

CHASING

Every spring, spawning alewives and blueback herrings jump-start the striper fishing in northern Atlantic states. But to catch the predator, you've got to find the prey. **BY TOM KEER**

No saltwater fly rodder heads down to the shore to catch baitfish. And I've never heard a fisherman boast about going after a world-record alewife or blueback herring. But if you want to chase stripers on their spring run through New England, you'll benefit by learning all you can about herrings. After all, the more you know about the little fish that get eaten, the more likely you are to catch the big fish that feed on them.

The first step in understanding any predator-prey relationship is being able to identify the prey, and one of the first things you will notice about herrings is how different they look from many

other fish. Herrings are members of the family Clupeidae, which is known for having distinct mouths. A dentist would say that herrings have underbites, for their deep lower jaws extend beyond their upper jaws. And with anal fins that are far longer than their dorsal fins, these fish look like something from a distant era. Despite its ancient appearance, herrings are quite fragile. Poor water quality in estuaries and bays kills many fish, and that's before predators whack them. Only about 1 percent of young survive to maturity.

There are 30-odd species of herrings in North America, and along the Eastern seaboard, the most



BLUEBACK

RANGE: From Florida to the province of Prince Edward Island.

SPAWNING: Begins in May and runs through July, sometimes into August. Spawning begins when water warms into the lower 60s and peaks in water that is 69 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit.

WATER TYPE: Bluebacks like faster current.



ALEWIFE

ILLUSTRATIONS BY DUANE RAVER/USFWS

RANGE: Found seasonally from North Carolina to Canada's Gulf of Saint Lawrence.

SPAWNING: April through June as water temperature approaches the high 40s. Peak spawning occurs when waters reach a constant range of 59 to 63 degrees Fahrenheit.

WATER TYPE: Alewives favor slower water than bluebacks.

It can be tough to tell the difference between alewives and bluebacks. Both are about the same size, color, and shape. Both have grayish-green and violet backs and silver bellies and a black dot on the same level as their eye. However, bluebacks have a bluer hue on their dorsal surface and are generally more slender. Some anglers also contend that the bluebacks eyes are slightly smaller. In any case, the same fly patterns will work for both species. The primary difference for anglers is when and where you will find them.

PREY



Because herrings move from saltwater to freshwater to spawn each spring and summer, river mouths and estuaries are prime locations to intercept their primary predator: big striped bass.

DAVE SKOK

important baitfish for stripers are blueback herrings, alewives, menhaden, Atlantic herrings, and American shad. For stripers in the New England spring, two species are first on the menu: alewives and blueback herrings.

THE SPAWNING RUN

Adult alewife and blueback herrings are of similar size, between 12 to 18 inches long, but there are two major differences between the two: range and the spawning season. Alewives are found seasonally from North Carolina to Canada's Gulf of Saint Lawrence, while bluebacks run from Florida to the province of Prince Edward Island.

Herrings are anadromous fish, meaning they move from saltwater into freshwater to spawn. The herring spawn is contingent on a river's water temperatures. Quite obviously, the farther south the river, the sooner the spawn starts.

Bass will hammer herrings as the baitfish begin their spawning run upriver and will hammer them again when they return to the ocean.

Anglers in southern New England look for the spring run of alewives and bluebacks in March or April. The bait fish will show in Maine in May or June. In each locale, the breeding peak usually happens a few weeks after the initial wave.

Generally, herrings breed in the Northeast from April through early August. Specifically, alewives spawn from April through June, as the water moves into the high 40s. Peak spawning occurs when water temperatures reach a constant range of 59 to 63 degrees Fahrenheit.

Bluebacks spawn from May through July and sometimes into August. When the water warms into the lower 60s, you'll start to see some spawning activity, but bluebacks breed heaviest in water that's 69 to 75 degrees Fahrenheit.

Bear in mind that these temperatures are in river systems not in the open ocean. As a trout fisherman studies the water and hatches to identify prime fishing, many striper fishermen will monitor a river's temperature. Check the mouths of the rivers on the full-moon tides as the thermometer begins to climb. Odds are, you'll find staging schools of bait waiting for the water temperatures to rise before moving upstream. For a bass angler, concentrated and staging bait offers prime fishing.

Any freshwater river system that connects with the ocean is capable of supporting a herring run, though not all rivers do. Since alewives and bluebacks can't leap like salmon and don't tolerate toxic water, the stream needs to be clean of obstructions (dams, debris, et cetera) and pollutants. Herrings prefer constant water temperatures, which they find in the reaches above the tide line. Alewives favor slower water while bluebacks like faster current.

Each species heads for the ocean when spawning is complete.

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What that means to a fisherman is that herrings are available for the majority of the angling season. Keep in mind that bass will hammer the herrings as the baitfish begin their spawning run up-river and will hammer them again when they return to the ocean.

During the non-spawning warm months, alewives and bluebacks live in bays and estuaries throughout New England. While their precise movements are unknown, they'll leave Maine as early as September but linger in southern New England as late as December. It is thought that the herrings move into deeper water to spend the winter, then return to the shallows in the spring.

