



The Stripper Watch

Jerry Diltsaver

The Cape Fear River system's striped bass fishery is slowly but surely being rebuilt with help from guides, fishermen and a group that wants to protect the river.

By Jerry Diltsaver

Nice striped bass like this one caught by the author are becoming more common in the Cape Fear River as efforts to rebuild stocks show some success.

Jot Owens put his bay boat on plane for a couple of minutes after leaving the Dram Tree Park Ramp in Wilmington. He crossed under the Thomas Rhodes Bridge, pulled the throttle back to just above idle and announced it was time to fish.

"There was a good little pod of fish on a hump just up from here the other day," Owens said as he reached for a rod already rigged with a medium-diving crankbait. "I'm slowing here and letting this falling tide slow us down as I get the lures out.

"We'll pull some diving lures across here, and if they hit us good, we'll come back and set up and cast."

With the lines out, Owens, a full-time fishing guide, pointed to a hump on his depthfinder and said to get ready. A few seconds later, the rod on the bank side bucked once and then laid over, with the reel giving up a little line and the pulse of the rod tip indicated it was a fish, not a snag.

"There he is," Owens said, excitement in his voice. "Get him. If they're here like the other day, we should get another strike or two."

There weren't any other strikes, but soon, a 22-inch striper appeared in the dark water a few yards behind the boat. Owens reached with his net, deftly scooped the fish up and lifted it into the boat.



“I’ve activated my sampling permit for today, so let’s just get him in the livewell and make another pass,”

Owens said. “The fish should bite pretty well for a while on this falling tide, and we’ll try to catch a bunch before we stop and tag them.”

Owens is on the Cape Fear Riverwatch board of directors and is one of only a few captains with special permits that allow holding Cape Fear River stripers alive for tagging. On this trip, he planned to insert tags similar to those chips used to identify pets in striper cheeks. A biologist with a reader can scan the fish when recaptured and verify when and where it was tagged and its size at that time.

Spinning his boat around, Owens made another pass over the hump, but with no takers this time. One more time with the boat just a few feet farther off the bank and no strikes convinced Owens the fish had moved.

“That must be the only one here right now,” Owens said. “Reel those lines in and let’s move to another spot and give it a try.”

The second spot didn’t produce any stripers, and Owens relocated again. The third spot produced a nice striper on the first pass and a smaller one on a second pass.

Owens eased to the side and deployed his Power-Pole to hold the boat in place between the drop where the two fish had been and a dock that sometimes holds fish — both in casting range.

He pulled out a couple of spinning outfits rigged with swimbait hooks. Opening a container, he threaded a couple of Gulp! Jerkshad on the hooks and eased the

hook points lightly into their backs.

“This will make these weedless and keep them from hanging up on everything,” Owens said. “The edge where those fish we just caught were is right over there towards the bridge abutment. Cast over there and just work the bait along the bottom.”

“The stripers will be feeding along the bottom, so be sure you feel the bait bump it occasionally. The water is cold, and they won’t be striking real hard, so be ready to set the hook when you feel a good bump. Don’t go crazy, but set the hook firmly. You need to pop the hook out of the bait and set it in the fish’s jaw.”

A few minutes passed without any other strikes, so

Owens decided that it was a good time to measure, tag, record and release the stripers in the livewell.

He laid his tagging kit out on the rear casting deck and prepared two tags for each fish: a small tag in their cheeks that can be read with a scanner plus a spaghetti tag anchored in the upper abdominal cavity.

The spaghetti tag can be cut off and returned by the next angler that catches the striper, and biologists working the river can still scan and record any stripers they catch.

In both cases, the stripers can be released and the data still recorded. With luck, they will be caught several times, and their movements can be documented over a span of time.

During the Cape Fear River Watch Striper Tournament in January 2012,

biologists tagged several stripers of spawning size with special sensor tags that would record if they crossed Lock and Dam No. 1 or passed through the locks at the dam. In the weeks after the tournament, they added several more to bring the total number of sensor-tagged stripers to 20.



TOP: Jot Owens nets a striped bass that was caught on a diving lure. BOTTOM: Owens casts to fish in a series of pockets off the Cape Fear River outside of Wilmington.



CFRW and its striped tournament

The first Cape Fear Riverwatch Striper Tournament was held in December 2008, but the annual events are now held in mid-January, with this year's set for Saturday, Jan. 19, as part of Striperfest 2013.

While possession of stripers in the Cape Fear River and its tributaries upstream to Jordan Dam is illegal, the tournament has a special-use permit allowing stripers to be held live long enough to record information for fisheries biologists. Research shows that steeper numbers are increasing in the river, and fish are getting larger.

Stripers caught by tournament participants are measured, tagged, photographed and released, with larger fish being transferred to a marine fisheries boat for tagging. The tournament ends at 3 p.m., and awards are given for the most stripers tagged and released, the largest steeper tagged and released, plus awards for female and youth anglers catching and releasing the largest stripers.

For more information on the CFRW Striperfest and Striper Tournament visit www.cfrw.us or call 910-762-5606.

