

autumn

in the bay



days

Cape Cod Bay corrals schools of bluefish and striped bass each fall. It's time to string up the 9-weight and head inside the Bay.

By Tom Keer
Photographs by Barry & Cathy Beck



Bluefish and striped bass show up big and only get fatter as they gorge on bait migrating through Cape Cod Bay each fall.

MOON MOVES

There is a reason why fly-fishing book author and fly-tier Ken Abrames named the full moon in September the Stripermoon. It's when the staged bait and fish make a grand push, the climax of the season. Some years the Stripermoon is early in the month; other years, it's later. (I've always wondered if there ever was a Blue Moon in September and what would happen.) You'll be fine if you're fishing up the moon. It's the time of year when the biggest bass of the season get caught.

—Tom Keer

Whenever folks ask me where I live, I adopt my best body-builder pose, arm curled tight, and point just below my wrist on the inside of my forearm. My anatomical reference is to Wellfleet, on outer Cape Cod. Everyone laughs, but the biggest cackles come from Michiganders because they know what it's like to chart geography on a body part. (Michigan is known as the Mitten because of its resemblance to the hand shoe.) But, then again, they may just find humor in the fact that I need to hit the gym and grunt out a few hundred more bicep curls.

But no gym time for me now because it's fall on the Cape and that's fishing time. Vacation crowds leave in droves around Labor Day, and we anglers have the entire sandbar to ourselves. There are few vehicles waiting at red lights and beach parking lots are virtually empty (and non-permit parking is generally allowed). Vehicles with bike racks disappear and are replaced by rigs with rod racks. By Columbus Day, the restaurants are closed, and it becomes increasingly difficult to get a cup of coffee or some junk food to chow on in between midnight fishing trips.

You'll see old pick-ups with pop-up campers running the beaches at Race Point, or Jeeps and SUVs rolling down Sandy Neck to access Barnstable Harbor. There are no 4-by-4s along the Cape Cod Canal, just women's bikes. There are fleets of them, ridden by tougher-than-nails old men. Just ask one why a woman's bike.

"I can't get my leg and waders over the bar on a man's bike," they'll say. Their bikes have rod racks, too, and many of those two-wheelers have baskets so big they'd make Dorothy and Toto green with envy.

Autumn on the Cape is about boats, too. Long, deep-vee hulls with twin outboards capable of timely runs in heavy seas in search of giant schools of bass crashing the surface. One fall I saw a 26-foot Regulator launching with twin 250s in the stern. I wasn't on that boat, but hell—at \$5 a gallon on the gas dock, I couldn't even afford the fuel for a trip like that, let alone the boat.

There are skiffs and kayaks as well, perfect for working the offshore bars, flats and tidal seams. Getting into skinny water and working a pod of small bass is more fun to me than casting into a blitz of big fish. Sure I like big fish, but there isn't much that is more exciting than hooking a striper in a foot of water that is not much farther away than your rod tip. A slob at that same distance is what dreams are made of.

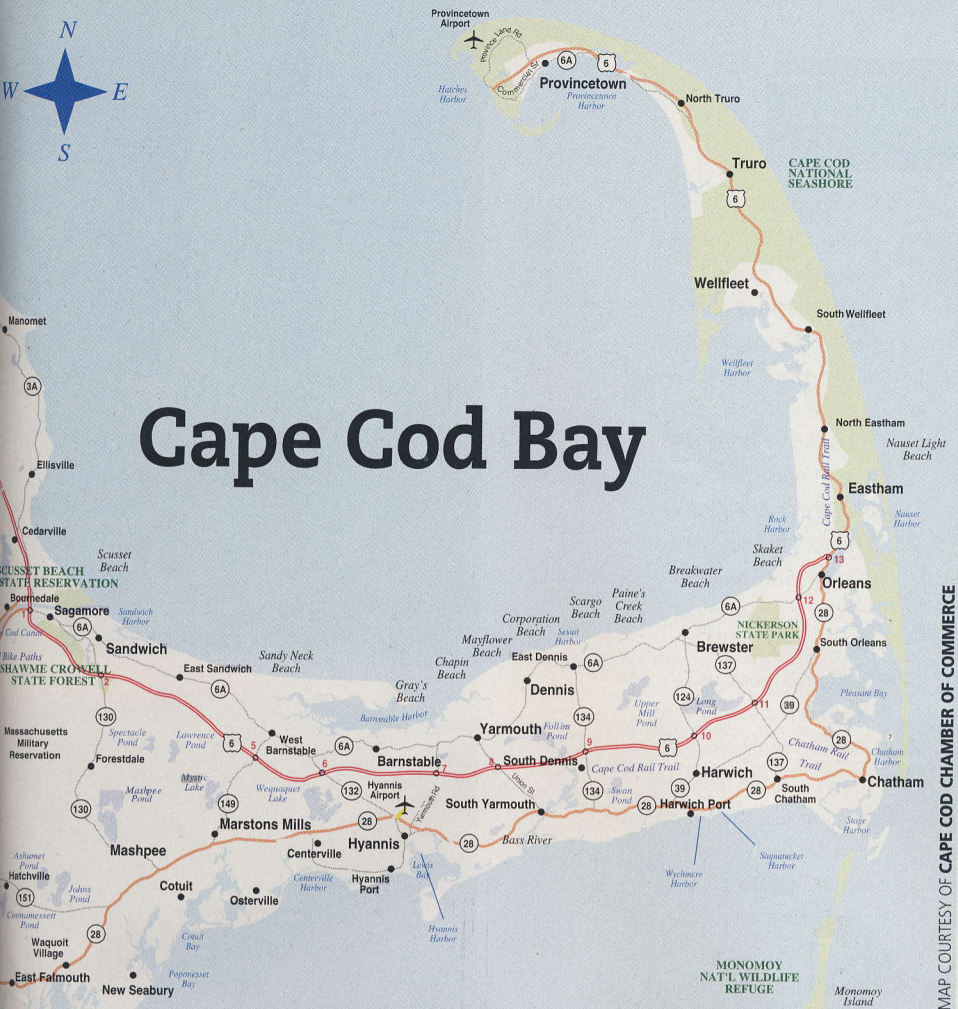
There are all sizes of fish. Next to the spring, when the big fish are feeding on herring, the fall is a solid bet for a shot at a big striper on Cape Cod. It doesn't matter if you're talking bass or blues, they're fat and they want to get fatter. The schoolies and the pesky 3- to 4-pound cocktail blues get transplanted by the double-digit fish. A 12- to 14-pound bluefish in skinny water marks a successful fly-rod day, in my book.

