

“We’re Vikings!” the captain shouts. He’s blessed with a Chapel Hill education but is also a native of Cumberland County so it comes out sounding more like ‘Vikens.’

“We’re Vikings!” is what he likes to say when it’s wintertime, the water temperature’s in the low 50’s, the air is cooler than that, and we go fishing anyway. Other people may winterize their boats and curl up on a couch by the fireplace. Some kooks even head for the mountains for skiing. But certain hard-crab types will pile on layers of wool, fleece, and neoprene and head to the ocean in small boats. Often it’s speckled trout we’re pursuing, but this year from December into February striper fishing was the driving force.

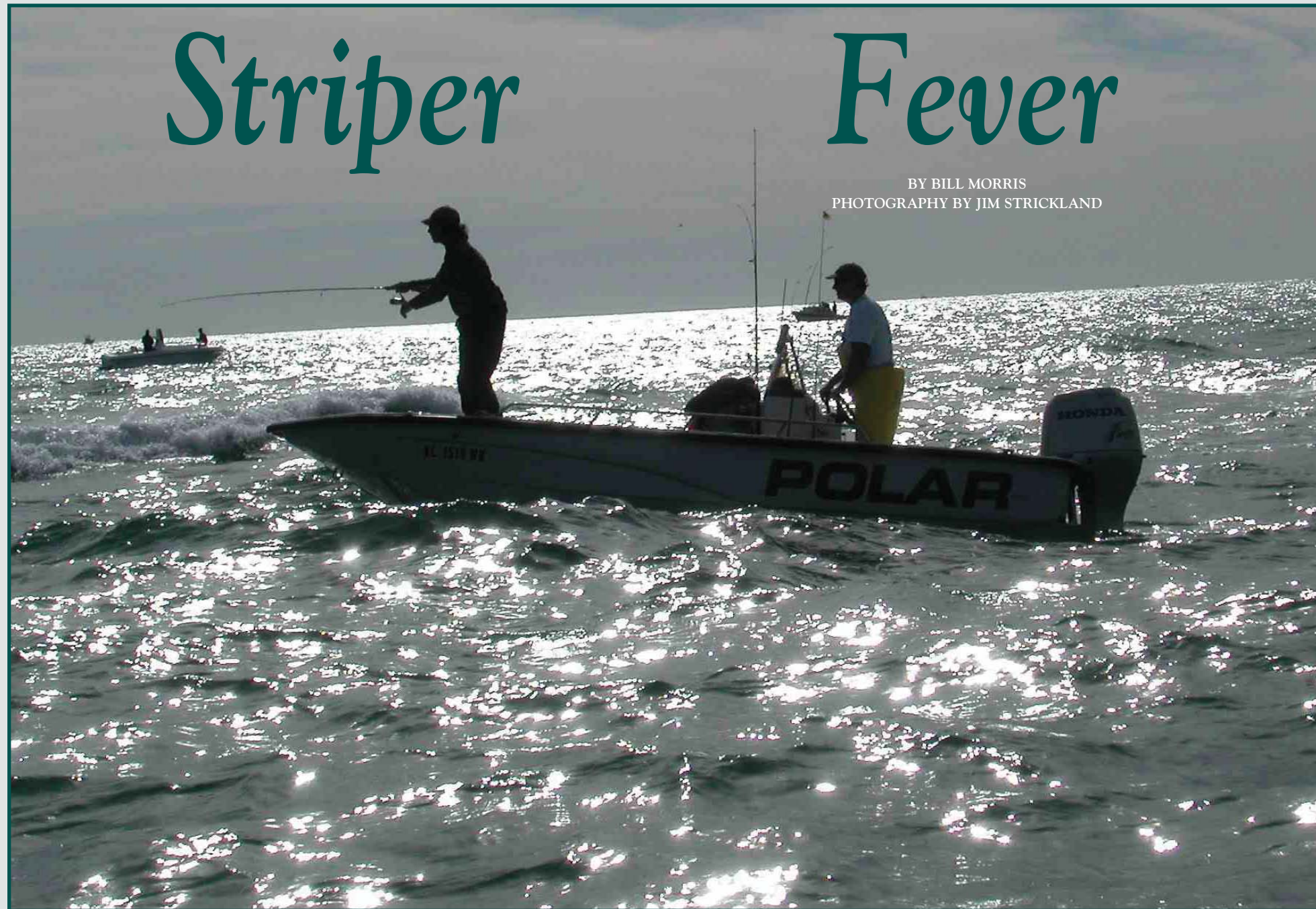
From Duck to Morehead City large striped bass, also known as rockfish or rock, were being caught in huge numbers by charter boats and private vessels alike. They were caught trolling, casting plugs, on the surface, and even on fly rods. They were caught from 40-foot depths all the way to the beach and on the shoals in between. Many days catching a limit (in the ocean, two fish over 28 inches) was no problem at all and thousands of stripers were caught and released, particularly by the charter boats.

