

Fall Fishing with Captain Travis Patsell

9/15/23 presentation to Smith Mountain Striper Club

Transcribed by Jon Anderson

The meeting room was packed with SMSC members for an informative and entertaining presentation from Captain Travis Patsell. A lifelong lake resident and charter captain for many years, he recently began a 9-5 job, but still fishes regularly on weekends and stays in close touch with fishing trends. Below is a recap of his remarks.

Editor's note: you can also watch his full 1-hour presentation on SMSC's Facebook page, at this link:

<https://fb.watch/n84XXyCkvJ/>

Fall Fishing

The term "Fall Fishing" means different things to different people. One event that occurs in the fall is the semi-annual lake turn-over, when water temperatures go from being stratified, or layered, to being more even from deep to shallow areas. A bigger change to the fishing system comes after that, usually in November, when increasingly cooler water temps prompt the stripers to make a migratory move from the deeper areas in the main body of the lake into the faster current area of the headwaters in the Roanoke and Blackwater rivers. In years past this change occurred earlier in the year, end of September and beginning of October, as fishing action moved from main lake areas to river channel areas. Now, however, the fish stay in the main lake longer, typically not making the move until mid-November comes. When the water has cooled to low 70's temp stripers will begin moving from deeper parts of lake toward the river channels, with the move continuing as the temps decline each week.

"Swamp Monkey", Triangle Jigs & Swim Baits

Favorite fall tactics for Captain Travis include using a skirted Swamp Monkey jig or a paddle tail swimbait for cast/retrieve fishing, and a triangle head jig for vertical fishing. The vertical style works best in summer, while cast/retrieve seems to be better in fall as water cools and fish get more active. For casting, he uses bait casting reel or spinning reel, with a drop/retrieve motive to make the Swamp Monkey move vertically in the water as it is retrieved to the boat. He describes this as using wrist action to 'hop' the Swamp Monkey bait in the water and then wind the slack as it falls, repeating the process with a steady pace (aka, "hopping the monkey").

His two favorite colors for the skirted Swamp Monkey are white and blue, with a matching color Zoom fluke soft bait (5 ¼" size) that matches the skirt color (albino or white ice for white skirt). His swim bait preference is Mr

Waggs, made by Aaron Baits, available online and at local tackle shops. <https://aaronsbaits.com/collections/wags>

Editor's note: A 3-part, 1-hour video presentation by LT Burnette, maker of these two products, is available on the SMSC website at this link: <http://www.smithmountainstriperclub.com/sml-fishing-resources.html>

The written transcript of that presentation can be viewed and/or downloaded at this link:

http://www.smithmountainstriperclub.com/uploads/1/3/4/2/13428842/lacy_burnette_swamp_monkey_presentation_to_sml_striper_club_9.10.21.pdf

Gizzards and Bluebacks

Captain Travis echoed a similar theme as heard from other recent Striper Club speakers (Dan Wilson DWR Fishery Biologist and Captain Tommy Moore Wicked Striper Fishing), that since blue back herring became present in the lake in recent years, it has resulted in significant changes in striper feeding patterns and striper fishing techniques. Blue backs favor deeper and colder water compared to gizzards, which prefer muddy and shallow areas. That mean now stripers have at least one forage option in their preferred water depth and temp. This could a contributing factor in fewer stripers moving to shallow and muddy areas in early fall, such as the back sections of creek channels and upper river areas.

When gizzards are the bait of choice, getting them the afternoon or evening before a planned fishing out tends to work better. The areas for finding gizzards are usually shallow and muddy, like the far end of Indian Point and

Gills Creek. That means muddy nets and a dirty boat can be expected as part of the process of catching the “mud shad” for bait. For fall fishing in the upper river areas Travis prefers gizzards in shallow water, compared to fishing in mid or lower lake at that time, where his preference is for bluebacks (alewives as a second option). The Captain recommends against placing gizzards in the same tank with alewives or bluebacks because the larger and stronger gizzards will beat up and wear out the smaller baits when kept together.

Bluebacks may enable stripers to stay longer in the deeper areas and be more scattered and less schooled up than in years past. Captain Travis also shared that on fishing trips where he had access to both blueback and alewives on his boat at the same time, rods on one side fishing the bluebacks outfished the rods on the other side fishing alewives by 2-1 or more! He also noted that channel cats are being caught more frequently now by anglers fishing with bluebacks. When fishing with alewives or bluebacks, he uses less weight on the lines than with gizzards, which are more sturdy and hardy than the other baits.

Planer Boards

In the fall Captain Travis switches from the summertime tactic of fishing live bait on downlines to presenting live bait using planer boards. He prefers to use big gizzards on planer boards, fished close to the bank in shallow water. The gizzard closest to the bank is usually only 6'-8' behind the planer board, so the fish doesn't have too much line to get hung up on shallow water brush or rocks. The shallow bait is also fishing with no weight to give the fish ability to move freely, with just a bead above the swivel to keep the planer board from sliding all the way to the hook once a fish hits the bait. Another trick is the use of a treble stinger hook on gizzards in the 10"-12" size, so that short strikes have a change of producing a hook-up. The planer that is second in a 3-line spread would have more line between bait and planer, for example 10' or so. The planer closest to the boat would have 15' of line between planer and bait. The second planer may also have a light weight (3/8 or 1/2 oz), with the third planer having a slightly heavier weight (3/4 - 1 oz). This makes the baits run not only at different distances from the boat, but also at different depths, thus covering more of the water column. He places the biggest baits against the shore, and smaller ones closer to the boat. Planers and floats in the main channel also have a weight on them. Often it is hard to see fish when fishing shallow in fall, as they stay close to bottom and are difficult to detect with down imaging. Side scan and live scope can help see fish in shallow water, but more often fish are caught despite the screen showing only signs of bait but not clear marks of stripers in the same are feeding on that bait. He also recommends fishing slower if schools of bait are visible on the surface, to keep your baits low and in clear view of stripers on the bottom as they come up toward the school of bait at surface. Fishing directly in the bait school is not recommended; having your baits be separated on one side or another from a big school will make them stand out better.

Catch and Release

Usually if a fish has been played for a long time or kept out of water for pics or measurements, they do not survive that stress. Most times, and especially in summer, he keeps the fish in the water in the net after bringing it to the boat, then quickly 'torpedo' releases them into the water. This release technique almost always results in a fish swimming away successfully. So do your part - keep them in water and make it quick!

Captain Travis ended with a few memorable moments. His two biggest stripers from SML were 44" length and 32 lbs weight! These big fish were caught deep. One time a guest sneezed and blew his upper dentures out of his mouth and into the water, where they quickly sank from sight! Another time the charter guests “washed” their hands in the bait tank water, then promptly plunged those same hands into the chip snack bag!

THANK YOU, Captain Travis, for your excellent presentation! 😊