

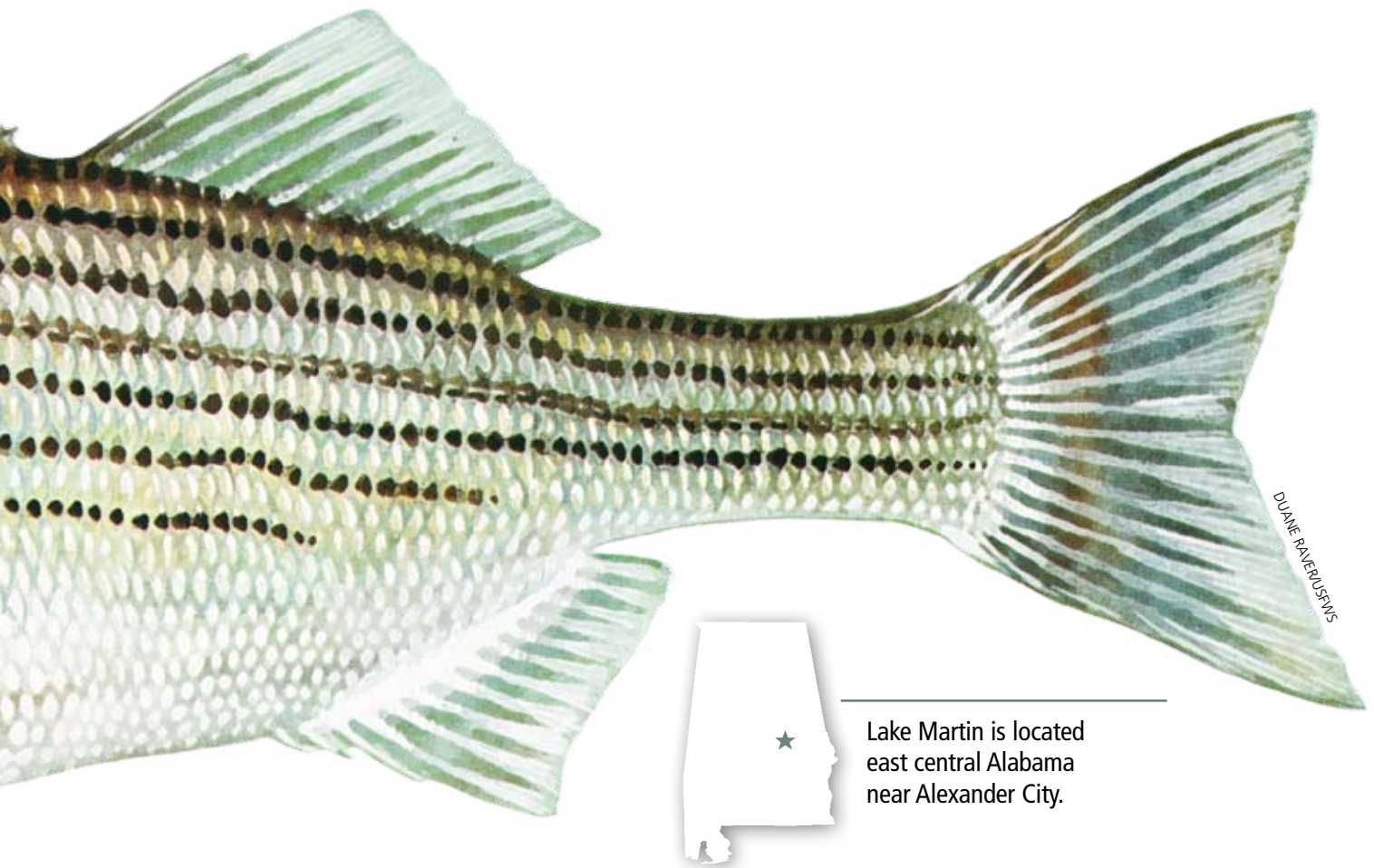


# Lake Martin Stripers

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By J. Chris Greene, District IV Fisheries Supervisor

**Lake Martin covers approximately 40,000 acres and spans portions of three counties in east-central Alabama.** The waters of the Tallapoosa River, including Lake Martin, are extremely clear and preferred by most water sports enthusiasts such as jet skiers, water skiers, swimmers, and pleasure boaters. To the contrary, this infertile water is not considered ideal for most sportfish species, but the deep, clear waters of Lake Martin provide essential habitat for the striped bass.



