

Bait Fishing for Striped Bass on the California Delta and Sacramento Area

Bait fishing refers to using some kind of bait that you pin onto your hook. You cast out your line, sit back, and wait for the fish to come to you. It's one of my favorite ways to fish, and it usually provides steady action all day long.

This article is focused on fishing the California Delta, which generally covers the area from Sacramento down to the Carquinez Bridge. However, these methods will apply to some other areas as well.

I recently started fishing with circle hooks, which is a slight variation on the methods described in this article. Be sure to check BassJack.com for the link to my circle hook methodology.

Good Luck,



This 8 pound lineside gobbled up some chicken liver near Sherman Island in 2013

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Seasons

Spring

Spring is the best time to fish the upper stretches of the Sacramento River system. This is the main run of fish that migrate from the delta up to Colusa and Knights Landing to spawn. It's the best time of year to catch lots of small 'schoolie' sized stripers. Some good areas to fish in the spring time are Clarksburg, Freeport, Sacramento, Verona, Grimes, Knights Landing and Colusa. Stripers spawn during full moons in April and May near Colusa. The delta can also be a good place to catch fish on their way up to spawn. The best bait this time of year is sardines. In the late spring when the fish are heading back to the bay, try fishing along the edges of the shipping channels in the delta. Stripers use these channels as easy highways to migrate downstream.

Summer

Summer is the most challenging time to catch striped bass. The delta is really windy this time of year and some places become rough and unpleasant. The main run of fish is in the ocean and bay during the summer. Big fish seem to hang around the American River in June and July. Try using whole sardines in this area during the summer. Shad are scattered in warm water, so the stripers will be more scattered during the summer months.

Fall

Winds begin to die down in the fall. During September and October stripers start to move back into lower delta areas like Antioch, Montezuma Slough, Sherman Lake and Steamboat Slough. Shad is your best bet for bait in the fall and winter. Try flat areas that are 20 to 30 feet deep.

Winter

The winter time can be the best time of year to fish the delta. Winds are usually at their lowest this time of year, but fog can be a problem. Fish are much more lethargic due to colder water temperatures. Big fish move to shallow water during the winter. The majority of fish will hold in deep water in the 15 to 30 foot range. They don't move around much in the cold water, so if you find concentrations of fish keep trying until they bite. The bite will be very light, and in some cases you will have to feed the fish line when they bite. Stripers concentrate when the water cools because the bait forms balls and slows down.

Weather

As with all types of fishing, weather can play a major role in success. Besides any safety issues that weather can cause, weather actually affects how and when fish feed. Long periods of unchanging barometric pressure are good for fishing. It gives the fish time to settle down and resume their normal feeding activities. Weather changes and storm fronts pose a different situation.

A steady or dropping barometer (low air pressure) is normally good. This is the time right before a storm. The fish will tend to feed during this time. They are gearing up for a possible period where they might not be able to find food because of a storm. Low pressure or deep pressure before or during a storm is a great time to fish.

When the storm begins to clear and the barometer starts to rise (high air pressure), the bite normally turns off. This is typically when we see north wind in the delta. The clearing stage right after a storm is usually the worst time to fish.

Fishing in the wind can be extremely annoying. If you are getting blown around by the wind while anchored, try attaching a drift sock to the back of your boat. This can help to stabilize the boat and it keeps the wind from pushing you around. In some cases a rear anchor is necessary to keep the boat straight.

Water Temperature

Water temperature is a factor when striper fishing. Sudden changes in water temperature are usually bad for fishing. It may take a week or two for fish to adjust. Fish increase their activity levels in warm water. They tend to scatter out during the summer months.

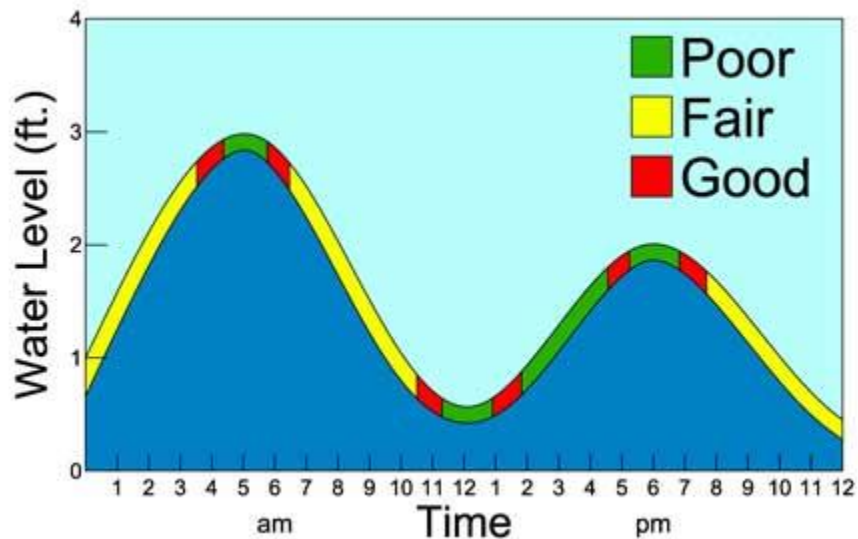
The ideal temperature for cut bait fishing is **above 56 degrees Fahrenheit**. When water temperatures drop, fish become slow and lethargic. Fish tend to school up more during colder months to chase schools of shad. Anything below 46 degrees Fahrenheit and the action will really drop off. I usually won't even bother with fishing if the temperature is anywhere below 46 degrees.

