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The Three Seasons of Great Bay

*Something's always
biting in the Granite
State's "Inland Sea."*

ME 12WFV

Elliot Jenkins puts a bend in his fly rod against the distinctive backdrop of the hardwoods and pine trees that make Great Bay such a unique striped bass destination.

It's a safe bet that swapping "how did you do?" stories with fellow anglers is as much a part of our fishing culture as snapping photos or exaggerating the size of a catch. Early last May, my friend Kyle Walsh posed that question to me after my maiden South Shore striper shindig. It had been a so-so outing overall, one in which I caught a few fish but nothing worthy of a megapixel moment. Because the striped bass migration sweeps from south to north, I expected that Kyle, who fishes New Hampshire waters, would offer an even more dismal fishing report. Instead, his response was, "Took a couple 38-inchers on topwaters, but the big girl threw the lure." I was shocked – how could a fish that size already be so far north? Obviously, my next question was "When are we going?"

At 18 miles long, New Hampshire's seacoast is the smallest in the nation, but just past the tip of Rye's Odiorne Point lies the mouth of the Piscataqua River, which drives ocean waters into New Hampshire's own "Inland Sea," Great Bay. Comprised of seven tributaries and a major river system, the Great Bay Estuary drains from a 930-square-mile watershed and features underwater grass beds, intertidal rocky shores, tidal marshes and tidal flats throughout its 5,000 surface acres of water, making it one of the largest estuaries in New England.

These varied habitats make Great Bay an ideal environment for a multitude of organisms that attract predators such as striped bass. Alewives, blueback herring, silversides, rainbow smelt, tommy cod and menhaden, both large and small, are just some of the bass forage that inhabit this region and make Great Bay a three-season fishing destination. Due to its thriving herring runs, Great Bay kicks into high gear earlier than many would think possible, and its potpourri of other baitfish ensures that the action continues through the summer. Great Bay also hosts an often spectacular crescendo in the fall, especially when pogies are present.

