



Striped Bass

Morone saxatilis

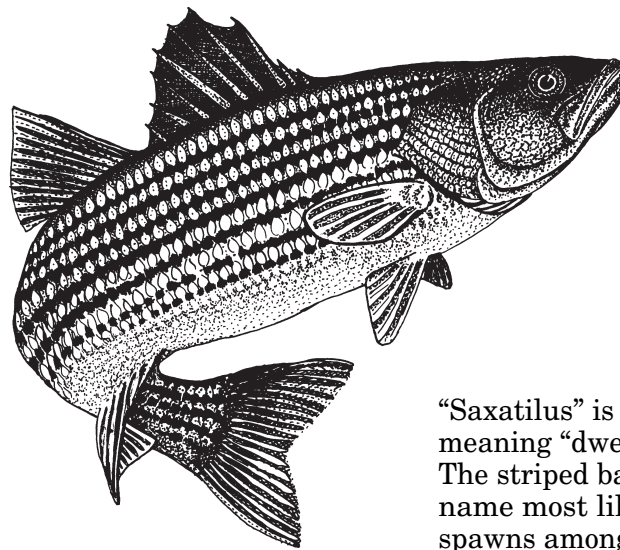
Since the days when the Atlantic Coast of the United States was a string of British colonies, the striped bass (or rockfish) has been a prized and plentiful food and game fish. In 1614, Captain John Smith of the Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote in his journal: "I myself at the turning of the [tide] have seen such multitudes pass out of a [pound net] that it seemed to me that one might go over their backs [without wetting one's shoes or feet]." Striped bass were one of the first animals to be protected by law in colonial America. In 1639, the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law to stop farmers from using striped bass as fertilizer, because of the fish's value.

History and Status

Striped bass are native to North Carolina and other states along the Atlantic coast and the Gulf of Mexico. In North Carolina and in other states along the Atlantic coast, the striped bass is a species of special concern.

Concern about North Carolina's striped bass population dates back to 1881. In that year, North Carolina's first fish commissioner, S. G. Worth, reported that a falling number of migratory fishes (like striped bass) was "an outgrowth of our civilization and results first from cutting them off from favorite spawning grounds with dams, and second by increased fishing to supply the wants of a growing population . . ."

Concern mounted again when, between 1968 and 1979, the



commercial and recreational striped bass harvest in the Albemarle Sound and Roanoke River declined about 80 percent. As a result, many harvest controls were put in place during the 1980s.

Description

The striped bass is a silver-white fish with seven to eight horizontal black stripes along its sides. Its back is often greenish-blue and its stomach white. Its large silver scales shine when held in the sunlight. The striped bass has two separate fins along its back. The front fin has a series of nine long and short spines. Most adult striped bass are 1 to 3 feet long, weigh 2 to 20 pounds and are less than 10 years old. A 125-pounder, the heaviest striped bass on record, was caught in Albemarle Sound in 1891.

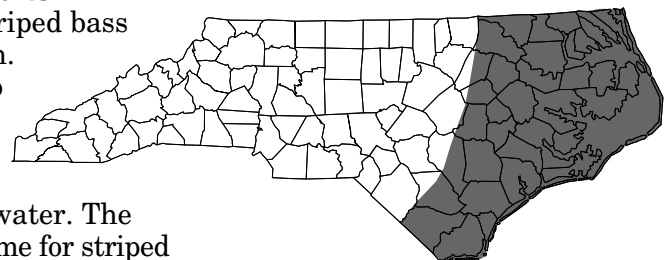
Habitat and Habits

Scientists call striped bass an anadromous fish. This name refers to the striped bass' habit of living in salt water and spawning in fresh water. The scientific species name for striped bass (*saxatilis*) provides a clue about its spawning habits.

"Saxatilis" is a Latin name meaning "dwelling among rocks." The striped bass was given this name most likely because it spawns among the rocky rapids near the "fall line" where rivers descend to the sea.

Striped bass adults from the Albemarle Sound return to the Roanoke River each spring to spawn. At one time, striped bass from the Albemarle Sound swam to Clarksville, Va., a distance of nearly 200 miles. Since 1950, when the Kerr Reservoir dam was constructed on the Roanoke River near the Virginia-North Carolina border, striped bass have been kept from some of their historical spawning grounds. Today, most striped bass from the Albemarle Sound spawn near Weldon, N.C., about 130 miles from the sound.

