



Wiper Fishing

By Rob Kolanda



WHERE TO GO

Aurora Reservoir ~ Barr Lake ~ Bonny Lake ~ Cherry Creek Reservoir ~ Douglas Reservoir ~ Horsetooth Reservoir ~ Jackson Lake ~ John Martin Reservoir ~ Lonetree Reservoir ~ Martin Lake ~ North Sterling Reservoir ~ Prewitt Reservoir ~ Pueblo Reservoir ~ Trinidad Lake ~ Union Reservoir ~ Wellington Reservoir #4

Vanilla ice cream and apple pie, peaches and whipped cream, chocolate chips and sugar cookies -- all are two things which are great by themselves, yet when combined produce a unique satisfaction. The wiper is a cross between a white bass and a striped bass, and to the fly angler it is perhaps sweeter than any of these. Wipers grow fast, strike hard, and fight like no other fish, yet remain under the radar from most fly toting pursuers. Most anglers simply do not know much about the fish or its habits. That is until he has hooked into a 3 pound wiper on a 6 weight rod. It is at that moment that his world has officially been changed for the better-- yet questions only lead to more questions.

Here in northern Colorado we are fortunate to have several impoundments which these fabulous hybrids call home. Union, Lone Tree, Horsetooth, Douglas, Jackson, Stanley and Boyd Reservoirs are all within an hour drive from the North Denver/ Boulder metro area, with many just several minutes from your front door. This accessibility combined with a desire to eat a well presented fly are what makes this fish a personal favorite of mine. I've spent the last ten years a junkie to the "wipe out", and would like to share a seasonal guide to help those current or considering anglers find success this season.



The Fish

There are two types of wipers: the palmetto bass made using the striped bass egg and white bass sperm, and the sunshine bass made using the white bass egg and striped bass sperm. The Colorado Division of Wildlife stocks the palmetto bass version. The wiper, like its striper parent, has two rows of teeth near the rear of the tongue. The white bass has a single tooth patch on its tongue. The state record wiper weighs 22 pounds. The world record wiper is listed at 27 pounds, 5 ounces. Wipers within our local area average between 1 and 3 pounds but are commonly caught up to 8 and 10 pounds! Sometimes larger!

Seasonal Changes

Spring, March/April

As water warms fish begin to increase activity due to increasing water temperatures, increased baitfish movement and futile spawning urges. Broad flats bordered by steep drop-offs and inlet streams, particularly on the south ends of lakes and reservoirs when available are prime spots to target these awakened fish. Early and late in the day will find these fish moving through these shallow shelves. Deeper water adjacent to these features can be areas that will concentrate schools. For any kind of consistent bite the angler must find a way to keep his fly in the middle of these fish. A boat and sink tip or full sinking line to keep the fly along these 5-

15 foot ledges can be critical for success. Medium to large baitfish/shad patterns in the 3-4" range have proven to be successful on these fish.

As April approaches May and water temperatures ascend to between 50°-55° the urge to procreate and metabolisms align. Rip Rap banks and inlet areas attract fish into shallow areas that the wading angler can exploit. Again prime times will be early and late. Chop on the water seems to allow these fish a greater sense of inhibition - breezy afternoons can be excellent. Sight fishing to these fish is sometimes possible with females in tow with aggressive males often wandering into water less than 2 feet in depth. These fish however will not settle in a particular area, as will a trout or largemouth bass, instead they will swim in quickly slowing down for 5-10 feet along a shallow bank and then leave as they approached. A well-placed cast will turn these fish at any point of these swim throughs. The same size flies used prior to this period will also work well. In fact, placement and hour of day seem to influence good fishing much more than pattern selection during this window. Floating and intermediate lines are the most effective means of presenting your prey while fishing these shallow depths. Mid-day action though not as fast paced can still be had on the same ledges and drop-offs mentioned earlier.

Early summer, May/June

Water temperatures are prime, action has progressively increased in the last month then suddenly things slow down. Where did they go? The common assumption is that the fish have moved deep, avoiding the warmer surface temperatures. There is certainly truth in this as I've found fish between 15-25 feet of water. Full sink lines are necessary and action can be inconsistent, but fish can be caught. I've noticed a tendency of smaller fish in these deeper schools with 13-15 inch fish being the norm. The same flies used all spring still prove successful as shad that have also gone through their own spawning cycle are now dispersed and found in a variety of sizes.

An anomaly for bigger wiper I've found has been fishing submerged structure close to shore. As lakes in a normal water year will often flood shoreline cover, smaller fish and crustaceans utilize this cover known to bigger predators including wiper. A largemouth bass mentality – casting towards shallow cover and retrieving flies with intermittent pauses -- has resulted in larger than average fish during this period. I've also taken fish on much larger pike length style bunny flies. These flies are often 6 inches in length and in colors not associated with wiper fishing such as black, olive & brown.

Late Summer, June/ July /August

As lakes start to recede juvenile shad are evicted from the flooded cover nurseries that have harbored them through the first months of their lives. They gather in large, tight schools then move to deeper water protection in the form of submerged weed beds and larger underwater structures. They find life hard in these blue-water situations as they soon find a seemingly endless parade of predators surrounding these same features. Small mouth and largemouth bass, walleye, catfish, wiper and even carp enjoying these same haunts soon discover the buffet that has moved in, leaving our young shad with one place to go – up! Now things get fun.