Ask Jim Anker. We were out one September day. The wind was a perfect woodcock wind, 10 to 15 knots northwest. We saw a few blues here and there on the dropping tide, the kind of fish that catch your attention but really don't make your heart race. We waited as the tide dropped to slack low, and set up where a sand spit adjoins a giant flat. The pattern had been that, when the tide turned, the





Cape Cod Bay



fish moved up along the sand spit until they hit a guzzle, about a foot deeper than the rest of the bottom. Then, they passed through and got onto the flat. No need for an anchor: I trimmed down the motor until the skeg stuck into the sand.

We jawed on for about a half-hour until I noticed the wind pick up—the wind always gains strength once the tide turns—and I climbed up to stand on the boat’s console to scout for fish. There were two, no three, no a dozen, and then I couldn’t count that high. An enormous school of fish was staging, waiting for the water to rise enough so they could get onto the shallow flat.

“I’m thinking about getting out of the boat and walking up onto the bar,” Jim said.

What is Cape Cod Bay but a giant catcher’s mitt? The geography of the “arm and fist” of the Cape makes a natural fish-catching pool during the autumn migration of striped bass and bluefish.

“Why not cast over the bar and see what happens?” I answered. I tied on a low-profile popper and he pitched it about 40 feet over the bar. Strip, strip, strip, *bam*.

A bunch of bluefish raced toward the popper but the big dog got there first. With the exception of a tarpon or a salmon, there is nothing quite like the pure savagery of a big bluefish erupting on a popper in a foot of water. The fish slashed on the surface and then jumped again, this time landing on the sand spit. It flopped like the proverbial fish out of water and landed in the drink, on our side, and the fight resumed. We hooked fish like that for about two hours.

Cape Cod Bay in the fall is like a catcher’s mitt. America’s favorite pastime, baseball, is in full swing, thereby making it easy to conjure up that image. (Particularly with the success of the Red Sox in recent years.) The majority of the fish that summered off the Maine and New Hampshire coastlines get the itch to head south for the winter. Bass and blues that lingered along the Massachusetts coast from Plum Island down to Boston Harbor and then from the South Shore to White Horse Beach are a captive audience. These inshore fish take a



CAPE COORDINATES

Beach and Boat Launches:

There are many public ramps on the Cape, and they're not that busy in the fall. Check out www.cc-waterweb.com/ramps for specific information. Pamet Harbor is a paved ramp with dock fingers and ample parking and is the closest to Provincetown. Sesuit Harbor in Dennis puts boaters in a perfect position to move along the bayside. And Barnstable Harbor will get anglers in range from the east end of the Canal through Barnstable Harbor.

Fly Patterns:

The omnipresent Clousers and Deceivers catch their share of bass and blues. Tied with a variety of wing colors from olive-and-black, lavender, brown and gray will match more realistically to the sandeels, peanut bunker and silversides. Exopoxies in a variety of colors, such as olive over white, and big poppers should be in your box, the poppers pre-rigged with bite guards so you're catching, instead

of singing, the blues. My favorite patterns in the fall are flatwings. I never leave home without a variety of sizes of L&L Specials and Bullrakers for shallow water, Razzle Dazzles for big bass and the September Night Fly when the mullet are moving. Go to stripermoon.com to order the flies.

