



NIGHT *Stalkers*

The moon is down. The striped bass are in. And the water is black as night. Welcome to the dark side.

by Tom Keer

These days, catching striped bass on a fly rod is about as common as sunburn. But that is literally only half the story of Northeast striper fishing. While it is true that most fly rodders still prefer to chase bass during the heat of day, there is a small cadre of night owls who would just as soon hit the beaches after hours. Historically, in fact, striper fishing started out as a sun-down to sun-up game because these light-sensitive fish feed most aggressively at night. You can always tell an old-school, night-time striper fisherman by the dark circles under his eyes, but they will always tell you that the reward is worth the effort. ➤

There is nothing quite like the tug of a big bass when it is pitch black and you're standing in water up to your waist. Every sound, every movement of the rod or swirl of water is dramatic. If you have not tried the night bite, you should. The fishing is excellent. You can fish around work or family obligations. And you don't have to put up with the crowds on weekends.

Mapping it out

Don't tell your boss, but you can do much of the prep work for an evening's outing during the day. Start with nautical charts to see what areas look good around mean low water. Books such as the *Mariner's Atlas* or *The Embassy Maptech Guides* are great as they feature some 50 to 75 charts within a region and reveal countless areas to fish. As a cross reference, Maptech's Web site (www.maptech.com) features aerial photos of many of the places that you'd like to fish. Terraflly (terrafly.com) is another fascinating map site that will allow you to "virtually fly" over an area.

Tide charts are the last step of reconnaissance, and they will

let you know the heights of the tides, which can vary considerably in the Northeast, particularly around big moons. The lower-than-average, or minus tides around full and new moons are great for getting farther out; but watch it when the tide trots back in. It can be swift. Check out saltwatertides.com for a few hundred tide charts spanning a variety of regions. Or check in with a local tackle shop for up-to-the-minute fishing reports that will help you select your sites and times.

After you've picked a spot, take a few hours to drive around and survey the water you plan to fish. From this you can determine wave lengths, wind direction, tidal force, baitfish activity, current flow, or bird activity. While that information may change later on when you're ready to fish, it helps to see what happened during the day.

Going at any time of the tide will give you basic information, but the best time to check your spots is during the few hours on either side of low tide. With lower water you can see all the nuances of the beach and set up entrance and exit points. You can also see what effect the combination of wind and water has on the structure.

In estuaries, you can see any of the pockets in the bank where baitfish gather to avoid the current. You'll see how the bottom topography looks and how man-made features, such as mosquito ditches, affect the river bed. You can also see any mussel beds or structure that will add texture to the current.

As the saying goes, every good entrance has an even better exit, so map out your start and finish points. If you see an onshore bar that extends far out into the ocean, take a range on land to know where it ends. In other words, use several fixed points on land or water to find where bars start, how far out holes lie, and the location of other fishy features. A range can be anything from the end of a treeline to a cottage light (See "Bar Hopping," pg. TK).

Night fishing is primarily a low-tide affair, so head out and fish as the tide drops and you can gradually work your way farther into the best spots. As you do, reference those points on land so that you know when you're nearing the end the line. As the tide turns and starts to come in, keep an eye on your ranges,

and you can continue to catch fish as you work back toward the starting point.

The Right Stuff

Being set up for night fishing is really not much different from daylight hours. A standard saltwater kit of flies, terminal gear, hook hones, and the like are perfect, but there are a few additional pieces that will serve you well.

First and foremost, a headlamp is essential for close-up work such as sharpening a hook or tying on a new fly. But also pack a bright light for finding shoreline reference points or marker stakes at a distance, or for scanning the water for baitfish.

Some anglers worry about eye protection at night. For about \$15, a simple pair of clear shooting or construction glasses will shield your eyes from flying hooks and won't impede your vision.

On the issue of safety, every year an angler or two drowns while fishing at night in the Northeast. Often, they haven't done their scouting and don't know how to get off a bar. Mix in cold

GETTING THE DROP

Your odds for hook-up during the day or night improve if you're fishing a few different flies. A standard dropper rig should have a large bait pattern on the point with a small bait pattern further up the leader and a clam worm or attractor pattern on top. That will help match more of the diverse bait in the water. For deep-sinking rigs, go with two or three feet of 30-pound mono to two feet of 15-pound test looped to a sinking line. For fishing right under the surface, you could go with a floating line and perhaps a slightly longer leader. A Bimini twist with a double surgeons loop connects right to the fly line. Triple surgeon's knots at the sections with one tag end left long completes the dropper system.



JONATHAN MILO



BUNNY DECEIVER

Hook: Mustad 34007 or equivalent, size 3/0.

Thread: Danville Flat Waxed Nylon, color to suit.

Body: Cross-cut rabbit.

Eyes: 3-D prismatic eyes.

Head: Thread head coated with Softtex.



