

**M**ANY LONGTIME STRIPER fishermen consider flats fishing a tropical phenomenon—irrelevant north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The truth is, it's an effective way to catch striped bass, and it's a blast. When I watch a striper—regardless of size—close on my fly in 12 inches of clear water, I light up. Because it's so exciting, many Northeasterners are wetting a line in skinny water.



TOM KEER

### What Is a Flat?

BEFORE THE LATE 1980s, flats were usually called shoals or sandbars. Some are wide and long and best measured in square miles. Others are short and narrow and may provide just a few hundred yards of fishable water. Each flat is different, and the same flats change from year to year because of the effects of the tides and weather that continuously shift the ocean floor. A flat can change dramatically when violent storms churn the water.

If you watch the structure of your favorite flats over time, you may see patterns develop depending on the season or other factors. A series of flats not far from my home on Cape Cod takes on approximately the same contour every five years or so. As the flats change, so do the dynamics of the fishery. Survey your flats at the beginning of every season to see how they have changed.

Depending on the height of the tides in your area, flats are either fully or partially exposed at low tide. The bottoms of the flats vary by region, as well as by proximity to the mainland. Some flats are sandy, others have patches of eelgrass, and others have cobble bottoms. The rocks and cobble are washed into the ocean from natural erosion on the mainland.

Water clarity also varies from flat to flat. Flats in Long Island Sound tend to be murkier than flats closer to the open ocean due to the lower current exchange. Small flats in estuaries are not as clear as ocean flats. Flats change quickly, and a stiff wind or an overnight storm can cloud normally clear water. A day or two of calm weather following a storm clears up most flats.

All flats have edges and drop-offs where the depth changes from shallow to deep. Sometimes it is a steep drop-off and in other places the change from shallow to deep water is more gradual. Bass and other gamefish (as well as baitfish) follow these edges as they move from place to place. When the tide is moving, the



# STRIPERS on the Flats

*Find fish on the flats without a trip to the tropics*



*Striped bass (inset) and bluefish feed mostly on sand eels and silversides on Northeast saltwater flats. You need a boat to access most flats, but you can anchor your boat and wade (right) or use the boat to drift across the flat. Barry and Cathy Beck photos*

current along these edges is often stronger, or more erratic, which can disorient baitfish and make for an easy meal. The baitfish often flee onto the flat for safety, and when the water is deep enough, the bass follow them.

Hard edges (sharp angles and stronger current) make predators more aggressive than softer edges. Where the contour is steep, and the current strong, the fish need to move quickly in order to get a meal before it washes by them. If you have to choose an edge to drift along, or stake up along, choose the edge with the most dramatic depth change.

Some shallow areas consist of a series of bars with cuts and troughs between them, known colloquially in Massachusetts as "guzzles." Water spills over the bars and drains through the cuts and troughs. Fish often use these troughs and cuts as entrance and exit points onto and off the flat. If these cuts are adjacent to nearby bays, estuaries, rips, or deep water, they become even more convenient entrance and exit points for bass.



Some flats are sandy with patches of eelgrass while other flats (above) have cobble bottoms. In most cases, your fly color should match the bottom color.



Learn where stripers enter and exit the flats—and how they move across the flat at various stages of the tide—and you'll catch more fish in shallow water.

## Fish Movement

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT aspects of fishing is a thorough understanding of your quarry. Merely showing up on a flat and hastily shouting out points on the clock—coordinates for your buddy to cast—doesn't result in many successful opportunities. On some days, particularly those following a storm, it is difficult to spot fish from a long distance, so it's important to know where to begin looking.

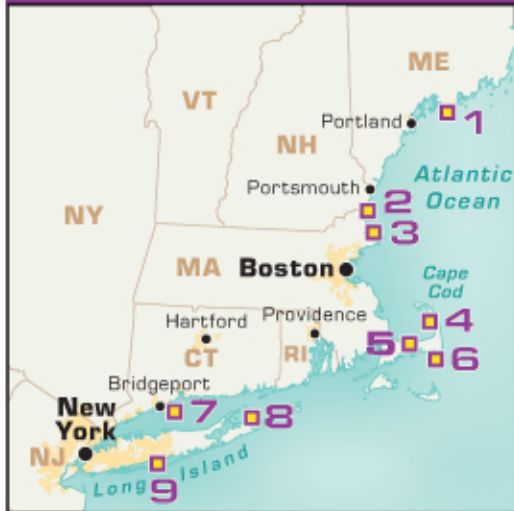
If you take some time to study the fish—without actually fishing—you'll find that they move predictably while on the flats and also while moving to and from the flats. Bass are predators, and predators follow edges. Some edges are formed by structure—such as a depth change or where an eelgrass bed adjoins a sandy flat. Other edges are formed by current or color change—such as where

fast water meets slower water or where clear water meets dirty water. Wind affects the current speed and can form edges as well. Wind moving with the tide smooths the surface and speeds up the water flow. Wind moving against the tide creates a chop and slows the current.

