

Fishing

Yipes! Stripers arrive in upper Cape Fear

As I sat down to write this, I realized that this week's newspaper comes out on the last triple date we will have for 88 years. This Wednesday is 12/12/12 and the next one will be 01/01/01—in 2101. Even though there are advances in medicine and healthcare almost daily, I don't believe many of us will be around to see that one. This isn't important fishing-wise, but just a little trivia to give some food for thought.

What is important is our weather. We have had a couple weeks of exceptional weather, but will be returning to more seasonable temperatures as this week's *Pilot* is being delivered. I hope you have found a few opportunities to take advantage of the great weather and get out and do some fishing. The weather has been so nice that I had to swat mosquitoes one afternoon. However, I was so happy with the sunny, warm weather, I didn't let those mosquitoes bother me.

We are looking at cooling temperatures with the daytime highs only ranging through the mid-60s, but that is still extremely nice. There will be more days with chances of showers, but we need the water too. The long-range forecast then brings the sun back over the weekend, but with daytime highs returning to the 50s like several weeks ago. You may need to head south for Christmas to stay in shorts and short sleeves.

I received several calls and emails this week about Mary Lee and her travels. My thought is to enjoy that Ocearch (www.ocearch.org) is letting us view the shark tracker on their website and follow her. I hope they learn a lot about great white sharks by tracker Mary Lee.

Someone asked me over the weekend if I was worried, and I answered no. It really is because of the busy Christmas season that I haven't been surfing or fishing in the ocean in my kayak. The fact that I know there is a 16-foot long, 3,400-pound great white shark cruising the Carolina coast has nothing—well, OK, not a whole lot—to do with it.

Actually, Mary Lee has *very little* to do with it, as I can check the tracker and know about where she is. As I am writing this, she is spending a few days off Hilton Head in South Carolina and has been joined by Genie, a 2,200-pound female great white shark, who only recently pinged a few miles farther south. Genie was also tagged off Cape Cod in September, but didn't show any pings as she traveled south in the past couple weeks until she pinged off Tybee Island, Georgia, on Saturday. I have to admit that being able to follow Mary Lee, and now Genie, has made me wonder a little about where their family and friends might be.

No bluefin catches

There still hasn't been a bluefin tuna caught, but fishermen are trying. There were a few hook-ups and missed strikes reported, and hopefully someone will land one soon. All the fishermen are saying the area where they have caught bluefins in the past is loaded with bait, and has whales and all the right signs. Maybe that catch will come this week.

One of the things fishermen are doing is heading out with heavy gear and trolling for bluefins early, then, if they aren't successful, heading a little farther offshore to around Frying Pan Tower and catching king mackerel during the late morning and afternoon. This allows putting something in the boat as a reward for a long day.

... But trout all about

Fishermen in inside waters continue to sing the praises of catching speckled trout. The mild winter last year allowed most of the young of the year to survive, and those trout are 16 to 19 inches long now. The 10- to 13-inchers are this year's hatch and hopefully they make it through the winter with no issues. If so, there will be even more trout around next spring and fall.

Fishermen and tackle shops tout live shrimp as the best bait for specks. There are some shrimp still in the marshes, but most have moved to deeper holes or have left for the winter. Fishermen who have taken the time to learn to fine-tune their fishfinders can mark shrimp on the bottom in the deeper holes and catch them. Most fishermen are buying theirs, and Capt. Tommy Rickman at The Tackle Box said they will continue to carry live shrimp through at least Christmas, as long as they can get them.

For fishermen looking for lures to catch specks, the scented soft plastics have generally been producing best. Soft plastics, with scent added, are also catching pretty well. There is a general feeling, but with no established testing that some of the suspending and diving hard baits, such as MirrOlures, Rapalas, Yo-Zuris and Bombers are catching larger trout than the soft plastics, but not necessarily catching as many trout.

Live shrimp and all of the lures mentioned will also catch puppy drum, and there are good numbers of pups around too. While trout will move up into shallower water to feed occasionally, they generally prefer being in the deeper sections of the creek. On the other hand, puppy drum will swim and feed in water shallow enough that their backs and tails are occasionally exposed. Many times these areas are just a few feet from the holes holding specks, and it is possible to catch both of them and flounder at the same time in the same place.