Tides

Tides cause water movement due to the gravitational pull of the sun and moon. Depending on the alignment of these heavenly bodies, tides will vary from day to day. Some tides cause the water level to drop or raise as much as six or seven feet at a time. Other tides may only move the water level a few feet at a time. The tides in the lower delta cause the river to move one direction, become slack, and then move in the opposite direction.

Tides are one of the most important factors while fishing the delta. The best bite window usually happens when the tide starts to change directions (see red areas on the chart below). For example, if you are fishing a strong outgoing tide the current is usually moving pretty fast. When the current starts to slow down, the fish will bite like crazy. They normally slow down during the slack tide. When the tide starts to move again, they will bite again. Once the current picks up, the actions usually slows down somewhat.

Big tides that produce fast currents are usually good for bait fishing. I like lots of current when anchored up with bait. It pushes more fish through the area. If I see a tide less than two and a half feet in elevation change, I usually will troll instead of bait fishing.



The tide chart above mainly applies to the delta areas where the tides move the current in both directions. Once you move above Walnut Grove on the Sacramento River system the current moves downstream all of the time. This will vary depending on the amount of water being released upstream by the dam operators. You will get a faster current on the outgoing tide and a slower current on the incoming tide, but the current never changes directions. The water level will still rise and fall due to the tides. Once you get above Verona the tides won't have much impact on the water flow.

In the areas above Walnut Grove, the tide still impacts the time that the fish bite. The outgoing tide seems to be better than the incoming tide. I've noticed that the best time to fish these

areas is right around the tide changes. The high tide seems to be the best time to fish areas like Clarksburg, Freeport, Sacramento, and Verona.

As with all factors involved in fishing, predicting action using tides is not an exact science. There will be days when the fish defy logic and bite during unexpected tides. I've caught fish during all tides, and I've also been skunked during all tides. I use the tides as a guide to plan my fishing trips around the times that I hope will be the most productive.

If you get stuck fishing a slow tide and you aren't getting any action, move to deeper water. Deep water will usually have more current than shallow areas.

Fish tend to favor different tides at different locations. You will need to keep track of which areas are most productive during incoming or outgoing tides.

Outgoing Tide (Ebb Tide)

The outgoing tide moves downstream towards the ocean. It is usually faster because it moves with the flow of water. Because of the speed, it is usually dirtier and more prone to stir up weeds. This seems to be the best tide for bait fishing.

Try fishing in deeper water during the outgoing tide. Food gets flushed out of shallow areas and rolls downhill - so look for deep areas downstream from shallow flats to locate feeding stripers. Fishing in water that is 15 to 25 feet deep is a good bet during the outgoing tide.

Incoming Tide (Flood Tide)

The incoming tide moves upstream away from the ocean. It is usually slower because it moves against the flow of water. Because of the speed, it is usually clean and less prone to stir up weeds.

During the incoming tide, stripers will move up onto flats in shallow water to feed on prey that has been exposed by rising water levels. They cruise along tules and weed lines looking for food. Try anchoring in shallow water during the incoming tide, and especially at high tide. Look for water in the depth range of 5 to 10 feet. Be sure to fish incoming tides greater than two and a half feet in elevation change. Otherwise you might not have much current to deal with.

Slack Tide

The slack tide is usually the slowest tide for fishing, but it is a good time to catch really big fish. Try moving into a shallow area and chumming the water (where legal). Throw out your bait with no weight at all and put on your clicker. When a fish runs with the bait set the hook. This is called fly-lining.

Neap Tides

Neap tides occur the day before, during, and after the first and third quarter moons (a three day period). Neap tides are small, or soft tides. They usually produce slow currents, less water level change, less sediment, and less weeds. These tides can be slow for bait fishing.

Spring Tides

Spring tides occur the day before, during, and after the full and new moons (a three day period). Spring tides are big, or hard tides. They usually produce a strong current, high water level change, more sediment and more weeds. These tides are usually good for bait fishing.

