

AUTUMN STRIPER FISHING IN THE SHALLOWS

By: Martin Gary



I shed the my shackles and actually got out twice this past week. Two mornings out on two very different locations on what had to have been one of the most beautiful weekends of the year. On days like these, you almost don't expect to catch anything (blue skies, high pressure), but that wasn't the case. The two trips raise some questions to ponder. Just when you think you are beginning to figure them out.....On Friday, October the 13th (yikes!!!!), I was lucky enough to be the guest of CCA Maryland Executive Director, Sherman Baynard. DNR Fisheries Service Director Eric Schwaab and I accompanied Sherman to the Corsica River, a tributary of the Chester River. Sherman has been spending a fair amount of time fishing this tributary and parts of the adjoining

Chester River. He has caught decent numbers of stripers in the shallows on various artificials. Some of those fish have been in excess of 30 inches. Friday saw the beginning of one of the most beautiful weekends of the year, and featured a full moon on one side of the river and simultaneously a glorious sunrise on the other side of the river. Pictured at left is DNR Fisheries Service Director Eric Schwaab holding (just before releasing) a 17 inch striped bass caught at the mouth of the Corsica. Eric caught this near certain 1996 year class striper on his 6 weight fly rod using a yellow clouser. Eric outfished all of us that day, as Sherman and I used light spinning gear. We primarily fished the south side of the Corsica, in areas that Sherman had put in a substantial amount of time getting to know the underwater structure. This late season shallow water fishing is absolutely all about structure. Sherman knew several dozen locations, but we concentrated on just a few of his favorites. Just off the mouth of the Corsica, out into the Chester River were a large congregation of hand tongers. Ansel Adams could not have found a better subject to photograph on a day like this one. After pulling up and taking a few photos of the tongers, we sped off to the mouth of the Chester to see if there was any breaking birds, or other activity. We didn't run into much down there, just a couple of charterboats chumming on Swan Point Bar. No monsters were to be had on this trip, but Eric did hook up with a very nice fish that was lost about midway to the boat. Which leads us to the next part of this story. Sherman was also taking part in the 2nd Annual Joe Judge Liars tournament in which the proceeds go to children who have lost loved ones. Joe Judge was a world renowned fishermen that seemingly traveled and fished everywhere, but loved his home waters of the Chesapeake. Sports Illustrated twice chronicled his exploits. Joe and his wife Donna are Centreville residents. Joe passed away a couple of years back, and Donna started the tournament in his honor. Earlier this year, Donna worked with charterboat captains to take children who had recently suffered a loss fishing. It was a wonderful event.

My second trip out this past week took me to another shallow water location on the opposite side of Chesapeake Bay. How often does one get to fish with two Maryland State record holders? Not very. So I jumped at the chance to fish with Carroll County residents Gary Peters and Bob Bruce this past Sunday morning. If you have been following our website or the local papers recently, you probably know that Gary and Bob have been on a tear of late up at Liberty Reservoir that saw them catch 4 striped bass in excess of 40 pounds in two weeks. One of



those fish wound up being the new Maryland freshwater striper record for Bob Bruce. As the action at Liberty cooled with last week's falling water temperatures and high winds, this duo set their sites

on territory that they have taken the time to become familiar with, but precious few others have. And that would be the most unlikely of all places, the Middle Branch of Baltimore Harbor. Within sight of PSI Net Stadium, they have found over the past two years that numerous striped bass move into the Harbor of Baltimore during the winter. Last week's cooler temperatures pushed the first of these fish into the river, and they found them the previous weekend. We launched Gary's Bass Boat at sunrise at Baltimore Harbor Hospital. With a full moon, blue skies and warm temperatures, one's expectations might not be so high. Gary and Bob started by pointing out various structures that they fish (I am sworn to secrecy). They have taken much time to learn the structure in this area that is so often looked down upon. There was much floating trash, but there were also great blue herons, a variety of ducks, Canada geese and striped bass and bluefish. Yes bluefish! Our action started out slow, but eventually Gary nailed the fish you see pictured above, a nice 28 incher. Several other stripers followed of various sizes, from 17 inches up to 24 inches, and we lost a couple of others that were more than likely in the 5 to 8 pound range. Gary wanted to show me some other places upriver that he has also found fish in the winter. As we started motoring toward the Hanover Street Bridge, we saw the water begin to boil, as hundreds of fish rolled and slapped the surface. Gary and Bob quickly switched over to top water plugs and the action was non stop for mixed blues and stripers. It was a fish on every cast. The blues were snappers and the stripers were mostly sublegal, but they were great fun in the most unlikely of locations. We left them rolling after 30 minutes of non stop action and headed up the narrow entrance of the Patapsco. We crossed under Potee Street and headed upriver. We passed a couple of piers that the City of Baltimore had put up and it looked as if they saw plenty of use. Gary thought that these folks also caught numerous rockfish at certain times. I felt like I was on the African Queen steaming up the Zambezi River (or whatever River they were on). It seemed eerily quiet. On our right was a closed landfill and to our left was a urban, industrial area.



We finally hit the area known as the Belle Grove Ponds (pictured at left). They are not true ponds in that they are tidally influenced by an open connection to the Patapsco River. Gary and Bob proceeded to tell me that the local fishermen had educated them on how and when to fish these ponds. Now is the perfect time, as the waters chill, and an amazing variety of fish assimilate in these tidal ponds. Gary told me he has caught striped bass, largemouth bass, crappie, yellow perch, catfish, carp, chain pickerel and white perch in the approximately 10 acre waters of the Belle Grove Ponds. He said although he personally had never caught any, he had heard of walleye being caught as well. We approached two separate shore fishermen and asked how their success had been that

morning. Both had similar answers. Good, but their luck would be better in the coming weeks as water temperatures cooled and the stripers moved in. They both held up respectable striped bass that looked to be

about 26 inches. One of the shore fishermen commented that he had caught and released over 50 stripers in one day! I saw no reason to doubt their words. Which brings me to another thought. The prevailing belief has always been that the stripers move to deeper waters and school up in the winter. Certainly when myself and several of my colleagues were subsampling commercial catches aboard drift gill net boats in the early 1990s no one would have disagreed. At that time, the watermen were setting their nets in 110 feet of water off Matapeake, below the Bay Bridges. This went on for a few years until in 1996, when watermen found stripers in 10 feet of water off Worton Point and set their nets in that area for several weeks that season. Since then, recreational fishermen have forgone winterizing their boats and found productive locations for winter striped bass fishing. Certainly the power plants were an option, but the Baltimore Harbor? The stripers have not concentrated out in the deep channel off Kent Island in any great numbers since 1994. The question is, "Have they changed their behavior?" Or, are they redistributing themselves as their population reaches levels that many of us have never seen in our lifetimes. Perhaps the forage base for these fish dictates where they will be and not be at any given time. Perhaps it is a combination of all of these factors. The variables may be so complex, that they may not ever be predictable. Just some food for thought. Fishing is supposed to be fun, not analytical, right?