

## *Top spots for the East Coast's greatest saltwater gamefish*

I WAS A TINY BOY, BARELY OLD ENOUGH TO INDEPENDENTLY CAST MY ZEBCO INTO THE SALTY ESTUARY OF THE VIRGINIA COAST. The tiny striper was the size of my hand—and the very first fish I remember catching. Little did I know that back home in the Chesapeake Bay, the stripers were fighting for their very existence.

# The Pilgrimage

> BRIAN IRWIN

► **Adult striped** bass navigate the East Coast from North Carolina to Maine annually, feeding in the cool waters of New England in the summer, and wintering in the South in the Carolinas and at the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. Find out where and how you can intersect their amazing pilgrimage.

Photo ] Joe Klementovich



▶ **A mature** striped bass may be 20 years old or much more. While they are popular gamefish, commercial harvest is permitted in Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, and North Carolina.

Photo | H. Earl Evans



By the time I converted my religion to fly, Chesapeake Bay was closed to all striper fishing. Overharvest had brought East Coast stocks to the brink of extirpation. I read about it in the papers, and listened to the frustrated banter of old-timers with a passion for linesides. The Chesapeake is a fragile place, one where abrupt collapses of ecosystems pummel communities that depend on the water.

Stained boats with rusty outriggers used to chug along, their berths full of lobster-size Chesapeake crabs. At picnics we would gorge ourselves on them, but by the time I went to college, you paid a premium for a dozen 6-inchers.

In 1973, the peak commercial catch of striped bass was a reported 14.7 million pounds. A decade later it was only around 10 percent of that figure. Overfishing, in combination with degradation of the stripers' spawning environments from pollution and acid rain, is theorized to be responsible for the nadir in the population. In turn, the Atlantic Striped Bass Conservation Act was passed, and complete moratoriums on fishing for or keeping stripers were levied in Delaware, Virginia, and Maryland. It became illegal to fish for stripers in the water that makes up over 70 percent of the species' spawning grounds.

To the surprise of many skeptics,

the ban on striper fishing, which eventually was adopted by Northern states as well, worked. By 1990 the strongest spawn in the 30-year history of the monitoring program led to confidence in the effort and lifting of the moratorium, albeit with new, stricter regulations and management. The Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission continued to monitor the number of spawning females and in 1994 found them to be comparable to the historical highs noted in the late 1960s. The ASMFC officially announced, "Striped bass stocks will be considered recovered as of Jan. 1, 1995."

### Inland Spawning

Striped bass, or *Morone saxatilis*, are anadromous, spending their lives in the salt, and moving inland to spawn. Their journey is one of staggering proportions, as their native range is improbably broad. They range from Florida along the entire length of the East Coast and as far north as Nova Scotia. Endemic to the North Atlantic, they have also been transplanted successfully to the West Coast, and inland to freshwater impoundments across the country.

Stripers have long been revered as important commercial fish. These fish were so abundant at one point that they were a reliable source of food for the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

In 1614 Captain John Smith penned in his journal:

"I myself at the turning of the tyde have seen such multitudes pass out of a pounce [a fish trap], that it seemed to me that one might go over their backs drishod."

Yet even then, overfishing was a problem. The fish were salted and used for winter consumption, the excess of which were even used for fertilizer.

In 1639 Massachusetts levied the New World's first conservation law, forbidding the use of stripers for fertilizer. Over the centuries the species became an increasingly popular gamefish, and today more than 75 percent of landings are due to recreational, not commercial angling.

The striped bass life cycle begins in the brackish water of Eastern coastal rivers—the estuaries of the Delaware, Hudson, Roanoke, Potomac, and Susquehanna are among the most important of these estuary spawning grounds. In April and May of each year, female stripers deposit eggs at the head of tide where the salinity drops, and seawater mixes with incoming fresh water.