Locations

One of the most important aspects of all types of fishing is location. If you don't present your bait to a fish you will not catch anything - it's as simple as that. In the middle of channels, deep holes, shipping channels and high traffic areas are *not* where you want to fish for stripers. I laugh when I see bank anglers casting out as far as they can, as if all of the fish are in the middle of the river. Ironically, I tend to fish right along the banks on purpose. This is where the biggest fish are staging an ambush! Salmon and sturgeon may like to hang out in holes and channels, but stripers do not.



When fishing from a boat, I like to find large flat areas in 12' to 19' of water. You want to fish an area that has a silt bottom, not rocky. You will often find stripers holding in deep water, but they aren't always feeding. Stripers tend to feed on flats and rest in holes. If you find them in shallow water it's likely that they are actively feeding. Fish rest in deep cool holes because there is more oxygen down there. They move into the shallows to feed.

Look for current breaks. If you see some fast moving water, a current break and some slow moving water, fish on the slow edge of the current break. If you see an eddy of swirling water, fish on the outer edge, in the main current.

Look for bends in the river and anchor on the inside bend. Slow moving water is good, but you want some current. You might have to move around based on the changing tides. When water gets cold (less than 56 degrees) go deep.

I strongly advise that you buy a map of the delta. There are several good maps available that show depths, fishing areas, and boat ramp access.

First of all, we all know how fast fishing conditions can change. A hot bite one day will often lead to a cold bite the next. Not to mention the fact that in the delta fish are constantly on the move and are most likely miles away by the next day anyway. I've been told that striped bass travel an average of eight miles a day. With that in mind, there are some general locations in the delta that usually hold fish.

I usually try to avoid the fleet of boats and fish in more secluded locations. Guess what - I still catch lots of fish. Look at where all of the boats are fishing and now look at a map. Chances are, the terrain 1/2 mile upstream or 1/2 mile downstream is very similar and will hold just as many fish. Take a cue from fishing guides and charter boats. They never stick to the same "glory holes" day after day. They are constantly moving around looking for fish.

Sacramento Area

- 14'-16' of water in the Sacramento area is a good depth to fish
- Yolo side of the river at Clarksburg
- Clarksburg in 17' of water on the incoming tide
- The white house near Clarksburg in 18'-20' of water on the incoming tide
- Below Garcia Bend anchor upstream of light 9 on Yolo side of river below 3 old pilings in 27' of water
- About 200' yards north of the Garcia Bend boat launch is a good spot. Anchor on the west half of the river.
- Below the Freeport Bridge there is a wastewater outlet. You can see the backflow structure (gray concrete building) on the east levee. Anchor even with the structure. This is a popular spot for both salmon and stripers.

Steamboat Slough

- Deep hole just above the ferry on Steamboat Slough is good on incoming tide
- Steamboat Slough – fish above the hole at the Steamboat/Miner Slough split

Rio Vista Area

- The stretch of river between Sandy Beach and Sherman Island is an excellent area to fish with cut bait.
- The power lines between Decker Island and Sherman Island are a very productive area. Fish along the red shipping channel markers in 29' to 33' of water.
- When current is fast move near channel marker 18 in 22' depth – water is slower here
- Flat areas near shipping channels
- Flat areas just north of the small islands north of Sherman Lake. Fish the shallow edges of the holes.
- Just upstream of the dredger in the middle of Decker Island in 16' of water (outside of Decker – not in Horse Shoe Bend)

Incoming Tide

- Insides of Bends on incoming tides
- Green buoy 21 in 18'-21' depth (slower)
- Channel marker 8 near Sherman Island is great for stripers and sturgeon. Get between the channel and shore, but be careful. There are submerged pilings in this area along Sherman Island. You can see them at low tide.

Outgoing Tide

- Red channel markers 22 & 24 in 26'-28' depth
- Outsides of bends on outgoing tides (faster)
- Santa Clara Shoals between the shoal and the shipping channel
- San Joaquin River

- Mouth of Three Mile Slough and the San Joaquin River in 14' of water
- Fish along the tullees by the barges in 14'-18' of water
- Across from Eddo's on the San Joaquin River in 14' of water on the outgoing tide
- Old River

Montezuma Slough

- Fish for stripers upstream of the bridge at Belden's Landing
- Fish deep areas
- Look for wing dams
- Locks open and close regularly

Suisun Bay

- Buoy 12 on the incoming tide in 8' to 10' of water October through May

Safety

Delta winds can be annoying and in some cases dangerous. Winds can kick up very suddenly and catch you off guard. Don't get trapped! Always have a plan to get back to the boat ramp safely. In a small boat, head into the wind on the way out so that you can ride with the waves on the way back to the ramp. When winds kick up, head into safer water along protected levees and into sloughs. Summer time is the worst for wind, while winter and fall are calmer. When the wind and tides are running in opposite directions, rollers will start to form. Try to plan your traveling time to avoid these situations, or be prepared to catch some spray on the way in.