Lake Martin is located east central Alabama near Alexander City.

## Stocking Practices

Striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*) are considered anadromous, meaning they historically lived in estuaries and saltwater before migrating inland to spawn in freshwater. The Gulf Coast strain of striped bass is native to Alabama, but current populations are not self-sustaining. Before the construction of dams, stripers made their annual spawning runs from the Mobile Delta into the Alabama River. As they traversed on a northern path, they eventually reached their chosen spawning grounds in rivers such as the Coosa and Tallapoosa as well as their tributaries. Females deposited eggs into these flowing systems, which matured as they suspended and progressed along many downstream miles before hatching. Dam construction along these major river systems now impedes flow,

which eliminates the potential for natural reproduction. This necessitates stocking for the continued existence of this now land-locked species in Alabama.

The Fisheries Section of the Alabama Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division stocks striped bass fingerlings annually into predetermined public water bodies statewide. Unique reservoirs such as Martin, Lewis Smith, Yates and Thurlow are chosen for stocking since they provide suitable summertime thermal refuges.

Adult brood-fish are collected from select locations during the spring and are transported to the state operated Marion Fish Hatchery for spawning. Once the eggs hatch, the fry are reared in earthen ponds before they are harvested as 1- to 2-inch fingerlings and transported to reservoirs for stocking. Striped bass stocking rates in Alabama are extremely low compared

to many other southeastern states. They are based primarily on lake fertility, which directly impacts the availability of forage species like shad. Occasionally adjustments in stocking rates may be required based on fish condition and growth as determined by fisheries biologists. Lake Martin is typically stocked with three fish per acre annually for a total of 120,000 fish.

Most reservoirs in Alabama do not offer the year-round habitat that is vital for striped bass survival. The combination of cool water, which is well oxygenated, does not continually exist in most of these systems. These reservoirs are sometimes stocked with hybrid striped bass (*Morone chrysops x saxatilis*), which are more tolerant of warmer water temperatures. Hybrid striped bass or palmetto bass are a cross between male white bass and female striped bass.



*Tommy Simmons holds the 48-pound, 6-ounce striped bass he caught on Lake Martin on August 11, 2008.*

## Seasonal Habitat Preferences

To be a successful striped bass angler, it is vital to understand fish movement and location during different times of the year. Large stripers have very distinct habitat requirements and will travel throughout a reservoir during certain times of the year seeking cool, oxygen-rich water with access to prey. These fish typically prefer water that is cooler than 25 degrees Celsius (77 degrees Fahrenheit) and has adequate dissolved oxygen (>2mg/L). During the winter and early spring, this habitat is usually abundant since cooler water typically contains sufficient oxygen. At this time of year, striped bass are somewhat scattered as they tend to reside throughout the upper reservoir and in many of the feeder creeks. They may also be located at a variety of depths depending largely on the location of baitfish.

As the water temperature rises in the summer, critical habitat can become limited. Sunlight heats up the surface waters to temperatures not tolerable and the deeper, colder waters may not contain enough dissolved oxygen. At this time, larger fish migrate to the lower reservoir and suspend at specific depths near the thermocline where oxygen and temperature are both adequate. The thermocline is the depth in a lake where the rate of temperature change is the greatest when measured in a vertical profile. Generally, this habitat is too cold for shad and thus stripers become separated from their preferred food source resulting in poor health. During extreme conditions, suitable habitat may diminish to the point where fish can no longer survive. Occasional striped bass die-offs have been documented in Lake Martin during the months of August and September.

