



An Introduction to Fishing Popham

by Captain Peter Fallon

If you fish with us this season and you plan to spend some time exploring Popham on your own, we can introduce you to the area described below from the boat. We're always happy to show you the spots mentioned here, suggest appropriate flies and lures, and help you understand tides and currents. During a coffee break we can roll out the chart and take a ride past the beaches. We will be posting regular fishing updates on our website www.mainestripers.com starting late May, so check back to get the latest news about water conditions, bait patterns and fish activity.

The mouth of the Kennebec River is one of the most celebrated places in Maine to catch striped bass and bluefish. Powerful currents, great structure and ample bait create an ideal place for these fish to feed. Many of our clients at [Gillies & Fallon Guide Service](#) come to this area for a week or more; when they aren't out on the water with us they are looking for places to fish from shore. Popham Beach, an expansive area that can produce memorable fishing, provides the best public shore access on the Lower Kennebec River, and it is one of the places we suggest. Here's an introduction to these waters...

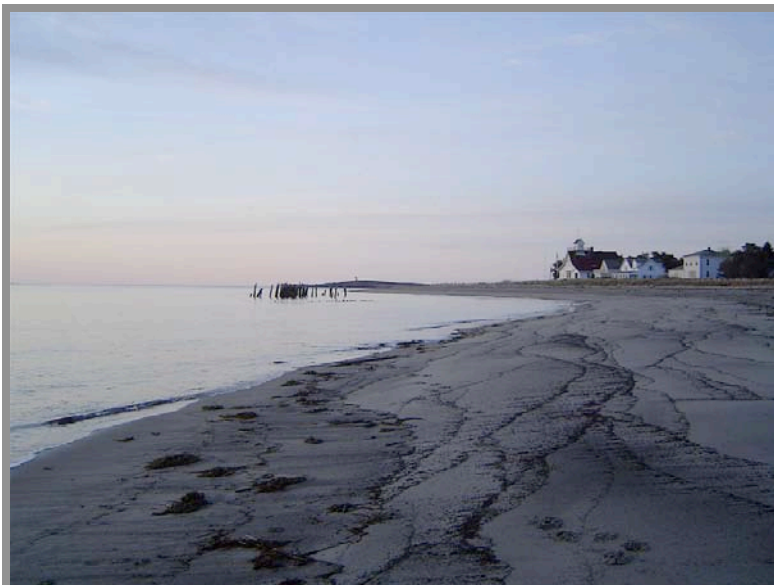
The first striped bass arrive in mid-May and they're here until at least mid-October. The bluefish are fond of warmer water and they typically show up in late June and depart by the later part of September.

For this article, we'll start at Fort Popham (Hunnewell Point), work our way south along Popham Beach, and then turn west along Hunnewell Beach to Morse Point, the Morse River and Seawell Beach. To get to Fort Popham, follow Route 209 from Bath, Maine. You will drive into Phippsburg, past the entrance to Popham Beach State Park, and on to Fort Popham and limited parking. The lot adjacent to Spinney's Restaurant is for their customers only, but Percy's Store provides additional parking for a small fee. [Map of area.](#)



View north to Fort Popham from Spinney's Restaurant

Walk onto the beach in front of Spinney's Restaurant and look left up the river. You will see **Fort Popham** perched on a ledge that juts out into the currents of the river. There are spots all along the ledges where you can stand and cast into fast moving water. At times, stripers and blues will hold in this current for extended periods. More often, the fish will move through the water ambushing bait as they continue down or up current. The current can really rip past these ledges so be extremely careful. Some of the rocks have a near frictionless surface. If you're having trouble fishing your fly in a good-looking spot because the water is moving too fast, come back to this location toward the beginning or end of the tide when the current has slowed.





Lifesaving station and pilings

Between Spinney's and a **former lifesaving station** (a white building with a red roof and tower—now the [Popham Beach Bed & Breakfast](#)) downriver, you will see some **old pilings** from a long gone steamship wharf. A back eddy flows along the inside of these pilings. It's worth keeping an eye out for a splash, swirl or shower of fleeing bait. Make a few casts into this water as you walk past it. Directly in front of the old lifesaving station is a distinct corner in the beach that alters the current flow and offers close access to deep water. The beach structure is always shifting here. Take some time to explore this area, especially on the dropping tide.



The green can with Pond Island behind



Fish in front of this cottage



Wood Island

To the right of the former lifesaving station, the beach stretches to the south, extending to **Wood Island**—identified by a large colonial house facing upriver—at low tide. A subtle point in the sand inserts itself into the outgoing current in front of a **shingled cottage with green trim and a red roof**. A drop-off [not visible] extends from the beach out into the current toward a **green buoy**. For me, this is the most productive spot on this shoreline. (You'll see people casting close together just north of this green buoy.)



The view south at the corner



The sandbar to Wood Island

Keep your eyes open as you continue down the beach toward Wood Island. South of the green buoy, the beach shoals up. When the wind is down and the sun is bright you can spot fish in the curl of the breaking surf along this section of beach. The **sand bar** that reaches out to Wood Island fishes well on both the east and west sides. Big stripers will cruise in two feet of water or less, so cover the whole bar at low tide. If the waves are calm, you can wade along the bar at the start of a rising tide or the end of a dropping tide. Big stripers will cruise in two feet of water or less and **this corner of beach can produce at the top of the tide**. Watch the water level, or you'll be stuck on Wood Island for many hours. The tide rises quickly and the currents are strong so be careful when fishing here.



