

## **SPRING-TIME STRIPER FISHING**

**BY**

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Early each year, the large Striped Bass, also known as Rockfish, begin their migration out of the Bay having spawned in the upper reaches of the Chesapeake and its tributaries. As these fish move out, they will generally stay in the upper 20 feet of the water column where the water is warmer. Therefore, you want to set your lines to fish that upper portion of the Bay's water. Some tips to keep in mind are as follows:

### **Trolling Patterns:**

1. Run all your lines in a "W" pattern with your lighter lines way back anywhere from 125 to 250 and even up to 300 feet, using no weight at all.
2. Some of your other lines may use 2 to 6 ounce inline sinkers with double tandem rigs set about 110 up to 175 feet back.
3. Finally, your heavier lines up front in the boat can be fished with 12 to 16 ounce inline sinkers on your umbrella rigs; and as much as 20 to 24 ounces set on your deep lines only 55 feet back.
4. This array gives you a standard "W" pattern for all of your boat rods. When using planer boards, the trolling lines are set light with no additional weight. Usually these planer board rods are set for no more than 80 to 100 feet back and under certain circumstances, they can be fished even shallower.

### **Planer Boards:**

I use the three-bladed boards connected by stainless steel rods with 75 feet of "weed-wacker" line on each side. Attaching your fishing rigs to the Planer Board can be accomplished several ways. One of the most popular ways is to set your lines with a double tandem rig on the outside fishing line. Then wrap a number 30 rubber band around the line once you have let out 60, 75 or 100 feet of line from your reel, then attach it to a "shower curtain ring" and slide it out to the end of your board. Another way to attach your fishing lines to the Planer Board line, is to use adjustable snap rigs with rings to attach the line at its designated length. Once again slide your tandem rig out to the end of your board. This is done for both sides. Then set your second rig for 60 or 75 or 80 feet out and put it out the same way. This will give you a total of 4 rods fishing on your Planer Boards.

When setting out your lines, put out your roof rods first. One about 275 feet back and the second one 300 feet back; they can either be a single lure, a double lure set-up or a spoon. I prefer a single #19 silver Tony Acetta Spoon. Next, you put in your Planer Boards and set those 4 rods in motion. I then put out a middle of the stern rod with a double tandem rig out 175 feet (no weight). Now that you have 7 rods out with no weight, you start putting out your side rods with varying amounts of weight depending on wind, waves, and current. On the two back corner lines, I use two umbrella rigs with 12

ounce in-line sinker on one with a 20 foot leader to the umbrella (all white) and put out 110 feet. The second umbrella rig, I use a 16-ounce sinker with a 20 foot leader to a chartreuse umbrella put out 100 feet. If you put out a single lure from the umbrellas, it runs a little smoother and I prefer large bullet shaped parachutes weighing between 6 and 8 ounces. The next set of side rods, I use 5 and 6 ounces in-line sinkers on each rod respectively, using double tandem rigs out 95 for one rod and 125 for the other rod. Finally, my two heavy weight rods, I use 20 and 24 ounces respectively and let them down only 55 feet on each side. These can contain either double tandem rigs of different size parachutes or large buck-tails all with 9-inch Sassy Shads. Another variation is to use a large spoon together with either a large buck-tail or a large parachute with a 9-inch Sassy Shad including a 9/0 or 10/0 stinger hook. Remember that when rigging large spoons like No. 19 or 21 Tony Acetta or 11/0 Crippled Alwive, be sure to use a good ball-bearing swivel about 4 to 5 feet above the spoon. Some people have used two swivels in their spoon leaders.

After we have all 13 rods set, I usually put down two dummy lines that are hooked to a stainless rod screwed directly into the side of the upper cabin. These dummy lines are rigged with 5 pounds of lead so they get down very quickly. I further add a light elastic cord that is attached to a port and starboard bell. This way when the fish hits the lure, the bell will ring.

### **Tandem Rigs:**

There are several different ways tandem rigs can be constructed, and I will explain how they are used:

1. Start making your tandem rigs using 60 or 80 or even 100-pound test monofilament line. Tie on a good quality snap swivel and attach a 3-foot length of leader. Then tie this leader directly to a medium size 3-way swivel that is now ready for the two lures to be attached. First cut off a 12 to 15 foot section of leader and tie on a 5 or 6 oz buck-tail or equivalent size parachute threading on a 9-inch sassy shad using a stinger hook arrangement. To the other end of this leader, tie on another good quality snap swivel that in turn is clipped onto the 3-way swivel. Next, measure off 20 feet of leader material for your lighter lure and attach it to the three-way swivel using a good quality snap swivel. The lighter lure in this rig is usually a 3 to 4 ounce parachute with a 9-inch sassy shad and stinger hook arrangement. Once again attach this lure and leader to the three-way swivel with another quality swivel. There are several leader lengths that can be used as long as there is 5-foot difference between the heavy (shorter leader) and light lures (longer leader).
2. The second variation of this tandem rig is using a large spoon such as a #19 Tony Acetta as your lighter and mobile lure. Place a ball-bearing swivel about 5 feet before you tie on your spoon and attach the other end of your 16 to 20-foot leader to your snap swivel which in turn clips onto your 3-way swivel. The other lure in this combination can either be a large bucktail or a equivalent size parachute. This spoon will give some additional action to this rig.

