

Five myths and
realities about
using floating lines
for striped bass.

By Steve Culton

Mainly Misunderstood

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A funny thing happens to trout anglers when they make the transition to fly fishing for stripers: they forget everything they know about the importance of line management and presentation.

They also forget their floating lines.

Part of this is because of the often-simple nature of fly fishing for striped bass. In many cases, all that is required to catch stripers is to find them, cast a fly, and strip it. An intermediate line suits this purpose well.

However, as an angler spends more time on the water, he or she encounters an increasing number of situations where the stripers are holding on station, feeding in current, and not willing to chase a stripped fly. Often, the solution lies within traditional trout and salmon presentations. Yet that knowledge—and the potential of the floating line—is ignored.

The greatest obstacle to the widespread use of floating lines for stripers is a fundamental misunderstanding of what floating lines can do—and what intermediate lines cannot do. I haven't used an intermediate line in nearly a decade. A floating line accounts for 95 percent of my striper fishing. (The remainder is with full-sinking tips or an integrated full-sinking line.) I use the floater year-round, and I catch more than my fair share of striped bass.

There's nothing extraordinary about what I'm doing. Anyone can learn to fish with a floating line. But it starts with faith in the method and suspending preconceived notions, many of which are inhibiting, if not just plain wrong. These are some of the most common popular misconceptions about using a floating line for striped bass, and notes on the reality of the situations.

Myth #1

The floating line is a specialty line for presentations on the surface.

Let's return to trout fishing. The floating line is the line of choice for catching trout on the surface. But it's also the line of choice for presenting nymphs along the bottom and wet flies anywhere in the water column.

Striper grandmaster Ken Abrames explains it this way: "How far down you fish is governed by your leader, your fly, any added weight, the current, and your ability to mend." That's true whether you're fishing the Madison in Montana or the salt pond outflows of Martha's Vineyard.

My favorite time to fish the mouth of the Housatonic in Connecticut is when the spring moons are full or new and at perigee. The tidal swing is enormous, and the current moves at a blistering pace. Even so, I can present my flies at or near the bottom in overhead deep water because, as Abrames says, "A floating line gives you speed and depth control." My leader may be anywhere from 7 to 10 feet long, and I might also add a 3/0 shot to the leader just above the fly. By casting upstream and then mending, I can feel the fly ticking along the bottom. Occasionally, I'll even hook a stray oyster shell.



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Still, anglers attempt to fish the bottom in the same conditions with dumbbell-eyed flies and intermediate lines. In many cases, their flies are not getting nearly so deep as they think.

The Reality: Floating lines are for presenting flies on the surface, the bottom, and all points in between.

Myth #2

A floating line conforms to the surface shape of waves, causing you to lose contact with your fly.

A few summers ago, I was fishing on Block Island, Rhode Island, just hours before Hurricane Arthur hit. On that night, the surf was in the three- to four-foot range—not insignificant, but certainly manageable. Even in the growing maelstrom, I could see the splashy takes of bass greedily feeding on sand eels. I was fishing off a jetty, and my floating line formed a series of undulating arcs over the crests and down the troughs of the waves. I took fish after fish, their hard strikes resonating from the fly to my fingertips. This is just one of many times that I've caught stripers in significant waves, chop, or swell with a floating line.

The Reality: A floating line will indeed conform to the shape of the waves, but you're still very much in contact with your fly.

Myth #3

An intermediate line is the most versatile striper line.

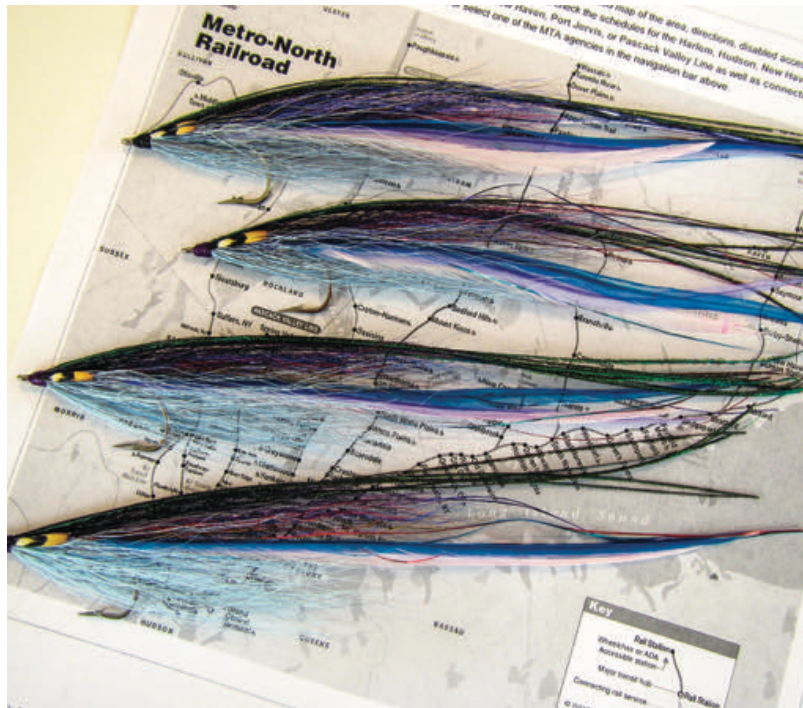
Popular and versatile have quite different meanings. Once you cast an intermediate line, there are only three things you can do



