

**SALT-WATER FLY-FISHING**



## CHAPTER VII

### SALT-WATER FLY-FISHING

**I**T is a cardinal principle with the angler that a fish must be buncoed. If you keep faith with him, by delivering a real fly instead of a counterfeit, you are disgraced. You are quite on the level of the lad with the bare feet, who sits on a log by the stream with a pole, a string and a can full of bait and yanks in the fish that had scorned the orthodox flies you so skillfully tendered them.

Fly-fishing had linked itself with the mountain torrents, swift rivers and rock-bound lakes of mine own North Countrie by ties so sacred that it seemed immoral to attempt it in the bays, rivers and passes of the South. Before I could really essay it I had to retire to my room and read aloud the Declaration of Independence. I rejoice now in my victory over superstition, for I find myself a missionary in a benighted land.

Such ignorance among fish I never before encountered. I tried them with a split bamboo rod, an expensive reel and a cleverly constructed fly. I had tied bits of bright worsted on the line to mark distances for the Camera-man, who was keeping in focus for possible jumps. The fish ignored the fly but ate up the worsted and sections of the line with

it. Then I tried old flies that had been chewed by salmon and eaten by moths, and found the fish rather prejudiced in their favor. In general, if they got the colors they wanted, the form in which they came was immaterial. Sometimes I tried the light silver-and-vermilion casting spoons of the shops, with indifferent success. The lure that was irresistible, which channel bass, cavallies, Spanish mackerel, ladyfish and a dozen others varieties seized with avidity, was a bit of bright tin about two inches long by a third of an inch wide, roughly cut to something like the shape of a fish. Then with a tiny swivel in the mouth, a hook in the tail and a slight twist to give the thing a wiggly motion, it becomes a great and successful deluder of the fish. Yet there are times when nothing will secure his attention. Dangle your fly before him, trail it on both sides and drag it over his back. If it hits him he will knock it in the air with his tail and close one eye gently as he turns slowly away. Then you lay down your rod and walk along the beach till you find a sand crab scooting for his hole. Catch him before he gets there, or if you fail, put your finger in the hole, wait until he takes hold of it with his biggest claw, and pull him out. That's the way I did the first time, but since then I've let my boatman catch the crabs. Then borrow a plain hook from some fisherman who isn't an angler and catch the fish that derided you.

In such an emergency all anglers fall from grace; the worm will turn. I once knew the dean of anglers in this country to tie a mouse to a hook and let him



From the beach at Gasparilla Pass we used the fly-rods.



In proportion to size the lady-fish will discount any other fish in existence for pyrotechnics.



---

### *Salt-Water Fly-Fishing*

---

swim across a pool past the lair of a big trout who feared not God nor regarded man.

Of course any fisherman on the coast will tell the angler the best time and place to catch fish, only no two of them will agree, and when one finds out for himself he will have to learn over again the next day. My latest theory is that the best time to catch fish is when they bite, but that view is subject to change.

The passes leading to the harbors of the west coast of Florida are popular with fish of many species. Instead of wading in ice-cold streams you walk out in the warm surf and cast among the breakers, or stroll inside the pass, on the shore of the bay. In quiet water choose from the gliding forms the biggest channel bass and coax, tempt and badger him with a fly, thrown before, behind, all around and straight at him, until you rouse him to languid attention, growing interest, earnest desire and furious determination. This will end in a wild rush for the fly whenever and wherever it touches the water, and your fish is hooked. You must mind your eye as the rod bends double; it isn't a brook trout or a black bass that you have on your line, but a powerful creature that may wear you out before you land him.

Your line is steadily running seaward and your patience with it, but nothing can be done beyond keeping all the strain you dare on the rod. Perhaps when two hundred and fifty feet of line are out and only fifty left, just when you are losing hope, the fish turns and makes for the shore. Then you must run up the beach like a scared rabbit, wind in line as

fast as you get a chance, letting it out only when you must. Always supplement the action of your rod with your legs and if, in an hour, or two, or three, the fish gives out first, you can decide in accordance with commissariat requirements whether your fifteen- or twenty-pound captive is to be netted or released on parole.