The number of eggs each female deposits depends on the size of the bass, but for a fish of 15 pounds, a drop of 1 million eggs is not uncommon. Once fertilized by a swarm of males, the eggs hatch with a yolk sac that provides their nutrition for the first four or five days of life. When this is absorbed, the fry drift with the current into the river deltas or estuary mouths, where they feed on small crustaceans and spend the next two to four years maturing.

Typically, females reach reproductive age within four to eight years, males in around two. Adult stripers migrate to the open ocean, often settling during the winter months off the coast of North Carolina and Virginia near the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay—the most important spawning grounds on the East Coast. Geographic points such as Cape Hatteras and Virginia's Bay Bridge Tunnel are two of the country's best winter striper fisheries.

### Long Journey North

After spawning, mature striped bass begin their epic journey north toward the colder waters of New England. In most years they hug the coastline, pausing in fertile feeding grounds such as rocky rips, bait-rich freshwater estuaries, and sheltered bays.

This perennial northward migration is a New Englander's bounty. Having been holed up in drafty cabins with

mounting snowdrifts, by spring most anglers have benches littered with deer hair and dollops of lacquer. Rows of fresh Clousers, the staple fly for New England stripers, line up in boxes, held in the anxious hands of anglers. And when the word on the streams gets out that the first stripers have been caught off the coast of New York's Long Island, the season begins in earnest.

Long Island is a mosaic of box stores and crowded neighborhoods in the west, which slowly taper to the idyllic dune-studded beaches of the east. There, mansions stand among perfectly manicured lawns, the water is clear and crisp, and the fish filter into the area in abundance.

Pressed eastward by the stretch of land that guards the northern waters, stripers are forced to flood around the eastern tip of Long Island, past the dignified town of Montauk. In June, stripers feed on the sand flats of the Montauk area, making for thrilling

# Pilgrimage

## The

sight casting and promising days.

As the summer moves on, some bass settle down into summer feeding grounds along Connecticut's Long Island Sound, while others continue their trip north into the nearshore areas of Rhode Island and Massachusetts, where they filter past Nantucket Island, and hug the southern shore of Cape Cod. While fishing with a boat (and a guide) is the best way to stay on top of the fish, perhaps the best experience is sight casting on the hard sand flats of Monomoy Island.

Situated off the coast near Chatham, Monomoy is an 8-mile-long stretch of sand with no roads, no residents, and no power. Designated as a National Wildlife Refuge in 1970 due to its critical role in the migration of hundreds

of bird species, Monomoy is a rare gem in the crowded East.