The numbers of flounder are down, but there are still some around that are mixed with the drum and trout. I feel like I catch more "accidental" flounder while fishing for pups and believe that is because I am usually fishing shallower and along the bottom. However, I have had flounder swim up in the water column to eat a bait or lure that was intended for a trout. This is never a surprise, and is always welcome.

The stripers have arrived

With the cooling water, stripers have arrived in the rivers around Wilmington. I am always curious as to where they come from, because we don't catch a few accidentally with them traveling up the river, but they weren't there a month ago.

For those of you who are new to the area, or are younger than me, when I was a kid we used to catch some stripers in Walden Creek. Prior to Sunny Point being built in the mid-1950s, Highway 133 to Wilmington went out Moore Street, crossed Walden Creek, then traveled along the river through what is now Sunny Point and out by Brunswick Town and Orton Plantation. It joined what is now the existing highway at the sharp curve, with the bridge across Liliput Creek near Orton.

Stripers, flounder, puppy drum, specks and more were caught from the bridge across Walden Creek, and boat fishermen in the creek did even better. The bridge was accessible until the nuclear power plant was built in the early 1970s. While the specks, pups and flounder held on, the striper slowly disappeared during the 1960s.



Capt. Jerry Dilsaver landed the first striper during the 2012 Cape Fear Riverwatch Striper Tournament.

Now, there are stripers around Wilmington again, but not in the lower river, even though these are considered migratory stripers. The stripers in the Cape Fear River begin roughly where the power lines cross the river above Town Creek. From there, they range to Lock and Dam Number 1 (and a little above now) in the Cape Fear River, to above Castle Hayne in the Northeast Cape Fear River and along the complete length of the Brunswick River. Currently, they are on the lower end of this range from about the power lines to a few miles above Wilmington.

Striper season is closed in the Cape Fear River and all its tributaries below Jordan Dam, so fishermen are not after these stripers to keep. This is purely catch-and-release fishing. Occasional incidental catches are redfish, specks and flounder and they can be kept according to bag and size limits.



Capt. Jerry Dilsaver



Fishermen target the Cape Fear stripers in three general ways. The first is to cast a bait—live or cut bait—on the bottom and wait. Second is to troll diving stick baits along and over structures. Third is to drift or anchor and cast lures, generally large soft plastic swim baits rigged weedless on heavy worm hooks, to the bank and slowly retrieve them back to deeper water. All or none of these tactics may work at any time. I have had days of no stripers and days of 20-plus in the same week.

There was some good news for Cape Fear River stripers and striper fishermen this week. The Corps of Engineers announced the completion of the rock arch fish ladder that has been built to allow spawning stripers, sturgeon, shad and more to swim across the dam at Lock and Dam Number 1 on their way upriver to spawn in the spring. This is a start, and fishery biologists say that with similar structures in place at Locks and Dams Number 2 and 3, the striper population could rebound in 10 years or less.

A century ago, prior to these dams being built, the Cape Fear River was considered one of the top five striper rivers on the East Coast. Wouldn't it be great to return to that status?

Biologists are also stocking the Cape Fear with striper fingerlings to aid the population numbers. One morning last week, a couple tanker trucks were at the ramp under the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge releasing some fingerlings. One of the biologists said they planned to release 100,000 fingerlings this winter.

Offshore fishing

The offshore fishing has been very good for king mackerel and bottom fish, but rather hit-or-miss for wahoo and blackfin tuna. The water temperature around Frying Pan Shoals has been holding in the low 70s and the kings have been biting in that general area. Currents pushing around the end of Frying Pan Shoals are carrying bait, and the kings could be anywhere in water above about 65 degrees. The kings sense the approaching winter and are actively feeding. They are hitting spoons, sea witches with strips, frozen cigar minnows and any live baits that can be found.

Just beyond the kings, the grouper, triggerfish, grunts and porgys are biting on the bottom. Grouper season will close for four months on January 1, 2013, so if you want some to freeze for the winter, you better get to them in the next few weeks. Black sea bass, beeliner and red snapper seasons are already closed.

