

# Fishing for Striped Bass on the Roanoke River

By James W. Kornegay

Restoration of the Albemarle Sound/Roanoke River striped bass population has resulted in a world-class fishery enjoyed by thousands of anglers each year. Each spring, beginning in March, striped bass in Albemarle Sound begin their spawning migration up the Roanoke River. The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission opens a limited striped bass harvest season on the Roanoke River for anglers who enjoy turning their catches into delicious table fare. Timing of the striped bass harvest season, along with protective size limits, ensure that most of the harvest consists of three- to five- year-old male striped bass.

Good numbers of striped bass first move into the lower Roanoke River during mid-March. Catches at that time are best around the Plymouth area near the Highway 45 bridge. The lower Cashie and Middle rivers, also crossed by the Highway 45 bridge, can be productive as well. As springtime progresses into April, stripers make their way up the river and by the first week in April, the action really picks up at Jamesville, Williamston and Hamilton. Also by the first of April, the first stripers are beginning to appear in the upper reaches of Roanoke River near Scotland Neck, Halifax and Weldon. By mid-April, striped bass fishing in the upper areas is in full swing and it seems as though the entire length of the river is shoulder to shoulder stripers. Anglers should note that river flows and weather conditions dictate the arrival and upstream movement of striped bass from year to year so the exact timing of striped bass movements can vary a few weeks either way.

## Boating Access Areas

The following is a list of boating access areas on Roanoke River open to the public. The designation "NCWRC" indicates a no-fee access area built and maintained by the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission using your fishing license dollars. These boating access areas are listed in order from downstream areas of Roanoke River to upstream areas:

### Washington County

Highway 45 Access Area (NCWRC) - located near Plymouth on N.C. Highway 45, approximately three miles north of U.S. Highway 64.

Conaby Creek Access Area (NCWRC) - located near Plymouth off N.C. Highway 45, approximately two miles north of U.S. Highway 64.

Town of Plymouth Ramp - located in downtown Plymouth on Water Street behind the Plymouth Police Department office.

Water Street Access Area (NCWRC) - located in downtown Plymouth on the west end of Water Street.

### Bertie County

Sans Souci Access Area (NCWRC) - located on Cashie River, at the end of Woodard Road, approximately 12 miles from Windsor off U.S. Highway 13 and 17.

### Martin County

River's Edge Restaurant (fee) - located in Jamesville off U.S. Highway 64 and Stewart Street.

Gardner's Creek Marina (fee) - located on U.S. Highway 64 approximately one mile west of Jamesville.

Williamston Access Area (NCWRC) - located at the U.S. Highway 13 and 17 bridge just north of Williamston.

Hamilton Access Area (NCWRC) - located just off N.C. Highway 903 at the end of East Main Street.

### Halifax County

Edward's Ferry Access Area (NCWRC) - located at the U.S. Highway 258 bridge north of Scotland Neck.

Weldon Access Area (NCWRC) - located off U.S. Highway 301, just downstream of the U.S. Highway 301 bridge.

### Northampton County

Gaston Access Area (NCWRC) - located off N.C. Highway 48, just across the river from Roanoke Rapids in the town of Gaston.

## **Boat Ramp Courtesy**

At times, particularly on weekends, these access areas may become crowded. If there is a waiting line to launch or retrieve your boat, we highly recommend that you rig your gear well before entering the ramp area or tie down your boat and store your equipment only after you have cleared the ramp. Due to swift river currents and steep terrain, launching and retrieving a boat by yourself on Roanoke River can be quite challenging. A two-man crew will greatly expedite managing your boat. Please be patient and courteous to fellow anglers.

## **Accommodations**

**Lower river area.** There are numerous motels, restaurants and fueling facilities located in Plymouth and Williamston. Contact the Washington County Chamber of Commerce at (252) 793-5823 or the Martin County Chamber of Commerce at (252) 792-4131 for specific information.

**Upper river area.** There are numerous motels, restaurants and fueling facilities located in Weldon and Roanoke Rapids. The Halifax County Tourism Development Authority, <http://www.visithalifax.com/>, has a package of useful information for anglers concerning accommodations and fishing guide services in this area. Visit their web site or contact them at 1-800-522-4282.

## **Tackle And Bait**

Rods, reels and terminal tackle used for striped bass fishing on the Roanoke River are as variable as the individuals who use them. In general, medium to medium-heavy action rods are recommended so that stripers can be landed quickly, improving their chances for survival

if released. The combination of swift river currents, heavy terminal tackle, and four- to five-pound fish can easily break light-action rigs and their use is not recommended. Because of underwater obstructions likely to be encountered, heavier line (12-20 lb. test) should be used.

Many anglers in the lower Roanoke River prefer to use cut herring as bait but it must be fresh. The difference between a successful trip and being skunked is sometimes determined by the freshness of your bait. When herring begin making their spawning run up the Roanoke River, local commercial fishermen frequently have fresh herring for sale. In addition, anglers returning from a successful trip are often willing to part with their unused bait. In the upper reaches of the Roanoke, cut bait is also used with good success but some prefer live minnows purchased from bait shops. Small live herring (locally called “shad”) caught with a cast net at the base of Lake Gaston or Roanoke Rapids dams are a favorite. (See the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission Inland Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping Regulations Digest for rules pertaining to taking and possession of bait fish.)

