



Magic Marker

The Connecticut River is the largest in New England, and it is a great place to fish for stripers, especially between mid-April and mid-July. A twenty-four foot center console with fancy electronics is not required for you to be a successful striper fisherman; a fourteen-foot tin boat would suffice on most days. The river has so much structure with unlimited locations that even on busy weekends you can find a place to fish alone.

A book about my relationship with stripers would be incomplete without talking about the Connecticut River. In fact, it has been an influence on my whole adult life, with duck hunting in the marshes, deer or pheasant hunting along the banks, crabbing, snapper fishing in the coves, and fishing for schoolies. I also plied the deeper rock piles for jumbos and did some commercial shad fishing part time. Did I mention that my tackle store was just down the street from the launching ramp!

The range marker number 25 sits on a pile of rocks. This marks the western part of the channel south of the town of Essex. There's a stone reef on the north side running in a north-south direction for about a hundred yards, and another reef runs from the marker to the west for another hundred yards. Picture a shallow, backwards-L-shaped reef with a pile of rocks and a ranger marker in the corner of the L. So many things happened to me in this spot, and you may be interested to hear about a few.

Early in my career, I knew this spot as the schoolie spot. However, I noticed occasional large swirls that were attributed to carp or sturgeon, in those days the river was alive with them. One day, on a whim, I tried some live herring. Lo and behold, the swirls turned out to be larger bass in the twelve- to twenty-pound range, with an occasional thirty-pounder thrown in. I had definitely discovered something special, and I kept it quiet for years. This was a difficult job, made harder by the fact that, in some years, the menhaden were upriver of this spot - meaning every bass fisherman from Clinton to New London would be driving by me to get bait. Getting caught on the secret spot was not an option; fortunately, all the boats in Essex were moored fifty yards upriver from the spot, which gave me an outstanding hiding place. Whenever a boat came up or down the river, if it looked like it held a bass fisherman, I would sneak up into the moored boats and hide. I paid little attention to boats that didn't seem to hold fishermen.

One guy in particular was a daily visitor; he was in a small aluminum boat, so I paid no attention to him motoring by. The river was just too busy to watch everyone. One day, he drove up to me and said, "I've been watching you catch all those big fish for weeks; I would like to know what kind of fish they are." He caught me by surprise, and I was not about to give up such a good spot, so without thinking I replied, "Carp." You could plainly see them rolling all over the river, and I was pretty sure

he would buy that one and keep going. To my surprise, he wanted to know what to use for bait. Again unable to think of anything, my hasty response was, "Corn, yup, Green Giant." Thanking me, he drove away. I was reeling up the next day, getting ready to quit, when he drove up next to me with an ultra-light spinning rod, and - you guessed it - a can of corn! I left, never knowing if he caught any carp, but I'm pretty sure he didn't catch any stripers.

One windy morning, early in May, I was teaching the herring how to attract bass at marker 25 when I looked up and saw a capsized sailboat drifting down the river. The current was raging ebb, awful because of the spring freshet and a howling twenty-mile-per-hour north wind. Three very cold, wet sailors were clinging to the hull. My first thought was, "What the hell are those crazy bastards doing out here on such a cold day?" Then I realized that they were in trouble. The sailboat was drifting so fast that it took a few minutes to reach them. I managed to get all three of the violently shaking sailors aboard and tie a line onto the bow of the sailboat; the mast was broken off, but was held by a bunch of rigging. I delivered the boat and crew to the public launching ramp in Essex. The whole time they kept thanking me for saving them and their sailboat.

Another time, a small tin boat about sixteen feet long was coming upriver and pointed right in my direction. I don't know why, I cannot explain it - I just knew they were game wardens. Their uniforms were not visible until they were less than a quarter mile from me. I stopped fishing, turned off the baitwell and put my heavy rod away. I think took out a spinning rod, and snapped an eight-ounce crocodile spoon to it, putting it in the gunnel rod holder. My suspicions were confirmed: two wardens drove up, showing me their badges, which didn't especially concern me since I was breaking no regulations. One boarded my boat, asking if he could look in my fish box. "Go for it," was my reply. It happened to be a pretty good day; the box held a fair number of stripers, each weighing ten to twenty pounds. They warden's eyes almost popped out when he lifted the lid, but he never looked in, or asked about, the baitwell on which I was sitting.

Then the questions came. It was pretty obvious where the bass had been caught, but the wardens still had a lot to ask. Kidding with them, I said I knew my rights, and furthermore, I wasn't talking until I had a lawyer. The questions kept flying until I finally got serious and said, "You have a right to check me out to see that I am not breaking regulations, but it's not my job to teach you how to fish." One of them said, "That's alright, we know where you're fishing as well as what you're using," and then pointed to the huge crocodile spoon. "When we drove up, it looked like you were trolling."

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