

Plugging for Stripers on the California Delta and Sacramento Area

Introduction

Lures that you cast out and retrieve by cranking your reel are commonly referred to as "plugs". Plugging on the Sacramento River Delta system is an exciting way to target striped bass. I'm by no means an expert on plugging. I've listed some basic information in this paper. Following these techniques will give you a head start towards dialing in your own methods.



Striped Bass Being Released

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. These areas aren't great areas to use plugs - you would be better off using bait or trolling. 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.

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 throwing top water lures like Pencil Poppers or Super-Spooks in the American River during the summertime. 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. Reaction baits like Rattle Traps are good this time of year.

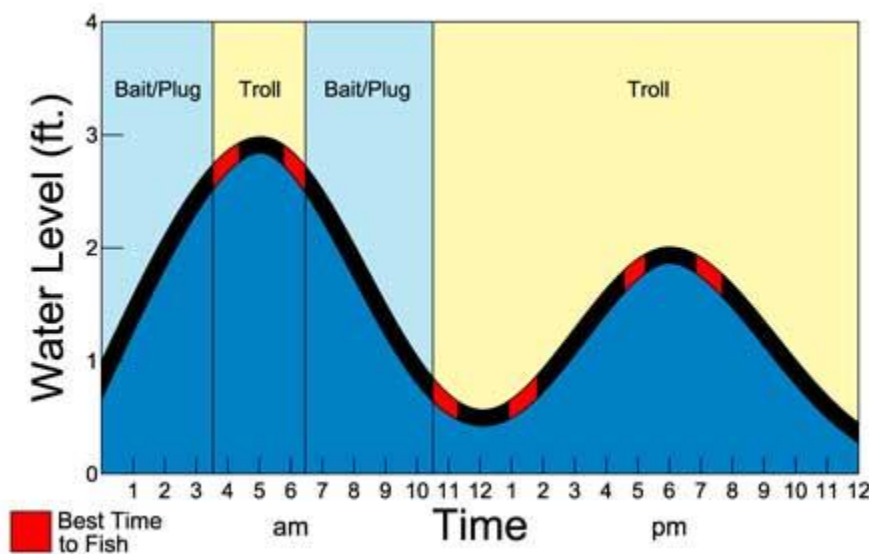
Winter

The winter time can be the best time of year to plug 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. A good time to fish is when the water clears up between storms. Big fish move to shallow water during the winter. Stripers concentrate when the water cools because the bait forms balls and slows down. In the winter stripers come into the delta to feed as far up as Wimpy's on the Mokelumne River and the Snodgrass Slough area.

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 lasts from one hour before a tide change until one hour after the slack tide (see red areas on chart below). This will usually give you a few hours of good fishing. Really fast tides are usually better for bait fishing or plugging while slower moving tides are better conditions for trolling.



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.

Aside from the tides, time of day will affect when stripers bite. The early morning and late evening are always good times to plug. The period right before dark is probably the best time to fish on any given day.

Generally speaking, you want to find current when plugging for stripers. Slow moving water is usually no good. Look for areas like fast water pushing up onto a shoal.

Outgoing 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.

Incoming 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.

Slack Tide

The slack tide is the time between the incoming and outgoing tides. The current will go slack like the water in a lake or pond. Slack tides are bad for plugging because it's tough to get fish to bite. Stripers like to feed in current by ambushing their prey. Bait fish and shad are scattered during the slack tides. During a slack tide, work your lure really slow along the bottom. A hair raiser jig is a good choice during the slack tide.

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 a slow current, less water level change, less sediment and less weeds.

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.

Locations

One of the most important aspects of all types of fishing is location. If you don't present your lure to a fish you will not catch anything - it's as simple as that.

You generally want to look for shallow shoals and weed beds when plugging. Shoals are shallow silt and mud bars in the delta created by material dumped by dredgers. Fish the fronts of shoals, where the current is pushing into.