Blitzing Wiper

Looking like a pulsating brown or olive amoeba, schools of shad are hundreds, even thousands of fish compressed into a single creeping entity that might resemble a slow moving skate or ray to the saltwater angler. Creeping along in a general direction individual fish may suddenly leap out of the water from the rest of the pack, giving away the presence of one or several would be predators swimming underneath. Now is when fly selection and line type become crucial.

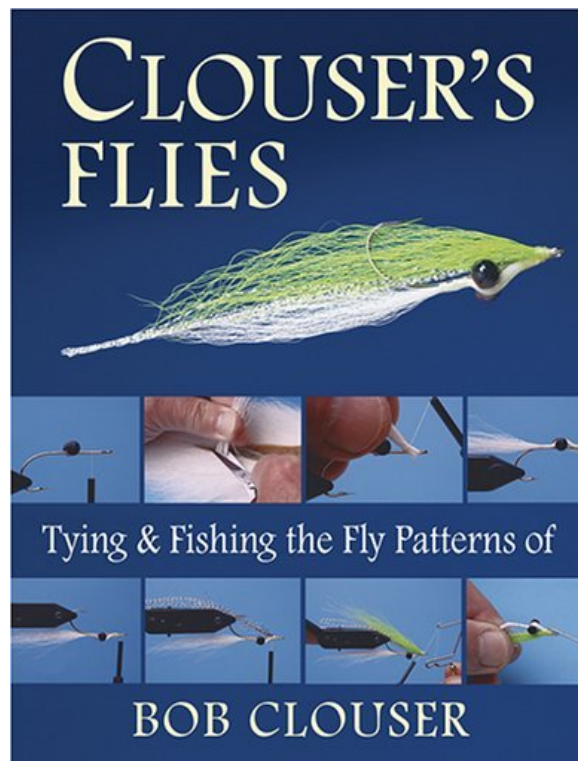
The Incredible Edible Shad

Shad are a fish capable of growing to lengths of 15 inches, and weighing 2-3 lbs. In a few trophy wiper fisheries (Red Willow Reservoir in Nebraska, Cedar Bluffs Reservoir in Kansas, Nee Noshe & Pueblo Reservoir in Colorado) fish exceeding 15 lbs and occasionally topping 20 lbs, these larger shad may become important. Larger saltwater imitations for menhaden achieve the build and length of these adults and for someone looking exclusively for wipers of this size, are the proper choice to fish. That being said, most of these fish achieved their size eating juvies much like trout in a river that will eat smaller Baetis or P.M.D.'s over larger bugs because of the sheer number available to them. Wipers show their preference towards efficiency. As shad are flushed out of these shallows average size is between 1" and 2" in length. In the span of only 6 weeks these same shad will almost double their size. Keeping up with this change separates the good, the bad and the ugly. The key is looking at live shad when possible. If not available, dead or crippled shad are often present on or near the surface. Dead shad can also be found on the leeward edge of the windblown shorelines. If having problems matching the hatch a few minutes of walking may crack the code. A half-inch can make or break your day.

Fly line selections are similar to late spring with floating and clear intermediate lines being clear favorites. Clear tip lines are my personal choice as they keep the fly in the top 3 feet of the water column and extend the invisible connection between fly and angler by 10-15 feet. This is important, as wiper can become angler/boat shy as word of "blitzing wiper" can attract a lot of fisherman. Although wiper can be caught from the bank during this period a boat of some type including belly boats can put you literally in the middle of the feeding frenzy. Again, the best times are morning and evening.

Fall, September/October

As water temperatures cool so does the metabolism of the wiper and the shad. A cold snap can cool the surface temperatures quickly forcing shad and wiper into deeper water. Wiper will continue to feed on shad, they'll do so all winter, but unfortunately for the fly angler finding not only the shad but active windows of feeding is left to those with boats equipped with good electronics and the patience of a nun. The fly angler is forced to deliver his fly into 15-20 feet of water. Lake turnover can stop feeding activity all together. That being said, I know of a few die-hards that continue well into November with brief glimpses of glory.



A great reference book for tying the clouser style flies you will need

Wipers at a Glance

Rods: 6-8 weight faster action rods. A 9 or 10 may be necessary to dredge a sink tip effectively in 15-25' of water.

Reel: Must have a decent disk drag.

Line: Floaters such as the outbound and clouser taper are great for delivering long shots. Full intermediate and clear tip intermediates are probably the most popular lines used due to their invisibility and range of depth. More aggressive sink tips and full sink lines in either type V or 200-300 grains is necessary to attack wipers in depths great than 10'. Saltwater lines perform excellent during the heat of the summer.

Flies: Shad and generic baitfish imitations. Clouser minnows are certainly the most popular and continue to catch fish year after year. Keep in mind the size and build of the shad you are fishing. The right pattern achieves the right silhouette and depth of the natural. Wipers will eat fleeing shad on the surface - include some surface flies in your box. Don't be afraid to cast two flies on the same leader; although more difficult to manage, this can prove effective in determining the right pattern. Be careful in blitz situations as you might just catch two fish!

Glasses: Should be polarized to see not only wipers, but also the shad they will be feeding on. As with striper fishing birds can lead anglers to active feeding. Watch for circling/diving seagulls over the water.

Boats: Conventional boats work great, but lots of wiper are caught every year out of pontoons and float

tubes. Any type of flotation device increases your range, and in doing so, your chances for success.

For up to date reports on local wiper haunts please call Front Range Anglers at 303-494-1375.

Good Luck!