

Alabama GAMES & FISH

40-POUND STRIPERS!

Where To Find Them

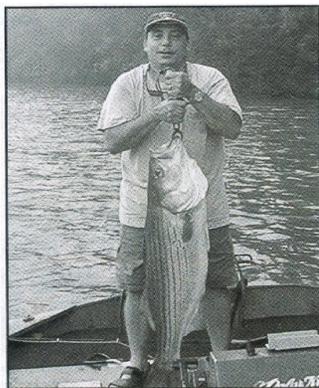
The Tennessee River below Guntersville Dam is not the only waterway to have given up a 40-plus-pounder in the last couple of years. A client of fishing guide Kent Edmonds caught another 43-pounder last summer on a fly rod just below West Point Dam on the Chattahoochee River, which forms the Georgia-Alabama border.

"It's unofficially a lake record," Edmonds said. "I say 'unofficially' because we put the fish back in the lake."

The lake that he was talking about is Lake Harding (better known as Bartletts Ferry, after the dam that impounds it). Unlike more-conventional striper fishermen, Edmonds specializes in using fly gear and big saltwater streamers that imitate injured minnows to fish for those stripes.

"People think we're really doing something special because we go after these big fish with fly gear," Edmonds said. "But it's really no big deal. They catch tarpon on fly gear too on the Gulf. Fly gear can take a lot of heat."

Two 43-pounders from two different waterways — let's take a more in-depth look at each of these places and the striped bass fishing that's available there.



While on the Chattahoochee with guide Kent Edmonds, Joel Daniel used a fly rod to catch the striper that he's hoisting. The 43-pounder was released. Photo courtesy of Kent Edmonds.



North Bama's GIANT STRIPERS

A couple of venues in the northern half of the Cotton State have given up monster striped bass recently. Let's have a look at these hotspots.

CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER

The Chattahoochee River is part of the historic range of striped bass in Alabama, according to state assistant chief of fisheries Nick Nichols. In the days before impoundments blocked their path, stripers would swim up from the Gulf of Mexico to spawn in the river.

In the modern era, fish have returned to the river, thanks to human intervention. Although Alabama and Georgia share the Chattahoochee, it's Georgia that's done much of the management and stocking work on the river.

"They have stocked both stripers and hybrids over the years," Nichols noted. "They went to almost all hybrids several years ago, but now they're switching back to stocking almost all stripers." Owing to the new stocking efforts, the fishery should continue to produce an abundance of stripers for anglers for many years to come.

The stretch of river that Kent Edmonds likes to target runs from West Point Dam down to Bartletts Ferry Dam and even to Goat Rock Dam and on down to Phenix City. "The big one came from just below West Point Dam," he pointed out.

Fishing for both stripers and hybrids in that stretch of river is great sport. "The hybrids grow a lot faster," Edmonds explained, "but they don't get as big as they stripers, and they don't live as long." Those hybrids also tend to run more in schools in the river, although big stripers will also school up.

In March and April, the big striped bass run in the river, finishing the movement ganged up below dams. "We like to throw big saltwater streamers that look like shad," Edmonds said. "Conventional-tackle fishermen also throw various baits that imitate shad."

Some fishermen even catch and use live shad. "If you catch the stripers busting on top, you can sight-fish," remarked Edmonds. "But you're not going to do that every day, and you're not going to do it very long on days when you are able to do it." So you're basically just blind-casting into areas in which you expect that stripers should be.

The best fishing is to be had when the dams are pulling water; indeed, a lot of striper fishermen think that you're wasting your time if you even try to fish when no water's coming through the powerhouses.

When you tie into a big striper on a fly below West Point, you'll either boat him or lose him fairly quickly, Edmonds asserted. "The water you're likely to be in is 8 to 10 feet deep, and there are a lot of rocks," he said. "And he's going to cut you off pretty quickly if you don't get him in. It took my client 15 minutes to bring the 43-pounder in."

Striper fishing tends to be a feast-or-famine sport: Either you catch a lot or you get nothing. "Fifty-plus fish a day is not uncommon on the Chattahoochee," Edmonds emphasized. "But you may go and not catch anything." He also said the best fishing tends to occur early and late in the day.

Stripers are open-water fish. Look for threadfin shad near the dams, and you should be able to find some stripers nearby. "They're out hunting the shad," Edmonds explained, "and they're going to be close to where the shad are. Neither the shad nor the stripers like real warm water, so you'll find them deep in the cool holes in the summertime."

In the fall, he continued, the bait-fish move to the backs of the coves; anglers can then follow them and catch them on lakes rather than in tailraces. "There's no doubt that there's nothing like fishing for stripers — in freshwater around here anyway," Edmonds summed up. "You'd have to go west and fish for steelhead or salmon to have a similar experience."

The 43-pounder was estimated to be 14 or 15 years old, one of the original fish from the earlier stockings in Bartletts Ferry.

TARGETING THE HOOCH



For information on booking a day of guided fly-fishing for striped bass on the Chattahoochee River with Kent Edmonds, give him a call at (706) 883-7700.

You can also visit his Web site at www.flyfishga.com.