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Whether you're on shore (top) or pursuing fish from the bow of a boat (right), fish a floating line (left) for stripers parallel to shore to make it easier to lift the line off the water and over a wave crest. Also, don't concern yourself too much with lifelike flies. Impressionistic patterns, like those based on Ken Abrames' designs (middle) work great.



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with it: nothing (let the current take the line where it wills, or, in still water, let it slowly sink); strip it in; or feed line into the drift. Once I began using a floating line for stripers, I realized there was nothing I could do with an intermediate line that I couldn't do with a floating line—and so much more I could do with the floater.

It all comes down to control. Floating lines, by their nature, allow you to mend them, and mending equals line control. When you use a sinking line, you are ceding most of, if not all of, that control. The floating line opens the door to a vast array of presentation options that exponentially increase the angler's chances of hooking up—particularly with bigger stripers that won't chase a stripped fly.

From beachfronts to breachways, legions of anglers treat their fly rod like a spinning rod. I call it “armpit fishing,” and I did it for years until the numbing metronome of cast, strip, and repeat sent me searching for another way to fish.

“The basic fundamental thing about fly fishing is learning presentation,” Abrames says. “Presentation means that you control what's going on, so that you can bring your fly to the fish. So you're in control. Not the line. Not the accident [of randomly hooking a fish].”

And that's the beauty of the floating line. You can cast it and strip it to your heart's content and catch the stripers that anyone can catch. (The floater is my favorite line for targeting aggressive schoolies each spring.) But most of all, you'll have the line you'll need to make specialized presentations like deep dead drifts or greased-line swings for those difficult-to-catch stripers.

The Reality: Intermediate lines are limiting because they are extremely difficult to mend.



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Floating-Line Flies

When you switch to a floating line, it's also a good time to rethink your striped bass fly box, especially if it's heavy with dumbbell-eyed flies or stiff, opaque carbon copies of baitfish. Consider flies that are more impressionistic than realistic. Take a lesson from trout anglers and “match the hatch.” Your go-to fly on any given day should be the fly that best represents the bait the stripers are feeding on.

Finally, think about fishing presentation flies—that is, flies you don't need to strip to be effective. Presentation flies come alive when the magic ingredient of water is added. They move and breathe and pulse even when at rest. Best of all, they fool fish.

Myth #4

Intermediate lines are the best choice in surf because they sink under the waves.

It had been a rough night. I caught one lonely striper between 9 p.m. and 5 a.m. The wind, a brutal nor'easter, had been blowing at a sustained 20 knots. In a desperate attempt to salvage the outing, I walked along a surf-battered beach at dawn. The sand angled at a steep pitch down to the waterline, where a substantial trough lay a few feet offshore. I had been using a full-sink integrated line to cut through the wind, and since nothing was showing on the surface, I made a what-the-hell cast into the trough. Bass on! I caught a striper on each of my next eight casts.

Then, I noticed a blitz 50 yards down the beach, with both birds and stripers ravaging bait on the surface. I switched over to the floating line, casting and then mending it over the tops of the breakers. I caught dozens of bass, both stripping the fly and letting it dead-drift in the chaotic currents.

Anywhere there are waves, there is also current. Current moves in and out, and side to side. Once a line sinks below the surface, it is beholden to those currents. Conversely, a floating line can be lifted over the tops of waves. Some of my favorite spots are pockets where a jetty forms a right angle with the beach. Stripers will cruise the trough just off the beach and pin bait against the shore and the rocks. I like these spots when the surf is two to four feet high; I stand on the jetty and cast parallel to the beach. When a wave or wash comes in, I simply lift my line off the water and place it where I want it. That would be difficult, if not impossible, with a sinking line.

To be fair, sometimes it doesn't matter what kind of line you use—in certain conditions, the sea is going to win. Years ago, I fished with some friends at the beaches of Watch Hill, Rhode Island, in advance of a September hurricane. I was using my floater; they were both using intermediates. The surf was so enormous, we all ended up with our lines in a jumble at our feet after every cast.