BANGER

Hook: TMC 511S or equivalent, size 4/0.

Thread: White Gudebrod size D rod-winding thread.

Tail: Chartreuse bucktail.

Body: Chartreuse or orange Estaz.

Eyes: Large silver-and-black prismatic stick-ons.

Head: Live body foam cylinder covered with chartreuse prismatic tape.



GARTSIDE GURGLER

Hook: Eagle Claw 254SS or equivalent, size 3/0.

Thread: Danville 3/0 monocord, color to suit.

Tail: Bucktail.

Body: Black foam over Estaz and palmered grizzly saddle.



SILICONE EEL

Hook: Mustad 34011 or equivalent, size 3/0.

Thread: Danville Flat Waxed Nylon, color to suit.

Body: Black Secret Streamer Hair, head coated with silicone.

Eyes: Large prismatic stick-on.

DAVID KLAUSMEYER

autumn waters, heavy waders, and sleep deprivation, and even an experienced angler can get into trouble. A horse-collar or a waist-wrap flotation device can add additional protection. If you are fishing on rocks or jetties, wading cleats are a must, and a wading belt will keep water from shooting down your boots if you take a wave over the bow. Leave your wading jacket untucked outside of your waders to help keep out splashing waves.

Finally, always bring a compass. The fog can roll in quickly, particularly in the spring, and a compass will always set you straight.

Hooked on a Feeling

Night fishing is a tactile endeavor. If you're used to fishing during the day then your vision is probably very keen, but your sense of touch may be undeveloped. On some nights, particularly on high-pressure nights or around full moons, you might not even need a light to re-rig. But on low-pressure nights, especially on a dark, new moon, you won't be able to see much. Here are a few pointers that will make the difference.

Start fishing before sunset. You'll be able to see your terrain, feel the current flow, and get comfortable as the light fades. Your eyes will adjust, and it won't be as much of a jolt as if you show up on the beach at midnight.

Adjust your cast. Most night fishermen will drop their casting arm to the side to keep the fly line and the fly a slight distance from their head. The stroke remains the same, but by dropping your arm you'll prevent mishaps. Your sense of distance will also change at night, and the tendency is to tick the water or the beach on your backcast. So stop your backcasts a bit higher than you normally would.

Swim your fly. You'll have to feel your line to know where it and your fly are. Floating or sink-tip lines work best for line control. After you make your cast, feel where the rod is bending and where the line is drifting, and you'll know exactly what is happening. If you need to get deeper, you can always add a pinch of split-shot or some extra weight to a tippet. Since you won't be able to see a fish inhale your fly, consider every bump a strike, just as you would when nymph fishing for trout.

Listen closely. When the wind isn't too stiff, or if you're downwind, you can hear a long way off. On quiet nights you'll often hear fish slurping silversides or sand eels or slapping at herring.

Hunt by smell. I was fishing with Kenney Abrames one time when he suddenly yelled STOP! LET'S FISH! We got out and walked the beach, and within a few minutes were catching fish. When I asked him how he knew there were fish there, he said he smelled them. Train yourself to key in on that fish scent just as you would a grilled steak at a bar-be-que.

Fish points and coves. In the fall, most bait stages on the quarter moons and migrates on the big moons. Areas with slower current, such as coves, are better on the quarter moons. Points are

BAR HOPPING

There are several types of sandbars on the beaches that you need to identify during the day so you'll know how to fish them at night. A bull-nose bar is rounded and attaches to shore. Offshore bars are separated from the beach by deeper water. While you may be able to wade out to the offshore bar at low tide, you may get wet if you stay out too long when the tide comes in.