Wahoo, blackfin tuna and occasional surprises are holding along the temperature breaks and weed lines at the inshore edge of the Gulf Stream. Unfortunately, the characteristics and location of the inshore edge are changing daily, and the fish are not always at the same place. Some days, a few miles can make the difference between spending a long day switching washed-out baits or staying busy fishing.

Wahoo and tuna move along the edges of warm currents and stop to feed when they find baitfish. The open water pelagics prefer clean water. While blue water is preferred, they may move into green or blended water if there is food, but rarely tolerate cloudy water.

Applications being accepted

These are the last few days for anyone interested in serving on the Shrimp Fishery Management Plan Advisory Committee to submit an application. Applications for the Shrimp FMP Advisory Committee are available online at <http://portal.ncdenr.org/web/mf/mfc-advisory-committees>, at DMF offices or by calling 252-808-8022 or 800-682-2632. Applications must be returned by December 14 to the Division of Marine Fisheries, P.O. Box 769, Morehead City, NC 28557. Attention: Lauren Morris.

The committee will assist the division in drafting an amendment to the Shrimp Fishery Management Plan that focuses on bycatch and associated issues. Scientists and persons with experience in commercial or recreational shrimping are preferred. The committee will meet at least monthly, and members must actively participate in the committee process.

Snapper season reopens—briefly

At their meeting in Wilmington last week, the South Atlantic Fisheries Management Council (SAFMC) voted to reopen the commercial red snapper and gray triggerfish seasons December 12-19 as the quota had not been caught. There is no minimum size for either off North Carolina during this season, but red snapper will be limited to 50 pounds per trip (gutted weight). More information can be found on the SAFMC website at www.safmc.net.

Tournaments continue

The December Tackle Box Tournament features speckled trout and there hasn't been one weighed yet. If you are a Tackle Box customer and catch a trout, it would be wise to go by and weigh it. There is no entry fee for the Tackle Box monthly tournaments. Participants register by making a purchase at The Tackle Box and then bring in their fish to be weighed. At the end of the month, the winner receives a \$100 gift certificate to The Tackle Box. For more information visit www.the-tackle-box.com.

While striper season is closed indefinitely on the Cape Fear River and all its tributaries below Jordan Dam, Cape Fear Riverwatch receives a special permit to hold an all-release tournament each January. The Cape Fear Riverwatch tournament is held to gather information on the status of stripers in the Cape Fear Basin and to raise funds to help clean the river and help rebuild the once-thriving striper, shad and sturgeon fisheries in the river. Research shows, with the help of Cape Fear Riverwatch, striper numbers are increasing and the fish are getting larger in the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear rivers.

The first Cape Fear Riverwatch tournament was held in December 2008, but the tournaments have since been moved to the middle of January. The fifth annual Cape Fear River Watch Invitational Tag and Release Striper Tournament will be held on January 19 as a part of Striperfest 2013. Prizes are awarded for the most stripers tagged and released and the largest striper tagged and released, plus special awards for the lady angler and youth angler catching and releasing the largest stripers.

Striperfest 2013 begins with the annual auction and banquet to benefit fishery restoration at the Coastline Convention Center in Wilmington on Friday, January 18. In addition to an excellent meal, there are raffles, silent auctions and a live auction. All anglers and captains are invited to the banquet and auction, which is also open to Cape Fear Riverwatch members.

Saturday, January 19, begins with a pancake breakfast for anglers and guides, then a shotgun start for the tournament from the junction of the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear rivers behind the Coastline Convention Center. Fishing is measure, tag, photo and release, with larger fish being transferred to a Marine Fisheries boat and crew for special tags that register when the fish crosses the dam or goes through the locks at Lock and Dam Number 1.

While the tournament fishermen are scouring the Cape Fear, Northeast Cape Fear and Brunswick rivers for the big stripers, Cape



Photo by Jerry Dilsaver
Capt. Jot Owens with a 27.5-inch striper caught near the Battleship North Carolina using a trolled stickbait.

Fear Riverwatch staff, area fishery biologists and volunteers conduct fun and informative sessions at the Coastline Convention Center to educate the public about the health of the rivers, including stripers and other life in the rivers. For more information on the Striperfest and striper tournament, visit www.cfw.us or call 910-762-5606.

Good fishing!

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