

A fisherman wearing a light blue jacket, a white cap, and sunglasses is crouching on a sandy beach. He is holding a fishing rod and reel, with a line extending into the water. The background shows a vast, flat beach meeting a calm, greenish-blue ocean under a clear blue sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a soft glow.

ANGLER'S DELIGHT

A solitary fisherman shares his space on the flats as the sun rises over Chatham *By Tom Keer*

During the warmer months, I wake up every day before sunrise. One of my indulgences is to pour a thermos full of hot coffee, get into my barely running CJ5, and drive to a beach to see the sun come up. Not much inspires me more than the sun rising above the Atlantic Ocean, and when the light touches the water I am invigorated with infinite possibilities.

Just before the golden ball pops, there is a significant temperature drop, commonly noted among fishermen and other hoot owls. It's called False Dawn. If you've been fishing all night, odds are you've been warm and comfortable. Then you feel the chill roll in, like some foggy scene out of Macbeth. When the temperature drops, you know it's approaching the magical time when the beautiful Cape Cod oranges, lavenders, magentas, and blues flood the horizon. It's no small wonder that droves of artists summer here. The light is pure. Sometimes I even get out of my Jeep and go fishing.

The author fishing for stripers on the flats off Chatham.
PHOTOGRAPHY BY BARRY AND CATHY BECK

One of my favorite places to see a sunrise is on Shore Road in Chatham. Chatham is at the elbow of the Cape, and the sun touches only the Atlantic Ocean before it hits land. It's where the Chatham Bars Inn is located. The magnificent property harkens back to the turn-of-the-century when life was slower and more relaxed. The view of the sunrise from the Inn is among the best on the Cape.

People flock to Chatham from all points on the compass, and in the warm months, many are fishermen. Folks visit the quintessential seaside town to patronize the art galleries, unique retail stores, spas, and great restaurants. Anglers come for the white sand flats, long stretches of barrier beaches, and water so pristine you can see sand dollars while wading. Some fishermen love the shallow water sight fishing for striped bass and bluefish, while others jump aboard the Inn's boat the *Starfish* for offshore angling adventures for tuna, mahi mahi, or swordfish. There is a time, a season, and a method that will suit the most discerning fishermen.

One June morning, I sat in my Jeep and drank my coffee. I came to fish, and scanned the water across from the Chatham Bars Inn. As usual, I was alone. The tide dropped and I studied the water pouring out of Pleasant Bay through Chatham Harbor for signs of life. Black-backed seagulls and terns cruised the shallows looking for herring, menhaden, silversides, or sand eels. Gulls haven't earned my respect. They are indiscriminate at best, feasting as aggressively on washed-ashore horseshoe crabs as on bait. But the terns command my attention, and they seldom lead me astray. In the fall I pay the same level of respect to gannets and shearwaters.

As I planned my approach, I noticed a man on the CBI patio. He set down a coffee cup, walked across Shore Road, and headed toward the spot I had been scouting. Nothing motivates an angler more than seeing another fisherman heading toward his mother lode, so I ditched my coffee, grabbed my fly rod and kit, and snuck off through the bushes to beat him to the punch. He didn't even see me.

Neptune was kind to me, and on my first cast I was into a good bass. Not to be outdone, Poseidon rewarded me with a better striper on my second cast. I looked up. There, about 75 yards away was the angler from the CBI porch watching me. I feared he would descend on me. Instead, he headed away toward Tern Island.

I figured since the tide was dropping, the fishing would be spotty up there. The grace and dignity of his action made me whistle to him. He turned around and looked, and I waved him over. No need to be paranoid any longer, I thought. He's a fisherman who enjoys pre-dawn coffee, a sunrise on the beach, and striped bass.

"There are a ton of fish over here," I said. "Take a cast."

"Sure you don't mind?"

"Not at all," I said.

Catching striped bass in Chatham's clear water requires patience, skill, and luck. You can hook them from a shallow-draft boat or you can get in the water and wade. All you need is a guide to point out schools coming your way, and the right fly. When you land a fish you've seen in water shallower than your knee, it's hard not to smile.





“I didn’t want to crowd you. There aren’t many people awake this time of morning, you know.”

“I appreciate that,” I said. “But there are lots of fish right here.”

We got to work, moving south as the tide dropped. His name was Nick and he was from Manhattan. He spends a week every year with his family at the Inn. “It’s perfect,” he said. “I can get up early while my family sleeps, catch some striped bass, and meet them for breakfast at a more civilized time. A few days ago we took the Inn’s *Bartender* to North Beach.”

“What were you angling for, free cocktails?”

He laughed. “The *Bartender* is a shallow-draft launch that ferries guests to the beach. I was able to fish some more while my wife read a book. The kids snorkeled nearby. They love the clear water and the white-sand flats. I trade them ice cream cones if they tell me when they spot a school of fish. It’s a win-win.”

“You might want to get a permit and dig some steamers at slack low tide,” I said. “Monomoy steamers are among the best on the Eastern seaboard. Because of the clean water and sand, their shells are white as snow. There’s seldom any grit.”

“We dug a peck yesterday,” Nick said. “The Inn prepared them for us as an appetizer. I just need to land a legal bass so they can grill that for dinner.”

The tide dropped quickly, and we moved down with the current. I didn’t realize how much we waded, but behind us was the Stage Harbor Lighthouse. The sun was up now, and several fly-fishing charter skiffs were out on the water. By North-eastern standards the boats they were using seemed out of place. Typically used in Florida or the Bahamas, these sleek boats have platforms on the stern so the captain can quietly pole them along the flats. They sneak up on the bass and blues just like they sneak up on tarpon or bonefish, oftentimes in less than a foot of water. Two anglers hooked up as quickly as Nick and I did.

“My wife and son are attending fly fishing school offered by Fishing the Cape. I participated a few years ago and the instructors are terrific. With luck we’ll all be out here tomorrow together. She’s not an early riser, though.”

“No worries there,” I said. “One of the reasons these flats are world-class is because it’s better to fish them with bright sun. It’s neat to cast to fish that you can see, and in the shallow water they fight like junkyard dogs.”

“I’ve never done that before,” he said. “Maybe we’ll try it later in the week.”

The sun was getting higher in the sky now, and I had to go. From the looks of it, Nick would have the beach to himself a while longer. Then he’d head back to the Inn for breakfast with his family. Just the way he liked it. ■

It’s easy to get addicted to striped fishing, especially on Cape Cod where you are surrounded by natural beauty. Whether you fish the flats, the rolling surf, or the grass beds in a protected harbor, it will be a satisfying experience and you may not even care if you catch a fish.

