

# Valley Angler Strippers by Bill Thompson

They say that, “time and tide waits for no man” and last Sunday the tide and the time was right for Janet and I. This would be the first time since last June when Janet and I would enjoy the luxury of having a day off together. As luck would have it there just happened to be a convenient early evening tide at one of our favorite stripper locations on the Maine coast. The plan was simple: sleep in, get up have a good breakfast, head for the coast, enjoy a fried clam dinner at probably the best clam shack in Maine and then go stripper fishing on the out going tide. Our favorite stripper destination just happens to be the Mousam River in Kennebunkport. Now I am not usually in the habit of giving up fishing locations in this column, however the Mousam may be “the worst best kept secret” in New England. As some of you may already know the Bush family maintains a summer place just down the road at Walker Point. Occasionally the former President can be spotted fishing from his boat off the mouth of the river. This past weekend the current President just happened to be in town for a family wedding. The TV news showed some footage Saturday morning of the father and son fishing. Needless to say with this kind of notoriety Parson’s Beach and the Mousam River are pretty well known.

One reason that we like to fish the Mousam so much is because we are able to make the short drive into Kennebunkport and enjoy some real Maine fried clams. As I have already mentioned probably the best clam shack in Maine just happens to be located there. The place is located right on the bridge as you drive into town. It is appropriately called the “The Clam Shack”. How the owners came up with such an original and clever name is beyond me. The clams, however, are indeed perhaps the best in Maine. Now you can get some pretty good fried clams right here in North Conway and save the drive by staying home. However, there is no substitute for eating your clams on the coast of Maine. Clams are best enjoyed when served in a cardboard quart container while standing in a location where you are able to watch the water. A side order of fried onion rings should be part of the meal and tarter sauce, catsup and extra salt are necessities.

We did spend some time walking around the town of Kennebunkport. The town did not seem all that busy despite the fact that the President was in town. The shops seemed to offer the same stuff that you find right here in North Conway. True there was a more nautical theme as opposed to our mountain theme; however the t-shirts seemed to have the same cute sayings with only the name of the town changed. Moose gifts seemed to be as popular over there as they are here.

Around 2:30 we finally headed to the river. Our plan was to fish a couple of hours before the low tide. The low tide was not until 8:00 that evening so we were on the early side. I rigged up with my 9 weight with a 350 grain shooting head. These lines are designed to

get down fast and with the tide having just turned I thought I might pick up some fish in the river. Janet rigged up her 7 weight with a floating line opting to keep it simple. The bend in the river where I had hoped to fish was already occupied with a family of anglers slinging live bait. They were well encamped so we headed down the river towards the beach. Probably because it was a cloudy day with some light showers the beach was all but deserted. All the better for fishing. We took up a position and began casting blindly. A few minutes later I happened to notice that there seemed to be a large group of birds just up the beach from us. Now this is an event that all stripper fishermen live for. Sea birds hovering and diving in large groups usually signals that strippers are working bait fish. At first I thought that my eyes were deceiving me, but after watching them for a while it became evident that these birds were indeed onto a school of fish. I signaled to Janet and we headed down the beach to where the birds were.

The bait fish must have been desperately engaged in evasive maneuvers because just about the time you would catch up to them they would move. I noticed one beach house owner dash from his home with rod in hand and getting to the edge of the surf just in time for the whole contingent of birds, bait and strippers to move off shore.

This went on for a bit until eventually a group got close enough to me to make a cast into the foray. I was into a fish almost immediately. I managed to catch a couple of schoolies before they moved on once again. This event went on for some time with the bait fish moving up and down the beach. There seemed to be a pause in the action and I decided to run back to the truck and change my sinking line to an intermediate line. When I came back the bait followed by the strippers had just entered the mouth of the river. If you have never witnessed a school of strippers herding bait fish I can tell you that it is one of the most awesome sights in nature. Standing up to your chest in the surf surrounded by terrified silversides doing everything in their power to escape feeding stripped bass is awe inspiring. Suddenly right in front of you the water turns to silver as hundreds of bright silver fish leap free of the water. Right behind them, in hot pursuit, a large stripper appears. In this frenzied moment you try to focus and make a cast to the feeding bass. Not as easy as it may sound. It would seem that at that very second every thing possible will go wrong. Your line will somehow mysteriously become entangled around your stripping basket, you will inevitably throw a tailing loop and your fly will become hopelessly ensnared at the tip of your rod, in other words Murphy's Law will prevail. Somehow Janet and I managed to overcome our failings and for the next twenty minutes we caught fish. At one point we even had a double. None of the fish were especially large, but they fought hard. There were a few larger fish in the mix, but they only showed up when I was forced to change flies.

This whole event took less than an hour to unfold and it ended as abruptly as it had begun. Suddenly there was only the sound of the waves. The bait fish were gone, the screaming seagulls were gone and so were the strippers. There was still an hour before low tide, but it was obvious to everyone that it was over. Janet and I reeled in and waded ashore. In the time that it took for this all to unfold quite a few other anglers had gathered; everyone else was calling it a day as well. It had started to rain now in earnest and it was starting to get dark. We took a moment to pause and look around. I am sure

that it would sound odd to some to say that the Maine coast is just as beautiful in the fog and rain as it is on the most sunny beach day. There is something about it that you will find no where else in the world.

On the way home we stopped for an ice cream cone at the local Dairy Queen in Kennebunk. A tradition that we always try to observe when stripper fishing. The tradition began on our first trip to the Mousam when a good friend first introduced us to the spot many years ago.

See you on the river