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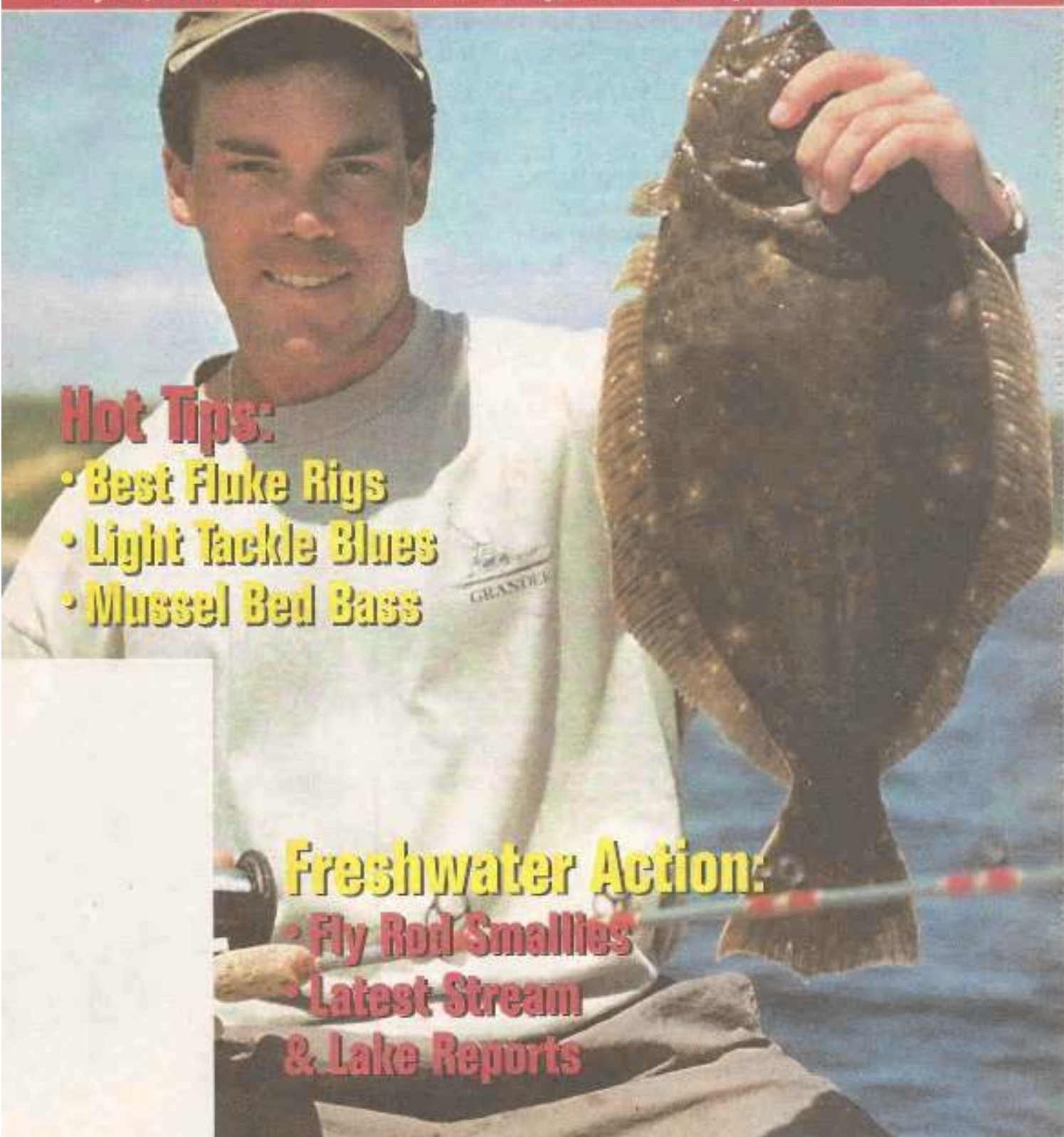
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