Spring for Feeding Bass

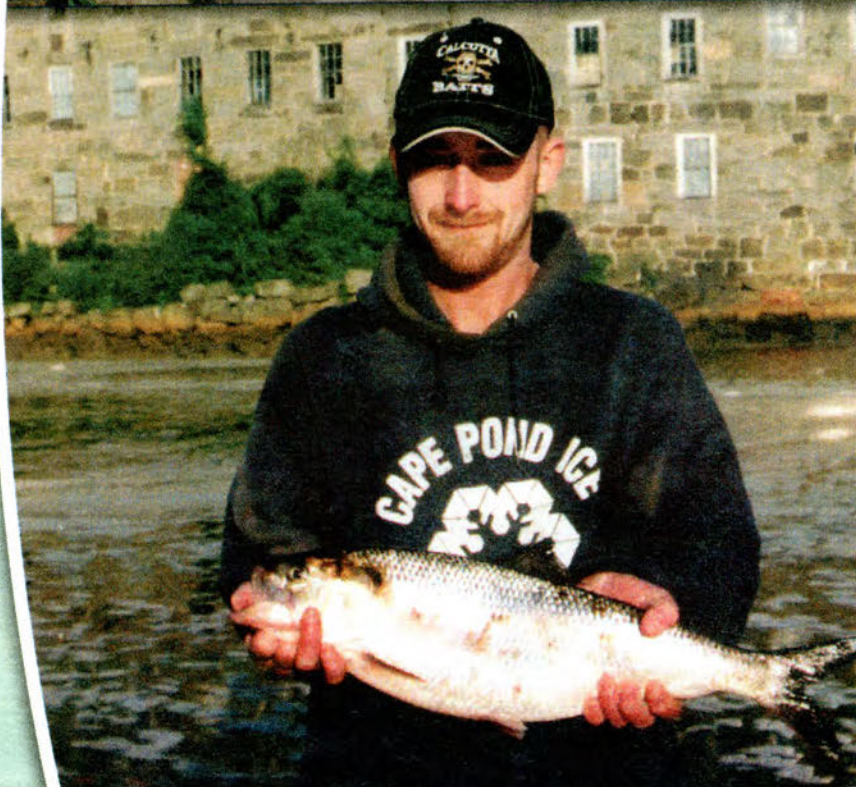
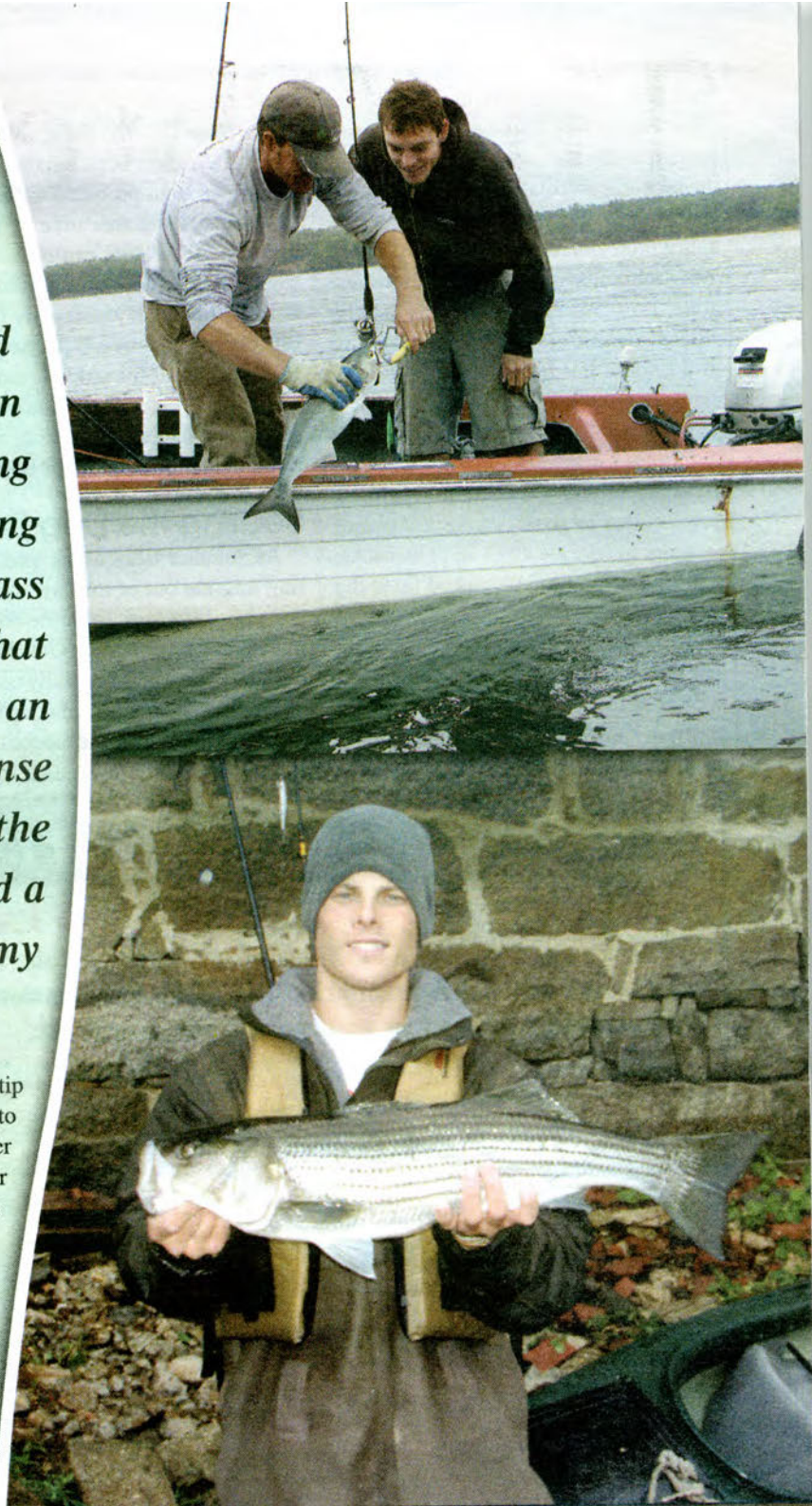
Great Bay's action sparks in the early days of May, when striped bass embark on their 10- to 15-mile trek upstream from the mouth of the Piscataqua River to the tributaries of the bay. Vibrant, healthy blueback and alewife spawning runs enrich the Squamscott, Lamprey, Oyster, Bellamy, Taylor, Coheco and Salmon Falls tributaries and lure linesiders in from afar. Having witnessed first-hand the demise of some of the more storied Bay State herring runs, I find it refreshing to be in the midst of a prolific run, watching herring flee from hordes of hungry striped bass.

When bass are on the feed, they will push the herring up against boulders and ledges where the water is too skinny for the herring to mount the fishways en masse and escape. At these times, a well-placed cast is as close to a guarantee as there is in the fishing game. Effective artificials when the bass have herring on the brain include herring-colored 9-inch Tsunami Swim Shads, alewife-colored 10-inch Fin-S Fish, and bronze Yo-Zuri Mag Poppers and Mag Minnows. I can't imagine a bad time to be out there for bass, but false dawn is always best, preferably at the lower stages of the tide as it begins to flood. These herring runs are prolific from the beginning of May and last well into June, and "dropbacks" will keep a few big bass interested into early July.

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TOP: Late in the season, harbor-sized bluefish like this one being tag-teamed by Gary and Noah Hertzler make for fast-paced action in Great Bay.

