

Fishing A Sand Flat

by TOM RICHARDSON



Most anglers are amazed to discover that striped bass and bluefish can be found in water so shallow it barely covers their backs. And I'm not talking about small fish. Sometimes bass up to 30 pounds and bluefish in the teens can be seen cruising in just 2 feet of water.

A "flat" is a loosely defined term in the Northeast. In one sense, it can mean acres of water under 2 feet deep with a light-sand bottom - the type of water you'd wade for bonefish.

In another, it can encompass wide, mud-bottomed coves where stripers grub for worms and crabs, their tails occasionally breaking the surface. A flat can also be a narrow band of shallow water running parallel to a beach.

This last type of flat may only be fishable on the highest stages of the tide, but it can attract some very large fish indeed. Further, flats along exposed ocean beaches tend to hold fish through the summer and fall due to the cooler water temperatures and wave action.

The downside to fishing exposed ocean flats from a boat is the danger of being washed onto shore by the waves. In other words, you need to pick your days and be careful in these areas. So-called "backside", or bay beaches, offer more protection from the prevailing wind and swells, so you'll stand a better chance of sighting and casting to fish in these areas more often.

The great thing about flats fishing in general is that you don't need a big boat to fish them. In fact, you don't need a boat at all. Kayakers, wade fishermen and boat anglers in expensive flats skiffs all stand an equal chance of finding fish as long as they know where to look and what to look for.



Any small, shallow-draft boat can be used to fish the flats.

Shallow-draft skiffs obviously offer comfort and greater range for getting to and from remote flats or those with limited shore access, but it's often best to get out of the boat and stalk fish on foot once you've reached your destination and have located a productive spot, as the fish are often wary.

Poling a skiff is one of life's great pleasures, to be sure, but



it requires good balance and training (although not always a poling platform). A bow-mounted trolling motor also makes fishing the flats easier, and allows you to fish single-handed. I highly recommend one if you enjoy shallow-water fishing of any type.

But you don't always need to cover ground to locate fish on a flat. In fact, it's often best to drop

anchor and let the fish come to you, especially if you've discovered one of their so-called underwater "game trails."

Always look for working birds, surface slicks or bait balls when you arrive, and check out these spots first. Even a lone tern dipping low over the water or a group of gulls resting on the surface or along the shore can be a clue that fish are or have been feeding in the area.

The edges of the flat are always good places to watch and wait for fish. Stripers and bluefish both like to travel along the drop-off and make forays onto the exposed shallows.



Matt Koenig poses with a nice striper taken on a Cape Cod flat.



Tom Richardson with a flats striper taken from his modified aluminum boat.

If you locate a trough or depression between a sandbar and a shoreline flat, or a shallow channel ("guzzle") that carves through the flat, you've found a great place to ambush fish as they

move on and off the flat. (to page 32)