Sometimes a school of mackerel swims past, tossing the water into little cascades as they break up an assemblage of minnows and devour them in detail, and you toss any old fly you have among them, assured that three or four will jump at it at once and you will have broiled Spanish mackerel for supper—provided, however, that their sharp teeth don't sever your line. If a two-pound ladyfish, sometimes appositely called skipjack, strikes, you will have attained the *Ultima Thule* of fishing with a fly-rod and light tackle. No other fish jumps so quickly, so often, nor so high in proportion to his size, nor does any other make so brilliant a defense. Compared with it even the tarpon is sluggish, and trout, bass and salmon little livelier than mud puppies. Your reel will buzz an octave higher than you ever heard it, and your fingers will be blistered wherever they touched the line, while playing this splendid fighter who so richly earns the liberty you will surely restore it at the close of the performance. It is quite too bony for your alimentary canal and has already fed your mind, heart and muscle.

Now cast your line far out to where that tarpon rolled. Perhaps he will take the fly, and then you



---

## *Salt-Water Fly-Fishing*

---

will barter fly and line for one beautiful leap, the sight of which will be well worth all it costs, for your reel holds less line than will be called for by the rush of the Silver King.

No use to cast for that flying beauty with the big wings and a back spotted like a leopard. He is a whip-ray and lives on mollusks whose shells his quartz-crusher jaws pulverize without effort.

That ugly fish with the big fin and the cruel mouth would never find it out if you chanced to hook him. He is called the tiger of the seas, but is really a low-down, cowardly brute.

The great splashing around that bunch of little fish is made by cavallies. One of them will take your hook with anything you choose to put on it and you will get it back with the fish, after strenuous effort that may consume hours. From the back of the cavally, at the base of the dorsal fin, you may cut the curious "lucky bone" and insure your own good fortune, at the cost of his, while from the flesh of this dark-meated fish you may cut steaks that will remind you of tender beef.

Sometimes I take a light Canadian canoe and with my boatman paddle out through the pass to fish in the surf, hoping thus to keep dry. It doesn't always work that way. The boatman has learned to sit low in the canoe and exert himself mightily to keep it at right angles to breaking waves, and I have been taught to choose weather that is fair for tempting the surf with so frolicsome a craft. When a wave really catches a canoe broadside on, however, and

---

*Florida Enchantments*

---

breaks over it, it bumps it heavily on the sand, rolls it over, with its passengers inside, and fills both full of sand in a negligible fraction of a second.

Most fish on the Florida coast will rise to a fly. I have taken from one to a dozen varieties at every pass between Cedar Keys and Cape Sable. Some can be caught at any season, but number and variety are greatest late in the spring. Yet all are subject to moods, the secret of which I have not fathomed. At times they require more coaxing than a balky horse, at others you can't keep them away with a club. There are mackerel days, sea-trout days and ladies' days. On one of the latter, at Little Gasparilla Pass, my score was two channel bass, four cavallies, one sea trout and thirty-nine ladyfish. The mackerel were kept for the table and the rest turned loose as they were caught. On the following day at the same place not a fish could be coaxed to rise. I have seen Mr. Herbert Johnston and the late Doctor Trowbridge catch five- to eight-pound channel bass by the light of the moon at Sarasota Pass. In the bay of the same name the latter captured from his light canoe, handled by himself, a twenty-two pound channel bass and a sixteen-pound cavally, all on light fly-rods. The late Doctor Ferber, dean of fly fishermen on the Florida coast, coaxed to his rod every species of fish to be found in the Homosassa River, from the so-called fresh water trout, or big-mouthed black bass, down to the worthless gar and tiny needle-fish. His record as a fisherman was handicapped by his conscience, for he habitually carried a tape



Pelicans and gulls flew up before us, and posed in picturesque fashion.



---

## *Salt-Water Fly-Fishing*

---

measure and a spring balance which he religiously used before he spoke.

Tarpon of all sizes will rise to a fly when they have been sufficiently tantalized. Big ones six feet and upwards in length can be found in passes, deep channels and broad bays near the coast, but can rarely be landed because the hard mouth of the fish strands the light line before he can be captured. Baby tarpon of eighteen inches and upward abound in small tributaries to the large rivers and the countless little inland ponds of mud and water. Often these will rise freely, but their mouths are so hard they are hooked with difficulty. The rare event of their capture leaves a delicious tingle in the memory. If they do not respond promptly to your cast, trying to fool them with that lure is a waste of time. "If they will, they will, you may depend on't. And if they won't, they won't, and there's the end on't." Try another brand of fly, and another, and another until you have bullied them into a passion.

