



When water temperatures rise in the spring, striped bass, bluefish, and squeteague begin to migrate. Find, identify, and match the prevalent early-season baits for success.



Because adult herring can run up to 15 inches (more commonly 10 inches or so), you should carry a size range of blue-over-white baitfish patterns such as Lefty's Deceivers, Bucktail Deceivers, or Skok Mega Musbmouths (right).



Early Season STRIPERS

TOM KEER

COME APRIL, most Northeast saltwater fly fishers have tied plenty of flies and rigged their gear. Simply put, it's time to catch some fish. With rising water temperatures triggering their migration, striped bass, bluefish, and squeteague move to the Northeast. Though they frequent the same haunts and feed on similar baitfish, these three species behave somewhat differently in the early season; success with them is contingent on patterning their behavior. Weather is volatile during the early season.

Sometimes it feels like summer, other times like winter, and still other times it is just right. Good anglers improvise, adapt, and reposition themselves as the fishing situation dictates. So when heading for the salt in April and May, here are some important points to remember when searching for any of these fish species.



Follow the Bait

KNOWING ABOUT EARLY SEASON bait is critical to finding striped bass, squeteague, and bluefish. While baits like mummies and shrimp are important, anglers who find herring, silversides, and squid know they have found a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

Herring. The most important bait in the early season is herring, most notably alewives. Alewives are anadromous, and they move into freshwater rivers and streams and ultimately spawn in freshwater lakes. Schools of alewives move from the ocean along beachfronts and gather along the mouths of rivers. Sometimes their only access into the rivers is on the full or new moons of spring tides, which raise the water level to a navigable depth. The young-of-the-year spend

Surf Candies (right), Jiggles, or Ray's Flies are good choices for matching silversides, which range in size from 2 to 6 inches.



Top fly patterns for early-season baits



Popular Northeast squid patterns such as Jamie Boyle's Red Can Squid or Dave Skok's Musby Squid (left) imitate the squid's prominent eye and fusiform shape. Flies with lots of movement and translucency, such as Kenney Abrames's Banana Squid, are also effective imitations.

two to six months in fresh water, growing 1 1/2 to 5 inches in size before they migrate to sea. Look for them at the river mouths in the fall, too. Blueback herring follow a similar pattern and are common near Long Island and in the Hudson and lower Mohawk rivers.

Silversides. The most common inshore saltwater baitfish is the silverside, a year-round inhabitant. Often confused with sandeels, silversides are more common, are around longer, more abundant, and saltwater fish key-in on them more. In the early season, there are few, if any, sandeels. Silversides live in tidal creeks and grass flats during the summer and then migrate to deeper water in the winter. They are important in the early season because they return to the shallow estuary waters or the intertidal zone, where they spawn during the day on high tides.

Atlantic silversides congregate in large schools that usually consist of similar-size fish. They are found along the shore, often within a few feet of the water's edge. Silversides are commonly found swimming among submerged grass in brackish waters where streams and rivers meet the sea. In the summer they rarely swim in water deeper than a few feet, but in winter they descend to greater depths to avoid the cold water temperatures.

Squid. Squid are in the Cephalopoda class, which means "head-footed." Their arms and tentacles are attached directly to their head. They have an internal shell that supports the soft, muscular body and have large, well-developed eyes. Squid are milky white or rusty brown in color; that color changes as they expand and contract and acts as camouflage.

Squid have a 12- to 18-month life span, and they breed in the slopewater off the continental shelf. What is most important to fishermen is that they favor high-40 to mid-50 degree water (F.), which means they migrate inshore in April and May to mature. They also

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move into the shallows at this time to feed on glass minnows (Atlantic herring fry).

Select a Location

FISH WHERE THE BAIT ARE. Since alewives search out fresh water for spawning, look for areas with adjacent river systems. The abundant estuaries in the Northeast are a logical first step. Watch known herring runs, and when the baitfish start to arrive you know that either the predators are in or are soon to follow. Many salt ponds also have freshwater rivers or streams running into them. A side benefit to fishing these areas is that they are alluvial and have mud bottoms that retain some of the sun's heat, and the current flows aren't as severe as in other areas. Water temperatures climb quickly in estuaries and salt ponds and create prime feeding grounds for striped bass and weakfish.