Terminal tackle for using live or natural baits should consist of a rig that places the bait on the river bottom. The “slip-sinker” rig is commonly used and is made by slipping the end of the fishing line through a one- to three-ounce egg sinker (depending on river flows), then tying a good quality swivel to the end of the line. An 18- to 24-inch leader is then tied to the other end of the swivel and finally the fishhook is attached to the terminal end of the leader. As the fish takes the bait, line slips through the egg sinker, triggering a strike readily felt by the angler.

Alternatively, some anglers use a three-way swivel rig consisting of the line being attached to one swivel, a short leader with sinker attached to another swivel and a longer leader with fishhook attached to the third swivel. Because of all of the woody debris in the river, be prepared to lose and replace your terminal tackle many times during your trip. Remember, it is critical that the bait is on the river bottom.

## **A Word About Fishhooks**

When using live or natural bait for striped bass fishing, the Commission strongly recommends the use of circle hooks. Studies we have conducted on Roanoke River striped bass as well as studies done elsewhere have shown that most striped bass caught on small, barbless circle hooks are usually hooked in the jaw. A jaw-hooked striped bass has a much greater chance of survival after being released than does one that is hooked in the throat or gut. Use the smallest circle hook that you can; one with a minimal distance between the hook point and shank. Unfortunately, circle hook sizes are not standard among hook manufacturers but we found circle hooks the size of the Wright-McGill Eagle Claw 4/0 circle hook to be effective for catching striped bass and reducing the incidence of deep hooking. Hooks of this size and shape made by other manufacturers would likely be just as effective. Our research also showed that larger circle hooks or circle hooks with offset points (hook points offset from the axis of the hook shank) were not effective in reducing the incidence of deep hooking.

Note that circle hooks have to be fished differently than regular “J” hooks. When you feel the fish take the bait, **don’t** set the hook, just start reeling in your line. Remember: “*Crank, don’t yank.*” As the fish swims away, your line will tighten, the circle hook will begin to be pulled out of the fish’s gut and throat and as the hook begins to exit the mouth cavity, the perpendicular hook point catches the bony jaw structure. In the beginning, you may lose a few fish because

all of us have learned to “set the hook” when a fish bites. Setting the hook with circle hooks, however, usually results in pulling the bait and hook out of the fish’s mouth. So when you feel a good bite, “Crank, don’t yank.” Let the circle hook do the work. Many stripers caught on circle hooks can be released to fight another day. Keep in mind that whether you use circle hooks or regular “J” hooks, regulations only permit the use of a single barbless hook in Roanoke River upstream of the U.S. Highway 258 bridge each year from April 1 through June 30. Many experienced anglers use barbless hooks throughout the season because fish can be released very easily.

## **So Many Lures, So Little Time**

Ask 10 striper fishermen on Roanoke River about their favorite artificial lures and you’ll get 10 different answers. Throughout most of the spring in Roanoke River, stripers feed primarily near the river bottom so sinking lures are a must. Bucktail jigs are a favorite and a local variation (referred to as a “hairy worm”) seems to work very well. A hairy worm is simply a bucktail jig with the addition of a curly-tail, soft-bait to the hook. Curly-tail, soft-bait jigs by themselves often work well as do the paddle-tail fish imitation jigs. Fly fishing for stripers is becoming increasingly popular on the river with flashy Clouser minnow streamers being the preferred lure. Weighted fly line is a necessity to get these lures down deep.

Anything that remotely resembles a baitfish — minnow imitations, spoons and crankbaits — will catch stripers when conditions are right. If you’re using artificial lures and aren’t catching fish, switch to a different lure or observe anglers fishing around you. Sometimes, just a modest change in lure style or presentation can greatly improve your catch rate. Later in the spring, as water temperatures rise into the upper 60s, stripers can sometimes be caught on topwater lures. Topwater action usually occurs for an hour or so just after daybreak and again an hour or so before dark. Whatever your choice of lures, as is the case with natural bait rigs, expect to lose some to the woody debris of the Roanoke.

## **Regulations For 2002**

### Lower Roanoke River

The Roanoke River and tributaries, downstream from U.S. Highway 258 bridge near Scotland Neck to Albemarle Sound, including Cashie, Middle and Eastmost rivers: **Season opens March 1, 2002 and closes April 15, 2002.**

### Upper Roanoke River

The Roanoke River and tributaries upstream from U.S. Highway 258 bridge near Scotland Neck to Roanoke Rapids Lake Dam: **Season opens March 15, 2002 and closes April 30, 2002.**

### Daily Creel Limit

Two fish.

During the open season, anglers may possess one daily creel limit of striped bass any day of the week.

### Size Limits

Minimum length limit: 18 inches **AND**

No striped bass between 22 inches and 27 inches in length may be possessed at any time.