3. One can experiment with different size lures and different colors of both lures and the Sassy Shads. I prefer to use two parachutes of different sizes, but remember, always use the lighter lure on the longer of the leaders and the heavier lure on the shorter leader. Remember, use high quality snap swivels with all of your rigs. You would hate to lose a prize Rockfish just because a snap swivel failed.

One can see that if I troll 13 rod with double tandem rigs, I am offering at least 24 to 26 lures for the fish to see, and hopefully grab onto. Under normal trolling conditions, one should troll at 2.5 to 3.0 mph. Some variation may be needed when encountering stronger tides or winds. I normally troll East to West across the bay and back again so my lures go anywhere from 40 feet of water out to well above 110 feet of water fishing in our area of the Bay.

Let's address the types of **rods and reels**:

1. For the roof rods, I have used a good quality light-weight 6-7 foot rods custom built by Ken Preston with either a Penn 309 or Penn 330 GTI reels. In the more recent years, I have graduated up to Okuma T21-L reels loaded with at least 200 yards of 80 pound test Cortland Line as backing, and 130 yards of 60 or 80 pound test "Spectra Braid" line. Be sure that your reel "clicker" is in its working position. What a wonderful sound it is to hear the drag buzzing off.
2. The four rods used on the Planer Boards are also 6.5 foot Ken Preston custom made rods with Okuma T21-L reels loaded with the same type of Power Pro Spectra fiber line. During the years of fishing on the Bay, I have picked up 4 additional Ken Preston rods to give me some extra rod and reel set-ups. The heaviest boat rods on the back of the boat are 5.5 to 6 foot Custom Rods with Okuma Triton 20-L reel loaded with 80-lb test spectra. These are very smooth reels and work like a charm with umbrella rigs. My side rods are also 6 to 6.5 foot Preston-custom rods with the same Okuma reels and spectra line. Finally, my two upper side rods are seven-foot custom-built rods using Penn 340s with 80 pound test line. This array of rods and reels has handled many Rockfish over 40 inches that we catch in the early portion of the season on the Chesapeake.

**Lures:**

When it comes to all sizes of buck-tails, I make my own starting with both large and small heads being made with other members of our SMC/MSSA. Some of these early lures were designed and produced for me by John Theunissen. These heads have long-shank 8/0 to 10/0 hooks and are shaped in the following ways:

- Bullet shaped weighing anywhere from 3 to 8 ounces;
- Round headed with room to insert large eyes; (2 to 6 ounces); and
- "Ruby Lipped" shape, and again with room to insert large eyes.

Using nice quality deer tails, I tie my own buck-tails coating the final wrap with a plastic nail polish finish. They keep the lures in good shape and very clean.

I also have made several types of parachutes at various sizes and colors, but it is almost cheaper and certainly easier to buy them already made. I mainly use white and chartreuse colors. White, because “if it’s not white, it’s not right”. And Chartreuse, because “if it’s not chartreuse, it’s no use”. They work best and you can put white lures on one side of your boat and chartreuse on the other and see if there is any preference. Then, you can switch lures if necessary.

### **Trolling patterns:**

As stated before, we have all of our rods out in a “W” pattern, and in the Spring time, you want to be fishing your lures in the upper 20 feet of water. I usually start fishing in 40 feet of water and after putting out all of my lines, I will continue in an easterly direction going into much deeper water. We use an East-West trolling pattern going from 40 feet out to over 100 feet and turn back once again. Note at what depth you get a strike, it may tip you off as to what depth you should concentrate on to catch your fish. You should be aware of everything that is going on around you when trolling. If you see any birds, what kind are they? The regular sea-gulls will flock and work the surface of the water if the fish are feeding near the surface. However, in the early Spring you might notice larger birds called “Gannets”. These majestic birds have very keen eye sight and you should note how they are diving. If they are diving into the water from a medium height (around 20 feet above the water), that means that the bait is relatively shallow and your lighter rods have a good chance of catching fish. If, on the other hand, the Gannets are diving from way up in the sky, that means they are diving for bait fish that are down at least 20 feet, and your heavier lures have the better chance of hook-ups. .

### **Speed:**

Try to troll as slowly as possible. Using my GPS that measures speed over ground, I try to keep my speed around 2.3 to 2.7 mph. Look for baitfish on your depth sounder and you can weave to the right and left as you go over these baitfish. This will make your lures on one side of the boat to come up a little faster, and go down a little slower on the opposite side of the boat. As stated before, you want to stay under 3 mph if possible when Spring Fishing.

Always remember to carry a good size landing net on your boat, and there are techniques for landing your fish head first. Keep a tight grip on the net and do not let it open up fully until you have the fish started into the net. If you encounter a big female striper that has not as yet spawned out, be conservation-minded and release her so she can complete her mission!

### **Safety:**

Always be careful out on the water, be safety conscious, and be sure you know where the life preservers are located at all times. Do not drink heavy liquors. If it is sunny, protect yourselves with sun-tan lotion SPF 45 or better to help ward off any form of skin cancers.

Enjoy yourselves and tight lines!