

## Race to the tailrace - By Luke Clayton

Red River striper guide Norman O'Neal cranked up the rpm.'s on his big airboat's 330 HP. Vortex Chevy engine and the craft slid easily along a sandbar on the Red toward the turbulent tailrace waters below the Eisenhower Dam. A well designed airboat can run almost as easily on sand as water. The force generated by a propeller spun by a big block Chevy engine is substantial, but so is the force of the running water behind the dam of a huge impoundment such as Lake Texoma. When the boat slid into the emerald green water, Norman pulled back on the control stick, the rudders turned hard to the left, and the force from the prop wash pushed us out into the current. I listened to the big engine cranking out more horsepower when the boat's hull encountered the swift waters.



*Red River guide Norman O'Neal (rt) and Dubb Wallace with the makings of a great blackned striper dinner. Photo by Luke Clayton*

Since the early nineties, Norman has guided on the Red River below Lake Texoma for stripers and catfish. A protégée of Harold Speed, designer and builder of airboats and a life long river guide, O'Neal learned his craft from one of the best. With every flood, the river receives a restocking from Lake Texoma and, downstream about eighty miles, Lake Pat Mayse. The current created by moving water pulls fish upriver for many miles. When they reach the dam, they stack up in huge numbers, feeding on the baitfish that come through the gates at the spillway. The high oxygen content in the turbulent water serves as an added stimulant that puts the fish on a big time feeding binge. Stripers, transplants from ocean waters off the U.S. eastern seaboard, have the uncanny ability to catch fast moving baitfish in even faster moving water.

Last year's flood on the watershed above Lake Texoma caused a great deal of damage to boathouses and shoreline development but, behind every cloud is a silver lining. River fishing could not be better than it is right now and the influx of fresh water made the already great striper fishing even better. O'Neal predicts this to be one of the better summers in many years for catching big stripers. "We're already regularly catching stripers in the 12-20 pound range. The key to catching big stripers is big baits. We're using shad a foot long to attract the bigger stripers. Granted, those trophy fish don't come on every cast but when using the bigger baits, just about every trip produces a few 'wall hangers'. When using smaller shad 3-4 inches long, it's a fish on every cast most of the time."

Our trip began by running up into the very turbulent water as close to the spillway as allowed by law. Norman had done a good job briefing my buddy Dubb Wallace and I before our fist foray into the striper-loaded waters closer to the spillway. "Let's catch a few of these 8-10 inch drum swimming on the surface." instructed our guide. "The fish are temporarily in a state of shock from passing through the spillway and easy to catch. They make excellent big striper baits, often out-producing the big shad for trophy class stripers. When we get into positon, I'll shut the engine off and cast the big baits quickly into the eddy water, then put the reel in free spool and keep your thumb on the line. When a striper picks up one of the free-swimming baits, let him run a few feet, then engage the reel and rear back and set the hook, hard!"



*River guide Norman O'Neal heading upriver to the tailrace waters below Lake Texoma. Photo by Luke Clayton*

It took a couple of passes into the swift water for Wallace and I go get the hang of free lining the baits. "Cast the baits out, let the current strip the line off the reel and stay ready, keep a little slack in your line." shouted our guide over the sound of the rushing waters. We both missed the first couple of strikes,

which occurred simultaneously the instant our baits hit the water. These fish were stacked in the eddy water like cordwood and it was obvious they were hungry!

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Wallace engage his reel and rear back on the rod. "That's a good one. Just keep pressure on him and let the reel's drag and the rod do their job tiring the fish." instructed O'Neal. In a couple of minutes, Wallace had the fish boat side and into the waiting landing net. It lacked the streamline look of a pure striper; this was a hard fighting hybrid striper that had obviously traveled many river miles upstream from the tailrace waters of Lake Pat Mayse. On the next pass, I felt the line stripping from my reel. This time a striper had picked up the drum I was using for bait and was making for the Oklahoma side of the river. I followed instruction and let the fish run a few yards then engaged the reel and felt the power of big striper in fast current. Hooked forty yards down stream of the boat, the fish instinctively knew how to use the current to its advantage. Swift water adds another 50 percent to the fight of any fish!

After landing several of the larger fish while drifting, O'Neal anchored the boat just below the turbulent water and we cast smaller shad into the current. Within a few seconds of the baits hitting the water, we would feel the line begin to strip from the reel. O'Neal missed very few of the fish and Wallace and I soon perfected this 'free lining' technique, thanks to the non stop action provided by the aggressively feeding stripers.

Regardless where you might live, changes are very good you are within an easy drive of a river or creek downstream of a reservoir. It's also a good bet the fishing will be good there, especially this time of year. One doesn't have to have an airboat to fish such waters. We noted several fishermen doing very well fishing from the bank with big jigs with soft plastic shad imitation trailers and live shad. There were also a couple of larger boats with conventional outboards fishing the rough water. Regardless how you plan to do your tailrace fishing, keep safety first and make sure you learn the rules of fishing your chosen waters. Learn where the 'off limits' markers are and, if fishing from a boat, make sure your craft is up to taking on the strong current.

O'Neal says the deeper holes and adjacent flats downstream from the tailrace waters often provide excellent action on blue catfish during the summer months. But, that's another story. For now, the guide and his clients are quite happy with the non stop action provided by these river run stripers! Contact guide Norman O'Neal at 903-624-4900 or online at [www.striperguidetx.com](http://www.striperguidetx.com)