

## Catching Bait in Inland Lakes for Landlocked Stripers

Back in "the old days" when I first started striper fishing on Virginia's Claytor Lake I was mainly a lure and bucktail jig fisherman. I spent many hours casting Rebel spoonbill minnows in assorted colors and bucktail jigs in 3/8 oz. size to points and red clay flats in the early spring, both during the day and at night. I caught a lot of fish using these lures and some good fish at that, but never any true trophies. I am not saying you can not catch big fish on lures, just that I did not. By big, I mean fish over thirty pounds.

I knew the stripers in Claytor Lake and Virginia's Smith Mountain Lake would feed on the forage fish in these lakes. In the early days of Claytor Lake striper fishing, the only forage base was alwives with Smith Mountain having alwives, threadfin and gizzard shad.

I was young at this time, in my early twenties and fishing from an 18 ft. Winner bass boat. My father, uncle and another friend who was an exceptional angler were on a week long fishing trip on Smith Mountain Lake during the month of October. We had spent nearly three nights fishing with lures for the striped bass the lake was famous for, with very little success.

One day we decided to search the lake with our Lowrance flasher fishfinders to see if we could locate schooling stripers in an area and return to fish for them with lures after dark. We finally found a school holding in submerged trees in deep water in the mouth of a main lake cove. There were a lot of fish showing on the flasher units so we decided to try vertical jigging with Hopkins spoons. We started catching fish but they were coming slow. It was tedious work jigging the spoons up and down, and I started thinking how nice it would be to be able to fish a live shad over these fish. I had a small cast net of 4 ft. diameter in my boat, as we had been practicing in our back yard, learning how to get these things to open into a circle when thrown out.

I decided to try to find some bait, and motored to a creek in the upper end of the lake. I found some large schools of small gizzard shad working on the surface and finally caught a couple of dozen and dumped them in my live well. When I returned to our "honey hole" we simply caught fish after fish on these small shad, with no let up in the action, till our bait was depleted. This was when I truly became a live bait fisherman and little did I know at this time would eventually change the path of my life and lead me to be a professional striped bass angler and striped bass guide on four different lakes in two states.

Some people may frown on live bait fishing, but believe me, it is not as simple as it seems. In fact it is downright hard work. In order to be successful at live bait fishing you must not only know the habits of the striped bass, but the habits of the baitfish as well. You must also have the proper equipment to keep them alive and in good shape, as I have found stripers can be very finicky when it comes to taking a beat up, rough looking, scale-less bait. There are also several tricks you should master in presenting a live bait, but I shall cover that in future articles.

Knowing the habits of the bait you are pursuing at different times of the year is a must when trying to consistently fish live bait. This is a fact not lost on any guide using live bait. Keeping a supply of live bait is a pressure situation on a guide who is booked day in and day out. In my case, when I was guiding for a living, I fished live bait only and would catch it fresh every morning before I picked my clients up for the day. I did not live on the water and was forced to catch my bait early in the morning, sometimes starting at 1 AM. I was forced into learning the habits of both gizzard shad and alwives as my paycheck depended on it. I never cancelled a trip for want of bait, although I have ran out of bait and had to take clients in early, but only after they had hammered the fish on the first tank of bait I had provided. Sometimes it is impossible to catch any bait at certain times of the year after daylight on the lakes I have guided on.

First and foremost, to be a successful bait fisherman you must learn how to throw a cast net. The bigger, the better. My preference is a 10 ft. Betts Super Pro with 3/8 inch mesh and 1/2 to 1 lb. of lead per foot. Some guys throw much bigger nets. This is up to the individual. Sometimes I use an 8 ft. net as I find I can throw an 8 footer for several hours if need be and not become too awful fatigued. As I said, it can be hard work.

