

Prime baits for spring striped and hybrid bass

BY PHILLIP GENTRY
FOR THE JOURNAL

While trophy striped bass are frequently caught by anglers using seemingly exotic live baits — like large gizzard shad and 12-inch rainbow trout — the day-in and day-out choice of live bait for strippers under the 20-pound mark and all hybrid bass is a live blueback herring.

Like many clear-water lakes in South Carolina, lakes Hartwell, Russell and Strom Thurmond are herring lakes. The fish were at some point stocked in the lake, but it's also presumable they swam up the Savannah River and got in that way, too.

Semi-retired fishing guide William Sasser remembers the days of striper fishing on the Savannah chain before there were herring in the lakes.

"Me and some friends argue about this a little bit, but I actually remember (the late 1970s) when the hybrid population got real good before there were herring in the lakes," he said. "Back then, everybody just used large minnows or small bream for catching the hybrids. That was back before there was

somewhere to go buy herring or even go net them yourself."

Striped bass, blueback herring and hybrid bass, to an extent, share a common denominator — they originated as saltwater fish. Though capable of living in saltwater, they also can live their entire lives in freshwater.

"It's their natural bait," Sasser said. "They're both really a saltwater fish. They come from the ocean, and that's what saltwater strippers eat."

Sasser said the availability of buying herring — thanks in no small part to long, grueling hours spent by live bait suppliers to net, transport and store the baits — has made striper fishing much easier than in the old days.

"It's wonderful," he said. "Most people, myself included, care nothing about getting up at 3 in the morning and catching bait. The availability has helped the striper fishing industry a lot. You know it's brought more fishermen to the lake if they can just stop and buy bait compared to trying to catch it. Most people aren't going to do that unless you're really a

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hardcore fisherman."

For the hybrid and striped bass angler who is planning on using live bait to catch fish, a bait tank is a piece of equipment that's high on the list of importance. A bait tank should handle about a dozen 4-to-6-inch baits per 5 gallons of water at a minimum size of 20 gallons. For larger baits — 7 to 12 inches — a good rule of thumb is one bait per gallon of water.

Ideally, your bait tank will be equipped with a filtration system. The filtration system is designed to remove deadly organic matter to keep water clear and the odor down. It will also remove ammonia, which causes stress and kills your bait.

Water circulation via a circulation pump is needed to keep water flowing at the proper speed based on the size of tank you use.

Temperature control is an important consideration for keeping and storing bait. Cooler water temperatures hold more oxygen and thus keep baits lively. Temperature control is more of a consideration during hot weather than at other times of the year.

Non-iodized salt can be mixed into your tank to help condition the water before adding bait. This will help harden scales and rejuvenate the bait's slime coat. The recommended dosage is one half of a cup of non-iodized salt for every 10 gallons of water.

Frequent cleaning and care of the bait tank will ensure bait health and survival. Baking soda and a plastic dish-cleaning brush can be used to remove grime from inside a bait tank. Rinse the tank thoroughly with water after cleaning and allow the tank to air dry.

PHILLIP GENTRY is the host of a forthcoming podcast radio program — The Outdoors Show with Phillip Gentry & Boat Girl. More info on the show is available on the podcast's Facebook page.



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Hands down, the best bait for springtime striper and hybrid fishing is live blueback herring.