Outdoors: Learn to catch your own bait to nab trophy striped bass

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
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One of the most frequently overlooked spawning fish in the state's freshwater lakes this time of year are striped bass.

Anglers look forward to fishing largemouth bass on the beds, catching crappie when the dogwoods bloom and hunting bream on the full moon, but few consider stripers, probably because these landlocked saltwater giants don't successfully reproduce — though they do go through the motions.

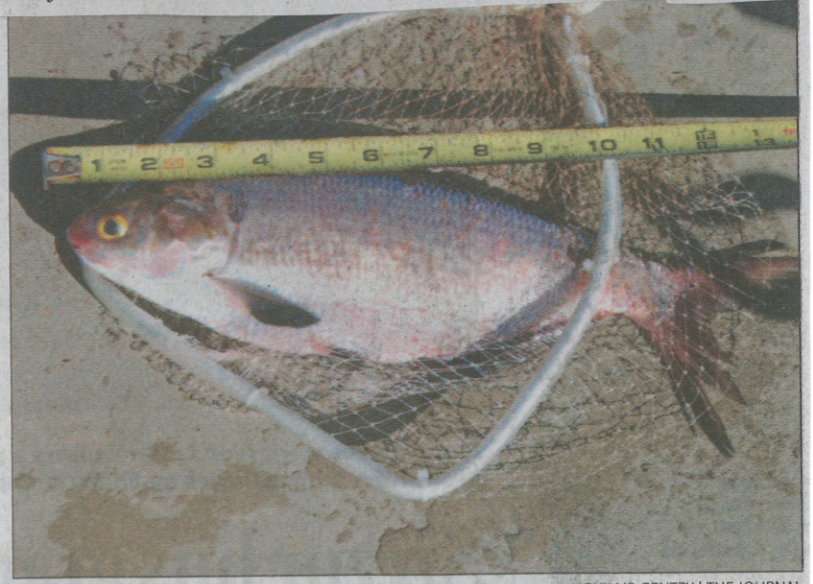
This time of year, striped bass will move out of the depths of the main lakes and move up many of the longer tributary arms. This is particularly true of lakes like Hartwell, Russell, and Clarks Hill. One of the top baits when it comes to catching trophy striped bass is large-gizzard shad.

Many veteran striped bass anglers know the secret to catching big fish — big bait. And many times, the best baits are right under your boat in the lake you intend to fish.

Fishki Business guide Steve Pietrykowski of Seneca catches most of his own bait, whether he's targeting striped bass in Hartwell, spotted bass in Keowee or rainbow and brown trout in Lake Jocassee. Pietrykowski said once you get the hang of it, throwing the big net for bait can be fun and even adds an additional facet to your fishing outings.

"Start by loading the cast-net line in small loops in your hand," Pietrykowski said. "Grab the net just below the horn and divide it into three portions. The first third of the lead line goes under my arm and over my shoulder, another third stays in my right hand and the last third hangs down from my left. With the net separated in this manner, I'm going to throw the net like a Frisbee. This is one of the easiest methods I've found for throwing a big 10-12 foot net."

When fishing big gizzards, the guide deploys two to three planer boards on either side of the boat while trolling. He arranges the boards so that the biggest shad are the furthest back in the lineup. He does that to give the bigger bait room to roam. He also indicates that when his baits parade by an ambush point where a striper is hiding, the fish may swirl at one of the first couple of baits and then often swoop in and hit the biggest bait that's last in line.



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Learning how to catch and fish with large-gizzard shad is a great way to target trophy striped bass this time of year.

"When a big bait gets hit, the best thing to do is just feed the fish line" Pietrykowski said. "I'll sometimes have fish blow up on a bait several times over a span of 50 or 60 yards. If you tighten up and that fish feels pressure, he'll spit the bait if he can. Let him take it — you can tell he's got it when the line peels off in a hurry."

Another factor in hooking up with big fish is how you rig a big bait.

"I use a 5/0 to 8/0 shiner hook for big gizzards," Pietrykowski said, "but the key is to rig a stinger on a big bait."

To rig a stinger hook, he ties the main hook to the leader using a palomar knot. He allows enough slack to the tag end to span the length of the bait, plus a few inches slack with enough left over to tie on the stinger hook. He typically uses a 4/0 extra-strong treble hook. One point of the treble is impaled just under the skin between the dorsal fin and the tail of the bait.

It's important that the stinger and stinger line not impede the natural swimming movement of the bait or inflict a mortal wound when hooked into the bait.

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of "Upstate Outdoors," broadcast from noon to 2 p.m. Saturdays on 106.3 WORD FM. This week's guest will be Kyle Clark from Doc's Deer Scents. Contact Gentry at pgentry6@bellsouth.net.