Fog can be a dangerous element in the winter time. Unless you have radar, be very cautious while navigating in the fog. Always use your running lights in the fog or during low light conditions.

Currents can become very swift in the delta. Remember that current is always stronger in deep water and along the outside of bends. Shallow water and the insides of bends have slower currents.

When navigating unfamiliar waters, stick to the shipping channels when possible. Always use a map to scout out the area prior to hitting the water. There are sand bars, rocks and submerged items that can get you in trouble. You might want to cruise an area during the low tide to see items that will be under water at high tide.

Wear a personal floatation device (PFD) whenever possible. I have a Stearns coat that has a built-in life jacket. I wear it at all times during the winter months. During the summer I use a life jacket that has tank top style shoulder straps. It's small and light enough so that it doesn't really bother me while fishing. The river looks calm and peaceful, but anybody who has ever watched the news knows that people drown in the delta all the time. Be safe!

Use common sense! Get out of the water when you think unsafe conditions are present or ominous.

Tackle

Rod



I like to use long steelhead type rods. You'll want to use a rod with a fairly limber tip when fishing with cut bait. This will help to detect the bites. A 7.5' to 8.5' medium rod rated for 8-20 pound test should suit your needs. My favorite rod is the 8.5' Ugly Stick CA1186-2MH Steelhead/Salmon rod rated for 8-20 lb line Medium Heavy. It will run you about \$60. Here are some other suggestions:

- Loomis 7'-10" rods (HSR981C & HSR942C)
- Loomis 8' hot shot salmon rod
- Shimano Solara TLAF70M 10-17 lb test medium action
- Lamiglass 7' B-Power Graphite XCF705R
- Fenwick 8.5' HMGAB 8-12 lb test

Reel

Any mid-sized bait casting reel will suit your needs. It's usually a good idea to use a reel with a clicker. I use Abu-Garcia 6501 C3 reels. They are fairly cheap, durable and easy to clean. You can use a spinning reel, but they tend to be harder to use with rod holders or balancers.



Main Line

The best choice is to use monofilament in the 20 pound test range. P-Line CXX moss green is a good choice. If you use braid, be sure to go light on the hook sets, or you will end up breaking off leaders or swivels (don't ask me how I know).



Leader Line

I use P-Line CXX 25 pound test moss green monofilament for my leader line. I tie about a three to four foot leader.

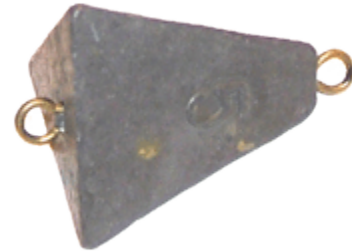


Sinkers

For casting directly behind the boat I use cannon ball sinkers. These will drift with the current until they are directly behind the boat. The cannon ball sinker is nice because it stays in the bottom and doesn't plane up in the current like the flat river sinkers that many people use.



When I need to cast rods out to the side of the boat, I use pyramid sinkers because they stay put. These are your best bet if you are fishing off the bank. You will have to increase your weight if you cast out to the side of the boat or off the bank.



I normally use 2 to 4 ounce sinkers. Adjust your sinker size to the current. Use the lightest possible sinker that will hold the bottom.

Sliders

You will want to use a slider to attach your sinker to the main line. I like to use a plastic slider. Point the short end of the slider towards the rod tip and the long end towards the leader.

Be sure to check the slider for grooves or cracks prior to casting out. Braided lines can wear grooves in plastic sliders, so pay extra attention if you use plastic.



Some people use metal snap swivels for sliders. This works, but I've had problems with the leader wrapping around the main line with this setup. Go with whatever works best for you.

Hooks

I like to use quality chemically sharpened hooks. I normally use either Gamakatsu or Owner brand hooks. The size of the hook will vary depending on the size and type of bait that you use. Generally, I use sizes 6/0 to 9/0 hooks. Be sure to change your hooks if they become dull.

