

SIGHT CASTING STRIPERS IN THE LIGHT LINE



By Kayak Kevin Whitley

As I paddle out in the dark, to one of the busiest bridges in the lower Chesapeake Bay, I can hear Navy helicopters fly in low circles. I yell through the sonic thumping of their propellers. "This is the loudest place you will ever fish!" That maybe true about the Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel, but it is the best opportunity to site cast to stripers anywhere.

"You can see them?" Is the same question every time

I take a light line newbie. Every time I answer "Yes, you can see them. In the right conditions, you can grab their tails!"

We paddle under the low lying spans through hundreds of gulls diving and fighting for stunned silversides. Their loud squawking is overpowered by the 18 wheelers rumbling by, just over our heads. We slide up current in the darkness with our headlights off. Our eyes adjust and focus on the dozens of silhouetted stripers, crashing on silversides from their shady concealment.



Shante Fosket is holding a small light line caught striper on her first night out.

Six years ago, I was paddling back after dark from croaker fishing around the island of the HRBT. I hit a fish with my paddle under the bridge. I turned and saw them, my jaw dropped at the site. For nearly two years there were few of us who fished the light line, the right way.

Harry Huelsbeck and Jason Jordan fished out of Harry's 17' Sea Ox, and me, out of my Ocean Kayak. Harry is a fly line class world record holder for a 43-pound, 12-ounce striper caught at the CBBT light line. We became pals, laughing at the boat angler's confined to their anchor in front of the light line. We would watch as they cast their buck tails jigs at the line and sank. We could see that the stripers couldn't even get a look at it as it dropped below them as we picked out the ones we wanted to fight.

THE LIGHT LINE

The light line is the shadow of the bridge from its own street lights. The bait fish are attracted to the lights and when the current is running, the stripers will lay in ambush within the shadow of the bridge. They will nose up to the light line as the bait fish are swept to them by the current like a silverside conveyor belt. This happens every night, year round. Sometimes they are thin, seeing only five or six the entire length of the bridge. But I have also seen the line exploding like someone was dumping bricks off of the bridge and I could smell the silverside slaughter.

Every lit bridge has a light line, the CBBT, the M&M and the Lesner over the Lynnhaven Inlet. But in my opinion, the HRBT is the best light line around. The HRBT is lower to the water, which cast a more vivid light line. Both currents work equally well, although I prefer the incoming. The lights on the east bridge (west bound) are all on the east side, making a continuous line down the bridge. This combined with the shal-

I get a thrill in seeing the excitement in a light line newbie. They can't believe their eyes when they see stripers lined up, side to side across the line. That's when I yell, "Chose your target!"

I'm not claiming to be the first to discover the light line, but I found it quite by acci-



HRBT striper light line.

low shoal that runs parallel with the bridge makes for the perfect conditions. The shoal creates turbulence which disorientate the bait as they're swept to the long bright line where the stripers hunt in the dark, and that's where we stalk them.

THE GEAR AND TECHNIQUE

Most of the year the stripers are in the 16 to 20 inch class. In late winter and early spring the spawning class of 30 to 40 inchers show up in the line. There's nothing like paddling by seeing 20 incher after 20 incher, then running across a 36 incher. My adrenaline starts pumping before I get a cast off.

I take one medium-heavy rod when hunting the line. Any others will scrape on the bridge when a larger striper pulls you through the pilings. I use 20lb main line with an arms length of 30lb leader that is tied to a 6/0 Gamakatsu bait holder hook, no weight. The main bait fish at the HRBT are silversides. Any lure that looks like a 5 inch silverside will work as long as it's dark in color. The stripers are looking into the light. A dark lure will stand out, silhouetted against the lit water.

Fishing the light line is all about positioning, there's more paddling than casting. Getting the kayak to 'hover' in the current and wind will give you the time to make quick accurate casts at your target. A westerly wind will hold a kayak in the incoming current at the HRBT. When I paddle up to the line, I have my rod at the ready in my lap. I paddle lightly to be sure I don't run over the line. This will scare the stripers and they will dive. I only cast when I acquire a target. I keep my eyes fixed on him as I put my paddle down and fire a short, accurate cast. I don't cast out into the light. The blues own that part of the water. If I do cast too far into bluefish territory, I'll skip the lure quickly across the water to avoid them. I let the lure drop an inch under the surface two feet from the line and my target striper. I keep reeling with the current and twitch the lure as it passes in front of the fishes face. They are triggered by movement. When it's in front of them, I give the lure a little twitch. Without any movement, they will look at it pass on by in the current. When I see them turn and look, I twitch and they inhale it.

When the stripers are real aggressive and unflinching you can simply cane pole'em. Paddle up to the line with four feet of line out. Swing the lure out in front of a striper and give it a twitch. It's as simple as that. Ric Burnley has abandoned casting altogether for the cane pole style. He uses a seven and a half foot rod and will pick them off the line all night, never even making a cast. The light line is more like hunting than typical fishing. It is shooting fish in a barrel.

The HRBT light line is an amazing thing to see. You can watch the behavior of stripers feeding and pitch a lure in front of them and catch them until your thumbs are bleeding. The light line is made for a kayak angler. Boaters can get in on the action also and see what we've been seeing for all these years. But it might make a boat owner want to get a kayak. Then paddle out with us and GET ON'EM!

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Kayak Kevin with a 32 inch striper that he chased for a half hour.