These ocean stripers are migratory fish that spawn in rivers and their tributaries as far away as the upper reaches of the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland. They run in mammoth schools, are tough fighters, can be caught from small boats or surfcasting, and taste delicious. Add that all up and you’ve got what may be the perfect game fish. (One with the good timing to show up when we all are starting to go crazy from staring at the walls.)

When they’re feeding the rock swim through schools of baitfish – usually menhaden – in ravenous packs. You can find them by looking for flocks of gannets, the big white seabirds with black-tipped wings that can be easily spotted from a mile or more away. Often the gannets are diving in formation from tremendous heights, splashing down in spectacular fashion to pick up menhaden that have been chewed or stunned into easy pickings. When you combine a thousand diving birds, dozens of boats, and surface-busting fish that are literally knocking pound-sized menhaden (what the locals call mammyshad) into the air, then you’ve got the conditions that turn striper fishing into striper fever.

Striper Fever

BY BILL MORRIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM STRICKLAND



Striper fever can have some disconcerting symptoms. For example, in late December on the Cape Lookout Shoals I watched as a private-boat captain left his helm just long enough to gaff his buddy’s fish. Within seconds a breaking groundswell lifted the hull of the 23-foot Regulator clear of the water and plunked the skeg of its outboard down on a sand lump. Despite the hard landing they kept on fishing.

That’s striper fever.

On January 13, the Free Agent left its home port at the Oregon Inlet Fishing Center with a charter party of Rodney Rodgers and five friends from Westfield, NC aboard. Captain Rick Caton took them about 30 miles up the beach where they proceeded to cast and catch fish until their arms were ready to drop off. The six anglers caught 251 stripers up to 34 pounds. (239 fish were released.) These Vikings had intentionally set out to beat their own Free Agent record, set last February, of 228 fish caught.

That’s striper fever.

On a day when the air temperature never got above 40 and the wind was out of the northeast at about 15 knots, one of my friends figured we had to go have a look at the beach across from Cape Lookout Light, so we jumped in his 23-foot center console and headed up Back Sound at 40 knots. Halfway between Morehead City and the lighthouse I noticed that the gas fill hole on his portside gunwale was yawning open, the stainless steel cap dangling over the side by its tether of bead-chain. Obviously he had done the gas-and-go at the dock in a bit of a hurry. When I pointed this out the captain just grinned and yelled above the wind, “Striper fever.”

Viking or not, any boat operator needs to remember that in winter conditions a case of striper fever that gets out of control could cost a fisherman his life. This is especially true on the notorious Cape Lookout Shoals. Both Capt. Ken Kramer and Capt. Dave Dietzler of Morehead City stress that fishing on the shoals needs to be approached with caution.

Kramer, who’s spent 30 years fishing in and around the shoals, warns that, ““You should only attempt to go when the weather’s near perfect. The structure on the shoals is always changing, so you can never get complacent. People forget how strong the current across there can be, and they get sucked into someplace you’d rather not go.”





Dave Dietzler's advice is, "Just don't go there. Ninety percent of the fish are caught in deeper water anyway." Dietzler should know. By his count, between mid-December and mid-February he and his charter parties boated 530 stripers, the biggest 47 pounds. Compare that to the 80 fish he caught in the winter of 2002-03 and it's obvious that the past few months have seen some hot fishing in the Cape Lookout area. The best, in fact, that anyone can recall.

According to Dr. Louis Daniel of the North Carolina Department of Marine Fisheries, the increasing number of stripers moving farther south is the result of good fisheries management on the part of all the Mid-Atlantic states. "Stripers were over-fished so badly for so long," he says from the DMF office in Morehead City, "that their territory diminished along with their numbers. The recovered striped stocks are now extending back into what was once their natural range." Daniel says he wouldn't be at all surprised to see them working their way down to the Cape Fear area in the near future. In fact there have already been rumors of scattered catches that far south.

As good as the Cape Lookout fishing has recently been, or may become, the Oregon Inlet area is still Striper Central. Capt. Devin Cage's Poacher and Capt. Bobby Smith's Fish-N-Fool were the boats that first tapped into the ocean striped fishery in Dare County. Rick Caton and the Free Agent soon joined the party. Over the past several seasons, when the conditions have been right Caton's charters have averaged about 50 fish per trip.

Also fishing out of Dare County, Brian Horsley in Flat Out and Sarah Gardner in Fly Girl have specialized in the small boat/light tackle end of the spectrum. Between them they have held a number



of International Game Fish Association (IGFA) records for stripers caught on the fly.

"A lot of the IGFA striper records are in North Carolina now," Gardner says, adding: "Where they belong."

Will the winter fishery stay this good? There's a track record at Oregon Inlet that says yes, although the rock showed up a bit late this past November. The experts believe that since the migratory pattern now includes Cape Lookout, there's no compelling reason to expect it to change.

If all of this is giving you a case of striper fever, you should book your charter for next season soon. The hot captains are filling their schedules a year in advance.

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