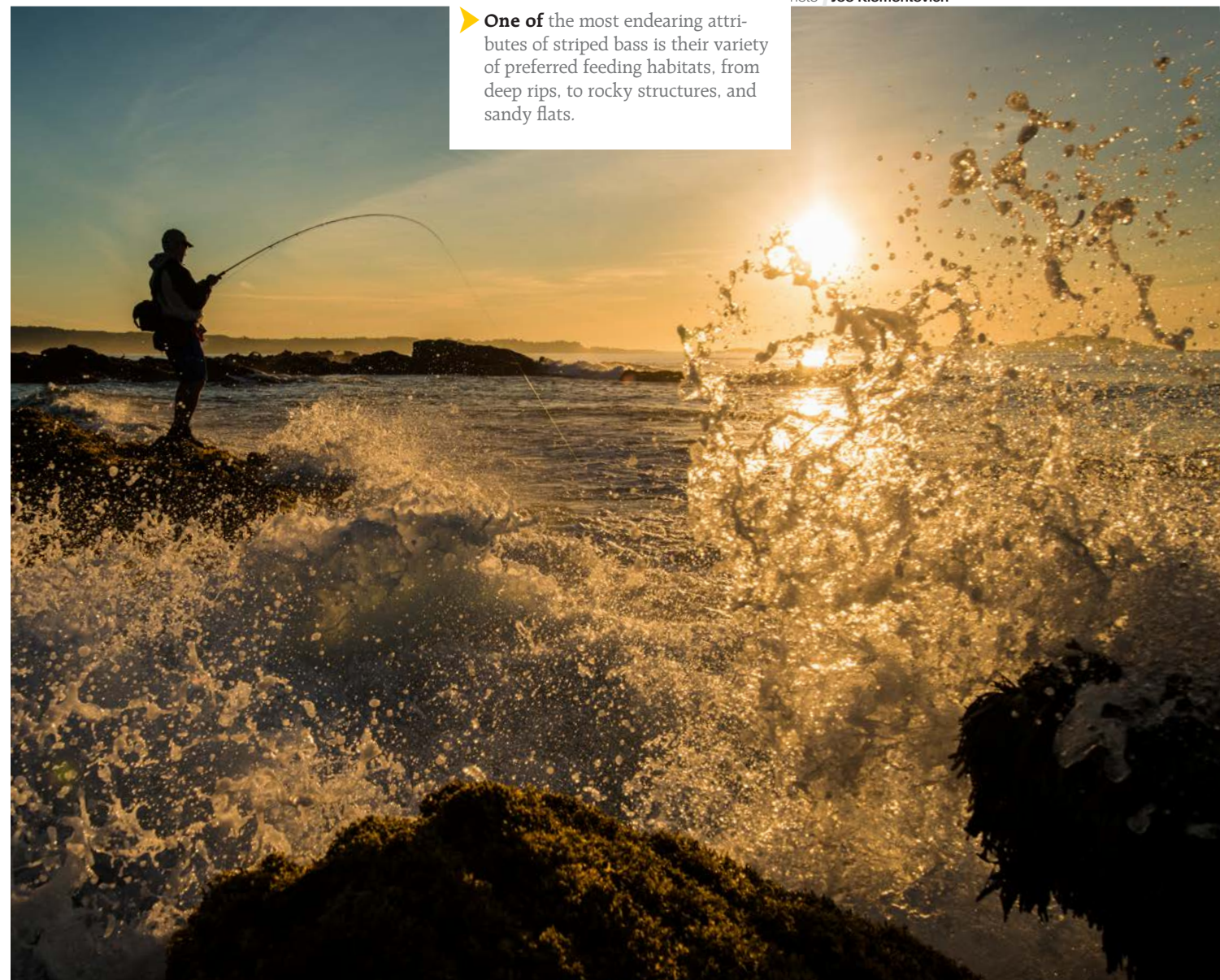
A true wilderness, the island was sliced into North and South Monomoy by a 1978 storm. This cut is a broad, shallow flat with variable rips that change from year to year. Winter storms press and pull sand in and out of the channel, giving it an ever-changing contour.

What doesn't change, however, is the quality of the flats, the remote setting, and the consistent presence of migrating stripers. On a clear day one can almost imagine your are flipping line on the flats of the Caribbean. Except in the Caribbean, there aren't gray seals.

In recent years there has been tremendous growth in the seal

Photo | Joe Klementovich

▶ **One of** the most endearing attributes of striped bass is their variety of preferred feeding habitats, from deep rips, to rocky structures, and sandy flats.





# Striped Bass Migration

**MAINE** New Hampshire and Maine are actually the northern apex of the striped bass migration. The rest of New England provides the bulk of the summer fly fishing, particularly in the Cape Cod region where water temperatures stay cool through July and August, and the bass feed voraciously on sand eels and silversides.

**MONTAUK** The key geographical landmark on both the north and southward migrations, Montauk, New York, provides a strategic position to ambush striped bass either on the flats of Gardiners Bay, or during the fall blitzes at Montauk Point Lighthouse.

**JERSEY SHORE** Striped bass filter past New Jersey on their way north in the spring, but it truly shines in November when large schools of striped bass and bluefish make their way past Montauk in late October and then hug the Jersey coastline through much of November, feeding on huge balls of menhaden.