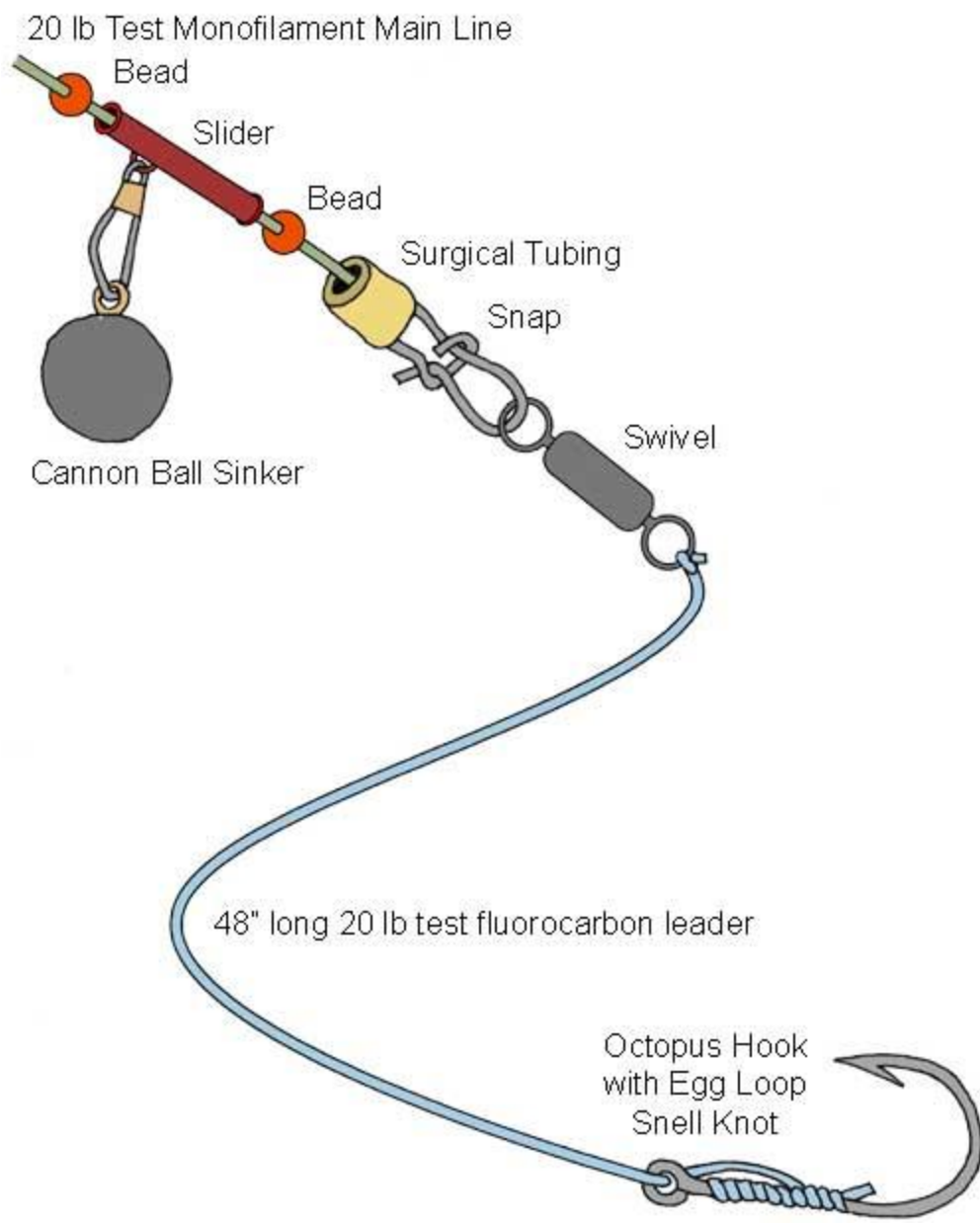
When using J hooks go with octopus-style hooks and tie them with a snell know. When using circle hooks, I like Gamakatsu 8/0 inline octopus circle hooks with a straight eye (265418 INLINE OCTOPUS CIRCLE SE). Tie a snell knot so the leader comes out of the eye on the same side as the hook point. This forces the hook point towards the line when you hook a fish.



Set Up

Here is my typical setup

- Main Line: 20 lb test monofilament
- Bead to keep grass off of the slider and protect the rod tip
- Slider with a cannon ball sinker
- Bead
- Short section of surgical tubing to protect the knot
- Snap rated to 50 lbs
- 4' long 25 lb test P-Line CXX monofilament leader with a swivel tied to one end and a hook using an egg loop snell knot tied to the other end



Bait

Sardines

Sardines are one of the top baits for striped bass. In the lower part of the delta below Walnut Grove, the best time of year to use sardines is during the spring spawning run. Above Walnut Grove sardines work great year round. Sardines definitely put out more scent than any other bait. The smell of sardines can stay on your hands for several days, so if you have a significant other I would suggest using gloves unless you want to spend the night on the couch.

There are many different ways to use sardines.