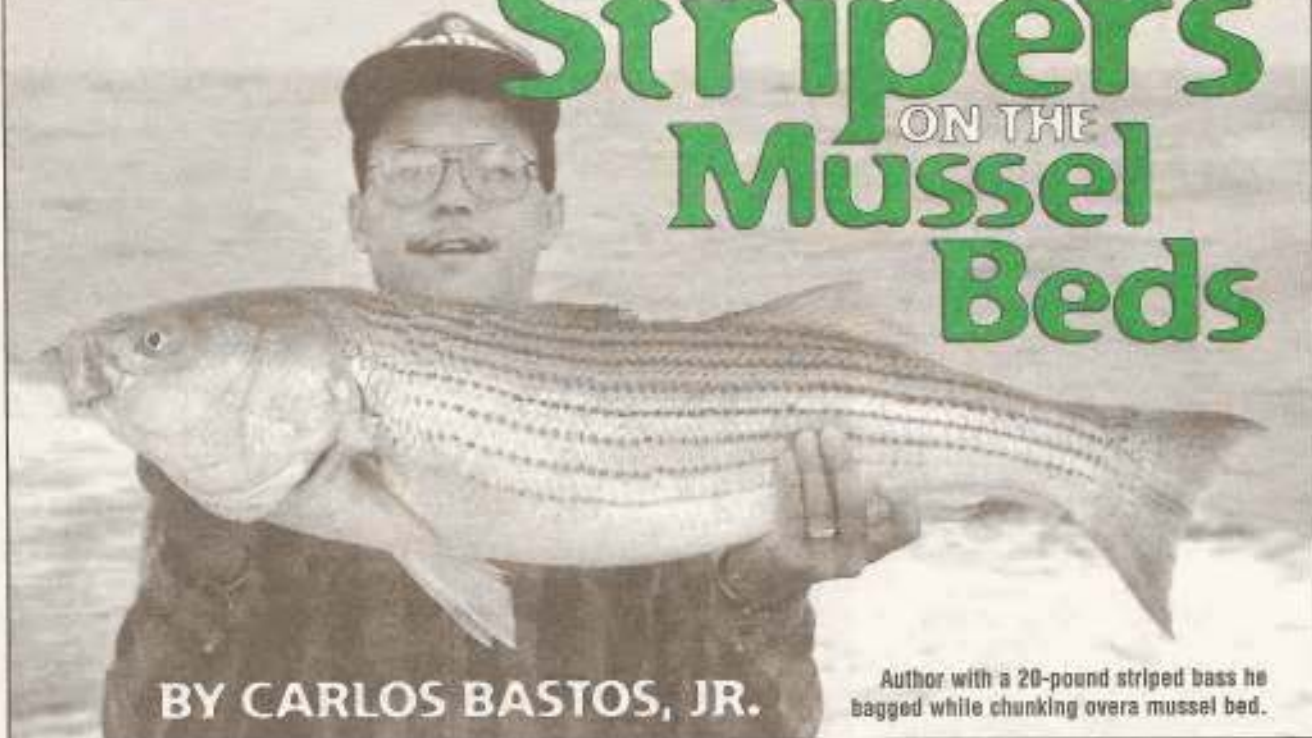
- Best Fluke Rigs
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Stripers ON THE Mussel Beds