**BAY BRIDGE TUNNEL** The Chesapeake Bay is the single most important spawning estuary on the East Coast, and huge numbers of mature striped bass spend the winter and early spring (Jan.-Mar.) staged at the mouth of the Chesapeake near the Bay Bridge Tunnel.

**OUTER BANKS** Although some striped bass make it as far south as Georgia or even Florida, the Outer Banks provide the southernmost fishable numbers of striped bass during the winter, and in the spring many of these fish spawn in the estuaries of Albemarle Sound and Pamlico Sound.

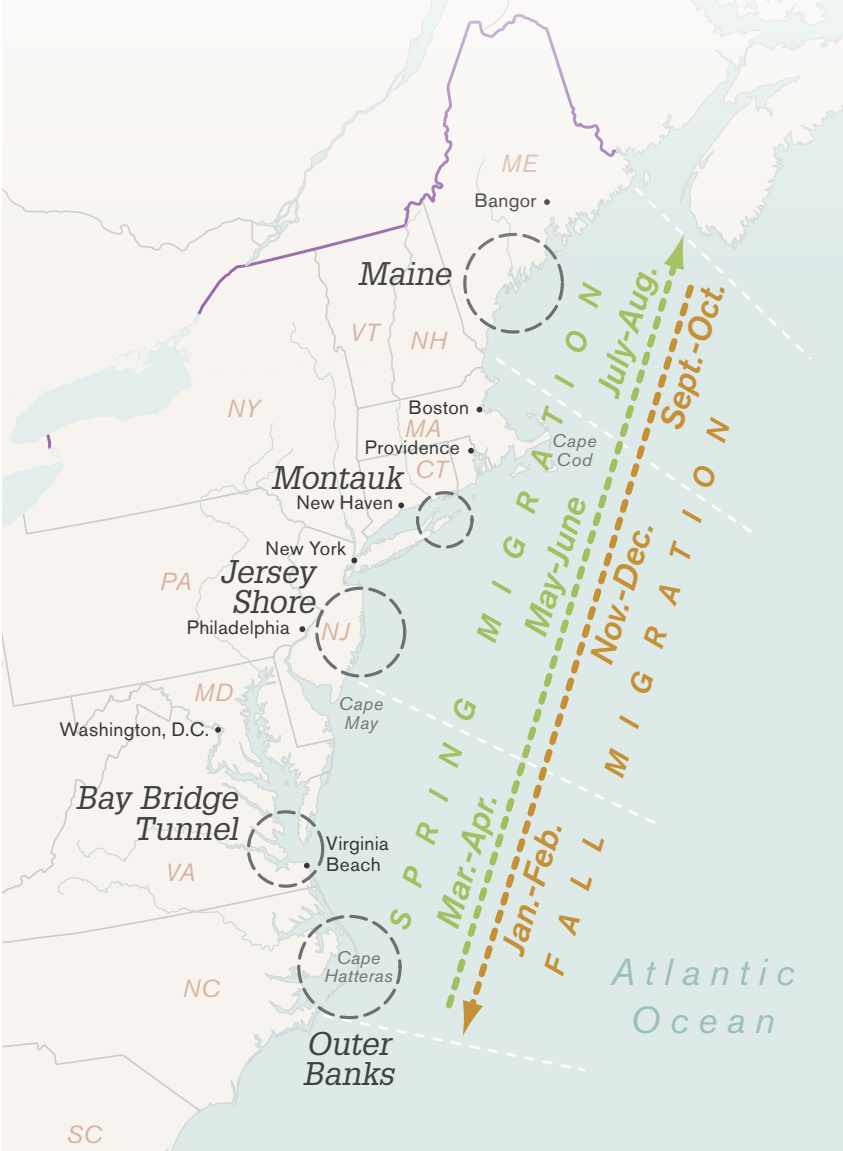


Illustration | David Deis

population in the Chatham area. It's not uncommon to have one slide by you as you cast, waking in the clear water.