Spanish mackerel are found in the currents of the passes and the rivers and, especially when traveling in schools, are ravenous, bite greedily and investigate afterward, which is good for the fisherman.

The sea trout likes the neighborhood of oysters and coral reefs, and affects quiet water and snags, but cannot resist a bright-colored fly. A three-pound specimen will fill an angler to the brim with joy. The swimming-bladders of these fish are large and gelatinous and when cooked can discount the famous New England dish of cods' sounds.

Ladyfish, or skipjacks, keep where the water is swiftest and if it is their hour for feeding will often meet the fly before it touches the water. Mangrove snappers collect under wooded banks in deep water and hide in hollow sunken logs, but when the spirit moves show greediness in their dash for the fly.

The cavally may be traced by the trouble he makes in schools of smaller fish and is then pretty sure to take anything in the likeness of a fly that is cast within his reach.

The sluggish sheephead rarely comes out from under his old wreck unless something more seductive than a bunch of feathers is tendered him, yet he has occasionally been taken on a fly.

Mullet can be taken on a fly-rod only by snagging them, after which they display a spirit worthy of a game-fish. At Little Sarasota Pass, where a school of mullet with their little sucker mouths lifted to the surface of the water were absorbing some floating scum, I caught eleven of them by casting flies at their mouths until the hooks caught in their lips.

Bluefish are commonly found just outside the passes. They are usually small and fall easy victims to a satisfactory fly.

Ravallia lurk in the shadow of the grass in shallow bays and streams. They take the fly well and are strong fighters.

Shark and jewfish can only be reached by the fly through an intermediary. In Estero Bay a small red shark swallowed a cavally that I was playing and

---

*Salt-Water Fly-Fishing*

---

then gave me an acrobatic exhibition by leaping like a tarpon several feet out of the water many times.

The ladyfish and tarpon always jump out of the water while being played; the kingfish usually jumps as he strikes, but not afterward; the Spanish mackerel rarely leaps above the surface. Excepting a few unimportant small fish, I remember no other fly-taking acrobats among the many gamy fish of the coast.

The fly-rod for salt-water fishing should weigh at least eight ounces and be very stiff. A multiplying reel, carrying one hundred yards of heavy line, is not too large. Many of the fish could be captured with a four-ounce rod, but the process would be a dreary one, lacking the excitement of a well-proportioned contest. The latter would require the more powerful weapon.

Poetic friends have deplored my fancied loss of sentiment for the brooks and the mountains, as if appreciation of the beauty of the one and the grandeur of the other could be lessened because for a time I revel in the quiet beauty of the open sea and take present delight in a broader horizon and the changing glory of storm and clouds.

On a certain day, which, as I learned later, was the one following the great cyclone that swept the Gulf coast and devastated Mobile and Pensacola, the beach at Gasparilla Pass was alternately dazzling in the sun, and dark in the shadow of the blackest of clouds. As I walked along the beach flocks of hundreds of gulls and white and brown pelicans rose

---

*Florida Enchantments*

---

and flew around me, seemingly stopping to pose when the background of clouds was most effective. Atmospheric brilliancy went to the brain of the Camera-man and in his craze for "human interest" in his pictures, he interfered with my fishing by embarrassing requests. "A few feet farther forward, please," and I stepped off a bank up to my waist in water, and as the next roller lifted me from my feet I inquired if there existed any artistic objection to my swimming occasionally, if the water got above my nose.

The clouds over the Gulf grew thicker, darker and massed themselves into a black, whirling column that promised a coming waterspout, when through haste in changing holders, a plate broke loose inside the camera, choking its machinery, to the despair of the Camera-man who had watched many days for the effect he was now losing, with a dozen fresh plates in his hands all aching to be exposed. He sat down in the wet sand and worked nervously until a solid wall of approaching rain threatened to flood his camera and drown him. As we fled to the shelter of our cruising boat he expressed himself in language which, although perhaps adequate to the occasion, seemed to me unbecoming in an artist and a fisherman.