## Determining Location

Since most anglers do not possess a temperature and dissolved oxygen meter to determine summertime striper habitat, locating fish involves other methods. Once an angler has a general idea of the area within a reservoir that striped bass are occupying, the use of a depth (fish) finder can provide crucial information. Today's depth finder technology offers the capability of not only viewing depths and bottom contours, but also observing fish with the ability to discern size. In late summer, it is not uncommon to view baitfish above areas where larger striped bass are seen. Many times stripers must ascend out of their desired habitat to feed since shad inhabit shallower depths. With this information, anglers can lower their lures to specific areas where stripers are residing or actively feeding. Using GPS to mark these hot spots can be valuable information for future trips.

Sometimes striped bass can be located by visually searching for surfacing schools of baitfish, especially during the cooler months when habitat is not a limitation. This is especially true on sunny days when the water temperature in a reservoir is on the rise. Small disturbances in surface water almost like tiny droplets of rain can reveal the location of a school of shad. Gulls and other birds that target fish for food can also give clues to the location of baitfish as they continually circle over an area or plummet into the water for an easy meal. In the early morning and late afternoon, stripers can even be observed actively feeding on these schools of fish as they create numerous and sometimes sudden surface eruptions. These feeding frenzies can often be short-lived, so it is essential for an angler to be prepared to take advantage of this opportunity.