Baitfish usually swim against the current, and predators follow them. If you see fish moving with the current, it often means that they are spooked or are moving off a flat with a dropping tide.

While feeding on or near the flats, groups of bass tend to find a particular depth and stay with it as the tide rises. On a flat with a gradual depth change, bass often move from the deeper areas to the shallow areas as those areas are flooded by the incoming tide. They need to have enough water over them to feel safe and feed aggressively.

## The Best Northeast Striper Flats



- 1. Mouth of the Kennebec River, Popham Beach, ME**  
Kennebec Angler  
(207) 442-8239  
www.kennebecangler.com
- 2. Joppa Flats/Merrimack River, Newbury, MA**  
First Light Anglers  
(978) 948-7004  
www.firstlightanglers.com
- 3. Mouth of the Essex River, Ipswich, MA**  
Rivers Edge Trading Company  
(978) 921-8008  
www.riversedgetrading.com
- 4. Barnstable Harbor, Barnstable, MA**  
Sorbus  
(508) 539-0007
- 5. South Cape Flats, Barnstable, MA**  
Sorbus  
(508) 539-0007
- 6. Monomoy Island, Chatham, MA**  
Fishing the Cape  
(508) 432-1200  
www.fishingthecape.com
- 7. Norwalk Islands, Westport, CT**  
Westport Outfitters  
(203) 831-8036  
www.saltwater-flyfishing.com
- 8. Gardiner's Bay, East Hampton, NY**  
Urban Angler  
(800) 255-5488  
www.urban-angler.com
- 9. Great South Bay, Brookhaven, NY**  
Camp-Site Sport Shop  
(631) 271-4969  
www.campsitesportshopinc.com

## Fly Patterns

SUCCESSFUL FLATS ANGLERS are like trout fishers who carry different flies to match different insect hatches. Flats anglers should carry baitfish imitations in different sizes, shapes, and colors and change flies regularly until they find the right match.

I use mostly Ken Abrames's Flatwing flies to imitate silversides and sand eels. (See "How to Tie Flatwings" by Ken Abrames at [flyfisherman.com/salt-water/](http://flyfisherman.com/salt-water/). THE EDITOR.) The L and L Special, Bullraker, Sure Thing, and Ray's Fly Flatwing consistently work for me. They suspend in the shallow water column of the flats environment and have the same lateral movement as silversides and sand eels.

Spend some time looking at baitfish and you'll see that the flies don't need to be complicated. One-inch sand eels can be imitated with a #8 hook and just a few strands of marabou—light on the bottom and darker colors like olive or brown on top.

Poppers and sliders sometimes work on a flat and bring the most memorable strikes. Gartside Gurglers are excellent flats flies.

I choose to fish shallower flats where weighted flies are rarely



Ken Abrames (above with a box of his flies) is a proponent of floating lines and unweighted flies that move and breathe in the water.

required, but if you are fishing where the current is strong, and the bass are looking down, a weighted fly may be in order. Clouser Minnows tied with bead chain or small lead dumbbell eyes are best for shallow water. Crab patterns such as green or brown Merkins—match them to the bottom color—also take their share of flats fish. Try plastic or chain eyes on your crab patterns so they are not overweighted, and don't be afraid to dead-drift them.



A guide with a boat and poling platform can spot bass from long distances, quickly move from place to place, and position the boat for the best possible presentation given the wind and current direction.

Where there are a series of adjacent flats of various depths, bass often feed on the deeper flats early in the incoming tide and on the shallower flats at the end of the incoming tide. When the tide reverses, so does the general direction of the game-fish movement.

As you follow fish moving from flat to flat, or across a large flat, you may notice that the fish tend to stay at a particular depth. Some days it seems as though they prefer 2 feet of water over their heads to feed comfortably on a flat, and on other days they might want a little more or a little less. If you can find a pattern to this behavior, you'll get into a lot more fish.

For instance, you may notice a group of bass on the southwest corner of a point bar. You see that they are moving into the current and with the wind. If you watch your depth finder, and compare it to the depth where the fish

Continued on page 71

## STRIPERS ON THE FLATS . . .

*Continued from page 35*

are, you may find that they are in 2.3 feet of water. When the tide rises, the fish move farther onto the flat, staying at that 2.3-foot mark. I often find fish moving up a series of edges or flats but always staying at about the same depth. If I move to another location, this trend may repeat itself, helping me quickly locate fish.