The Reality: Sinking lines are still subject to the forces of surf and current.

Myth #5

Floating lines in the surf impart an undesirable action to flies.

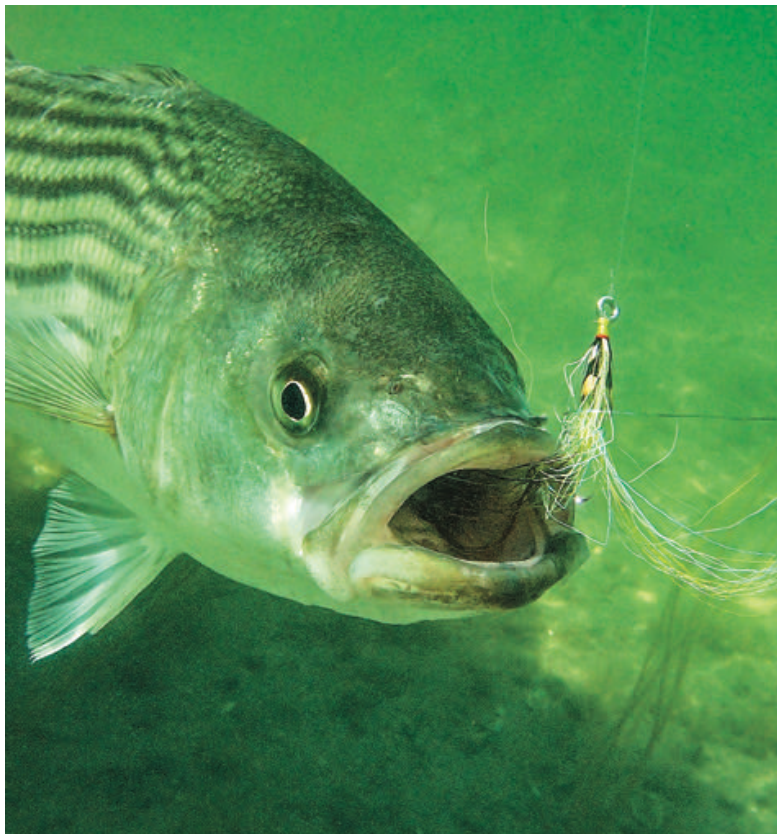
I've never understood this thinking. To repeat, once a line sinks, you cannot mend it; therefore, moving water will influence both the line and the fly. Even if I mend my floating line over a breaker, the fly may still be careening around in the wash. But that's not necessarily a bad thing.

Some baitfish, like anchovies, are notoriously fragile; small pods of them are constantly dashed against the Rhode Island shoreline during the fall migration. Stripers love to pick off the dazed prey as it flutters helplessly in the current—just as your fly would if you were making a slack-line presentation. I recall fishing the well-lit beachfront of a Rhode Island club on a chilly October evening. Anchovies were trapped between the waterline and a trough a few feet offshore. Stripers were holding in the trough, waiting for the wash to deliver the smacked-senseless bait to them. The only success we had was when we threw our flies into the break, then let the returning wave tumble the fly

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By its nature, a floating line allows you to mend easier and maintain better line control (top) versus a sinking or sink-tip line, which opens up a variety of retrieve options and techniques for manipulating your fly, especially around fish reluctant to chase flies (bottom).



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back to the bass. *Whack!* Flies behaving just like the naturals. That's what presentation is all about.

The Reality: You can always mend a floating line—and any action imparted by waves on flies, intentional or not, may be very desirable.

Taking the Next Step

Much of the resistance to floating lines is cultural. Fly fishing for striped bass dwells in the kingdom of the 9-weight rod and the intermediate line. Deviations are viewed as novelty, heresy, or just plain foolishness. Comedian Steven Wright said, "There's a fine line between fishing and just standing on the shore like an idiot." No one wants to look like an idiot. And if everyone else is fishing with an intermediate line, there is a clear comfort zone. But I've never aspired to fish like everyone else. When I made the decision to learn to fish with a floating line for striped bass, I was incredibly nervous about it. Today, I chuckle about all that unnecessary angst.

If you're intrigued by the possibilities of the floating line for striped bass, I urge you to try it. The experience is exhilarating. A floating line will present you with a wondrous new world of fly fishing opportunities. (I also recommend seeking out a copy of *Greased Line Fishing: For Salmon [and Steelhead]* by Jock Scott, and *Striper Moon* by Ken Abrames.) If you come from a fly-fishing-for-trout background, the parallels between the trout stream and the beachfront, salt pond, and estuary will amaze you. And you'll have to cast and strip only if you want to. 

Steve Culton is an outdoor writer, guide, speaker, and fly tier. You can see more of his work at www.currentseams.com.

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