

Striper Frenzy on Lake Powell, AZ

by Donn McKinnon

"They're fighting over it!" I exclaimed as several 3- to 5-pound gray torpedoes slashed at my small white deceiver. I stripped line as fast as I could. Finally one of the five pounder's won the battle and the fight was on.

After a 3-minute battle and a quick picture, I released the fish. When I looked up, the school was still in casting range, slashing at threadfin shad all around the boat. It was difficult to calm down enough to get the fly line in control so I could cast again.

I caught 6 fish out of this school before the bait sounded and the surface calmed again. The action lasted about 20 intense and frantic minutes. This is Lake Powell striper fishing!

I fished with guide Bill McBurney, of Ambassador Guide Service. Club member Jerry Bott recommended Bill to me several years ago. Bill has guided Colorado trout fishing trips out of Lees Ferry, Arizona for many years, offering a bonus day of fly fishing for striped bass in Lake Powell.

Unfortunately, the trout



populations below Glen Canyon Dam have been decimated by flow fluctuations and even shocking to "eliminate non-native fish species," such as rainbow and brown trout. It seems that western environmental groups have finally managed to use their influence to essentially wipe out this fishery.

Bill and his wife Cathy owned a fly shop with their guide service in Marble Canyon close to Lees Ferry for many years. He has moved to Page, Arizona and now he fishes mostly in the lake itself unless the angler wants to take a chance on the river's dwindling trout resource.

The good news is that Lake Powell has more striped bass than they can handle! In fact the National Park Service asks anglers to harvest all stripers caught in order to reduce the population. There is no limit on size or number of fish.

You might think that striper fishing is easy on Lake Powell, but it's not. The lake is 125 miles long on the Colorado River arm alone. There is also a San Juan River arm. When I fished it in

early September, the highest concentration of threadfin shad and therefore stripers were located some 35 miles from the launch ramp near the dam.

It can be a long waiting game before you start to see fish push the bait up to the surface, then you "run like heck" to the upwind side of the frenzy and start casting. Early morning and evening are best times for the bait to remain on the surface for longer intervals. However, the feeding frenzy can occur anytime during the day (or night). The mid-day frenzies are much shorter and the fish go down in about 15 seconds, or just about the time you race over to them.

When the fish are not coming up, you fish the area by trolling with foot-long, deep-diving Rapalas or you fish the rocky points for smallmouth bass. I tried it all. We caught several fish trolling, but I didn't find it too appealing. The smallmouth fishing was very good. Most were small, but we found several up to 3 pounds. We used sinking lines and even light spinners with grubs. Everything worked! While we fished for smallmouth, we watched for emerging striper frenzies. Often we had to put down the bass gear and race over to busting fish.

All in all, I had two outstanding intense days of fishing. Striped bass are a great game-fish and the visual part of chasing the feeding frenzies is great sport. Lake Powell is a wondrous place where it is sometimes difficult to simply gaze at the scenery. The marinas have huge houseboat fleets. Bill says he sets up lots of trips with up to 6 anglers on a houseboat. He brings another guide and boat out to fish 3 per boat for the stripers. He recommends this way to fish because you can catch the early morning frenzies then go back in the air conditioning during the hot part of the day. During the evening you go back out to fish. The best time of year for this is July. The best fishing time is around the new-moon phase.

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