Cool Bars and Restaurants:

While many restaurants are seasonal, a few good ones with big menus and even bigger beer selections are open year-round. A trip to Napi's in Provincetown for fresh seafood in an eclectic surrounding (all the decorations are from Boston-area salvage yards) is a good call. Land Ho in Orleans is packed all year long, as is the Chatham Squire. The latter two have no shortage of local flair.

What to Do When the Fishing Is Slow:

The fall is a perfect time for a scavenging walk on the beach. Collecting plugs is one of my

favorite pastimes, and if you look in the seaweed washed on shore, chances are you'll find plenty. Many folks collect lobster-pot buoys as well. In the event that you're in need of a little R&R, try a few hours sail aboard the Schooner *Bay Lady* // out of Provincetown (www.sailcapecod.com). Odds are you'll see whales. While you're up there, you might want to visit the Whydah Museum, which showcases the remnants of Barry Clifford's pirate ship discovery (www.whydah.com). A dune-buggy tour from Art's Dune Tours is a fun landlubber's alternative (www.artsdunetours.com). They've been running the dunes since 1946. There are several lighthouses as well, from Truro's Highland Light to Eastham's Nauset Light and on the ocean side Chatham Light. Kayakers head to Barnstable Harbor and Nauset Marsh. And if you've brought your golf clubs, check out Golf Cape Cod for information (www.golfcapecod.com).

—Tom Keer



southwest coordinate, gorging on bait and heading toward the Cape Cod Canal. It is true that some arrive at the northern tip of the Cape, or Provincetown's Race Point, and then skirt around to the outer beaches and onward. But the arm of the Cape corrals miles of striped bass and bluefish, and due to the bait present, she holds them captive for quite some time.

At the same time the bass migrate, the bait follow a similar rhythm. Peanut bunker, glass minnows, silversides, sandeels, herring, squid, all prepare for their seasonal travel, and they stage, on the quarter moons, in coves. What is Cape Cod Bay but a giant cove that runs south of Boston to Barnstable on a longitudinal track, and then from Plymouth to Provincetown on a lateral track? While the fish are trying to fatten up for their long haul, Mother Nature provides an all-you-can-eat buffet. To my mind it is sheer magic.

Weather this time of year, like the bait, is a mixed bag. Sometimes you'll swear it's summer, with hot, sirocco-type winds.




September Night Fly



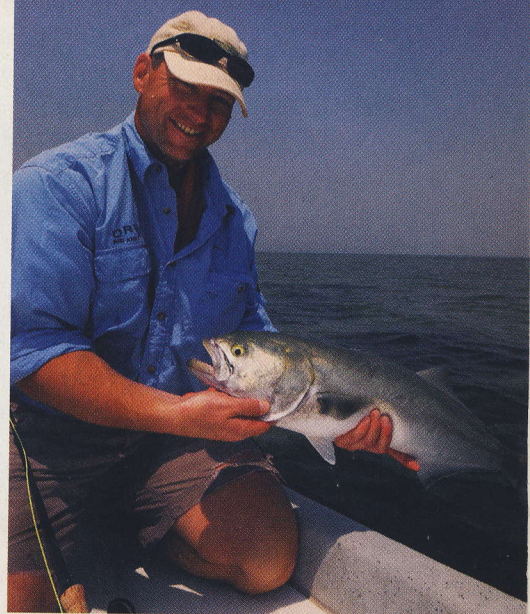
A fisherman can get punch drunk on those days, light-headed. It is the fishing equivalent of lying on a lounge chair, drinking a cold beer and listening to the ball game on the radio. Storms follow these lazy days and blow in fast. The winds shift around the horn from west-southwest to east-southeast. If you're on the water on a sou'easter be prepared to run for cover. The cloud ceiling drops suddenly, the haze disappears and thunderclaps, rain and wind whack the coast. Every cloud has a silver lining, and as fast as the storms roll in, they disappear. Usually they are replaced with colder northern winds, the kind that make the woodcock and the teal take notice.

My favorite weather pattern is that of Indian summer. When I hitch my trailer to the truck at 0400, there is ice on the deck. Evening dew combined with cold, overnight temperatures turns my casting platforms into an ice rink. When I launch and climb aboard I would like to believe that I resemble Wayne Gretzky, but the

sad fact is that I more closely imitate Bambi on ice. Not to worry. Around false dawn, that short time before the sun pops, the temperature drops again. And as quickly as it drops, it is replaced by heat that rises into the 70s if not 80s. A perfect cloudless day with a high ceiling and bright-blue skies is your reward for patience and perseverance.

Fall fishing in Cape Cod Bay is more than just hanging fish. It's a seasonal rite of passage. 

Tom Keer is a freelance writer based in Wellfleet, MA.



Below: The right flies, such as flatwing streamers, will keep anglers in Cape Cod Bay blues. Top: Casting on a hazy autumn day along the sandbars of Wellfleet.