The most common method is to fillet the sardine. I like to use a 4" section of sardine fillet. The sardines that you can buy at the Asian markets tend to be smaller than the ones available at bait stores. Both work, but the bait store sardines tend to be fresher because they are flash frozen when harvested. When buying sardines at bait shops, look for blood in the eyes. These are fresh sardines that you want to use for bait.

When the small fish are biting, it can be tough to fish with sardine fillets. The small fish will pick it off the hook in no time flat. When this happens, try cutting the sardine into chunks. Another method is to use the head, skeleton and tail of a sardine that you already filleted. You can also use just the head or the entire sardine.

There are lots of different ways to up the sardine onto your hook. Some people just weave the hook through sardine. I like to make sure the hook point is nice and exposed before casting out. Stripers are not hook shy! Try different folding methods to see which one is catching fish.

Sardines are very soft and can fall off of the hook easily. When small fish are biting, some people use wrap thread around their sardine fillet to keep it from falling apart. I like to use Miracle Thread, which is an elastic thread that can be purchased at most tackle shops. You can also cure your sardines before fishing.



Pro-Cure Brine-and-Bite will toughen up your sardines. Mix it up and add the whole

frozen sardine the night before you fish. You can also make your own home made brine. You will want to buy about 4 pounds of sardines per angler for each fishing trip.

Shad

Threadfin shad are the most popular bait in the delta below Walnut Grove. Try to buy fresh shad whenever possible. Avoid shad that are bloody. When the stomachs are ripped up on fresh shad it means that they have been handled roughly.

Most people butterfly the shad to disperse scent into the water.



This is done by partially filleting one side of the shad. You leave the fillet attached with enough skin to keep it from separating. Clean your knife each time you cut shad to remove scales that will tear up your next piece of bait. The current will cause a butterflyed shad to spin in the water, which will attract striped bass. Check to see if it is spinning correctly before casting out. Adding two shad will cause a slower spin. When small fish bite go to a slower spin.

The best size shad for striped bass fishing is about 3" to 4" in length. Giant shad aren't as good because they spin too fast in heavy currents. Big shad are okay in slow moving water. You will want to use about a 9/0 octopus style hook with shad. You want the shad to spoon the shank of the hook, so don't be afraid to use large hooks. With really big shad, you can plug cut the bait by cutting off the head in a diagonal fashion. You can also leave the head on and use a double hook similar to a bullhead setup.



Cooler Full of Shad

After you buy shad, throw them in a small ice chest full of icy water. Now throw about 1/4 cup of rock salt into the mix. This will help to toughen up the shad, and will preserve them if you end up freezing them.

Try spraying your shad with some Bang Shad scented spray before casting out. You will want

to buy about 1.5 pounds of shad per angler for each fishing trip.

Pile Worms



Pile worms work well for both striped bass and sturgeon. If you fish the lower delta a deadly combination is shad and pile worms on the same hook. Use a 4/0 to 5/0 bass worm hook if you are using pile worms. You can use a threader to thread the worm onto the hook. Pile worms work best upstream from Isleton. Be careful - these things can bite!

Mackerel

Mackerel are similar to sardines but are tougher. They will stay on the hook longer but are more expensive than sardines.



Anchovies

Anchovies are similar to sardines but are much smaller. You can butterfly fillet anchovies similar to shad.



Chicken Livers

Chicken livers are great striper baits. If you buy frozen, be sure to thaw them out the night before you fish or you will be stuck with a frozen block of ice. I get mine at Safeway or Walmart. These are great baits for using circle hooks.



Scents

Fishing with cut bait is mainly targeting the fish's sense of smell. Adding scents to your bait can only increase your chances of attracting fish.

The amino acid L-Lysine that is found on your hands is also produced by fish predators like sea lions. Fish are going to shy away from anything that reminds them of a predator. This is why I always wash my hand with scent-free sportsman's soap before handling my tackle. It's the little things that can make the difference between a good outing and getting skunked.