Once you determine what the fish are doing, you can set up your boat to get the best possible shots at them. Drifting with the tide may result in most fish coming toward the boat as you drift. In this situation, you'll need to speed up your retrieve to offset the boat's speed. I prefer to keep the boat at a 45-degree angle in relation to the current so both anglers get shots at the fish. This also keeps the line from crossing the cockpit, thereby reducing tangles. Having one right- and one left-handed caster is ideal, but if one of the anglers can accurately deliver the fly with a backcast, it's almost as good.



*In the summer, many anglers wade the flats wearing shorts and protective footwear (above). In the spring, you'll need breathable waders and insulated layers underneath to stay warm in the cold water.*

### Flats Bait

STRIPED BASS AND BLUEFISH MOVE onto the flats following baitfish. The dominant flats baitfish are silversides and sand eels. When silversides move inshore in March and April, bass begin moving into shallow water. Sand eels arrive later in May and June, and when both baits are on the flats, the fishing can be explosive. You can tell the difference between silversides and sand eels quickly—silversides spray out

of the water when chased by bass, but sand eels do not.

May through early July is typically the best time for flats fishing in most areas of the Northeast, but—depending on bait movement and water temperature on your local flats—the fishing can still be good in July and August. If the water warms too much, the bass seek cooler water elsewhere.

Flats fishing slows in the fall as the stripers school along the beaches in preparation for their migration. Menhaden and other important baitfish also gather and migrate along the beaches, and stripers take advantage of these easier meals. There may be times in September or October when fish travel across flats as they migrate south, but these opportunities are unreliable.

There are a variety of sizes of silversides and sand eels on the flats, everything from 1-inch juveniles to 7-inch adults. Imitate the most common size.

Silversides and sand eels take on different colors depending on the water depth, the color of the bottom terrain, and the sunlight. On bright days and over white sand, the bait is usually light-colored, and similar patterns perform best. On cloudy days or over eelgrass, silversides and sand eels take on a darker tint or a brownish-green color.

Saltwater tiers too often use monochromatic colors in their flies, but subtle color differences sometimes make a difference. This is the reason that Art Flick used urine-stained fox underbelly fur instead of regular fox underbelly fur for his Hendrickson. Sometimes a fly tied with plain green-dyed bucktail works over a kelp bed, but mixing yellow and blue bucktail together creates a green hue and a better imitation of most baitfish. If you favor synthetic materials, you can blend them as well to get the perfect shade. For underwater baitfish pictures to help you chose the right colors, look at Ken Abrames's web site [stripermoon.com/](http://stripermoon.com/).

If a fish trails a fly but doesn't eat it, the fly may have too much flash, be too thick, too long, the wrong color, or you may be using the wrong retrieve. Jockey around with the patterns and pull out some of the flash or cut down the tail. On a bright day, a few stands of flash are sufficient. Don't overdo it.

Your retrieve should imitate the natural movement of silversides and sand eels. Most prey species move steadily and rhythmically unless a predator pursues them. I use

*Continued on page 72*

## ELECTRONIC TABLE OF CONTENTS

Use this link  
[www.flyfisherman.com/toc](http://www.flyfisherman.com/toc)  
to find these stories  
and more:

### • Peacocks in Paradise

*Miami and Ft. Lauderdale canals provide do-it-yourself opportunities for peacock bass and other fly-rod species.*

Walt Jennings

### • B.C.'s Best Dry-Fly Fishing

*Native rainbow trout in the upper Columbia River*

Rosa Perrot

### • Montana's New Madison

*Despite the crowds, fishing on the Madison River has never been better.*

Greg Thomas

### • Stay Sharp

*Have your hooks to a razor point for quick, deep penetration and better holding power.*

Bob Crouser

### • Summer Terrestrial Tactics

*A Pennsylvania master explains his favorite summer terrestrial patterns and some effective techniques for fishing them.*

Ed Shank

### • Tying Terrestrials

*Videos and step-by-step tying photos show how to tie the Letart Hopper, Far Ast, and Fear Bands.*

FFM Staff

[www.flyfisherman.com](http://www.flyfisherman.com)



## STRIPERS ON THE FLATS . . .

*Continued from page 71*

several different retrieves. If the bass are down current, I usually cast up and across, throw a few upstream mends into the line, and drift the fly down to the fish. As my line tightens on the swing, I add a hand-twist retrieve or a strip retrieve. Since the current is already moving the fly, there is no need to use a fast retrieve. When I do use a strip retrieve, I retrieve 8 to 12 inches per strip for large baits like menhaden. For smaller baitfish such as you find on the flats, I use shorter strips, normally 3 to 6 inches. If bait is holding in the current or waiting to move over a bar, a dead-drift or slow-swing presentation works wonders. These are standard freshwater streamer retrieves, but they are excellent in the salt as well.

