

# Bright Lights, Big Stripers

## Fly-fishing in New York Harbor?

**T**HEY SAY THE LIGHTS are bright on Broadway, but on the water — in New York Harbor and the Hudson River — the city lights exert a kind of lunar pull on bait fish, and the bait fish in turn bring in hungry bluefish and striped bass. New York visitors who previously packed a necktie, comfortable walking shoes, and a can of Mace may want to add a fly rod to their gear.

Experts estimate that there are as many as 100 million stripers alone in the Hudson River breeding population, a massive comeback over the past 19 years due to a ban on commercial harvesting and new regulations on industrial dumping. And, yes, you *can* dine on them, though Joe Shastay, a charter-boat captain, admits, "I wouldn't want to eat more than one a month because of the PCBs."

Still, for catch-and-release fishermen, this can be an expedition with a difference. Though the stripers here rarely match the monsters hauled in off Long Island, fish of five pounds, with plenty of fight for a fly rod, are common in the harbor. Shastay has often caught 30 to 40 a trip in the peak fall months of October and November (May and June are also good). And he angles in the reflection of America's most monumental urban landscape.

Shastay typically fishes in the evening, and most of his customers are New York natives, whom he picks up on Wall Street as they fall out of work. On an ominously overcast night last April, he steered his 19-foot Mako toward the heliport pier just above Whitehall Station, where the Staten Island Ferry docks. He rigged a light spinning outfit with a diamond jig for my son Nicky, and I joined my Winston 5-weight fly rod and tied on a Clouser minnow. Since bass are crazy for "structure," the drill, as Shastay explained it, was to cast toward the foot-or-so gap between the water and the concrete piers. Ideally, the tide would grab the fly and dance it past the fish, presumably idling beneath the pier; you could hook up on the drift or on the retrieve. We made it on neither, and motored back across the bay, past Castle William on Governor's Island, now a Coast Guard base. "There's a good tide tonight," said Shastay. "The water's really moving. We ought to be kicking ass later."

### Double-Hauling Lady Liberty

Shastay thought the fish might be congregating in the shallows beneath the Statue of Liberty, frequently one of his hot spots. The trick here is to cast your fly 60 or 70 feet to the base of the retaining wall or even bang it off the wall, though then you run the risk of hanging up. The fly fisherman with a double haul in his arsenal, the guy who really enjoys throwing a loop, will get a kick out of fishing beneath the green lady.

We were having no luck, however, there or at nearby Ellis Island, the once-infamous immigrant processing center. Here the stripers (usually) feast on bait fish drawn to the light from the illuminat-

ed causeway that connects the island to the mainland. We had a couple of strikes but no fish to show for it, and to top it off, the rain that had threatened all night began coming down in sheets, snapping sideways.

We pushed back across the harbor, chugging up the East River, beneath the high spans of the Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Williamsburg bridges, huge electric signs shilling for Pepsi, Domino Sugar, and the Watchtower lighting our way. We hung a right and cruised into a maze of abandoned piers, settling on one where the overhead lights sketched bright pools on the dark water. On my fifth or sixth cast, I felt a hit, just as the fly started descending. I set the hook hard, and whatever was on the other end struck back with equal force. It turned out to be a 17-inch striped bass,

weighing maybe three pounds. Taking in slack, I played him on the reel. My next fish, which smacked the fly on the retrieve, was bigger and bent my rod nearly in two. Soon, Joe was onto a fish, then Nicky, then Joe again, then me — we made a night of it.

It was midnight when we began the return trip across the harbor. Wreathed by mist, lower Manhattan was more spectacular than ever; the city seemed to grow, to expand in another dimension, with its watery precincts added to the vision. ■ *William Plummer*

## Notes

**Charter captain Joe Shastay provides tackle, but if you want to bring along "Ol' Trusty," he recommends a 6- to 9-weight fly rod with a 10-foot sinking-tip line (tie on Clousers for stripers, poppers for blues), or a medium-action spinning rod setup with a diamond jig. Rates: Half-day (4½ hours), \$325; full-day (8 hours), \$425. (201-451-1988)**

Manhattan: The angler's last uncharted island

