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ANGLING ADVENTURES >>

Save a Salmon:

CATCH A STRIPER

The peak of the baby salmon's downstream journey corresponds with the spring spawning run of striped bass. Somewhere along the line, the two migrations crash headlong into one another

Okay, here's your mission, should you choose to accept it: Grab a rod and save some salmon! Let me explain: in the spring, Chinook salmon smolt move en masse down the rivers of California's Central Valley on their way to the ocean. Unfortunately, their timing is bad. Really, really bad. You see, the peak of the baby salmon's downstream journey corresponds with the spring spawning run of striped bass. Somewhere along the line, the two migrations crash headlong into one another. It's a one-sided blood bath, and when the spray and foam settles, the stripers emerge fat and happy while the Chinook suffer heavy losses.

When the salmon run was booming not so many years back, the spring slaughter at the hands (mouths) of the stripers was no biggie. The rivers had plenty of adult salmon returning each fall, so nobody worried too much about it. These days however, Valley Chinook are on the brink and every juvenile salmon is precious and needs to be protected.

That's where you come in!

You can do your part by going out and "educating" as many stripers as you can this season. Judging by the lack of rainfall this early winter, the spring water conditions are likely to be low (I hope I'm wrong) on rivers like the



When the bass are on salmon it's easy to double up on Sacramento River stripers. The downstream migration of king salmon smolts really gets the striped bass fired up.



Pencil poppers are a great striped bass bait. In the morning, when stripers are boiling on salmon smolt, you can have a blast tossing poppers.

Sacramento, Feather, American, San Joaquin, Mokelumne and others. If that's the case, the little salmon will have an even tougher time getting through the roving packs of stripers and will need our help even more.

By targeting salmon-munching stripers March through May, I've had some of my most epic fishing days, with scores well in excess of 50 fish occurring more often than you'd think.

Ambush Points

The whole key to this game is to find areas where stripers can easily pick off salmon as they move downriver. The bass will sit behind drop-offs and bars, behind current-swept points, rip-rap wing dams and in deep holes below fast water or rapids. Basically any spot that funnels the tasty little morsels into an area where they can be rounded up without too

much effort is worth investigating. Since all sorts of finned and feathered critters pound juvenile salmon along their migration route, the outgoing smolts will often hug shoreline structure, so any bank with rocks or woody debris is also a potential hot spot.

Topwater

In the early mornings the stripers will often give up their hiding spots and bust schools of salmon on the surface. When you see frothing boils, it's time to break out the poppers and get in on some super adrenaline-rich topwater fishing.

If you're on shore, make tracks to the spot of the activity as quickly as you can and start casting. When in a boat, however, you need to be a little more careful not to spook the fish. Running at full throttle right onto a striper school is a sure way to

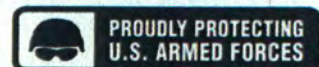


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put them down! Instead, cut the motor and drift (or use an electric trolling motor) to get into casting range. Ideally, you'll want to cast beyond the boil and bring the lure through the school. It seems odd, but there are times when a big plug splashing down in the middle of the boil will actually kill the bite. With all the commotion going on, you'd think the fish wouldn't care, but I've seen it happen too many times to not mention it here.

When the fish are in a surface-feeding frenzy, lure style and color aren't super important, but there are a few basic concepts to keep in mind. First off, consider the size of the baitfish they're eating. Salmon smolt range from three to five inches in length, so it makes a lot of sense to keep your lures in the same general size. In other words, don't bring a bazooka to a paintball fight. Lucky Craft's Sammy 115's, Heddon Super Spooks and 6-inch Pencil Poppers are all good choices. Since baby salmon are silvery in color, that's obviously the best pattern to go with, though the classic red head/white body will also work.

Unless you get a dark, cloudy day, topwater fishing is typically a crack of dawn or evening proposition. On most days, the topwater action is over when the sun hits the water. Just because the fish aren't showing on the surface anymore, however, doesn't mean they're not there. It's just time to switch gears.

Rip Baits

Obviously, stripers are easy to locate when they're boiling all over the place. When they're not up top, though, you need to go into search mode and that's exactly when throwing rip baits shines.

The basic game plan is pretty much the same as when you're fishing topwater. Look for the same ambush points and hit them with a fast and furious attack plan. It

Columnist JD Richey

shows why the downstream migration of salmon smolts is a great time to fish. You'll see the biggest bass of the year in the spring and fish more than twice this size are possible! Below, rip baits are a top choice for imitating small salmon. The real thing in a striper's craw.



doesn't take more than a few casts in each spot to see if the fish are there or not. If you don't get bit, keep moving until you do. And when you do get a grab, there's a good chance others are to follow because of the schooling nature of stripers. Find one and you'll usually find a bunch.

Unless the water's really cold, I like to keep my presentation moving along at a good clip with a jerk-jerk-pause-jerk-jerk type of retrieve. If it feels like the fish are being a little moody on a given day, it sometimes helps to slow the crank speed and vary the cadence and aggressiveness of the rips of the rod tip until you find what they want. Though stripers are generally pretty voracious, there are times when they can be as skittish as a brown trout in a spring creek.

There are tons of choices out there when it comes to rip baits and many of them have really nice actions and "salmony" finishes. A few of my favorites include Lucky Craft's 128 Pointer, Megabait's JB110 and the Cultiva Rip'n Minnow 112SP – in silver shad hues. The only real drawback to fishing rip baits for stripers is you're going to burn through a lot of hooks. The stock hooks on these plugs are sharp, but made of pretty light gauge wire and a good day of striper thumping will leave them in a state of disrepair.

Just keep a good supply of spares on hand and you'll be fine.

Speaking of hooks, I de-barb all of mine. Some rip baits and poppers come with three sets of trebles and all those hooks can be a real pain to dig out of fish (or fingers!), especially when you are in the middle of a red hot bite. I've spent many years fishing salmon and steelhead in barbless waters, so I have a lot of confidence in running hooks without a barb. In all honesty, I've lost very few stripers because of barbless hooks and the advantages far out-weigh the occasional dumped fish.

Timing

The spring out-migration of salmon and the upriver push of stripers are influenced greatly by water flows and temperatures and it's difficult to say exactly when the bite will kick into high gear. In high water years, the bass shoot up the river quickly and the salmon head downstream in a rush, so the overlap is short and sweet. We've had very low water in the Sacramento Valley the past few years, so the window has stayed open quite a bit longer. Generally speaking, you're looking at March, April and May, with some "shoulder" action a little before and after that period.

So do your part to help king salmon. Okay, you may not really be helping the salmon runs out a whole lot by catching spring stripers, but it's an awfully exciting way to kick off the spring and summer fishing season. See you out there! **WO**

