



Tattoo's Walking Stick

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By Willy Goldsmith

Ever since he started his own custom plug business in 2000, Mike "Tattoo" Dauphin has made a name for himself along the Striper Coast as a skilled innovator in wooden plug building. His products, which range from oversized Spook-type lures to perfectly balanced metal-lipped swimmers, have earned praise for their consistently excellent craftsmanship and exceptional ability to raise fish. The latest creation from this Portsmouth, Rhode Island, plug builder is the Tattoo's Walking Stick, a versatile spook/pencil popper hybrid that is deadly on everything from largemouth bass to bluefin tuna.

Mike first conceived the idea for the Walking Stick in 2006, when he received a call from his good friend Russ Comeau, a master largemouth bass fisherman and owner/operator of the bass fishing website Bazzdozer.com. Russ mentioned to Mike that two local bass tournaments in his home state of Arizona had recently been won with small pencil poppers, and he suggested that Mike craft something similar. Sensing that such a model might have a saltwater application as well, Mike accepted the challenge and got to work.

After a bit of experimentation, Mike realized that the wooden body of his 1-ounce metal-lip swimmer, when flipped around so that the rear hook attached to the lure where the head of the swimmer had originally been, would make one heck of an effective surface plug. After adding a pair of eyes to the rearranged hardware, the Walking Stick was born. Although it never really took off on the tournament bass circuit, it didn't take long for New England anglers to realize this lure's potential.

Back in August 2006, when the plug was still in its "research and development" stage, Tattoo's Tackle field tester Rob Taylor did a little experimenting with the new plug out on Stellwagen Bank, and his second cast hooked him up with a 90-pound bluefin tuna! Certainly an auspicious debut for this little plug, and the beginning of an infatuation for many anglers who "run and gun" for bluefin, false

albacore and bonito. Given its propensity to elicit heart-stopping strikes from stripers and blues when retrieved through the wash, the Walking Stick has also found its way into the tackle bags of many New England surf rats.

When I first fished the Walking Stick for stripers this past spring, it didn't take many casts to convince me of its effectiveness. As a result of its unique shape, the Walking Stick can be fished in a variety of ways, resulting in a versatility that makes it a good choice for a number of applications. When conducting a slow, steady retrieve, the lure behaves just like a floating needlefish and creates a gentle "V" wake, a method that has proven effective in tempting indifferent linesiders to inspect and attack. With short, sideways snaps of the rod tip, the lure can be coaxed to "walk the dog" like a spook. When fished like a pencil popper, with a quick upward whipping of the rod tip, it will move seductively from side to side while barely moving forward at all, ringing the dinner bell for any curious bass or blues observing from below. The Walking Stick can also be fished like a conventional popper, with quick pops punctuated by pauses of a few seconds.

As I fished more and more with the lure, its versatility really started to pay off. I found that I could search for fish and cover a lot of water by walking the dog, and once I piqued a fish's interest, I could get the plug to "pop" in place like a pencil popper, giving the bass a chance to home in on the target. Fish can usually slurp down the 4-inch lure easily, so its strike-to-hookup ratio is higher than larger surface artificials. The diminutive size also makes it much less tiring for anglers to work for hours on end. To maximize the plug's action, be sure to use a loop knot or a high-quality snap when attaching the plug to your leader.

The Walking Stick is a slender plug, measuring only 4 inches long and weighing 1 ounce, which makes it ideal for light-tackle applications when the target species is feeding on small, slim baitfish such as silversides or sand eels. In spite of its size, the back-heavy design makes it a pretty good casting lure. For bass and blues on the beach or jetties, Mike prefers to use the plug in low-light conditions with a calm surf. In order to maximize casting distance, he'll use a 7- or 8-foot rod with nothing heavier than 12-pound-test monofilament or 30-pound-test braided line. This has been my go-to lure on calm, overcast mornings, although I've taken fish with it under all sorts of conditions, even on hot and steamy June afternoons. According to Mike, the lure also really shines under dock lights on summer nights, when small baitfish like silversides and peanut bunker will gather to feed and find shelter. Bass of all sizes frequently lurk beneath the docks, seeking out weakened individuals for a midnight snack – a Walking Stick slowly twitched through the activity is often just the ticket.

As far as bluefin and "funny fish" go, Mike and many others have found that casting the Walking Stick and ripping it across the surface at a good clip is extremely effective; this method simulates a rapidly fleeing squid or sand eel and draws positively savage strikes. As a result, it's become a go-to lure for many guides in southern New England who regularly tangle with these speedsters on light tackle. Like the other models of wooden plugs that Tattoo's Tackle produces, the Walking Stick is made entirely in-house to ensure quality control. It also comes in a dazzling array of 23 color patterns, although I've been able to do plenty of damage using just the simple white version. The through-wired Walking Stick is outfitted with top-quality hardware, including size 2, 4X VMC treble hooks and heavy-duty split rings designed to withstand even the tough punishment that a school bluefin tuna can dish out.

The Walking Stick has already become a mainstay among diehard surf rats and tunoid tempters in New England. It's also a staple in the tackle boxes of anglers chasing everything from snook in the Florida backcountry to mahi in the canyons to largemouth bass in sprawling Mexican lakes. The lure's versatility makes it an ideal choice for any number of circumstances, be it a slow, subtle presentation to cajole a wary predator or a noisy, splashy assault to call in fish from a distance. A product of good old-fashioned Yankee ingenuity, Mike Dauphin's newest creation has proven itself to be a worthy member of any New England angler's arsenal.