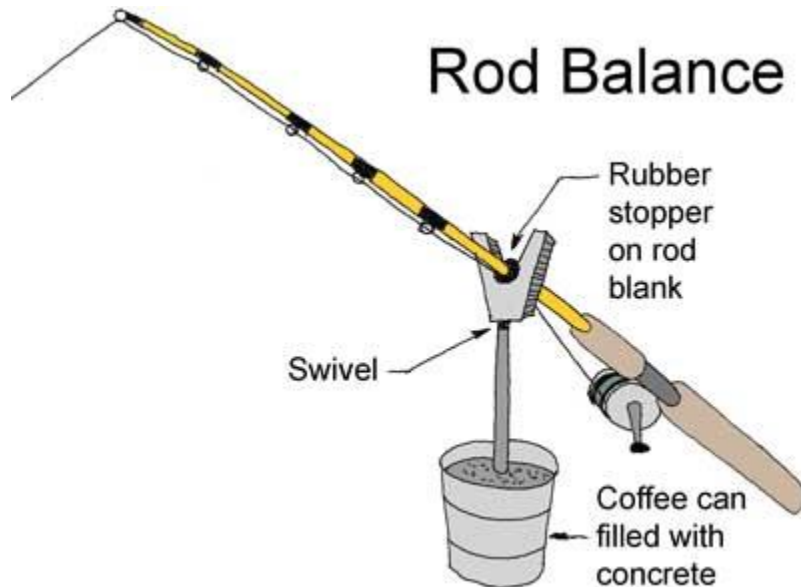
Some Good Scents for Striped Bass

- Pro-Cure Sardine Oil
- Pro-Cure Anchovy Oil
- Pro-Cure Predator
- Bang Crayfish
- Bang Shad
- Anise. For anise scent use McCormick pure anise extract you buy at the store. You will find it right next to the vanilla with the spices.
- Smelly Jelly Shad
- Garlic. For garlic scent mix about three ounces of cooking oil or olive oil in a bottle and add two table spoons of garlic powder.



Rod Balance

The rod balance principle is fairly simple to use. Instead of resting your rod in the bottom of the boat or in a fixed rod holder, you balance the rod on a beam or object. The advantage that the balance gives is that the fish can't feel resistance when pulling the bait. They are therefore less likely to drop the bait before you set the hook. Normally, the balance point is just above the reel somewhere on the handle. The easy way to do it is to lay a 2x4 across the back of your boat. This is why some people call it a balance beam.



Most people these days use a store bought balancer that has a 'Y' shape. These can be mounted to the back of your boat or to a beam that sits across the back of the boat. I have some custom balancers that plug into my Scotty rod holder bases. There are plastic models and recently a delta tackle company released a quality metal balance that mounts to the boat. I've used PVC pipe, net handles, backwards rod holders, sticks, the motor handle, etc.

I like to balance my rod at about a 45 degree angle. This gives the fish a chance to take the rod down before I set the hook. If you have problems with the rod slipping off the beam, you can add some rubber bands, surgical tubing or some other object to the rod handle to create a bump that will stop the rod from slipping down. I usually tie a 5" section of surgical tubing around my rod blank just above the handle. This is convenient when I need to slide the balance point up or down to adjust to changing current or wind conditions. As the tide changes, I always adjust the balance point to keep the rod at the correct angle. There is stuff called 'Rescue Tape' which is made of silicone. Wrap some around your rod blank from the handle up to the first eyelet and you will be set for life.

The Bite

There is an art to reading bites on a balance beam that you will acquire after some experience. The bite from striped bass will vary depending on the location and water temperature. Violent shaking bites that move quickly up and down are usually small fish trying to break up or pick apart the bait. Slow tugs that go up and down six inches are usually mitten crabs. I normally let these bites go without setting the hook. The bites I'm looking for are slow rocking bites. This usually indicates that the fish has taken the bait and is moving with it. I normally set the hook when the rod is parallel with the water.

Now you can see the value of the balance beam. If your rod was in a rod holder, as soon as the fish started off with the bait, they would immediately feel the resistance of the line. In some cases, they will drop the bait under these circumstances.

Warm water temperatures make the fish more aggressive. When the water temperature is above 56 degrees, the fish will just slam the rod down to the water. When the water is cool, the bites can be very light. If the water is below 50 degrees, fish won't run with the bait. Look for slight up and down movement and set the hook.

When fish are being finicky it helps to feed them some line after initial bites. There are times when the water temperature is warm when it's better to fish in free spool mode with the clicker on. This allows you to quickly feed the fish line so they will take the bait. You need to be able to adjust your methods to match what the fish want on any particular day. Being flexible and trying new things is part of being a successful angler.

I'll raise and lower my bait every couple of minutes to give the bait some action, clean off weeds, and to disperse scent into the water. If you get a bite and the rod starts moving up instead of down set the hook! This means that a fish picked up the bait and is moving upstream towards the boat.

Don't be shy about setting hook until you are more familiar with the different bites styles. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a crab pull and a bite. When in doubt - set the hook! If you miss the fish set your rod back down and wait. In many cases the fish will come back for more. If you don't get a bite for several minutes, reel up and check your bait.

You need to be on your toes with a balance beam! If you don't pay attention a fish can pull your rod out of the boat if the beam is not secured. I normally fish with my reel in lock-down mode. I keep my drag tight so I don't have to flip the rod over to thumb the drag when setting hook. After I hook a fish I'll loosen my drag. If I need to take a nap or decide to eat lunch I'll turn on the clicker and put the reel in free spool mode. This ensures that that a fish can't rip the rod out of the boat when I'm not ready.