When fishing for striped bass, you want to find underwater structures. These locations aren't as easy to find as above water structures that you would target while fishing for black bass. With stripers, you need to find underwater ridges, ledges and depth changes. Your sonar and a good map will help you find these locations. Sometimes it helps to scout out a location at high tide so you can find these structures when the depth is too shallow to navigate.

Look for moving water, corner breaks and current breaks. Fish uneven bottoms, weed lines, next to tules, fronts of shoals, pumps, points, piling, pillars, etc. Look for long stringy weeds in the delta – not the ones you have in your aquarium. Look for small groups of weeds, not long weed beds. Cast upstream and reel with the current.

Look for surface bait or birds working an area. When you spot birds stop 50 yards away and approach quietly with the trolling motor. If birds do fake-out dives, the bait ball is deep. If birds are circling in a funnel pattern or sitting in the water they are usually watching a sea lion - not feeding on a bait ball. You want to see birds whirling and diving up and down quickly.

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.

Places to Plug for Stripers in the Delta

- The West Bank of the Sacramento River from Rio Vista to Collinsville
- The inside of Horse Shoe Bend by Decker Island along the weed lines and tules
- Broad Slough in 7' of water along the weed beds

Frank's Tract

- The incoming tide is a good time to fish
- Look for inlets or breaks in levees
- Low tide is good time to look for weed beds
- Look for paths through weed beds
- Mark locations on GPS
- At high tide, ripples are deep areas, smooth areas are weed beds

San Joaquin River

- Move into San Joaquin River side of the delta when it rains and muddies up the Sacramento River side of the delta. The water will be clearer on the San Joaquin side.
- Good in the fall
- Look for shoals
- Fish upstream of the Mokelumne River on the incoming tide
- Fish downstream of the Mokelumne River on the outgoing tide

Mokelumne River

- The South Fork of the Mokelumne River from the bridge (Wimpy's) down to Beaver and Hog Sloughs

- The island by Sycamore Slough is a good location to plug
- Fish on the opposite side of the island in 6' of water
- Look for birds working in this area
- In February steelhead smolt are released near Wimpy's and New Hope Landing. This attracts feeding stripers into the area.
- Plug from B&W Marina to the San Joaquin River in the fall

Lures, Tackle & Techniques

There are lots of different lures available for plugging. I've listed some of the ones that I have experience using. Each lure has its own unique depth range and optimum retrieve.

Cotton Cordell Pencil Poppers

Cotton Cordell Pencil Poppers are large top water lures that work great for striped bass. The best colors on the delta seem to be Rainbow Trout and Red/White. Silver with a blue or black back will also get the job done. Pencil Poppers come in two sizes. I like to use the smaller of the two, but some people always use the large size.

After buying a Pencil Popper the first thing you need to do is change out the stock hooks and split rings. Use oversized split rings that are strong and salt water rated. Use a 2X strong 2/O round bend hook in the front and a 2X strong 1/O round bend hook in the back. I personally use Gammakatsu hooks.



As for tackle, you will want to use a fairly heavy rod. A 7'-2" heavy rod like a Loomis flipping stick is a good choice. Use a high speed gear ratio casting reel. Use 50 lb test Power Pro as your main line and tie a 10' long 30 lb test mono leader joined to braid with a Uni-knot. Then joining heavy lines with a Uni-knot, use four wraps. Tie the leader directly to the lure with a Palomar knot. A cool trick with the Palomar knot is to slide it up the line before cinching to prevent friction.

Throw the Pencil Popper out and let sit for 30-60 seconds. Now pop the rod tip and reel. Repeat this process so that your lure thrashes back and forth in a zigzag pattern. This technique is called "walking the dog" and is commonly used with other lipless top water baits like Zara Spooks. You will want to cast upstream and reel with the current when fishing the delta.

Generally, you want keep a steady retrieve all the way back to the boat. This is

especially important in dirty water where fish need a steady sound target for the fish to home in on. The speed of your retrieve will depend on the current activity of the fish. Vary your retrieve until you find out what the fish are looking for that particular day.

