

Plugging for Stripers

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Anticipation increased as I stepped off the beach access and made my way towards the water. The surf conditions were near-perfect; a slight, cool, northeast wind was quartering on shore giving a nice churn to the water. Sand eels and peanut bunker were in the wash. This is prime time to throw plugs to the hungry, migrating striped bass that were fattening up before heading south to winter.

Rummaging through plugs in my surf bag, I found what I wanted and attached it to the leader. Casting with one quick snap of the wrist, the plug landed perfectly between two incoming rollers. After a gaining the slack line to initiate contact with the floating plug, I began working the lure with a slight twitch and slow retrieve. Two cranks of the reel handle and the plug was hammered. It was *game on!* Five minutes later a nice, plump 31-inch bass was slid up the beach.

The Garden State's hundreds of miles of coastline and bay shores offer prime fishing for Jersey shore-bound anglers. Among the multitude of techniques for "surf fishing" along these waters, fishing plugs is an effective technique ranking near the top for catching striped bass as well as other predatory species.

Plugs come in a wide variety of sizes, profiles, colors and actions but the one thing they all have in common is the ability to imitate almost any forage found along New Jersey's tidal waters. A plug's swimming action conveys an appeal of vulnerability that draw in predators. Like most lures, plugs are cast and retrieved, creating lifelike movement to attract more active fish rather than soaking dead bait at one location and hoping that a target fish happens by.

With the large variety of plugs available and countless techniques for using them, it can be intimidating for novice anglers to master the art of "plugging." Like any specialty, understanding the basics builds

the foundation for success. With practice comes skill which leads to developing your personalized style. Below are some of those important basics and key points necessary for success when utilizing plugs to catch striped bass.

Types of Plugs

Although there seems to be an endless variety of plug makes and models from which to choose, most fall into several distinct categories:

Swimming Plugs

These plugs are constructed either of plastic or wood in a variety of profiles and sizes. Swimming plugs have a "lip" below the head which causes the plug to wobble or roll when retrieved. Thinner plastic plugs typically have a tighter wobble, or roll, than the thicker-bodied wood plugs with the metal lips. These are the most common plugs on the market and have proven to be quite effective in a wide range of conditions.

Darters

Darters are another type of swimming plug that has a downward angled flat slope on the top front of the plug rather than a lip to create action. This design imparts more of a gliding action that will erratically dart to the side when twitched. A great plug for fast currents or rough water, it is also very effective in calmer conditions.

Needlefish

These plugs resemble a pencil with hooks. Little or no action occurs while reeling and they typically sink slowly to the bottom when retrieved. These plugs are

very effective when sand eels are present and can be worked under any condition. They cast very well.

Twitch Baits

These lures usually have the profile of a baitfish with no lip. They can either sink or suspend in the water column. The lure is twitched by the angler when being retrieved to create an erratic action. They are most effective in calmer conditions and are often used in the back bays.

Popping Plugs

The fronts of these lures have a concaved or flat front that when worked stay along the top. They retrieve with a popping action, creating a surface disturbance. Pencil poppers, which have a long thinner profile, are shaped somewhat like a baseball bat. This lure is worked with a rhythmic shaking action that allows the lure to remain on top, thrashing on the surface. This plug is quite effective when adult bunker or mullet are present.

Plug Pointers

Teasers

Many anglers using plugs don't attach a teaser ahead of the plugs. Teasers can be nothing more than a simple saltwater fly made of bucktail or a soft plastic bait threaded on the hook. Teasers are attached with a separate leader, typically two to three feet ahead of the plug. While the teasers will hamper distance when casting, more often than not, striped bass and other gamefish will hit the teaser rather than the larger plug behind it. Using a teaser is very effective when small bait fish are present, however, there have been numerous times when large baits such as bunker and herring are in the wash and the teaser will still out-fish the plug.

Attaching a teaser is easy when using a shock leader attached to the main line. When using a barrel swivel to attach your plug's shock leader, just tie another leader about six to eight inches in length from the same barrel swivel, then attach the teaser. I prefer to use 30-pound leader material for the teaser as this allows enough strength for larger fish and yet remains supple enough for the teaser to work enticingly during the retrieve. I have had great success with this method but there are some drawbacks as the teaser sometimes will wrap around the barrel swivel. Nonetheless, this is the strongest way to attach the teaser.

Another popular method is to tie a large dropper loop up high near the top of the leader. Next, secure



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Steve George



the teaser to the dropper directly or with a perfection knot tied on a short length of leader material with the teaser tied to the tag end of the short leader.

S-I-o-w Down!

One of the biggest mistakes seen with anglers using plugs for striped bass is retrieving the plug too fast. Reel in just fast enough to keep contact with your lure. Occasionally allowing the lure to lie still for a few moments while keeping contact is even better. With plugs that sink such as needlefish, the retrieve should be just fast enough that the lure is running near—or periodically ticking—the bottom. Slowing down your retrieve brings out the true fish-catching abilities of the plug as it causes a seductive roll-wobble that imitates a weak or disoriented prey. Popping plugs are probably the only exception to the rule as reeling at a faster pace or imparting a thrashing action simulates a fleeing or frantic baitfish, drawing exciting top water strikes.

Color

Plugs are manufactured in a wide variety of colors and color combinations, including patterns that imitate live bait. Choosing which color plug to fish can be frustrating, even to the seasoned anglers. Color should be viewed as an enhancement to the plug, like the seasoning of a well-made dish. The fish-catching ability of a plug mostly lies in its built-in action; the color provides extra eye-catching appeal. For those starting out, keep it simple by selecting

proven, natural colors like white-pearl, yellows and other realistic combinations. For night fishing, black and purple work well. There really is no right or wrong color. It's a matter of personal preference gained through experience.

Structure

Learning to find and to fish underwater structure is probably one of the most important aspects in catching fish. Structure is a loose term referring to any natural or man-made physical feature that predatory gamefish, such as striped bass, use to gain an advantage when foraging on prey. Structure causes a physical or illusional disruption in the “normal” pattern of water flow that makes it easier for predatory gamefish to capture prey.

Classic beaches contain a variety of structure as the tides, waves and winds constantly shift sand creating prominent features like sandbars, points, coves, depressions and cuts that run along the beach. Man-made structure such as rock groins, piling and areas of dark shadow lines created from a permanent light source enhance fishing areas by adding to existing natural features. It is advantageous to observe the layout of the area you intend to fish, identify the structure that is present and fish your plug around these fish-holding features. A good way to observe natural structure is to scout the area that you plan to fish at low tide when these natural features are more obvious.

Another key point to increase your fishing success:



▲ **Needlefish Plug**
(Choopy Lures Needlefish)

during your retrieve with any lure, be sure to follow through *all the way to the beach*. One of the best structures is the drop-off at the edge of the shore break.

Consistent Success

To have more consistent fishing success, make note of what lure and technique has worked well along with the conditions present during each outing. Fish are creatures of habit and will relate to a particular area when a specific set of conditions are present during a particular time of year. I highly recommend keeping a detailed log to document successes or failures during each fishing trip and the conditions that were present at the time. Your log will prove to be an invaluable reference when planning future trips to the beach.

While technology has made fishing reports and information more accessible, even instantaneous, with the use of cell phones and online fishing sites, these technological “short cuts” are no substitute for experience gained first hand. Planning to fish based on yesterday’s Internet fishing report will often result in a fishless outing as conditions will have changed from the previous day. Instead, put in the time, make the effort, keep a fishing log, try different lures, read the structure and you may be among the 10 percent of anglers catching 90 percent of the fish. *Tight lines.* 