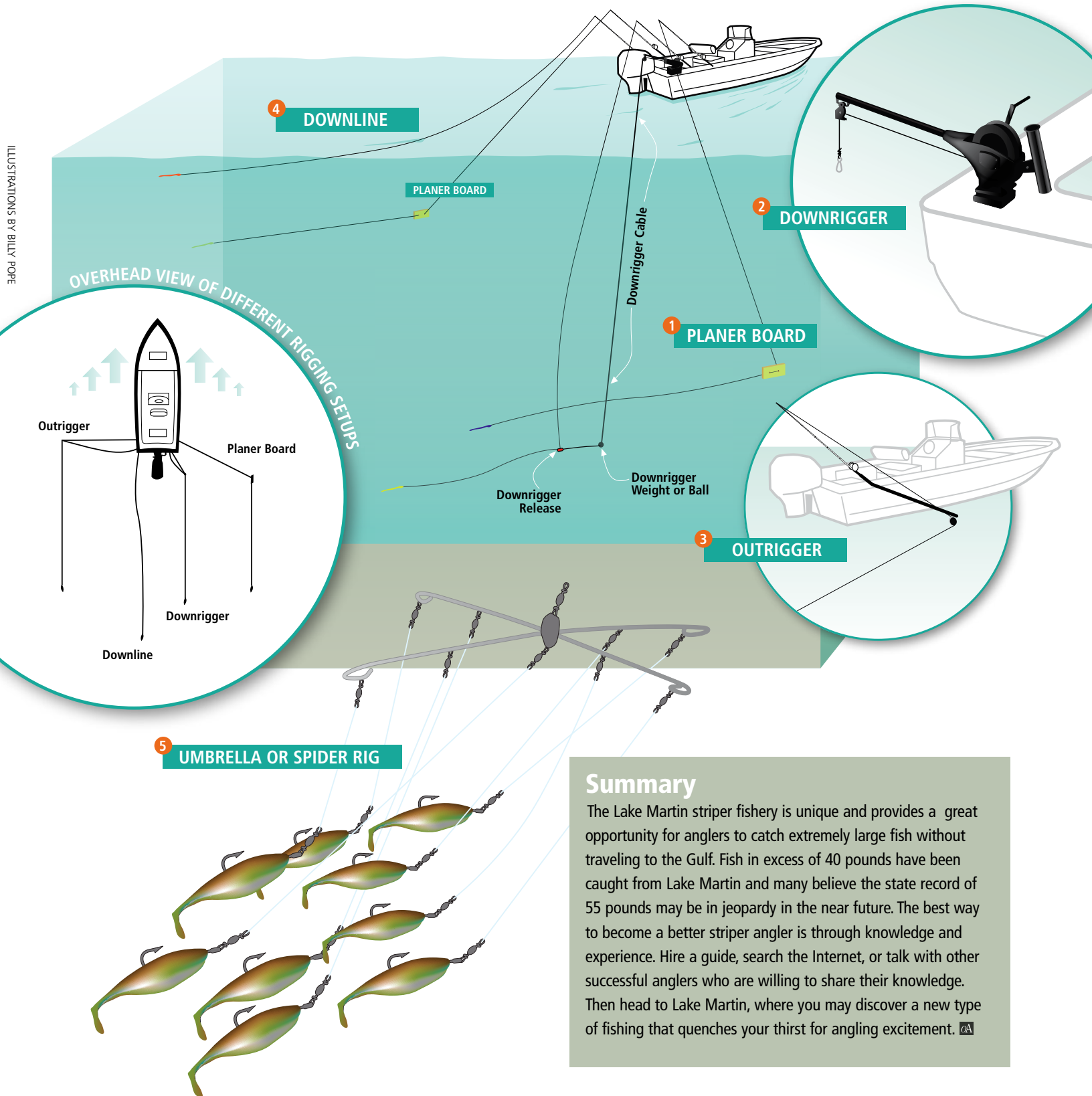
# STRIPER ANGLING

## Techniques

- 1** The **planer board** is a flat panel that attaches in-line above the bait. When trolled, this apparatus causes a lure to move sideways and away from the boat. This reduces the chances of fish being spooked by outboard noise and permits the angler to cover more area, especially when several are used at varying distances from the vessel.
- 2** **Downriggers** appear as specialized rod holders with a cable and large weight mechanism. The weight has an attachment point for fishing line that allows a lure to be lowered and maintained at a specific depth when trolled. This is especially effective during the hot summer months when larger stripers are suspended deep in their thermal refuges.
- 3** Similar to downriggers, **outriggers** are simply pole-type rod holders that extend from the side of the boat and allow multiple lines to be trolled simultaneously. This spreads out the lines to reduce the chances of tangling. Each method allows hands-free operation of rod and reels while trolling.
- 4** **Downlines** simply refers to baited lines that are being trolled directly behind the boat most often with the use of outriggers. When this method is used, the depth of the bait depends primarily on trolling speed. Faster trolling speed yields shallower towing of the bait, which is important to avoid snagging hooks on bottom structure when moving over humps or near the shoreline.
- 5** An **umbrella** or **spider rig** is a large apparatus made from wire that has numerous arms with attachment points for multiple lures. When this device is attached to fishing line and trolled at varying speeds, it mimics a school of baitfish. It also allows an opportunity to hook multiple fish on the same rod. Several umbrella rigs can be utilized to imitate larger baitfish schools and thus increase the chances of striper encounters.

Successful striped bass anglers often utilize a variety of techniques that may be unfamiliar to the average angler. Those who are versatile and equipped with an assortment of methods typically catch fish more consistently. Many of these techniques can be combined for increased effectiveness and may also be used with a variety of baits or lures. Shad, minnows, and shiners are popular live baits, although artificial lures such as spoons, crank baits, buck-tail jigs, and soft plastics also produce fish. The most popular methods include the use of planer boards, downriggers, outriggers, downlines, and umbrella rigs.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BILLY POPE



**Summary**

The Lake Martin striped fishery is unique and provides a great opportunity for anglers to catch extremely large fish without traveling to the Gulf. Fish in excess of 40 pounds have been caught from Lake Martin and many believe the state record of 55 pounds may be in jeopardy in the near future. The best way to become a better striped angler is through knowledge and experience. Hire a guide, search the Internet, or talk with other successful anglers who are willing to share their knowledge. Then head to Lake Martin, where you may discover a new type of fishing that quenches your thirst for angling excitement. 