Another technique is a Pop-Pop-Pop-Glide motion. You make the lure zigzag three times and on the forth pop you follow the lure with your rod tip. This will make the lure glide out to the side. This varied retrieve can trigger strikes on some when the other method isn't working.

When you get a hit, let them eat the bait before setting hook. Just like black bass fishing, the number one error that people make when top water fishing is setting the hook too soon. Sweep set the hook while you reel if you feel the fish. Save your big hook sets for single-hook lures like swim baits and jigs. Setting the hook too hard when using treble-barb hooks can rip the hooks from the skin. As with all other lures that have treble barbed hooks, you will want to set your drag loose.

If you get a hit and they miss the bait, thrash the lure for five feet and then stop for about 20 seconds. If you see a boil, pause immediately for about 20 seconds. Have another rod with a swim bait tied up. If you get boils but no takers throw out the swim bait right behind it.

Top water fishing is slow, but the average fish will be large. Expect to get about one bite per hour of top water fishing.

When the water temperature is below 48 degrees action is usually good. Water temperatures between 48 and 52 degrees are prime. Top water fishing for striped bass is usually best during the winter months. When we get cloud cover it's a good time to throw Pencil Poppers. Pencil Poppers will usually catch you more fish than Zara Spooks.

Heddon Zara Spook

Heddon Zara Spooks are top water lures similar to Pencil Poppers. You can use the same tackle and methods for Zara Spooks as described in the section on Pencil Poppers.

There are several different types of Zara Spooks. I like to use the "Super-Spook", which is an updated Zara Spook with rattles and better paint. There are also smaller models available like the "Super-Spook Jr." and the "Zara Pup".



The first thing you need to do is change out the stock hooks and split rings. Use oversized split rings that are strong and salt water rated. Use a 2X strong 1/O round bend hook in the front and a size 1 2X strong round bend hook in the back. I personally use Gammakatsu hooks.

Good colors are the bass pattern, rainbow trout, and silver with a black back. The Zara Spook makes less of a commotion on the water than the Pencil Popper. When it's windy, fish 6'-12' deep. When the winds are calm fish 1'-4' deep.

Rattle Trap

Rattle Traps are classic black bass lures that also work great for stripers. You will normally want to use the $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce size Rattle Trap for stripers. The $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce size will also work.

Popular colors include yellow with orange head, yellow with tiger stripes, chrome with black or blue back, and chrome yellow with red head (clown). Use the chrome colors on sunny days, and bright colors on cloudy days.



As with most other plugs, you will want to change out the stock hooks for stronger ones. Use a size 4 on the front and a size 6 on the back. Gammakatsu 2X strong hooks are a good choice for replacements. If you plan to troll with these, make sure to use 4X strong hooks instead.

Since these lures have treble barbed hooks, you'll want to use a limber rod. A 7' medium action rod with a soft tip 17 lb test rated is a good choice. Use a reel with a 6:1 ratio if possible. Braided line works well with these lures because it rips through the weeds. 15-20 lb monofilament line will also get the job done if you don't like braid.

Tie directly to the lure with your line and cast upstream along weed lines. There are many different retrieve patterns with Rattle Traps. The most popular is to rip and pause the lure. Another method is to reel fast and stop. Repeat these patterns until you find out what the fish are interested in that particular day. You can also try a steady retrieve if nothing else works.

Rattle Traps are good around weeds, shoals and current breaks. You will want to throw them in Fish in 3' to 7' of water. They are especially good during the fall months or during solunar periods when the fish are really active. Sometimes you can fan cast to locate fish.

There is a product called a "Rat-Zap" that looks like a normal Rattle Trap but contains an E-Chip which sends out electrical signals. I haven't had enough experience to say whether or not this lure works better than the original Rattle Trap.

Swim Bait

Swim baits are soft plastic baits that look like small fish. Some of them come intact as a complete lure while others only include the body (you have to add your own jig head to these ones).