### Barbless Hook Regulation

From April 1 through June 30 in the Roanoke River and tributaries upstream of U.S. Highway 258 bridge, only a single barbless hook or lure with a single barbless hook (or hook with barb bent down) may be used.

For information on fishing license requirements and other fishing rules, see the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission Inland Fishing, Hunting, and Trapping Regulations Digest or see our online regulations at [www.ncwildlife.org](http://www.ncwildlife.org)

### **Catch And Release Guidelines**

Many anglers enjoy catching and releasing striped bass in Roanoke River either during or after the harvest season. Hooked stripers can die from injury or from the stress of being hooked, fought and landed. Ideally, striped bass should be landed quickly, handled little, if at all, and kept in the water while the hook is removed. You can greatly aid in the survival of released stripers by following these guidelines:

- ✓ Know the fishing regulations and be prepared to release fish carefully.
- ✓ If you are planning a catch-and-release fishing trip for stripers, do so when water temperatures are below 70 degrees. Research is conclusive that stress-related mortality in striped bass is much higher when water temperature exceeds 70 degrees.
- ✓ Use strong enough tackle to land fish quickly, minimizing stress.
- ✓ Use artificial lures instead of live or natural bait to reduce deep hooking. Replace treble hooks on lures with a single barbless hook to reduce injury and handling.
- ✓ If using live or natural bait, use barbless circle hooks. Studies show that striped bass caught with small circle hooks are generally hooked in the jaw. A jaw-hooked striped bass has a much greater chance of survival after being released than does one that is deep hooked.
- ✓ If using live or natural bait, use only one fishing rod per person. Do not use rod holders. An angler holding a fishing rod will have no trouble feeling the striper bite and can sometimes set the hook before the fish swallows the bait.
- ✓ If legal, keep stripers that are bleeding heavily because their chances of survival are poor.
- ✓ Keep stripers in the water while dehooking if possible.
- ✓ Landing nets should be made of knotless nylon or rubber and used only when absolutely necessary.
- ✓ If a fish must be boated for dehooking, calm the fish by covering its eyes with a wet rag. Do not allow the fish to thrash about.

- ✓ Carefully, but quickly, remove the hook using a dehooker, needlenose pliers or forceps.
- ✓ If the fish is hooked deep in the throat or gut, cut the line and release the fish. Research shows that many striped bass are able to survive carrying a hook and many hooks are eventually expelled.
- ✓ A fish that does not immediately swim away sometimes can be resuscitated by moving it back and forth to force water over its gills.

## **Safety!**

Despite all its beauty and richness, Roanoke River can be a dangerous place to visit. In the lower river, swift currents, unseen logs and tree limbs and unexpected encounters with shallow flats can present life-threatening situations to boaters. In the upper reaches of the river, even swifter currents and the presence of rocks and boulders add to the list of navigational hazards. Here's a list of recommendations that will help make your trip a safe one:

- ✓ **Wear your PFD (life jacket) at all times.** An unexpected dip in 55-degree water can overcome even the best of swimmers. Cold water is a killer. There are many approved life jackets on the market these days that allow free movement of the arms and upper body so "discomfort" is no longer an excuse for not wearing a PFD.
- ✓ **File a float plan.** Tell someone at home where you'll be fishing, where you'll launch your boat and what time you should be expected to return. In some reaches of Roanoke River, there are miles of desolate areas between boat ramps so if someone knows where to look, a breakdown may only result in a minor inconvenience rather than an unplanned overnight stay on the river.
- ✓ **Prepare for the unexpected.** Bring warm clothes and rain gear. Springtime cold fronts can drop air temperatures in a matter of hours. Bring plenty of food, water and sunscreen. A cool spring morning on the Roanoke can quickly turn into a baking hot afternoon. Stay abreast of weather forecasts. Riding out a thunderstorm on the water is life threatening. Keep a properly charged fire extinguisher and a well-stocked first aid kit in your boat at all times.
- ✓ **Watch for navigational hazards.** The extensive wooded areas adjacent to Roanoke River result in numerous logs, trees and limbs being present in the water. Woody debris that you can see one day may still be present the next day but may not be visible due to a change in river flows. Upstream of Halifax, and especially upstream of Weldon, large rocks, boulders and rapids exist. Hitting a rock with your outboard, losing power and drifting into boulders or rapids can quickly overturn a boat. Venturing into the rocky areas upstream of Weldon is exceptionally hazardous.
- ✓ **Operate your boat at slow speeds.** In addition to reducing the likelihood of impacting a navigational hazard, slow speeds reduce the likelihood of impacting other boats and reduce boat wake disturbance as well. During the springtime, hundreds of anglers visit the

Roanoke River in search of stripers and some reaches of the river become congested with boat traffic. Slow down, be careful and be courteous to your fellow anglers.

### **More Questions?**

Call us at (919) 733-3633. Also, keep checking the Wildlife Resources Commission's web page for developments, as well as the weekly Roanoke River fishing report that we will post online every Friday afternoon this spring.

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