MIDDLE: With loads of access, small-boat owners and kayakers such as Travis Schoppmeyer can get in on the striper good times on Great Bay.

BOTTOM: Every once in a while an unexpected catch comes along, like this slab shad that took a 6-inch Yo-Zuri swimming plug.
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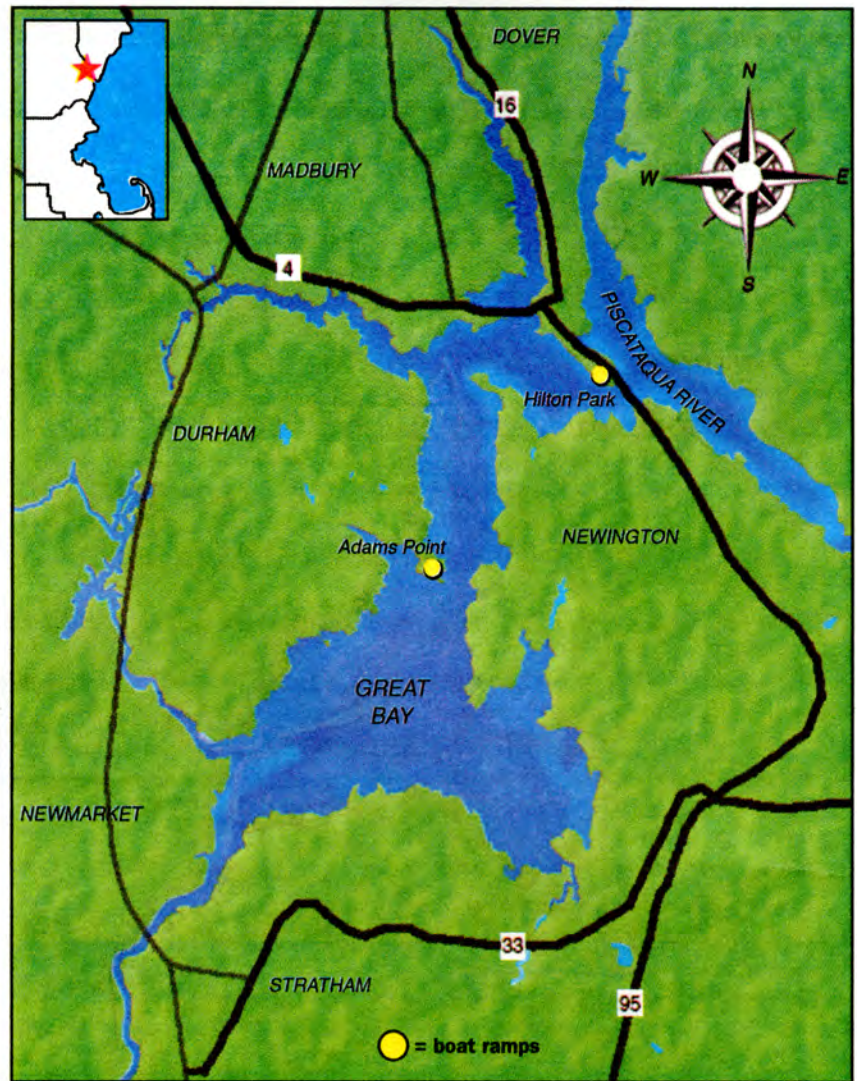
Because its herring runs are much healthier than those in the Bay State, New Hampshire does not have a moratorium on the harvesting of river herring. In fact, the regulations for the taking of river herring in New Hampshire are much more liberal than the regulations in Massachusetts have been for quite some time. Provided that you keep a healthy distance from the river's fishways, or fish ladders, it is legal to procure herring with a variety of nets, snag hooks and even Sabiki rigs. Fishing downstream from these structures does not require a freshwater fishing license, although you are required to possess a harvest permit in order to take alewives and bluebacks. This is free and can be picked up at the Marine Fisheries Division headquarters in Durham, New Hampshire. For a complete list of regulations, pick up or download a copy of the Marine Fisheries Division Saltwater Digest at www.wildlife.state.nh.us/marine/index.htm.

[nh.us/marine/index.htm](http://www.wildlife.state.nh.us/marine/index.htm).

Now and then, an aberration from the norm comes along while gunning for stripers. Anglers occasionally spot sea-run brown trout prowling the tributaries of Great Bay at this time of the year, and American shad can sometimes be found in the midst of the generic river herring. In fact, Kyle recently fought an especially aggressive, 6-pound-plus shad that swallowed his striper-grade swimming plug. This created quite a stir in our crowd and had us all buzzing about the amazing qualities of Great Bay.