The Fish Trap is a most popular swim bait used in the delta for stripers. These lures only include the soft plastic body and can be identified by the letters "FT" stamped onto the tail section. Use a ½ oz. chartreuse or silver Strike King jig head with fish traps. Superglue body to jig head to prevent slippage. The most popular color is pearl, followed by pearl/gray and rainbow trout. You can add some color by marking a pearl Fish Trap with a chartreuse pen.



Use a stiff rod because you will need a lot of backbone to set the single-hooked lure. A G-Loomis med/heavy rod with light tip is a good choice. Use a reel with a 6:1 ratio if possible. As for line, Yozuri Hybrid Fluorocarbon 15 lb test is a popular choice with light swim baits like fish traps. It is tough and sinks faster than monofilament line.

Tie directly to the jig head without using a snap. The Strike King jig head has an angled eye that will allow grass and weeds to slip past the lure instead of hanging up.

Use swim baits around weed beds and shoals in 3' to 7' of water. High tide is a good time to throw swim baits. Cast upstream as far as you can and work the lure towards you slowly without pausing. Pump the rod back and forth slowly on the retrieve. Don't react to hits until you feel the fish load up pressure. You will feel lots of taps before the fish finally grabs the entire lure. Set hook hard when they load up pressure. Set the drag tight when using lures with single hooks.

During slack tides, you can slowly drag the bottom to entice strikes. If you cast into a bait ball with birds working, let the swim bait sink to the bottom before you start to reel up. Cast into a frenzy and let it drop – swim – stop - repeat

Other good delta swim baits include the Megabait L.A. Slider rainbow trout pattern and ½ oz size Berkeley Pogies in shad pattern. With large swim baits like the L.A. Slider, you will want to upgrade your rig with braided line and a stiffer rod like a 8' Lamiglass rod. Use 50 lb test Power Pro as your main line and tie a 10' long 30 lb test mono leader joined to braid with a uni-knot.

Hair Raiser Jigs

Hair raiser, or bucktail jigs are classic striper lures. They consist of a lead jig head, a hook, and a bucktail skirt. You will want to add a 6" ribbon curly tail worm if the lure doesn't come with one already.

White or Yellow
are the most
popular colors.
Use ½ ounce to 3
ounce size
depending on the
depth and river
current.



Work hair raiser jigs up and down along the bottom. Drop to bottom – rip – reel up slack – rip – repeat. Keep it near the bottom at all times. Drag it slowly along the bottom during slack tides. When you get a hit, set the hook hard.

A.C. Plugs

A.C. Plugs are large wooden lures. They are hand made and therefore can be as expensive as \$50 each.

Use 20 lb test monofilament line with these lures. Fish these lures slowly with patience. Expect to get about one bite per day. Don't be surprised if the fish you catch on these lures average over 20 lbs.



Tips

- Try a stop and go retrieve
- If a fish is hooked near the boat, put the reel into free spool with your thumb on drag
- Water temperature below 57 degrees will congregate the shad
- Use sonar or birds to locate bait balls of shad in the delta
- Use more scents when the water is cold
- Clear water = bigger strike zone
- Big fish feed in shallow water and on the surface
- Ambushing prey uses less energy, so big fish like top water lures
- Move around until you locate active fish. You can travel 30 to 50 miles per trip looking for fish.
- Revive stripers before releasing them by slowly trolling with the electric motor to get water movement through their gills.
- I recommend releasing any stripers over 30" for the following reasons:
 - Toxins like mercury, lead, PCB's and pesticides build up in their bodies over time. These substances can lead to birth defects and poisoning if you eat the flesh.
 - We need the larger female fish to stay in the system as breeders
- Big fish feed while the other fish aren't active. From 11:00 am to 3:00 pm is a good time to catch a trophy fish. Night is also a good time for catching huge fish.
- Adjust your lure color based on the current light conditions and water clarity
- Use dark colors in dirty waters

- Use bright colors on cloudy days or early in the morning
- Use chrome or shiny lures on sunny days