

Spring Break Schoolies!

by Jack Naves

Spring is the best time of year to get into insane numbers of mid-sized delta stripers, otherwise known as 'schoolies.'

When water temperatures creep into the upper fifties, three to seven pound stripers form huge schools that storm the delta looking for food. During this pre-spawn period, big schools of fish search for anything in their paths they can devour. Luckily for us, local bait and tackle shops are fully stocked with P-Line Predators, Yo-Zuri Crystal Minnows, Bomber Long-A's, and other minnow-imitating lures that work great for targeting hungry delta linesides.

Once or twice a year, I experience an epic trip to the Delta where the stripers just refuse to stop biting. I stumbled onto one of those situations last spring on March 27 with a fishing buddy of mine Mick Berklich.

Mick and I had originally planned to fish on the preceding Friday, but strong delta winds forced us to postpone our trip until the following week. At the time, we were kind of bummed because the postponement put us right in line with the full moon.

On the day of the trip, we met in Elk Grove at 5:45 in the morning. After a quick shot down I-5 and HWY-12, we were launching his boat at Brannon Island in the pre-dawn twilight. He carefully navigated his vessel down to

the San Joaquin River and stopped at one of his favorite locations for shallow-water trolling.

On the menu for the day were Yo-Zuri Crystal Minnows with six inch white rubber worms pinned to the rear hooks. About ten minutes into the troll, Mick made a wide turn and the inside rod got slammed.

I grabbed the rod and said, "It's small, but I think it's a keeper." Mick cleared the other two rods and we quickly had our first fish in the net. It measured out at nineteen inches, and we decided to release the fish in hopes of getting some bigger fillets for fish tacos.

It wasn't long before we had landed three more keeper-sized stripers, two of which we kept. The outgoing tide was starting to pick up steam up, and I figured that he bite would shut off at any time.

The full moon was accompanied by its typical high tides. Large, fast-moving tides are usually not great for shallow-water trolling. In addition to this, we were fishing the middle of an outgoing tide, which once again isn't normally a desirable time to be pulling lures. Well, somebody must have forgotten to notify the fish of my tidal theories, because for the next couple of hours the action went off the charts.

For a half-mile stretch, we couldn't keep the fish off

• Cont. on Page 45



Spring Break Schoolies

• Cont. from Page 31

the hooks. Five other boats got into the action, but that didn't slow the bite down one bit. On every pass, one of the rods would get slammed. At one point, we had a near triple-hookup – three fish on three rods.

As Mick guided the boat along a shallow patch of tules, the inside rod doubled-over, and the sweet sound of the clicker rang out over the droning chug of the trolling motor. Mick ran back and started to pull the rod out of its holder. Before he could get it out, the middle rod slammed down and started pumping.

"There's another one!" I shouted. "This one came off," he said, so I replied, "Okay, take the other one then". Just like the first fish, the second fish came unbuttoned after a few seconds. We looked at each other in disbelief, wondering why both fish had come off so quickly. Not three seconds later, the clicker on the outside rod started screaming. Mick was able to keep fish number three on the hook, and it turned out to be our biggest striper of the day at 5.6 pounds.

After the excitement of the triple-hookup, we decided that we would keep the next couple of fish for the cooler and head home. At 11:52 am we finished off our limit with a feisty schoolie that was landed not far from where

we had started out.

We quickly headed back to the ramp with two nice limits of stripers in the box. In all, we landed twelve keepers plus two other fish that were just under legal size. We also had multiple grabs and hookups that didn't stick. Not bad for a half-day's trolling.

Our trolling technique was that of standard Delta protocol. We trolled in six to nine feet of water using 125 to 180 foot staggered setbacks on our three rods. Mick kept our speed in the constant four to five mile-per-hour range using his kicker motor.

Our thirty pound-test main lines consisted of braid to keep the stretch to a minimum. It also allowed our lures to cut deep into the water without using super long setbacks. Each rig was finished off with a barrel swivel, a three-foot long 25 pound-test monofilament leader, and a large duo-lock snap. This made changing out lures quick and easy.

Pulling limits of stripers out of the Delta isn't always easy, but trips like that keep me motivated on days when the bite gets tough. I like to stay positive and hope that a tide change or a new location is all it takes to go from famine to feast. Try to get out there this spring and enjoy the schoolie striper fishing while it lasts.

You will not find as many big fish as you would during the fall, but the numbers will keep you on your toes. Especially if you have a loud clicker on your reel.

