

The Striped Bass that inhabit SML offer residents and visitors the opportunity to catch “the fish of a lifetime.” The adult Striped Bass are piscivorous (fish eating) and will consume almost any small fish (baitfish, small crappie, small bluegill, etc) available in SML. Let’s discuss the baitfish that are available in SML.

The 4 types of baitfish currently in SML make up most of the Striper’s diet.



The gizzard shad *Dorosoma cepedianum* has a blunt snout and a long dorsal ray fin that extends off the dorsal fin. As gizzard shad grow, they become too large for most predators, but not the Striped Bass. Gizzard shad are caught with cast nets and can be used live or in cut pieces.



The next two forage species are similar in appearance and behavior. The blueback herring *Alosa aestivalis* (top) has a blueish colored back with silver sides and is a newer member of the forage base at SML. DWR Biologist Dan Wilson began noticing the blueback herring in his gill net surveys within the last 10 years. They have become very well established and offer the Striped Bass a deep-water food source. The alewife *Alosa pseudoharengus* (bottom) is typically gray-green and has a larger eye than the blueback herring. It also prefers deeper, cooler water. The blueback herring and alewife allow SML Striped Bass the opportunity to feed comfortably in warm-water months. Summertime surface temperatures at SML can easily reach the mid 80’s, but the blueback herring and alewife will stay at

depths (30ft and deeper) where the water temperature is in the 60's. Cooler water and more dissolved oxygen (DO) are very appealing to Striped Bass.



The threadfin shad *Dorosoma petenense* is the smaller relative of the gizzard shad. The major differences between the threadfin shad and the gizzard shad are the mouth and the distinct dark spot only on the threadfin shad. The gizzard shad's mouth is very blunt where the threadfin shad's lower jaw projects beyond the upper jaw. Threadfin shad are sensitive to cold temperatures making SML one of the most northern bodies of water that support threadfin shad populations. During times of cold weather and cold-water temperatures, SML can experience a threadfin die-off. The winter of 2021 was the most recent widespread threadfin shad die-off.

Now that we have covered the forage base at SML, how do you use these baits to catch the Striped Bass at SML? First you will need a cast net (or several), some sort of holding tank with aeration and filtration and some Striped Bass specific fishing equipment.

Cast nets are available at fishing tackle stores and online outlets. There are many types and sizes and it can be very overwhelming (and expensive) to find the right one for you. If you are a beginner, the best all-around net is an 8ft net with a 3/8 mesh and 1 pound of lead per foot. This net will allow you to catch bait of all sizes and will be an easy net to learn to throw. There are many videos available on YouTube on how to throw a cast net.

Once you catch your bait, you will need something to keep the bait alive and healthy. Again, this can be overwhelming and expensive when you start researching the options. If your boat has a live well, it can be used to hold live bait. You will need to add some sort of aeration and filtration component. There are several portable options that work well, just make sure it will fit the dimensions of your live well. For every 10 gallons of water, you will need to add 1 cup of water softener salt. The salt protects the slime coat of the baitfish. Also, try to match the water temperature where you catch your bait. Purified ice (without chlorine) can be used to lower the temperature in your live well.

How many baits do you want to have in the water at one time? More experienced anglers can manage a dozen lines or more! If you are a beginner, start small so that you can enjoy the fishing experience and not deplete all your fishing funds at one time. Start with 7ft medium heavy rods and reels that have a good drag system. The Striped Bass in SML are strong fish that can annihilate inferior gear. For live bait fishing purposes, you should use at least 12-pound test line or greater.

The live bait techniques used to catch Striped Bass vary depending on the time of year. In the spring and the fall when water temperatures are comfortable for Striped Bass to venture into more shallow water, a great technique is to use planer boards to spread your bait away from the boat and closer to the shoreline. Any of the baits outlined above can be used with planer boards, but the gizzard shad is the preferred bait in this technique. Planer boards are available at most local tackle shops.

Another live bait presentation is to send the bait down the water column using a weighted downline. Depending on what depth you want to target, the weight can range from 2 ounces to ¼ ounce. Typically, with this technique a circle hook is used, and the fish usually hook themselves as they eat the bait. You will need to pay attention to your electronics, SML has submerged timber. In places, the timber stands 25 feet below the surface of the water. Being able to identify the timber will allow you to speed up or wind up your live bait presentations before they get hung up in the trees.

There are many other ways to present live bait to Striped Bass in SML. The Smith Mountain Striper Club holds regular meetings that feature guest speakers that explore these very topics. More information can be found on our website www.smithmountainstriperclub.com or by joining the club. Membership information is available on the website.