### Light Conditions

STRIPERS CAN BE SHY in bright light. Anglers think that water temperatures always drive bass off the flats, but at times the bright sun is responsible. When bass move off the flats, bluefish often replace them. A big bluefish in skinny water is a treat, and they jump and tail-walk like small tarpon.

A flat devoid of bass on a bright sunny day may come alive with fish at dusk or at first light, and sometimes they feed there all night. Once my friend Tim Rice and I found only bluefish on the flat during the day, and when the sun started to fade, we saw the V-wakes of bass moving across the flat until well after sunset. The bass were feeding on sand eels with their noses pushed out of the water, inhaling bait as they moved.

### Gear

THERE ARE TWO DISTINCT philosophies on rods. Most anglers prefer 9-foot, fast-action rods for flats fishing because they can make quick change-of-direction casts to approaching schools of fish. Other anglers favor slower rods up to 10 or 11 feet long. These rods mend line more efficiently and do double duty as surf rods.

Because I rarely fish water more than 3 feet deep, I fish floating lines almost all the time. When I want to drop my fly lower in the water column, I add split-shot or use a heavier hook. Most of the time the weight of the hook sinks the fly enough, and bass will rise to a fly if it is the correct imitation. Sinking-tip lines have their place for slightly deeper flats (3 to 5 feet) and some anglers favor intermediate sinking lines. These cut the wind better than floating lines but are more difficult to mend or pick up and recast quickly in fast-paced flats situations.



*Monomoy Island, South Cape Flats, and the shallows near Barnstable Harbor (above) are among the best flats-fishing areas in the Northeast and they are all on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.*

Striped bass are not leader shy, so nylon monofilament leaders and tippets are sufficient. I've heard anglers debate the qualities of nylon versus fluorocarbon, but if the fly is right the bass will eat it regardless of the tippet composition.

I use three-piece leaders between 6 and 9 feet long with 2 or 3 feet of 40-pound-test nylon for the butt section, 2 or 3 feet of 30-pound-test for a midsection, and 2 or 3 feet of 20-pound-test for the tippet. I put a loop at the base of the butt section with a Bimini twist, loop the midsection to that, and join the tippet with a double surgeon's knot. I leave tag ends of the double surgeon's knot long (3 to 5 inches) to add droppers. Fishing two flies at once can create a feeding frenzy and often results in hooking two bass at a time.

If you wade, use a chest or waist pack with waterproof fly boxes and quick-drying, sun-proof clothing. In the early season, breathable waders with synthetic underwear or fleece are best in cold water. Later in the summer, many anglers wade saltwater flats in shorts. Wear Neoprene booties, sandals, or flats boots to protect your feet from horseshoe crabs, skates, and the sharp edges of broken shells.

A good hat and polarized glasses are important. I wear wraparound frames to reduce side glare and prefer amber lenses. Additional relevant saltwater gear, such as a hook hone, BogaGrip, binoculars, sun block, drinking water, and a rain jacket should accompany you on your flats trip.

### Accessing the Flats

IN MOST CASES, saltwater flats are surrounded by deeper water, so you need a

boat to get to the flat. Sea kayaks have recently gained favor among flats anglers. Many kayakers paddle to a flat and then get out and wade. You sit too low in a kayak to effectively sight-fish on a flat, but trolling along the edges of a flat is another effective kayak technique. If you wade, tether your kayak to your waist and walk with it, or anchor it on a sandbar. Use a length of rope twice as long as the expected maximum water depth so that a rising tide doesn't take your boat.

Fishing from a larger boat is the most effective way to sight-fish the flats because you can move quickly from spot to spot, you have a better vantage point to spot fish, and a team effort separates the boat maneuvering and the fishing. For a boat to work on a flat, it needs to have a shallow draft and move silently with a trolling motor or a pole. A poling platform is helpful—I stand on the center console of my Maritime Skiff to spot fish. Some captains fish Florida-style flats boats like Hewes, Action Craft, and Maverick, while others prefer boats with modified V-hulls like Jones Brothers, Parker, and Maritime Skiff.

Successful flats fishing means knowing the bait and understanding how tide and wind affect fish movement. Experimenting with flies will round out your flats-fishing experience. When you put it all together, you have a deliberate, methodical way to catch more fish and have more fun doing it.



TOM KEER is the FLY FISHERMAN Northeast field editor. He lives on Cape Cod, Massachusetts.