Outdoors: Get down on early winter striped bass

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With nighttime temperatures dipping near freezing over the last week or two, many area striped-bass anglers are looking forward to the late fall and early winter bite that is often one of the best fishing patterns of the year.

Probably one of the most commonly utilized bass-fishing tactics on our area lakes this time of year is the use of the down rod. Known by a variety of names, this tactic is the vertical presentation of live or cut dead bait. The most commonly used baits are live blueback herring purchased from local bait shops.

The most effective rig for down-rod fishing is a Carolina rig. The main line from the reel is attached to a barrel swivel. Above the barrel swivel is a threaded weight heavy enough to hold the bait in a vertical presentation. An egg sinker of 1 to 3 ounces is common, but some variations of weight choice exist, with any sliding weight configuration being acceptable.

It is common practice to thread a small plastic bead between the sliding weight and the swivel to prevent the edge of the weight from chafing against the knot and weakening the line. Tied below the barrel swivel is a length of leader material to which the hook is then attached.

An effective presentation is to first graph fish on your depth finder and mark the spot using a floating buoy marker, GPS cookie or triangulation with objects on the shore. If striped bass are not holding tight to a location but are in the general area, then it is often preferable not to anchor the boat and either drift with the wind or current through the target area. You can also use a trolling motor to quietly maneuver through the area if drifting is not feasible.

Depth presentation is the key to down-rod fishing. It's helpful to note the precise depth the fish are using and deploy several baits at or just above their depth. Placing bait 10 feet below the level active fish are marked may entice a larger, more solitary striped bass that often hangs out below and off to the side of an active school.

One of the most common mistakes striped-bass anglers make when fishing down rods is to set baits out at varying depths and leave them. Being a vertical presentation, fish moving right below the boat will be within the transducer-cone angle of your depth recorder. Constant monitoring of the depth finder and readjustment of baits to the level the fish enter the cone at will greatly increase your chances of hooking up fish.

While it may take a little time to convince that first fish to take the bait, oftentimes once a fish is hooked and fighting the line, other stripers will move in out of instinct, as the erratic movements of the hooked fish will signal feeding to the others. It is for this reason that it is beneficial to play a fish out before getting it into the boat, even allowing the fish to linger for some time to spur the rest of the school.

Using the trolling motor to search for fish or move within an area thought to hold fish is also an effective technique that is often combined with free-line, balloon or planer-board presentations. If the intent is to cover water with a down-rod setup, it is advised to keep the down rod baits above the highest level of structure — such as standing timber, trees, stumps or rocks — to prevent hangups.

The idea is to search the lower water column rather than providing a precise vertical presentation. If a school is found, the boat can then be held on the location with the trolling motor, and baits can be adjusted to specific fish depth.

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Recent cooling overnight temperatures are heating up striped bass fishing on our area lakes.