish are turned on.

Fishing on these chilled-down stripers can be either an incredible or a very cold experience. When they are turned on, the appropriate-sized soft plastic lure or plug may literally draw strikes within a few seconds whenever the boat is over the schools. On these days, anglers rack up hundred-plus fish catches and release totals with little problem. On the other hand, when the fish turn off, it can be challenging to catch a single "deskunking striper" out of the tens of thousands that are concentrated in the upper Thames River.

Think about it. During a trip, a boat may make 25 to 50 drifts over a school of stripers that can be a 100 yards long, 10 to 20 yards wide, and 10 to 20 feet thick. That lure may literally have been drifted or cast through half a million to a million fish (by going through the same huge school multiple times) and the catch total may end up at zero or slightly better than that.

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