The view west from the Wood Island bar (Fox Islands in background)

Around this corner to the west, the beach stretches as far as you can see. Right where the beach bends 90 degrees the fish will occasionally pin small bait in the shallows of that south-facing corner. The long stretch of beach heading toward the state park is territory I haven't fished much over the past few years. People do have success at times all along this part of the beach.

If you park at [Popham Beach State Park](#) instead of Fort Popham, you will have access to the following areas; the walk from Fort Popham to the locations described below is quite long. The parking lot at the state park is gated and the admission fee is \$4.00 per person. I've never had any trouble parking outside the gate and walking out to the beach when the park is closed, but you will get ticketed if you park along the road during the day.

In front of the state park another sand bar extends out to one of the Fox Islands—the largest rock close to shore. Walk out the sand bar and fish on the ocean side of this large ledge. Keep your eye on a rising tide to avoid an extended stay. I've taken nice fish right along both sides of this bar and off the rocks. There tends to be more moving water on the west side of the bar due to the current from the Morse River.



A bar extends out to North Fox Island



Closer view of North Fox Island

The Morse River feeds a tidal marsh behind the west end of Popham Beach. The fish will move in and out of this marsh with the tide. The channel that leads from open water to the start of the marsh changes yearly. There are some abrupt drop-offs that produce segments of faster current. Watch where you step if you're wading during low light. There is deeper water up at the edge of the marsh that can be well worth the walk. If you explore this area, don't ignore the undercut banks and the small drainages throughout the salt marsh. Conventional wisdom says to fish this type of water on the dropping tide. Ideally, the outgoing current would coincide with periods of low light. But, don't disregard the rising tide. Dead low tide is a great time to scout the structure in this area.

The Morse River, by the way, makes for a great belly-boat or kayak trip. You can put in at the edge of Route 209 and float down to the beach at the state park on the outgoing current. There is no parking along 209 so you'll need someone to drop you off.

The Popham Beach area attracts many visitors. If you're there on a warm, sunny day you'll have lots of company. Spend some time walking away from the crowds and you can find water to fish even on a Saturday in July. Another alternative for busy days is to make the two-mile hike out to Seawall Beach through the [Bates Morse Mountain Conservation Area](#). This is a spectacular stretch of shoreline that stretches from the west side of the Morse River all the way to Small Point. The parking area is on your left as you travel south on Route 216 toward Small Point and Hermit Island, about a half mile past the Route 209 turn-off to Popham Beach. When the lot is full, visitors are turned away and access is restricted to daylight hours. Please be mindful of the rules posted at the trailhead. Bring your bug dope; the trail passes through a large section of marsh.



Seawall Beach with Morse Mountain in the background

Wherever you are, fish your fly or lure right up to the edge of the ledge or beach. Oftentimes, the fish will be hanging right next to where you're standing. The bass tolerate churned up sand and rough water well and use this to their advantage. We all have a tendency to cast perpendicular to the shore and try to reach out as far as possible. Every now and then, cast parallel to the shore and bring your fly or lure right along the structure or wash of the waves.

Remember to vary your retrieve, both in angle and speed. It's easy to get into the habit of always casting perpendicular to the shoreline and retrieving at a constant rate. I like to cast up-current and experiment with different retrieves as my fly or lure sweeps past me. Think "nymphing," "dead drift" or "wet fly swing" when the steady retrieve isn't producing. These fly-fishing techniques can be employed with spin/baitcasting tackle, as

well. The clean, sandy beach is an ideal place to bounce or drag your fly or lure right across the bottom.

If you see a fish leap clear out of the water, straight up or at a slight angle, and crash on its belly, it's a [Sturgeon](#) (Atlantic or Shortnosed). They can be anywhere from one-foot to five-feet long. These fish are fun to watch but not fishable. Both species are protected by regulation.

Most people who fish Popham focus on the outgoing tide because the current flow is stronger. At times you can also find fish feeding on the incoming tide. When the current is slack, walk up to Spinney's or Percy's near the fort to grab a bite to eat. During periods of low light, you're more likely to find fish feeding on the surface and in shallow water. In June and September/October, mid-day fishing under bright sun can be fast, but the biggest fish are still more inclined to bite between dusk and dawn. Get up early or stay out late, but don't write off fishing even if it's noontime.

The [Kennebec Angler](#) on the waterfront in Bath is a great resource for the saltwater fisherman. Chris, Dana and the other staff are always up on the latest word from Popham anglers. They can provide you with all the spinning and fly tackle appropriate to current conditions. Don't hesitate to ask them questions; they are patient teachers and passionate fishermen.

If you plan on spending much time casting from the rocks or in the surf, here are some things to remember:

- A stripping basket makes flyline-management much easier, especially with a sinking shooting head.
- Be careful on the ledges because the rock can be very slick.
- Wet wading isn't a popular Maine activity in June
- Wear a wading belt if you don your waders.
- Korkers provide significantly more traction on seaweed-covered rocks.
- Keep a whistle on a lanyard around your neck.
- Some people now opt for an inflatable PFD.

[The Maine Department of Marine Resources website](#) lists the rules and regulations for saltwater fishing in Maine. You do not need a license to fish in saltwater. The state has a slot limit for striped bass that allows each angler to keep one fish per day that measures between 20" and 26" inches or over 40". If you release all your fish, you don't have to worry about length limits. Be sure to note special regulations that govern the waters described in this article. All striped bass must be released before July 1st and no live or dead marine bait or multiple hooks are allowed before July 1st. If you fish plugs, be sure to have only one hook (single or treble) on the lure. All you dropper fans (fly and spin) have to wait until July 1st to use that secret weapon. These special regulations are designed to protect spawning bass in this watershed. Check out the Maine DMR website for details.