



NORTH CAROLINA'S ROANOKE RIVER STRIPER FISHERY:

World Class Light Tackle and Fly Experiences Abound

By Capt. Richard Andrews

Due to its unique location along the Eastern Seaboard and with its expansive Pamlico and Albemarle Sound estuaries, the second largest in the nation, North Carolina hosts some of the most consistent year-round opportunities for striped bass on light tackle and fly. Resident sub-adult stripers inhabit these estuaries and their tributaries year-round due to the plentiful supply of bait and relatively stable seasonal water temperatures.

The pinnacle of North Carolina light tackle striper fishing is the April-May spawning runs on the Roanoke River, upriver near the town of Weldon. This area is a very popular fishing destination in the spring, and anglers from all over North Carolina, Virginia, and other locations around the country come to experience its unique striper fishery. Aside from the sheer numbers of fish and the frequent opportunity to hit the elusive triple digit mark, what makes the Roanoke River spring striper fishery so great is the variety of ways in which an angler can catch these exciting fish and how easily young or inexperienced anglers can catch fish there.

We catch fish from December through January along the Roanoke's lower reaches near the lower river town of Plymouth and the possibility for big numbers casting artificials or with flies is always very real. But, during March and early April, as the water temps warm into the upper 50s and low 60s, the fish start to migrate up the river for their annual spawning run, and that's when the action gets really hot. When the fish gather in great numbers in the upper reaches of the North Carolina section of the

Roanoke near Weldon, many eastern NC fishing guides offer charter trips there in the spring to take advantage of the opportunity for 100-plus fish days.

The most popular way to catch stripers upriver around Weldon is to use shad minnows. Shad is what locals call juvenile (3-5") alewife and blueback herring. Simply put, they are stripers candy. They are popular baits for lake fishermen and they work great in the river, too. They can be caught in the lakes with a cast net or purchased at local bait dealers for around \$10/dozen. Experienced Roanoke stripers anglers carry a large shad tank with several hundred frisky live baits, ready to be devoured by hungry stripers.

When the fish are biting aggressively, they can be easily caught by casting a soft plastic bait on a 1/4 -1/2 ounce jig head (weight depends on water level and flow velocity). I prefer the Z-Man MinnowZ, SwimmerZ, JerkZ, or StreakZ in a variety of natural colors that mimic the alewives and bluebacks. Most baits will drift with the current, so anglers cast upstream and let the current bring their baits back toward the boat. If a large school is located, dropping anchor and figuring out the optimal casting angle to give your bait the best presentation in the current is the best way to stay on them and put some big numbers in the boat.

For topwater enthusiasts and fly fishermen, May is usually the best time to come. Water temps push into the upper 60s and low 70s, and the fish become much more active and aggressive. As a result, topwater baits such as Zara Spooks or Storm Chug Bugs are very effective in the early mornings and late afternoons, or even all day on



overcast days. Most fly anglers use 6-8 weight setups with 250-450 grain fully sinking line, depending on water levels. I recommend the Teeny TS series lines. A variety of Clouser or deceiver patterns will work. The most important aspect of catching these stripers on a fly is using the proper presentation. Allowing the line to carry the fly down to the strike zone combined with a really fast strip (two-handed is effective) will usually do the trick.

In the Roanoke River Management Area, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission manages the regulations. For striped bass, the keeper season opens on March 1 and closes April 30. Anglers are allowed two fish/person/day 18"-22" and only one of those fish can be over 27" so for all practical purposes, this is catch-and-release fishing. Peak fishing in the upriver area is usually the last two weeks of April and first two weeks of May. Despite keeper season having ended, the fishing remains excellent in May with even

better opportunities for topwater and fly fishing. If you enjoy catching striped bass on light conventional or fly tackle, you really should book a charter to experience this magnificent fishery. A knowledgeable local guide is recommended, as the upper area of the Roanoke is quite rocky, and can easily damage lower units and boat bottoms of the uninitiated.

Whether you are a beginner who can barely cast a spinning rod or an experienced saltwater fly fisherman, you owe it to yourself to come to the Roanoke River in the spring—you won't be disappointed. It's a beautiful river and a great time to be on the water, enjoying time with family and friends, and above all, a world class stripers fishery!

This article has been provided by Wes Sumner, Co-Publisher of the Morehead City, NC edition of Coastal Angler Magazine.
 Capt. Richard Andrews owns and operates Tar-Pam Guide Services in Washington, NC. Contact him at (252) 945-9715 or on the web at: www.tarpamguide.com