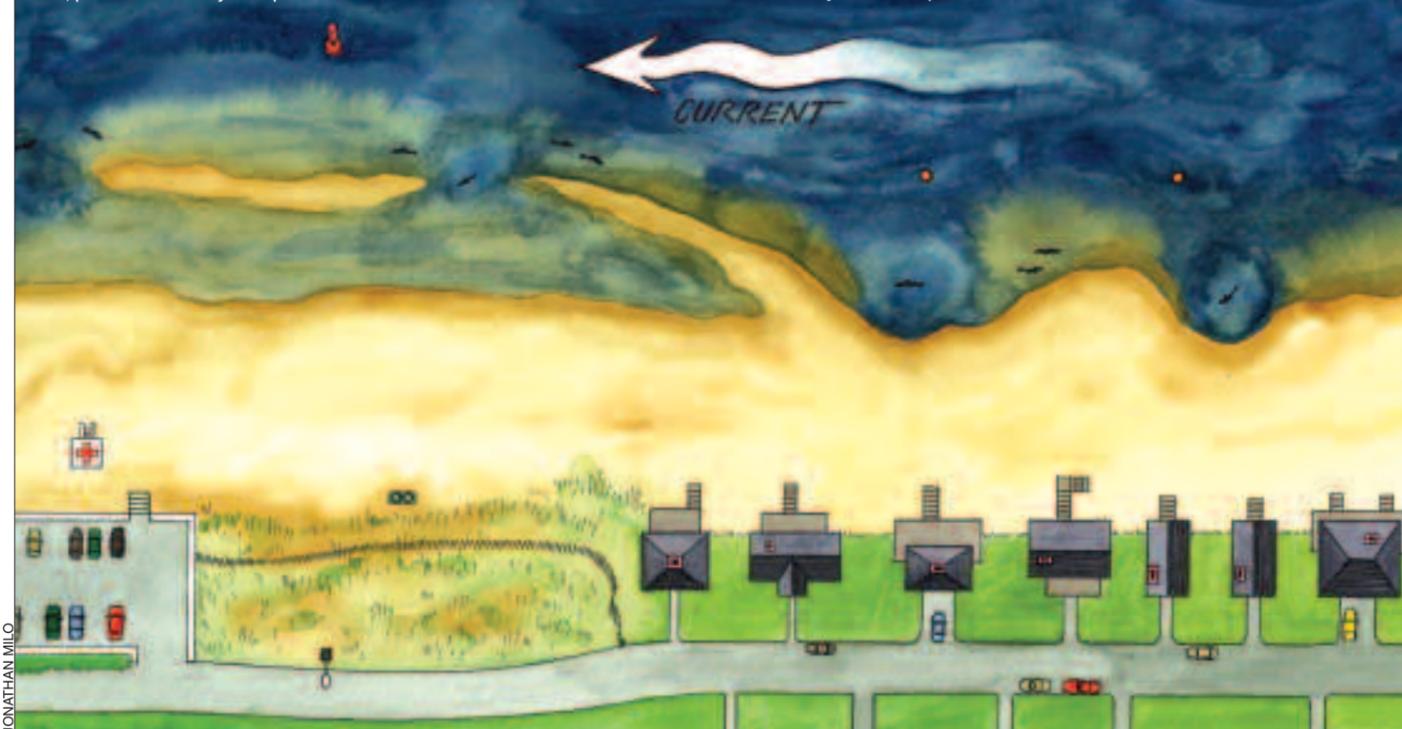
Onshore bars jut into the ocean and connect to the beach. They are prime spots for night fishing. Bowls or holes are basins that have deeper water and good current. Remember, too, that all bars are unique, so scouting during the day saves hassles at night.

Because most features will most likely be underwater when you fish, use "ranges" wherever you can (see illustration). A range is where you take a longitudinal point and match it with a latitudinal point to mark your spot. In the illustration, point A lies directly off a porch deck and marks the center of the onshore bar.

From that point, a line drawn from the channel marker to another porch deck indicates the angler's axis of travel along the sandbar. He'll know he's approaching the tip when he can line up the garbage cans (B) with the street sign. You can use water towers, breakwalls, lifeguard stands (C), lobster buoys (D), channel markers, rock piles or tree lines.

If there are no ranges, you can make one with a piece of driftwood and some orange flagging ribbon. Stake it in an inconspicuous area during daylight for later use.

Offshore bars are better accessed by a kayak to ensure a safe return at high tide. The appeal of onshore bars is that you can walk way out to some primo fishing spots, but finding your way back in can be a chore. I'll stake out the point where the bar meets shore (A) with a chemical glow stick. The light helps me find my way off the bar when the tide comes in. After you do it a few times, the patterns become familiar and you'll develop a feel for the beach.



JONATHAN MILO

great ambush spots when baitfish begin to move on the full or new moons.

Try colored flies. Most fly rodders use black flies at night due to the low-light conditions. But baitfish don't always respond to black-tie events. True, they will pick up the color that corresponds with their environment or light, but daytime patterns with brown or olive blends many times work just as well.

Shuffle when wading. It's tough to see where you are walking at night, so shuffle your feet as you wade. That way you will feel if the bottom starts to get soft or suddenly drops off.

Keep lights to a minimum. Bright lights are unnatural to striped bass. Turn away from the water you are fishing before you click on your light. And while it's fun to take pictures at night, flash bulbs tell other anglers you're hooking up.

Landing fish. Small fish are easy to lip and release, but be sure to

scout out an area for landing big fish. If you're on a beach, it's easy to watch the wave patterns and surf the fish onto shore. Out on a sandbar, have a friend help out. If you don't have a friend, then back up to some high ground and beach big bass on your own.

Stay cool. Striped bass feed most aggressively in water temperatures in the mid 50s to low 60s. In the summer and early fall, the water will cool down after sunset and is coolest just before the sun rises.

Fish with a pal. It's easier to stay awake with a pal. You also err on the side of caution when you have a partner watching your back.

With a little preparation and common sense, you'll quickly learn that you can double your fishing pleasure by taking advantage of the night bite. ■

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