

A DAY ON THE DITCH

A man in a red jacket and cap is fishing from a rocky shore at dawn. The water is calm and blue, with a misty background. The man is standing on a rocky bank covered in green vegetation, holding a fishing rod that extends into the water. The sky is a soft, hazy blue, and the overall scene is peaceful and serene.

A seasoned “Canal Rat” shares his routine for fishing a morning tide on the Cape Cod Canal.

By “East End” Eddie Doherty

My bare feet find the carpeted floor as I roll out of bed at 2 a.m. without the aid of an alarm clock. I’m still a little groggy, but my internal clock works just fine during fishing season without the need for electronic devices. Tiptoeing quietly to the bathroom allows my wife to continue sleeping and extends the warranty on a long marriage even longer. I sneak out to the living room and get dressed in clothes left there the night before while the coffee machine in the kitchen churns out the dark-roasted rocket fuel that will bring me to full attention in the car. A compact transport tray with a handle sits in its designated spot on the kitchen counter ready to hold a small, frozen plastic bottle of water, coffee, and a breakfast snack. My vehicle is already in the driveway, so I don’t need to open the noisy garage door and wake my bride. It’s time to grab my loaded tray and begin the 20-minute drive to the Cape Cod Canal for a surfcasting adventure. Some may call this an abnormal existence, but I am happy and don’t need sleep – I’m a Canal Rat!

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The author posing with a beautiful Canal striper.

Relevant tide tables have already been committed to memory on this late June morning as I drive on roads nearly devoid of traffic. This ride is usually the time to decide on my fishing spot based on bait presence, recent intelligence, tides, and other factors but, today, I already know that I am heading for Aptuxet Trading Post on the Cape side of the Canal, first to fish and then to attend an early morning cookout. I am a member of the Buzzards Bay Anglers Club, which will be joining the Falmouth Fishermen's Association next to the pavilion. The event organizer, Bill Produz, a great surfcaster who belongs to both groups, will be working his magic on the grill for a camaraderie-filled feast just a short cast from the raging Canal currents.

My Canal bike is equipped with two rod holders attached to the saddle basket on the rear. One rod always has a jig clipped on and the other is ready for topwater action with a surface plug. Since it is a woman's bike, I can get off quickly at the sight of breaking fish, eliminating the need for a leg swing over the back of the bike, thereby keeping my upright rods out of harm's way. A ride along the service road is a unique and enjoyable excursion because I often stop to talk with fellow Canal Rats like George Osowick, Phil Chorman, Steve Dewar, and the multi-talented John Doble.

A bike also gives me the mobility to relocate if I get a call alerting me to fish or even for a quick exit from a spot suddenly overrun by less experienced or discourteous anglers. When someone sets up too close to me, I try to politely explain the likelihood of tangled lines, but I'm not always as persuasive as Wild Bill. The 6-foot, wiry surfcaster with the bushy gray beard looks like he just came out of central casting for a movie audition about mountain men, but hidden beneath a gruff, weathered exterior beats the heart of a kind angler. When a guy came too close, Bill nicely asked him to move, but the stubborn neophyte wouldn't budge until finally abandoning his position after hearing an offer he couldn't refuse. Wild Bill trained

A Season On The Ditch

- The first schoolies nose their way into the Canal at the end of April, hot on the tails of the alewives headed for the Bournedale Herring Run. Keepers arrive in earnest by the first week of May, with 20-pounders being reported between the second and third weeks of May.
- The good fishing continues through June as waves of migrating stripers move through the Canal to Cape Cod Bay, feeding on bunker, river herring, squid, and mackerel.
- If big baitfish, namely mackerel, stick around, the full and new moon periods of July and August can bring excellent fishing.
- In September, bass begin moving through the Canal from east to west on the migration south. Some years, this begins in late August, but it is most apparent in September. October brings waves of good fishing with the last reliable shots at large stripers. Baitfish can include peanut and adult-sized menhaden, butterfish, mackerel, and spearing.
- Schoolies remain abundant in the Canal into November, and if sea herring show up, there may even be a last shot at big bass as they follow these silvery baitfish.



his stern eyes on the guy and said, “Don’t make me go back to prison!”

Today, however, my bike stays on my trunk rack in the Aptuxet parking lot because it is not needed for the short distance to my spot. I step into 16-inch deck boots with jetty cleats attached, buckle my utility belt around my waist, sling my lure bag strap over my shoulder, and take out my 10½-foot surf rod. Walking on the grass along the water side of the service road not only prolongs the life of my metal spikes, but also eliminates the noise they make in contacting macadam, keeping peaceful serenity intact. There is no one else here yet, so the silence is only interrupted by the sound of a passing commercial trawler’s diesel engine and the crashing swells generated from her wooden hull.

My brief easterly stroll has taken me close to pole 355, where I carefully descend the riprap, knowing from past experience that there is good footing at water’s edge. A perfectly flat spot in the Canal rocks is harder to find than a smile on Bill Belichick’s face, so locating secure, or at least decent, footing is always my goal. Physical safety is paramount and the acquired skill of casting with one foot planted on a rock 6 inches higher than the other takes time.

The Canal is a unique and endearing place, even when the fish are not biting. The Big Ditch was excavated through hard labor, but during the ensuing century since it opened to shipping traffic, it has become more of

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a natural phenomenon than a completed manmade construction project. The 7-mile saltwater trench and surrounding landscape is home to countless species of fish, birds, and animals, including thousands of mink.