Cape Fear Riverwatch was founded in 1993 by Wilmington residents concerned about their river and the region. The Cape Fear is North Carolina's largest river basin; nearly one-third of the state's population lives in the river's watershed.

CFRW organizes monthly environmental seminars covering topics and issues affecting the Lower Cape Fear River Basin, plus environmental-education classes, eco-tours, bird watching tours, water-quality education programs and storm-water management training, plus clean-ups and maintenance, monitoring, research and training for members.

CFRW has helped biologists make significant strides restoring fish populations in the river; the rock-arch rapids fish ladder at Lock and Dam No. 1 is the most-visible project.

For more information on CFRW and their concerns and activities in the Cape Fear River Basin visit www.cfrw.us.



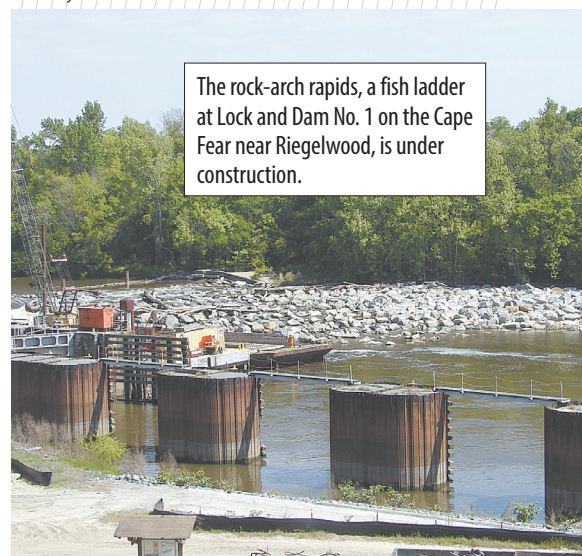
Stripers caught in the Cape Fear Riverwatch Striper Tournament help biologists with their research through examination and tagging.

Jerry Dilsaver

Cape Fear locks, dams and stripers

Striped bass were once so plentiful in the Cape Fear region that they were classified as one of the nine major steeper populations on the Atlantic Seaboard, but that was before locks and dams were built along the river to help with commerce between Wilmington and Fayetteville.

Lock and Dam No. 1 at Riegelwood has been in place since 1915. Lock and Dam No. 2 was added two years later near Elizabethtown, and Lock and Dam No. 3 was built in 1935 near Tar Heel. Once the three dams were constructed, the river was passable by barge all the way upstream to Fayetteville.



The rock-arch rapids, a fish ladder at Lock and Dam No. 1 on the Cape Fear near Riegelwood, is under construction.

Jerry Dilsaver

Many biologists and fishermen believe the installation of these locks and dams initiated the decline of the river's steeper fishery. No fish ladders or any other means to allow fish to continue upstream to spawn were built. At the same time, other anadromous species, including herring, shad and sturgeon, began to decline.

A moratorium on steeper fishing was declared a few years ago to protect the remaining fish in the river. Catch-and-release fishing is allowed, but it is illegal to keep a steeper from the Cape Fear or any of its tributaries.

A rock-arch rapids fish passage at Lock and Dam No. 1 is being completed. This will allow stripers, shad, herring, sturgeon and other anadromous fish to get across this dam on their way upriver.



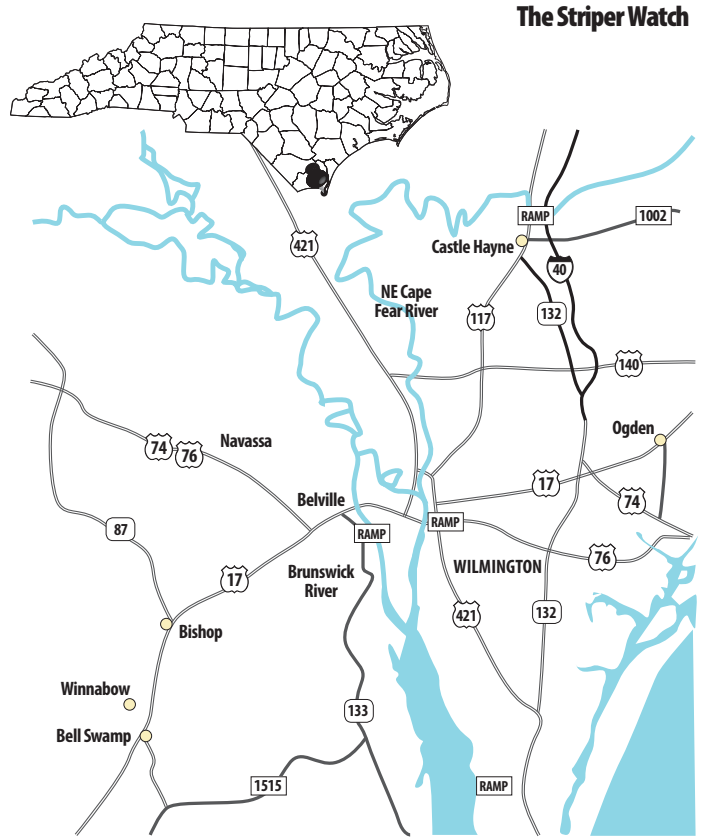
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The Striper Watch



The map shows the Cape Fear River basin in North Carolina, including major cities like Wilmington, Castle Hayne, and Brunswick River. It highlights various highways (US 421, US 17, US 74, US 132, US 133, US 1515, I-40, I-85, I-95) and public launching ramps for fishing. Key locations include Navassa, Bishop, Bell Swamp, and Ogden.