Because silversides spawn in shallower water, you'll find them along beachfronts as well as at the mouths of rivers and estuaries. Anglers fishing beaches this time of year find fish in the softer waters surrounding ocean holes or inside onshore bars.

Squid favor deeper water during the day. As light intensity decreases in late afternoon and evening, they ascend the water column and are sometimes found at or just below the surface. When squid are present, daytime anglers fish the deeper water around reefs or inshore islands as well as in rips. Night fishermen find squid along beaches, river mouths, or in coves.

Individual Species

STRIPED BASS MIGRATE in schools and small to medium-size fish precede the larger fish. Their patterns vary every year but some schools leave Maryland and take an offshore, northeast tack toward Block Island, Nantucket, and Martha's Vineyard before they arrive in Rhode Island, southeastern Massachusetts, and Cape Cod. Continental fish push through Cape Cod Canal and move along the Massachusetts South Shore, Boston Harbor, and the Massachusetts North Shore to New Hampshire and southern Maine. Another group swims past Provincetown at the end of Cape Cod and migrates directly to coastal Maine.

Other schools of fish follow the coastline through New Jersey and on to Long Island, New York, and into Long Island Sound where they may stay on Long Island's North Shore or on the Connecticut coastline. Big schools ultimately arrive in Manhattan's Hudson River watershed. These smaller fish are

constantly on the move until enough baitfish cause them to stop and feed.

Bluefish that arrive this time of year are called racers. They are gaunt from their long migration, and it is common to find a 3-foot bluefish that would weigh 15 or more pounds during the season weighing 9 or 10 pounds. These bluefish often fin in shallow water along beachfronts or around the mouths of

such as the Vineyard, Nantucket, Block Island, and New York and New Jersey get early schools of fish because of their proximity to the migration routes and to the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream channels warmer water to these areas sooner and creates optimum feeding temperatures for bass, bluefish, and squeteague.

Just because Long Island's South Shore or Rhode Island's Deep Hole in



Early season stripers in Chesapeake Bay feed on American and bicolor shad returning to the Susquehanna River.

salt ponds and are finicky only because they are not feeding. They spook easily, but it is possible to catch them on herring or silverside patterns or with poppers or sliders. South Cape Beach is well-known for its early season racers.

Squeteague, or weakfish, are sea trout, and they look similar to bluefish in fin shape and color. Weakfish have two large teeth in their upper jaw. Squeteague got the name weakfish because of the ease with which a hook tears from their soft mouths. Squeteague swim fast near the surface in large schools. When bait is around, squeteague feed on silversides along the beachfronts or on herring, crabs, worms, or other baitfish in salt ponds and estuaries. Small squeteague are baitfish for bluefish and striped bass.

Certain Spots Are Early Season Spots

CERTAIN SPOTS that fish well during the early season do not fish particularly well during the mid or late season. These spots have been historically early-season "hot spots" because herring, silversides, and squid are around. Still, some areas

Matunuk or Cape Cod's South Cape Beach have early fish doesn't mean that you can plan on catching them. Many anglers return to areas where they have caught fish in the past but may find the fish aren't there; early season fish, and all saltwater fish for that matter, move around. Static, routine-oriented fishermen may be lucky one day and unlucky the next. The fish may have repositioned to the end of the onshore bar or moved higher up the estuary. Take some time to watch what is happening. You may find the fish haven't left completely and that they have instead adjusted to changes in the wind or tide.

You might need to wear several layers and sometimes your cold hands may not tie the best knots, but if you get out and fish, you will be able to figure out what is going on. You'll see which baitfish have arrived, and then you'll find where the fish are. And if the fish aren't in? Well, there's always tomorrow. 🐟

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