Often, like this morning, I am one of the first to arrive on the Canal, and I'm so familiar with the terrain that my headlamp usually remains off. A few lights flicker in the distance, but this part of the magnificent Canal is all mine for now.

The butt end of my rod rests in a crevice at an angle between two rocks near 355, and my lure bag sits on a boulder behind me, away from the waves. The 125-pound-test Tactical Anglers Power Clip attached to the end of my braided line with a Palomar knot is unhooked, dangling over the rocks. I make my 3-foot, 50-pound-test fluorocarbon leaders in winter by attaching a 130-pound SPRO Power Swivel to one end and a Trophy Rigs XL Fast Snap on the other. I used

to use Trophy Rigs for all of my connections, but once in a while, the leader flew off during a cast, and Tactical Angler clips provide a more secure combination on the braid. Trophy Rigs, however, connect more easily to some plugs because their wires are slightly turned up at the ends. The eye of the swivel slides onto the Tactical Anglers clip so the leader is now ready for a lure.

Fooling a fish with a surface plug, like the Guppy JoBo Jr., is definitely the most exciting way to catch a striped bass because water sprays from the broad, slapping tail the instant the lure disappears into the fish's enormous, wide-open mouth. But bass are not always willing to feed on the surface, so I reach for my all-time favorite soft-plastic, bottom-bouncing weapon, the Bill Hurley 5-ounce Canal Killer in white. The hook is on top, which helps avoid a snag on a lobster pot or other obstacle, and the paddle tail gives off a steady vibration as it rises up into the current.

This is the most versatile lure in my bag since it casts favorably and is effective at every depth, sometimes even hooking a breaking fish an instant after splashdown.

I apply a few drops of BioEdge mackerel scent, even though the white plastic looks nothing like a mackerel. My second favorite color is the green mackerel pattern, but I am a firm believer that lure presentation is much more important than color. My drag is set tight on my Van Staal 200 spinning reel with help from an AquaSkinz Thunder Glove on my left hand. I never realized that a glove could have so many useful features. Anyone using braided line knows that you have to protect your casting index finger, and nothing works better for me than the AquaSkinz Finger Shield held securely around my right wrist.

The west-bound tide is flowing pretty fast since it's not scheduled to turn east for another couple of hours, after first light, with the extreme low-

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**Fishlab Tackle
Mad Eel**

PADDLETAIL SWIMBAIT

Paddletail soft-plastic swimbaits rigged on 3- to 5-ounce jigheads, like the FishLab Tackle Mad Eel have become a staple on the Canal in recent seasons. They can be worked through the water column with lift-and-drop or steady retrieves.

LONG-CASTING PENCIL POPPER

A heavy pencil popper capable of reaching distant fish, like the Ocean Born Flying Pencill can be the difference between catching and watching on the days when breaking stripers stay toward the middle of the Canal.



**Shimano
Colt Sniper**

MINNOW PLUG

1- to 2-ounce minnow plugs with internal weight-transfer systems, like the Shimano Colt Sniper Jerk imitate smaller tinker mackerel, herring, and just about any baitfish that moves through the Canal, tempting stripers of all sizes.



ARTICULATED SWIMBAIT

The frantic action of a quickly-retrieved articulated swimbait like the Sebile Magic Swimmer triggers punishing strikes from stripers in the Canal.

**Sebile Magic
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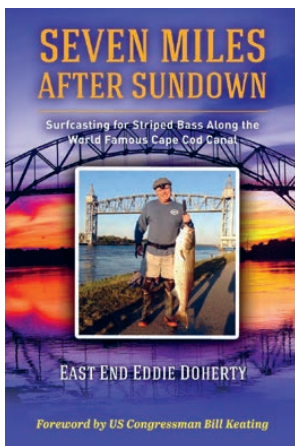
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tide scheduled to bottom out shortly thereafter, completing the breaking tide. I cast my Hurley up-tide to the right and through fog so thick I can hear the splash, but not see it. Many fishermen let the lure sink all the way to the bottom before infusing any action, but I like to give it some life by flicking a few rod twitches as it descends in case a fish happens to be holding at that level of the water column. I continue to jig as the powerful seawater sweeps my lure in front of me and down-tide to my left. The paddletail goes to work as the taut line forces it to rise off the bottom and flutter into the current. I occasionally add a little wiggle with my rod tip as I slowly reel in the 40-pound PowerPro braid and keep repeating this routine as more anglers join me on both sides.

Hundreds of lines end up in the water, but the surfcasters near me understand the importance of casting in sequence to minimize tangles. Suddenly, the distinctive sound of breaking fish can be heard off to the east. The fog lifts at 4:45 a.m., just in time to reveal a moving school of stripers ripping up the surface in front. It is not a huge all-out blitz, but it is a beautiful sight! My Canal Killer is already lifting off the bottom, down-tide in its most productive zone at 10 o'clock, when I get hit hard.


I can feel the weight of a nice fish as she makes a run and stays submerged under the reflection of the Strawberry Moon. Regaining line is only temporary, and my drag sings while she makes two more strong swims for freedom. The linesider is finally subdued, with her head resting between some rocks at my feet. I admire the healthy 45-inch striper before carefully setting her free.

Soon the smell from the grill permeates the air as I stow away my gear. I make my way to the gathering and wrap up another memorable day on the Canal with fish tales just as juicy as the burgers and dogs. 





Doherty, a retired Massachusetts District Court Clerk-Magistrate, is the author of *Seven Miles After Sundown: Surfcasting the Cape Cod Canal*, available at retail outlets, local tackle shops, and on Amazon.

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