Technique

Starting Out

Pre-cut your bait and keep it in a Tupperware container in your ice chest. I like to keep four or five setups pre-baited and waiting in my ice chest soaking in a Tupperware container full of scents. When I need to change my bait, I simply unsnap my old leader and put on a new one fresh from the ice chest. When the bite gets hot, this will allow you to catch successive fish without having to mess with cutting bait or rigging hooks.

Once you get set up you don't need to cast out very far. You only need to cast far enough behind the boat so that the current doesn't carry your sinker downstream. Thirty to forty feet out is usually far enough.

One trick is to cast your bait out to the side and allow it to drift back with a cannonball style sinker. Fish will hit it at the end of the drift right after it stops.

Once you master the art of the rod balance, you will be able to relax and wait for the fish to come to you. I've been told stripers move about 7-8 miles per day, so plenty of fish will pass by your bait. There will be periods when nothing is biting or only small fish are stealing your bait. Have patience, because eventually a school of larger fish will move through.

Times to Fish

As I already mentioned in the section on tides, you want fast moving tides. Slow moving tides are usually better suited for trolling.

Aside for the importance of tides, there are certain times that seem to be better for catching fish. As with almost all types of fishing, sunrise and sunset are always good times to fish.

Chumming

Be sure to check the current [regulations](#) regarding legal areas to chum. Not all waterways are open for chumming.

Chumming is the practice of throwing bait into the water to create a scent trail to attract fish. I like to cut up sardines into small chunks for chum. If you have old freeze dried bait left over from your last trip, don't throw it away! Use it as chum on your next trip.

In the delta, I like to cut up about four sardines and throw them overboard at least once before, during, and after the slack tide. In the Sacramento River where the tide doesn't

reverse the water flow direction, I like to cut up about four sardines per hour of fishing. This will help to get them into the feeding mood.

Crabs

Mitten Crabs are a nuisance in the delta in certain years. They came from Asia and now live throughout the entire delta. Slow tugs that move your rod tip up and down six inches are usually crabs. If you reel up and your bait looks shredded or is full of cuts it could be the work of crabs. Move away from crabs when possible. They are worse on slack tides, at night and when the water temperature is above 70 degrees. If you can't avoid them try using tough bait like lamprey.

Fish On!

When using casting reels, I keep my drag tight so I don't have to flip the rod over to thumb the drag when setting hook. After I hook a fish I'll loosen my drag.

When you hook a fish, remember to keep steady pressure on the fish. The most common mistake I see from beginners is right after the hook set. When you set the hook, the rod should be in the twelve o'clock position. The mistake beginners make is that right after the hook set, they whip the rod down so that it is parallel to the water and start reeling. This puts slack in the line which gives the fish a chance to shake the hook free. When you set the hook and the rod is in the twelve o'clock position, quickly reel down the slack until the rod loads up with pressure. Now slowly reel down until you are in position to fight the fish.

When hooked, striped bass usually run sideways towards deep water. Once the fish is to the boat, net or grip the fish. I like to use a Boga Grip to grip the fish. I don't recommend using your hand to grab the fish's lower jaw. If the fish starts to shake around, you might be headed to the hospital with a 6/0 hook in your hand.

If you plan to release the fish, handle it gently. Keep it in the water if possible. If you want to weight the fish, weigh it in the net and subtract the weight of the net from the total weight. Don't lift large fish out of the water by their lower jaw. Some recent studies have shown that this can damage their internal organs and they will eventually starve. For more information on this read this article:

<http://sportfishingmag.com/article.jsp?ID=9952>

If you decide to keep the fish, knock it out with a club. Bleed the fish by cutting the gills and soak it in water for about five minutes so the blood doesn't clot. This will remove unwanted blood from the meat. Now put it on ice for the remainder of the trip.

Sea lions in the delta ambush stringers from upstream, so be on the lookout. Normally, you can hear them surfacing for air before you see them. If you see one approaching,

you might want to pull in any fish on stringers until the sea lion has passed. The best way to store a fish for eating is on ice - not a stringer.

The best way to clean striped bass is to fillet them. I like to eat fish in the three to five pound range. The meat of these fish is firm and delicious. The meat on large fish is less desirable. I release all large fish because not only do they taste bad, but they are the breeding stock for the next generation of fish. Another factor to consider are the toxin levels of large fish in the delta. Please read the state's advisory for eating delta fish.

Conclusion

If you have any questions about fishing with bait for striped bass, feel free to shoot me an email.

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