DESTINATION INFORMATION

HOW TO GET THERE — Wilmington is the place to start for Cape Fear River striper fishing; it can be reached from the west via I-40 and US 74 and US 421, or from the north and south via US 17. The most-convenient launching ramp for downtown Wilmington is at Dram Tree Park, which is under the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge on the upriver side at Castle St. and includes a special canoe and kayak launch. Two more public ramps are off US 17 and NC 133 on the Northeast Cape Fear near Castle Hayne, and in the Brunswick River Park across the river in Brunswick County on NC 133 just south of Bellville.

WHEN TO GO — The Cape Fear River striper fishery is primarily a winter one, with fish showing up in late November and continuing into April. The peak is usually from late December until early February. This year, the stripers began arriving in October.

SPECIAL REGULATIONS — No stripers can be kept in the Cape Fear or any of its tributaries. However, pay attention to where you're fishing as far as your license is concerned. Downstream from the Cape Fear River Memorial Bridge, waters are coastal and require a Coastal Recreational Fishing License; upstream they are "joint" waters, where a CRFL or freshwater license will both be accepted. Pay attention moving out of the rivers into creeks, because waters may change to "inland" where freshwater licenses are required. Boundaries are marked with metal signs. Lists and maps of the boundaries are available from the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission (www.ncwildlife.org) or the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries (www.ncdmf.net).



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TACKLE/TECHNIQUES — Jot Owens prefers Penn 3000 and 4000 Battle spinning reels on 7-foot, medium to medium-heavy action Penn Regiment rods. He trolls for stripers, many times locating them by trolling, then stopping to anchor and cast. He spools his reels with Spiderwire Ultracast superbraid, feeling that the lack of stretch helps clear hooked fish of pilings and other underwater structure they prefer for habitat. The superbraid also offers increased sensitivity and allows feeling subtle strikes. For trolling, Owens prefers a Sebile Koolie Minnow ML, but aid other lures that will dive from four to eight feet will work. He casts 5- and 6-inch Gulp! Jerkshad rigged on swimbait hooks.

GUIDES/FISHING INFO — Jot Owens, Jot It Down Guide Service, 910-233-4139 or www.captainjot.com; Tex's Tackle and Bait, Wilmington, 910-791-1763; Island Tackle and Hardware, Carolina Beach, 910-458-3049; County Line Bait and Tackle, Castle Hayne, 910-675-8940. See also Guides & Charters in Classifieds.

ACCOMMODATIONS — Wilmington/Cape Fear Coast Convention and Visitors Bureau, 877-406-2356 or www.cape-fear.nc.us. The Best Western at the Coastline Convention Center (800-617-7732 or www.coastlineinn.com) is on the downtown waterfront and has some dockage.

MAPS — GMCO Chartbook of North Carolina, 888-420-6277 or www.gmcomaps.com; Capt. Segull's Nautical Charts, 888-473-4855 or www.captain-segullcharts.com.

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The Striper Watch

Tagging and releasing stripers caught in the Cape Fear River is part of a research project tracking their movement and growth.

Owens said that, according to reports from the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, five of the tagged stripers went upriver above Lock and Dam No. 1. Four went through the locks, and one hearty fish made its way up and over the not-yet-completed rock-arch rapids. Five may not seem like a lot, but that's 25 percent of the fish that were tagged, and the biologists were excited to see such a high percentage represented. Many times, fishery studies rely on results from a much smaller percentage of returns.

After tagging and releasing the stripers in his livewell, Owens moved up the Northeast Cape Fear River and caught a few more. He said that catches have been roughly equal between trolling and casting on his most-recent trips.



Jerry Dilsaver

Owens has proved to his clients there are enough stripers in the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear rivers to target and expect to catch them. He said the moratorium on keeping stripers might seem severe, but if it helps them rebound, he is all for it.

Owens said ongoing projects like the rock-arch rapids at Lock and Dam No. 1 are helping fish reach their traditional spawning areas, and numbers are already increasing.

He is anxiously waiting for similar projects at Locks and Dams Nos. 2 and 3 farther upriver. Once that happens, he believes the striper fishing in the rivers can rebound to the prominence it enjoyed in the early 1900s.

In the meantime, striper fishing in the Cape Fear River system is a matter of catch-and-release. Owens considered the half-dozen fish caught a "slow morning," but wondered aloud how good the fishing will be once fish ladders are built at all the dams and fish can reach their spawning grounds and fully recover. ■



Jerry Dilsaver of Oak Island, a full-time freelance writer, is a columnist for North Carolina Sportsman. He is a former SKA National Champion and USAA Angler of the Year.

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