BY CARLOS BASTOS, JR.

Author with a 20-pound striped bass he bagged while chunking overs mussel bed.

For so many years I would hear and read about all the striped bass being chunked at places like Flynn's Knoll and in between the channels. Finally I got my things together one afternoon and set out for a couple hours of striper fishing. Now I didn't know much about that kind of fishing so I went by what I've read. Well to make this story short I caught nothing. I fished for about five hours and spent a whole case of bunkers and we got a dogfish and a bluefish.

For the next two years I refused to try it again. I would fish for fluke or ling, but not striped bass. I felt that the old saying "you should have been here yesterday" would follow me every time I would go out for stripers. In the spring of 1997 I decided to give it one more try mainly due to the persuasion of my fellow fishing partners. This time I did a few things differently. First off I bought a couple dozen fresh bunkers and secondly I searched the bay for some sort of structure before anchoring up. Both things proved to be the trick to catching my first striped bass.

LOCATION

The structure that I found that day was a mussel bed. Our sinkers kept getting hung up on them and my anchor was full of mussels when I pulled it up. I have been going back to the spot ever since and it never fails me. We might not get into a hot bite all the time but we always catch some fish there. Just this past May my father Carlos Sr. and I limited out in two hours with the biggest one at 32 pounds.

There are quite a few mussel beds out in the bay, especially in the area between the channels, near Flynn's Knoll and Romer Shoal, but there are other places, too. They aren't easy to find, but then again, they aren't hard either. I have sent out a few friends to that area and they have found their own mussel bed and they have been making some nice catches on them. Now, these mussel beds do not come up that much off the bottom so you have to pay close attention to your fish-finder. You might only see a small hill that rises 3 to 5 feet off the bottom. You need a loran or GPS on board so you can save the spot for future reference. You would not want to catch a lot of fish on a spot and not be able to come back to it.

WHEN TO GO

I like to start fishing the mussel beds for stripers around the middle of May and my last trip will usually be towards the end of June. The action seems to die down once the water temperature hits 70 degrees. Also, bluefish invade the bay area around the same time and you can have a hard time catching a striper through all those blues.

My ideal conditions for an afternoon of striper fishing are a northwest wind with an outgoing tide. Actually I have never fished there on an incoming tide but that does not mean that you can't catch a fish during one. I will usually start chunking around a half hour after the slack tide and fish right through until I see that the tide is slowing down which usually coincides with the fish not biting anymore. You actually only get about a three-hour window of opportunity during an entire tide. Striped bass love a strong current!

One very important thing to remember is that on weekends there is a lot of boat traffic in the area so try to get out during the week. I'll pick a day with an afternoon outgoing tide and little wind and leave work around noon so that I can be fishing by 2 and heading back in by 6 or 7 o'clock.

TACKLE AND RIGS

I like to head out with a combination of medium and heavy action rod and reels. I fish with a Shimano bait runner spinning reel loaded with 25-pound Silver Thread on a 7-foot Star rod. My other combo is an Ambassador 7000 loaded with 20-pound line on a Quantum muskie rod. The strength of the tide will dictate which outfit I will use at the particular time. Also the size of the sinker that I will be using plays a part in which combo I will use that day.

On the terminal end, I use a fish finder rig, which consists of a 4/0 barrel swivel, a 5-foot piece of 30-pound leader and a 7/0 Owner hook. I have tried using circle hooks and while catching fish with them my hook up ratio was the same as using regular hooks.

The rig is very easy to make and not counting the price of the hooks, relatively inexpensive. First, I put the fish find-

er on my main line and tie the barrel swivel on. Then I take my leader and you can either snell the hook on or tie it via a palomar knot. Finally you tie the leader to the barrel swivel and you're all set.

BAITS

The number one choice for bait has to be fresh bunker. I know a few fishermen who have tried herring and have had some success but on my boat there is only bunker for bait. I know that sometimes it's hard to purchase fresh bunker but I will call ahead in order to find which bait shop is carrying them. If you can't get fresh you can use frozen and still catch some fish.

Every fisherman has his own method of chunking stripers. Some guys chunk a lot and some don't even chunk at all. I stand in the middle of both. I will start out by cutting the bunker in four or five pieces and then tossing the tail section along with a piece or two overboard. Some fishermen swear that the head catches a lot of big fish and even though I have seen the heads in the striper's stomachs, I cannot catch a fish on one. I like to chunk a bunker or two and then wait about 20 minutes or so before I toss another one over.

The main thing to remember is that if you chunk too heavy, the blues will move in and ruin everything. If that happens do not chunk until you haven't caught a blue in a while.

One thing that has worked great for me is to use some bunker entrails on my hook along with a chunk. I put a big piece of gut on my hook first and then a chunk to hold everything in place. I know that it can be a bit messy but my rod always out fishes the one with just a chunk on the hook.

ANCHORING

Out on the mussel beds, anchoring is usually easy enough where you don't have to reset the anchor. When the tide is really ripping, your boat could easily drift a couple hundred yards in no time. Make sure you have at least 150 feet of anchor line and a 6-foot piece of chain. That will help the anchor dig in a little better. Also try to anchor the boat just on the edge of the mussel bed and not directly on top. The fish tend to hang on the down slope of the mussel bed.

Well I can't say why the striped bass love to hang around the mussel beds but I can say that finding one of them has changed my perspective on striper fishing dramatically so this spring do a little searching and maybe it will increase your catches.

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*Contact your state health department if you have questions concerning the advisability of eating striped bass.

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