FINDING BAIT

Herrings move throughout the ocean in pods that range from thousands to hundreds of thousands. One reason anglers grow excited with the arrival of herrings is this schooling behavior: for when you find one herring you find a bunch, and that means if the striped bass are not on them, they will be soon. Their speed is consistent (unless they're chased), and they continuously adjust to current and tidal variations.

On calm days, it's easy to spot a school of herrings from a good distance. When they're high in the water column you'll see the otherwise glassy surface interrupted by small wakes. In the shallows during spawning times, you'll see fins and tails. If you're fishing at night, look for the light. Fly fishermen who chase stripers after dark look for phosphorescent plankton, which reveal the movement of a bait school and the trailing stripers.

A female herring can deposit 20,000 eggs or more, and in less than one week the young hatch. They grow until the fall when the juvenile herrings drop back into coves and bays. Because the immature herrings are nearly transparent they are known as "glass minnows," and they become an important food for pre-migration striped bass. As a matter of fact, come autumn, with the combination of adult and juvenile alewives and bluebacks, there is an abundance of herrings for stripers to feed on.

As the small herring fry concentrate in bays, the striped bass close in. For fly rodders, these tiny baitfish are difficult to match because of their countershading coloration, which offers the bait a type of open-water camouflage. When casting to stripers feeding on glass minnows, I always tie on a RLS False Dawn.

Mature striped bass are particularly relaxed when alewives and bluebacks are around. If it's a calm day and you can get close to them, try watching their feeding behavior. There isn't the frenetic slash-and-crash behavior of a lot of small aggressive fish on small bait. Instead, you'll see pods of big bass systematically working through the school of bait. Some bass will get under the school, others alongside it, and they'll work at corralling the bait for easy pickings. If there is structure around like a sand or mud bar, so much the better. The stripers move the bait into an increasingly tight group and then pick out individuals.

And if it's a school of adult herrings, you'll see some big stripers taking bait in one of several ways. Since frightened baitfish erect their dorsal fins, which can stick in a bass's throat, stripers will try to take them head first. Other times, stripers will attack the bait from the side, grab it, and crush it in their jaws.

Small bass chasing small bait, however, are aggressive. And many times, a small bass will slash a fly and hook itself. To

Find a Herring Run

CONNECTICUT: Anglers give the Housatonic and Connecticut Rivers a lot of attention, and for good reason—lots of bait move into these rivers. Also, try the smaller Hammonasset River. You may even find some sea-run browns and brookies mixed in.

Time of Year: March through May; September through November.

MAINE: The number of rivers in Maine that support good herring runs are too numerous to mention but the Mousam, the Sheepscot, and the Damariscotta Rivers are prime candidates, and the Kennebec is the biggest draw. Last year a 10-year old boy caught a 40-plus pound bass in the Kennebec a few miles below Fairfield.

Time of Year: May through June; August through September.

MASSACHUSETTS: Similar to Maine, there are too many rivers to mention, but the herring run on the continental side of the Cape Cod Canal gets the majority of the ink in fishing publications. Also, check out the Merrimack, Essex, Ipswich, Charles, and North Rivers.

Time of Year: April through June; September through October.

NEW HAMPSHIRE: While New Hampshire has a short coastline, the Piscataqua River system and its tributaries create many ideal spots for herrings. In particular, Great and Little Bay are two key staging areas for spawning herring.

Time of Year: May through June; August through September.

RHODE ISLAND: Many anglers flock to the Ocean State, which features more than 45 herring runs. The most well known are in the Blackstone, Wood, and Narrow Rivers. Gilbert Stuart Brook recently had major reconstruction to improve the herring run. So did the Ten Mile River, a terrific fishery that flows through East Providence and enters the Seekonk River at the head of Narragansett Bay.

Time of Year: March through May; September through November. —T.K.

make sure that you get your fly's iron in the bass's mouth, work slowly. Give the bass a second or two after it takes your fly, strip-strike with your line hand, and then lift back the butt of your rod to drive the hook into its mouth. I always give an extra tug or two for insurance.

Fly rods for stripers in New England should be fast action nine-foot rods with fighting butts and noncorrosive components. If you're fishing the flats or estuaries, a 9-foot 8- or 9-weight rod with a weight-forward floating line and a 9-foot leader tapered down to a 10-pound tippet is fine. Wading and working bigger waters from shore or fishing at the mouth of an ocean inlet requires a larger rod, say a 10- or 11-weight.

Patterns you'll want to have handy include Gartside's Blue-back Herring, Deceivers with a blue wing, and Grocery Flies, all in sizes 1/0 to 5/0. For juvenile herrings, Abrames's Glass Minnow is best (from bottom to top: white, yellow, olive, and black marabou) on hook sizes 2 to 6. These patterns should be only one to two inches long. Often, I'll tie sparse bucktails in that same configuration.

As trout anglers will follow a hatch, many saltwater anglers follow the herring. Give it a shot this year. Chances are you may land a lot of striped bass or the catch of a lifetime. 

Tom is a freelance writer who lives on Cape Cod. He is working on his first book, a collection of sporting essays to be published by Barclay Creek Press.