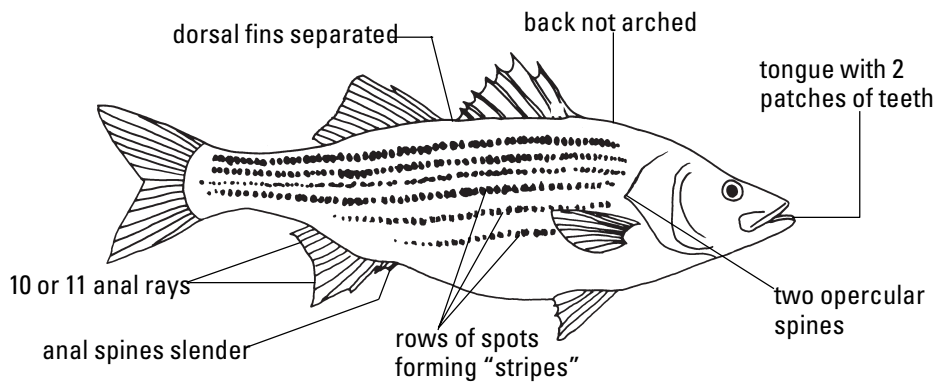
Most striped bass spawning begins when the water temperature reaches 62 F. As many as 20 male stripers surround a single female, releasing milt to fertilize the eggs released by the female. Spawning occurs near the sur-



Range Map:

Occupied range

**WILD
Facts**



STRIPED BASS

Classification

Class: Osteichthyes (Bony Fishes)
Order: Perciformes

Average Size

Length: 1 to 3 ft.
Weight: 2 to 20 lbs.

Food

Juveniles: zooplankton, fish (anchovies, menhaden, shad, herring). Adults: fish (mostly shad and herring).

Spawning

Male stripers typically are sexually mature at 2 years, while sexually mature females are 3 or 4 years old. Spawning occurs in the spring, when water temperatures are between 62 and 67 F. A 20-pound female may release as many as 2 million eggs. Usually, less than 1 percent of these eggs survive to become adults.

Young

Striped bass eggs hatch into yolk-sac larvae after 2 to 3 days. Within two months, these young stripers are 1 to 2 in. long and begin to feed on small fish. In the Albemarle Sound population, most of these stripers remain in the sound until they become sexually mature. Once they are mature, they join the yearly spawning migration up the Roanoke River to Weldon, N.C.

Life Expectancy

Can live as long as 30 years.

face, causing a lot of splashing, and it sometimes lasts several minutes. Many people refer to striped bass spawning as *rockfights*, because it looks like a group of stripers fighting. After spawning, the semi-buoyant fertilized eggs must float in the water for two to three days before they hatch. During this time, there must be enough flow in the river to keep the eggs afloat or they will not survive.

After hatching, young striped bass (called *yolk-sac larvae*) are carried by currents to nursery areas in the lower Roanoke River and western Albemarle Sound. For the first seven to 14 days, they live by getting energy from their yolk-sac (formerly the yolk portion of their egg). After their yolk-sac is used up, striped bass larvae feed on tiny water animals known as zooplankton. By the time they are 2 months old, striped bass are 1 to 2 inches long and begin feeding on small fish. Stripers spawned in the Roanoke River spend two to four years of their lives maturing in the Albemarle Sound before returning to spawn in the Roanoke River. Because they live to ages of 30 years, mature adult stripers return many times to the Roanoke River to spawn.

Range and Distribution

Striped bass are native to the Atlantic Coast from the St. Lawrence River in Canada to north Florida and in the Gulf of Mexico from Florida west to Louisiana. Most of North Carolina's striped bass population—the third largest on the Atlantic Coast—is found

in the Albemarle Sound and its tributaries. In North Carolina, striped bass are also found in the Tar-Pamlico River, the Neuse River, the White Oak River, and the Cape Fear and Northeast Cape Fear rivers.

Because striped bass can live in fresh water, they are stocked as a sport fish in man-made lakes.

People Interactions

The striped bass is one of the most important food and game fish found in the coastal waters of the United States. Scientists believe that its population is declining because of overfishing, changes in water flow caused by dams, construction in nursery areas, and pollution.

References

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- Matthiessen, Peter. *Men's Lives, the Surfmen and Baymen of the South Fork* (Random House, 1986).

Credits

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