You will also need a GOOD bait tank to keep your bait fresh and lively. There are several good ones on the market by Super Bait Tanks, Creek Bank Bait Tanks and others. I like the 35 gallon size but some prefer the larger 50 gallon size. The size of your boat will dictate the size of your tank. These

are tanks designed for the serious bait fisherman that incorporate filters and aeration systems. Adding salt to the water of the tank is a must to keep your bait fresh and lively. I use the 40 lb. bags of water softener pellets. Use five small handfuls to 35 gallons of water. You must fill the tank with cold water. Well water works fine.

There are different types of baits you can use for stripers here in Virginia , but my favorite is a gizzard shad. During the spring , starting in late November to late March , I find gizzard shad in abundance in the upper ends of major creeks. I usually arrive on the water 2 to 3 hours before daylight. If you can't see the bait working the surface , you can usually find it by searching with your trolling motor and graph. Sometimes you just have to start humping the net , throwing in the blind until you hit the bait. But in general , in the early spring , work the backs of the creeks before daylight for gizzard shad in the 3 to 10 inch size range. You may also find alwives , especially around any light shining in the water. This tactic holds true for the month of April also. If you run out of bait during the course of the day , go back to the creeks you had success in earlier in the morning. Search the shallows , sometimes you will see them darting by the boat. If there not in the shallows , you must find them on your fishfinder. Nine times out of ten , they will be holding in 15 to 30 feet of water. This is when the larger , heavier nets come into play. They sink fast enough to catch these deep water baitfish. A Betts 8 ft. diameter with 1 inch mesh works well here. It sinks fast , but is light enough to not be too much of a burden on you when retrieved.

During the month of May I find gizzard shad spawning in the upper ends of the rivers on Smith Mountain Lake and the creeks in the upper ends of the lake. I have found that the first hour or two of daylight is a good time to catch these spawners. You can usually see or hear them swirling on each other as they spawn. These are very pretty baits as they are pregnant with roe and are very appealing to stripers at this time. If you are on the water a few hours before daylight , so much the better , as you will here these baits spawning and will know where to cast your net.

Summer can be hit or miss when searching for gizzard shad as they tend to be scattered throughout creeks and the main body of the lake. Typically I start to work the backs of the creeks before daylight. The shad will be shallow , and it pays to throw the beam of a spot light across the surface ; if they are around you may see them lying near the surface or shooting out of the water as the light spooks them. You may find schools of shad after daylight by searching for their tell tale FLIP. They can be found anywhere at this time of year ; the backs of creeks , main lake points and flats and in deep water ¼ to ½ of the way back in coves. Look for FLIPPING bait. This is the give away as to their presence. I have also caught larger shad as far up a creek as I can get my boat , as they will search out cooler water in these areas. If you see a school of shad working a main lake point , you can just about bet there are stripers lying in deeper water off the point.

In the fall and winter months I still work the creeks of reservoirs I fish here in Virginia for gizzard shad. Lakes around the country in your area may be different, but I have used my bait catching tactics on reservoirs in Tennessee , Kentucky , South Carolina , North Carolina , Georgia and Virginia with great success. I have been on reservoirs that I had never been too before and been informed by the "local experts" that there were no gizzard shad in the lake , only to motor to the back of a creek on the upper end of the lake and find it thick with gizzard shad.

If you are serious about bait fishing for landlocked striped bass and have never tried it before , give these bait catching tactics a try. If you study the habits of the bait in your area you will also learn a lot about other species of fish as well. I have witnessed stripers , muskellunge , and trophy bass way up in the shallows of creeks emptying into a reservoir feasting on the abundance of gizzard shad to be found there. Chasing bait will definitely improve you as an angler.

If you would like to view a fine selection of discount marine electronics to help you find and catch your preferred bait visit: [GPSNAVPRO.COM](http://GPSNAVPRO.COM).

### About the Author

Michael King is a retired USCG licensed striped bass guide and professional striped bass angler. He lives in Virginia with his wife Leslie and children Lydia and James. Visit his website [GPSNAVPRO.COM](http://GPSNAVPRO.COM).

Source: <http://www.articletrader.com>