



Stripers, Squid and the Rips



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For ten years I worked hard tying flies and chasing the migratory striped bass along the Jersey(US) coast and New York bight in my boat. I tied every Bob Popovics, Lou Tabory, Brad Burns and Jack Gartside pattern and more. I caught literary thousands of these gorgeous fish. They're known for their black stripes but their backs vary from shades of grey, blue, gold and green. I caught about ten fish in the low twenty-pound range, usually in spring before spawning. The anglers using live bait and fresh clams within sight were harvesting thirty to forty pounders daily. I wanted to find a way to target bigger stripers, more consistently and catch them on a fly.

I asked my old family friend John DeFilippis, then president of the Atlantic Saltwater Fly Rodders, about contacting his friend Brad Burns, who ran Stripers Forever and wrote the L.L. Bean Fly Fishing for Striper Handbook. I heard Brad released some really big bass up in the Elizabeth Islands west of Martha's Vineyard. John put me in touch with Brad who graciously told me if I used his guides and followed the squid run, I'd have the highest probability of catch really big stripers. Generally, the bigger the forage is, the bigger the stripers eating them. The mature squid are 8-14" and craved by almost anything sharing the same waters. Seamen and fishermen of the 1800s, called striped bass squid hounds because of their behavior when squid are present.

I called the guides Brad recommended and became introduced to the technique of swinging flies on the rips of New England. Captain Steve Bellefleur with his 1984 twenty-three foot Seacraft was the first I fished with. He is a retired State Trooper and stands 6' 5" tall. Steve keeps his boat at a small quaint marina in Stonington, Ct and fishes the waters of Fishers Island Sound to Block Island. I first fished with Steve around 2000 and the striper population was still high.

Steve squeezed me in three days before the new moon and before the crowds of boats that start on Memorial Day weekend. Too much current on the full or new moon makes for hard unproductive fishing. The first year, I brought Shady Lady Squid flies I tied, originated by Bob Popovics. They were only 9" long and caught fish on almost every swing. Unfortunately, the bass were mainly school size; 5-8 lbs. I found out if you use much longer flies, you would hook the bigger fish in the ten and up sizes. I don't use tandem hooks. The smaller ones still grab but don't get hooked. This saves a lot of fishing time. You're not fishing if you're fighting and unhooking small fish. The downside to the persistent grabs is thinning out the fly material and reducing the fly's bulk. Here's a description of a rip and what the excitement is all about.

The tides in New England are quite strong and are a mobilizing force for juvenile fish and forage in the estuaries. The tides also act as a highway in open water and aid large migrations such as that of the Longfin squid. The squid are moving to or away from rivers, bays and estuaries where they spawn and feed in spring and summer. On their own below the surface without strong currents, swimming predators have a hard time catching these squid. If they swim near the bottom though, the flounder that buries itself in the sand can be successful in its ambush attacks.

The most vulnerable time for the squid is when they cross sand bars or rock reefs in strong tides where there is the turbulence, called a rip. A rip can cause a line of waves that are head high and extend the length of the reef or sandbar. The squid's propulsion can fail and the squid become temporarily disoriented. This is the time and place stripers, bluefish and other predators lie in ambush on the bottom or even hold high in the current like a trout. Even the great black-backed gull flies hunt overhead. Many times I've seen squid jetting out of the water with gulls and stripers trying to eat them in mid-air!

When attacked, squid secrete ink, turn clear and jet away. Scientists call this the blanch-ink-jet-maneuver. If cornered, they also use defensive posturing by opening their tentacles in a menacing way to appear larger. When injured by a nonfatal attack, squid will also change their color darker to brown, purple, or almost black. This is important to know when selecting your fly tying materials. Since the squid seen jumping by fishermen look white, that has been a favorite fly color. I prefer the darker color of the injured squid as noted by studies. Darker colors also contrast better in the waves.

The fishing strategy is to position the boat stern toward the rip and stem the tide with just enough motor power to hold position, or slide down the rip maintaining the same distance from it. I use very stiff 12wt outfits with 500gr fast sink shooting heads and a 100ft intermediate shooting line. The further away from the boat you can cast, the longer the swing and the less disturbed the fish are by the boat. You aim your casts across the tide while the fly sinks and the current creates a belly in the line and causes the fly to swing. When the line straightens and the fly rises to the surface, start stripping the line back through the rip. The big fish usually follow and strike when the line comes tight after the swing. The trick is clearing the line on a big fish and getting him on the reel. Assisted by the tide, a big one can make a run of 100 yards.

The next Captain on Brad's list was Jaime Boyle on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. He had a 23' Hewes Pathfinder and we fished the famous Middle Ground bar off West Chop in Vineyard Sound. We caught some nice fish with the wind blowing 25-30 mph! Jaime had some flies I really liked. He collaborated with his friend Dave Skok and created the Red Can Squid. I heard about the Red Can Squid and assumed it was named after a red buoy. But I found out the name came from the accumulation of red beer cans during the tying session during the birth of their new fly. This fly is limited to about 9" in length because of the maximum length of Slinky Fiber. He also introduced me to Capt. Tom Rapone's Humboldt Squid, which is longer, since Big-Fly Fiber is used to imitate the tentacles. These flies average 12-14" long.

I learned how to tie these simple, impressionistic flies and brought them on Steve Bellefleur's boat the next twelve seasons. My biggest fish was approximately forty pounds, according to Steve who unhooked it. Unfortunately, the fishing off Connecticut and Martha's Vineyard fell off and

I started fishing further east off Chatham, Massachusetts via the island of Nantucket. Excessive commercial fishing has been implicated in the fishing downturn.

I found a young captain out of Madaket Harbor, Nantucket, named Captain Corey Gammill, who specializes in the squid run. Ironically, Corey teaches school the rest of the year in a town nearby where I live in Connecticut. The squid run striper fishing occurs around the third week of June in Nantucket Sound. Instead of rock reefs causing rips, as is the case closer to the mainland, sand bars are the cause. The trick is finding the right ones. Corey has a 26ft Regulator center console with twin 250hp Yamahas. It's over an hour run to the best squid locations from the dock and this bigger boat makes it more comfortable in bad seas. Corey uses a huge built-in Furuno radar, GPS and sonar for navigation and safety. He had the right location boat, but I had the right flies and casts. Corey had never seen either of the big fly patterns I brought and they proved very effective. By the way he reacted, I also don't think he ever saw such long casts. I fished with Corey for three seasons and once brought my friend Alan Gnann of REC Components, who caught five stripers over twenty pounds in two days. Maybe the fish will return to the waters closer to my home in Connecticut but until then, I've got my sights on the waters of Nantucket Sound. Thanks Brad, you were right about the squid run.