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The Butte's striped bass bonanza

By Darren Marcy

Outdoor Editor

ELEPHANT BUTTE Among the lakes in the United States that offer inland striped bass fishing, few anywhere in the west can top Elephant Butte Reservoir in south-central New Mexico.

Spring is always one of the times when anglers land some of the biggest stripers of the year at the big lake often referred to simply as The Butte.

Located along Interstate 25 in southern New Mexico, The Butte is easy to find. In fact, it's hard to miss.

Stretching more than 40 miles, the dam is located near the town of Truth or Consequences.

The community of Elephant Butte is a good place to base operations, find a guide, get a room for the night and stock up on supplies.

Where you fish will largely depend on what you find out once you get there.

T or C offers additional options for lodging and restaurants.

Reports have anglers catching behemoth stripers exceeding 40 pounds, and fish in the 25- to 30-pound range have proven fairly routine at the Butte.

The state-record striped bass is a 54-pound, 8-ounce monster caught by

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Jim Secor of Ruidoso April 1, 1992.

In the first six months of 1992, six stripers topped the 50-pound mark.

That Elephant Butte fatty fell for a live shad, and measured 45 inches long and had a girth of 34 inches.

Secor, on his first striper fishing trip, was using live shad on 17-pound test line in rough water, a condition that sometimes spurs the bigger fish to feed.

The guide who laid claim to the state record striper died last year.

Buddy Humphrey, of Buddy's Guide Service, led Secor to the state-record bass, and was known as one of the top guides at the Butte before dying last year.

Patrick Webb now operates Buddy's Guide Service for Humphrey's wife.

Webb said Buddy's Guide Service has landed five fish over 50 pounds.

One fish that a client had on for 25 minutes before his line was wrapped around a submerged tree was huge. That same client later landed a 39-pounder and said the fish he lost was a lot bigger.

The 1990s brought a couple of years of relatively poor striper fishing, but the last four or five years have seen the lake's big striper reign return, said J.R. McManus, owner of J.R.'s Desert Bass Fishing Guide Service.

McManus has been guiding at the Butte for nearly nine years and said April is a prime time to stick a big female striper.

Because striped bass eggs don't hatch at Elephant Butte, taking a female isn't as big a concern as it is for largemouth or smallmouth bass.

From late March, through April and into May, the stripers move up into the shallow flats where anglers catch fish in water as shallow as 3 feet.

Top-water action is hot, and some anglers even use long rods to take stripers on Clouser minnows fished with sinking line.

Frankie Urzetta of Frankie's Guide Service offers fly-fishing specialty trips for anglers who aren't interested in live bait or plugs.

"It was kind of a struggle at first mixing in live bait and plugging and figuring out how to catch them on a fly-rod," Urzetta said. "It's a short window of time you can get them on the fly rod. If it gets hot they're out of the shallows and back in the deep water."

Urzetta said anglers love the thrill of potentially hooking a big fish on a fly-rod and reel.

"All you've got to do is see them and start casting with that sinking line," Urzetta said. "They hammer it. You've really got to be stripping like mad."

For those who are accustomed to traditional striper hardware, try a top-water lure while they're shallow, or plugs when they're deep.

McManus guided Rick Williamson of Alamogordo to a 52-pound, 1-ounce striper in early April two years ago.

That fish came out of 3 feet of water on a top-water lure, McManus said, and was one of two 50-plus pound fish caught that month.

He said his favorite top-water lures are a 5 1/2-inch Bomber Model A with a red front and clear back. He also uses a Cotton Cordell Red Fin.

McManus said he likes a fast, steady retrieve with the Bomber, but other times a stop and go action works, and sometimes it pays to stop and twitch the bait a bit.

"If one blows up and doesn't get it, stop and twitch it a little," McManus said. "It'll usually come back and get it."

Other popular baits include Pencil Poppers and large Rapalas.

When fish go deep, things get less predictable.

Live bait is probably the most popular way to fish for striped bass.

But the big question remains where to fish, how deep and what kind of structure the stripers might be holding to.

One thing is for sure, however, and that's the quality of the fishing.

"Our average fish is about 12 pounds," McManus said. "They have a real good chance of catching a 20- to 30-pounder."

The striper fishery is a big deal for the community of Elephant Butte, a town that hangs its hat on the fishery.

While plenty of anglers come to town to chase largemouth bass and fish tournament circuits, it's the stripers that draw people from long distances.

"It's probably our biggest resource here," McManus said. "It brings a lot of people here to this city."

Webb said the lake's reputation is well established.

"A couple of years ago, it was rated No. 3 for trophy fish," Webb said. "We get people from all over the world coming here to fish. It's a world-renowned lake. There are some big fish out there."

Low water levels don't seem to be hurting the fishery for the short term. And as long as the Rio Grande keeps water running into the lake, the stripers should be fine.

The talk of low water levels, however, has hurt the area, McManus said.

"We've had a lot of bad publicity," he said. "It hasn't affected the fishing any for stripers."

Elephant Butte's reputation for big stripers has grown, and the lake is now considered one of the top striper lakes in the Southwest.

Ten states have bigger stripers on record than New Mexico's.

The IGFA all line-class record is 67-8, a California fish.

Seven states have 60-pound, or better, stripers on their books, but the Butte could join that group, or take the top spot any time.

Last summer, a 67-pound striper was found floating dead at Elephant Butte.

The bass was studied and it was determined the fish probably died of old age.

During the spawn, she would have been full of eggs and quite a bit heavier.

Webb said the current state record had 10 pounds of eggs in her.

McManus agrees the fish would have been a new world-record striper.

"In April it could have been up to 70 pounds or more," McManus said.

Many believe the new world record is somewhere in Elephant Butte, swimming in the deep, clear water.

McManus is one of those believers.

"I think the record is in here," he said. "I just don't think we've caught it yet. I'm almost positive. I just hope I'm the one who catches it."

Some records have already been taken from the Butte.

The 1999 International Game Fish Association record book has an entry for an Elephant Butte fish that went 52-8 in 1991 and still holds the 50-pound line class record.

Jason Wedel caught a junior world-record striper for kids 11-16 years of age that went 51-10.

More recently, Chad O'Leary, 10, caught a 30-pounder that set a new junior IGFA record for youth 10 and younger.

Striped bass are not native to New Mexico, having been introduced by the Department of Game and Fish in 1972.

In addition to Elephant Butte, they are also found in Caballo Lake, which is just downstream from the Butte.

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Elephant Butte Striper Guides

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Frankie's Guide Service

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Rio Grande Guide Service

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