



Photo by Paulo Almeida

Sunshine on My Shoulders

Hard-fighting hybrids add fishing excitement and the prospect of great dinners.

BY HUNTER BACH

We drifted out of a small creek into the main channel of the river. I cast across the stream and at an angle up current. At the end of the leader, a large bluegill imitation fly with a deerhair head darted as I enlivened it with short, sharp strips. As the fly sank into the dark water, the line jumped taut and I strip set on what I suspected to be a healthy largemouth. Loose flyline jumped at my side as it slipped between index finger and corked rod handle under tension.

"Whatever this is, it's big," I offered to my girlfriend in the bow of the canoe. I got the fish on the reel before it took two more 10-yard-plus runs. My girlfriend slipped the net under a mesmerizingly striped fish.

"What is that?" she asked.

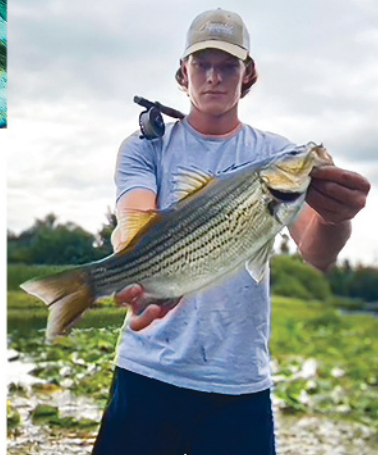
"That is a sunshine bass."

Sunshines, otherwise known as

hybrid bass, were first bred in 1971 by scientists with the then-Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission. They are a cross between a female white bass and a male striped bass. They do not reproduce naturally in the wild but may undertake instinctive spawning runs. All of the spawning of hybrid striped bass in Florida takes place at the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Blackwater Creek Research and Development Center near Holt, Florida.

As a candidate for stocking, sunshines have a role in optimizing aquatic ecosystems that have become eutrophic (overly rich in nutrients and low in oxygen) or overpopulated by baitfish. Sunshine bass feed heavily on shad, including gizzard shad, which when over-populated increase phosphorous and nitrogen levels in the water system. Sunshines seem to co-exist well with other species. Due to the pelagic (open water) nature

Writer with a sunshine bass on St. Johns River. Above: Springs along the river are favored in warm seasons.



of sunshine bass, they do not appear to be in direct competition with any other native gamefish populations.

Sunshine bass are fun to catch and provide a "put-grow-take" fishery for anglers looking for nice fillets. In rivers, sunshines typically hold in deep bends or holes and handle current exceptionally well in contrast to largemouth bass, which are much more structure-oriented. They almost exclusively feed on baitfish. They won't quite jump, but the take is a lot like a fired-up snook and, on fly or light tackle, the runs are comparable.

Sunshine bass grow the largest in Northwest Florida and can be

found stocked in lakes and rivers as far south as West Palm Beach. The best fisheries are found in the St. Johns, Apalachicola, and mouth of the Escambia rivers. The white bass genetics allow them to tolerate Florida's balmy summers, including water temperatures up to 90 degrees.

The FWC maintains logs on stocking and provides details about access to water bodies occupied by sunshine bass. Most major, spring-fed tributaries of the St. Johns hold them in their lower regions. On lakes, you will typically find them schooling in the morning and evening on baitfish and holding in deep water throughout the day. On the Harris Chain of lakes, the major bridges hold good numbers throughout the day due to the depth and current obstructions.

Look for deep water with docks jutting into the current, large fallen trees, and bottom contours that create eddies. They're a mostly open water fish but they most certainly take advantage of the current breaks to ambush baitfish.

Some of the best days are had with old school techniques like spoons and bucktail jigs. Other presentations that are very effective are suspending jerkbaits, lipless crankbaits, deep-diving crankbaits (obviously for fish holding deeper) and soft plastic flukes or Zara Spooks for fish feeding on the surface. On fly, you cannot go wrong with Clouser minnows, weighted and colored for the scenario. In most situations X-small dumbbell eyes offer the proper versatility.

With any presentation, you'll need to get your bait at the depth of the fish of course. Once it is in the zone, quick, erratic movements receive the most committed bites.

Last but not least, sunshine bass are delicious! The general state bag limit for them is 20 per person (to include any combination of sunshine bass, white bass or striped bass). No more than six of those may be larger than 24 inches. There are special regulations in effect on certain Fish Management

Areas, and waterways shared with Alabama and Georgia will have differing regulations, as well. Check MyFWC.com. [FS](https://www.fwc.com)

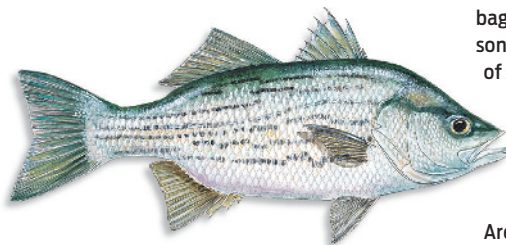


Striped Bass

Male striped bass interbred with female white bass in hatchery yields hardy, popular hybrid.



White Bass



SUNSHINE BASS