Beating the Dog Days

As summer ticks along and the herring migrate out of the bay, the bulk of the activity moves from the tributaries into Great Bay proper. Outside of the channels, the bay is generally comprised of shallow mud flats, and water temperatures here become uncomfortable



for larger fish during the summer. At this point, the bay becomes a haven for schoolie stripers and harbor bluefish. Blitzing fish and wheeling birds are commonplace, and you'll find topwater action aplenty. With the primary summer forage being silversides, I use Zoom Flukes, Storm Jerkin' Minnows, Tsunami Split Tail Minnows and Acme Needle Eels. This is a great time to get kids or new fisherman into the feel, particularly between Fox Point and the railroad trestles at the mouth of the Squamscott River. Until you're comfortable with the layout, however, take it slow off the channels and pay attention to your depth finder to avoid any lower unit mishaps

due to the bay's shallow bed.

Great Bay's action in the summer isn't limited to schoolies, but for the larger stuff you'll have to head toward the Piscataqua River. This huge tidal river drains the bay into Portsmouth Harbor and runs deep, cold and fast. According to Kyle Walsh, "The depth of the river averages around 30 feet, with the occasional hole dipping to 60. It's in those depressions where the stripers lie in ambush." Fishermen do well here trolling deep-diving plugs and three-way bucktails as well as eels. Drifting chunks along the current is one of Kyle's favorite methods; he rigs up with an egg sinker so that the fish can

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mouth the bait for a short period of time before feeling tension.

When the current is running full-bore in the Piscataqua, it can be difficult to tend bottom. Fishing the last few hours of the ebbing tide, however, will let you get away with 3 or 4 ounces of lead to keep the jig or bait deep in the strike zone. Current cushions just ahead of and behind the Piscataqua's bridge abutments and pilings are also good places to intercept linesiders. Just remember that the current is swifter in these areas, so you'll need more weight to tend bottom.

Shore-casters often catch nice-sized stripers in the Piscataqua by drifting eels in the current by the General Sullivan Bridge, especially come nightfall. Successfully landing fish from the bridge, however, takes a fair degree of dexterity and skill. Veterans are known to employ a bizarre form of "bridge ballet" as they maneuver strained rods around bridge beams over to the shoulder to assist a landing. If things are slow, you can try steaming out past the mouth of the Piscataqua to the 2KR-Can to jig up a few harbor pollock or even mackerel (especially early or late in the season) on Sabiki rigs. You'll sometimes find bass hounding the forage here; if not, a run upstream to drift these fish with the current should do the trick.

Autumn's Bass Crescendo

The appearance of pogies in Great Bay is a crapshoot, but if they do arrive, they almost guarantee some of the finest fishing around. Great Bay hosted a spectacular extended fishing season in 2007, when large schools of pogies arrived and were reluctant to leave until October. First light is almost always the best time to find the pogies. They can often be seen flopping on the surface of the water, or sometimes as a dark patch of nervous water. If you see a school slowly circling on the surface, get a line in the water as soon as possible, as this usually means one thing: terror-stricken pogies being harassed by cow stripers!

Although weighted treble snag hooks are standard issue for snagging, this method was much more effective a generation ago, when the pogies traveled in schools as thick as locusts. Now that sparser schools are the rule, you'll fare better with a modified casting spoon, such as a Kastmaster or Hopkins, with an additional treble hook attached to the nose split ring. With the spoon, you simply cast and retrieve through the school; the swinging trebles will gain purchase more easily than a weighted treble. This technique is also less likely to have you reaching for some Tylenol after a few hours of jerking the rod around.

All is not lost once the pogies and stripers exit Great Bay in the fall. You still have one last crack at them when the bass and blues corral the bait up against the shoreline of Rye, New Hampshire. Last year, long after many anglers had already stowed away their gear, Kyle and his pals had a monopoly on the mayhem, using oversized swim shads to land their quarry.

If New Hampshire does not already figure prominently on your saltwater itinerary, you should definitely reconsider your stance. Although the New Hampshire coast may barely register as a blip on your radar when travelling to Maine, the Great Bay Estuary ecosystem offers unexpectedly excellent saltwater action in spring, summer and fall. In New Hampshire, saltwater fishing isn't restricted to the coast; it just takes a left at the Piscataqua River. ←

Access

One of the advantages to fishing Great Bay is its accessibility. The New Hampshire Fish and Game Department has set aside 23,000 acres for public use in what is known as the Great Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve. Numerous ramps and launch areas are available for launching prams, kayaks and boats, and there is plenty of room for shore-fishing. Just keep in mind that at low tide, a large portion of Great Bay becomes a mud flat with limited channel access. For a list of access sites and tides, visit www.greatbay.org or pick up a copy of the DeLorme New Hampshire Atlas and Gazetteer.

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