As you scan for the dark shapes of striped bass ghosting over the flats, keep an eye out for dorsal fins. As recently as last summer, great white sharks have been spotted only a couple hundred yards offshore, preying on the booming seal population.

According to Dave Brownlie, Refuge Manager of the Monomoy National Wildlife Refuge, the island is a legendary destination for anglers. "Monomoy is a special place, largely due to a combination of excellent position in the stripers' migration path, and an abundance of flats." Sand eels populate the flats in May, and the stripers are right behind them.

## Northern Apex

North of Cape Cod, the striped bass press northward in June and July toward New Hampshire and the corrugated coast of Maine. The jagged edge of Maine holds deep, weed-choked channels interspersed with barnacle-covered rocks. Sea cliffs rise from the ocean, and shorebirds swirl above the water violently crashing into shore. Convoluted estuaries wind through salt marshes oozing into the sea. Rivers with names like the Spurwink, and shallow bays like Bald Head Cove are just a few of the waypoints or holding spots for stripers during the summer.

In New England summer ends quickly. It is warm one day, cold the next. When the first frost comes, the kids are already back in school. Leaves begin to change. By now some of the striper population has only just made it to southern New England, others as far north as Mount Desert Island or Machias, Maine, or even into the mouth of great St. Lawrence River in Canada. With the change of the season, the fish turn south. Like a giant machine, they methodically reverse their course, heading in some cases toward warmer water and bait concentrations offshore, or down the coast toward the warmer waters of Virginia and North Carolina.

This southerly fall migration provides a second chance for East Coast fly fishers, as the bass must again make their way past a series of geographical barriers, points, and islands as they fatten for winter on the largest bait feast of the season.

According to Captain Ernie French, who has been guiding out of Montauk for more than 20 years, striped bass are more aggressive during their southerly migration, and "Around Montauk there is a nursery of baitfish

like bay anchovies, sand eels, and other species that have matured during the summer. This collection of protein pushes south in a visible slick near Montauk. The stripers concentrate in such great numbers that sometimes they literally push the baitfish out of the water."

The annual fall striper "blitz" peaks during the last two weeks of October, but the largest trophy-size stripers come later in November. "I've see large fish landed as late as December," French recalled. "It's amazing."

The lifelong odyssey of a 25-pound striped bass is incredible. While Pacific salmon are widely revered for their single migration from salt to fresh water in a lifetime, stripers get relatively little respect for their longevity and resilience, completing an annual coastal migration through a bottleneck of predators and fishermen that measures thousands of miles.

They are a durable species, living 30 years or more. But they are not invincible. With proper fishery management and respect, it's feasible that the same fish I caught this year will still be patrolling the coast when my young son is my age.

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## Return to Sender

One afternoon during my medical residency, the emergency room fell quiet. I peered out the window at the Kennebec River as it coursed through Augusta, Maine. Water foamed as it poured over a protrusion in the riverbed where the Edwards Dam used to stand at the head of tide.

For more than 160 years this obstruction stood in the heart of Maine's state capital, blocking migration of sea trout, Atlantic salmon, and alewives. In 1999 the dam was removed, and although fishery concerns were integral in that decision, the salmon have still not returned in any significant numbers.

I crossed the bridge and waded into the shallows, pager on one hip, fly box on the other. I tied on a Grey Ghost, a utilitarian Maine streamer pattern. The sun was high and so was the tide, pushing the water into the throat of

the river for a few hours before allowing it to breathe. I hauled and thrust a long stroke forward, firing my line near the footings of the dam that used to guard the upper Kennebec. Two strips later the water detonated, a flash of silver in its center.

My line ran downstream, into the whitewash, peeling into my backing. After a short cycle of tug-of-war I eased an 8-pound striper to my feet. As I pulled the hook out of his scissor my pager chirped. As if startled by the tone, and with a glint of terror from the hand of man, it snapped out of my hand and vanished into the deep, dark water. 🐟

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