

PHOTOGRAPHING A SAWFISH



## CHAPTER X

### PHOTOGRAPHING A SAWFISH

**M**AKE him jump, I want more action," said the Camera-man, with his eyes buried in the hood of his instrument.

"Sawfish don't jump! What you want is more imagination—and a pencil. Then you'd be up-to-date."

The Camera-man was ungrateful. The biggest sawfish in the country had been harpooned for him; during a struggle of two hours the creature had done everything a sawfish knows how to do, and now two of us were resting, I with feet braced against the forward thwart, weight bearing on the harpoon line, and the huge fish so near us that every swing of his big saw landed a blow upon the bow that sent shivers through the skiff and the folks in it.

Some hours earlier, the beginning of the incoming tide had found me standing in the bow of a skiff which my boatman slowly sculled through one of the channels that wound among the shallow banks lying at the southern end of the peninsula of Florida. As the water had deepened on the banks, schools of silver mullet spread over them, seeking food one moment, and the next leaping in panic from some

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*Florida Enchantments*

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enemy, real or fancied; sheephead showed their stripes of black and white near the bottom, and drumfish left V-shaped trails on top of the water; channel bass, so big that the hand holding the harpoon was lifted involuntarily, darted fiercely upon their prey; sting-rays, from their beds on the banks, stirred up clouds of mud as they scurried away; the bayonet fin of a tarpon cut the water near me and invited the weapon which would have been thrown, had I not remembered just in time that he was not on our program for the day; families of dolphins came rolling toward us, but just beyond the possible range of a harpoon, lifted high their heads, gave us one slow comprehending glance, and a line of bobbing heads left a straight wake halfway to the horizon; the fin of a large shark gliding above the surface of the water, followed by a tail swaying from side to side with a quick uniform stroke, tempted me too far and the harpoon sunk in his body, but the line scarcely tautened, for the fish, turning quickly, cut it with his fine saw teeth and swam away with my beautiful harpoon of tempered tool steel, the evolution of years of harpooning. I was chagrined that my slow moving mind had failed to restrain my excited hand, for experience had taught me that sharks always cut the line that is not guarded by chain or wire.

I had hardly fastened a spare harpoon to the line, when there came gliding toward me, with slowly moving weapon, a sawfish of majestic proportions. The whole bottom of the channel seemed in motion, as I looked down upon his broad back. His saw



The die is cast.



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was already beneath the bow of the boat and the harpoon must be thrown instantly, if at all. The time for consideration was too short, I acted unwisely, and as the steel entered his body I was thrown to the bottom of the skiff, which was nearly capsized by a blow from the great saw of the fish, so savage, that it broke the weapon in two, about three feet from the head of the fish. For two hundred yards we spurted along the channel, at a rate of speed that must have broken the racing records of his family. My hands were torn and blistered from clutching the line to get under good headway before the end of it was reached. If I failed to well overcome the skiff's inertia, the line would part or the harpoon tear out, for there was *vis viva* in that half-ton of sawfish.

After the first big rush our steed settled down to a jog trot, against which I braced myself, throwing my weight on the harpoon line, with the sensation of driving a hard-mouthed horse with runaway tendencies. For a quarter of a mile we rode joyously, while far behind us, in a skiff with the Camera-man, an oarsman toiled painfully. When the creature, who for the time was running the show, reached the end of the deep water, he turned about and swam back through the same channel. As we passed the other skiff, the click of the shutter was heard and the chase was renewed in the new direction. Again, as the water shoaled, the fish turned, giving me a chance to gather in much of the line and bring the skiff within a few yards of the fish. Here three other large sawfish, each about twelve feet in length, joined the pro-

cession and for several hundred yards swam near us, sometimes beside our fish and sometimes near and under our skiff. Several times the tense harpoon line was struck by one of them and more than once I fancied their attitude was distinctly threatening to our skiff and its occupants. After they had left us, we rowed back and forth over the same course many times. When we passed the other skiff, I usually put an extra strain on the line, hoping to persuade both fish and Camera-man to get busy. When the sawfish stopped in a deep hole and sulked, I was reminded that long ago, when the Camera-man wore knickerbockers, he had played a smaller sawfish for seven hours, up and down this same channel, without tiring anything but himself. Something must be done, for we couldn't spare that much time. It was suggested from the other skiff that we hold back with the oars against the dashes of the fish. A single trial sufficed, two would have implied idiocy, the one so nearly wrecked us. We lashed a hunting knife to the harpoon pole and when next the sawfish sulked, pulled our skiff directly over him and struck. An ugly weapon rose beside us up through the water, like the Excalibur of King Arthur.

The Camera-man waited for the head to show, and when it didn't appear and he had lost his chance, I upbraided him for expecting a sawfish to lift his head above the surface, like a manatee or a dolphin. We punched the fish again with the knife and he whacked with his broken saw the bottom and side of the skiff which he kept always between himself and the camera.

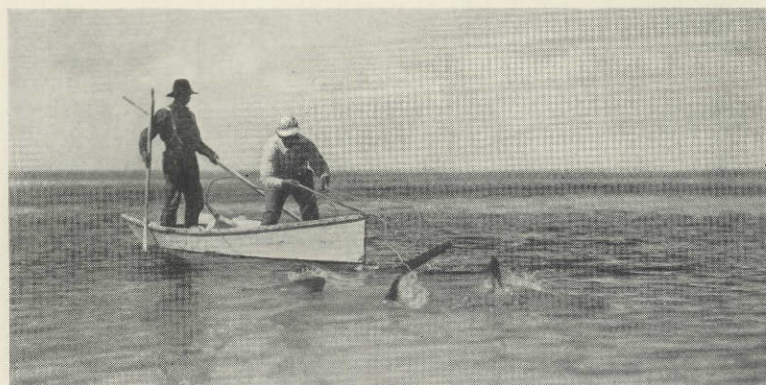




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### CATCHING THE SAW-FISH

- (1) There is a big swirl in the water. (2) You attempt to lasso him.  
(3) Succeeding, the struggling fish is drawn to the skiff.



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To provide against breaking the harpoon line, we borrowed the outfit of the Camera-man and my boatman put a second iron in the fish. When the flurry which this occasioned was over, we rowed to a bank where the water was so shoal that the fish would have to show up, if he could be towed there. We anchored the skiff to oars driven in the mud and attempted to haul half a ton of unwilling sawfish a hundred yards. It was a fine struggle, but "some laborious" as my boatman, who backed me up on the line, observed. As the fish reached shallow water he woke up, and when he was so near that every other blow of his saw landed on the bow of the skiff, I thought the picture sufficiently realistic and rested. Then it was that the Camera-man called for "more action," and as we struggled to drag the creature yet nearer, I found myself repeating "*Morituri te salutamus,*" when, with a sudden violent dash, the sawfish tore the skiff from its moorings and bore us away on another John Gilpin's ride.

When he had again been hauled into shoal water, we cast a line over his saw, passed it through the ring-bolt at the bow and lashing him to the skiff, fore and aft, started on a tempestuous voyage to the launch which carried us between our cruising boat and the cruising ground of the day. A heavy line from the launch was made fast to the tail of the sawfish, which was then cut loose from the skiff. Starting the motor was the beginning of a new contest. The balance of power was in favor of the fish, but the persistence of the engine won the battle. The launch gained head-

way for a moment, losing it at the next dash of the fish. Each sideplay of the latter threw the boat off its course, and its occasional blows on the planking jarred the craft from propeller to bow. The sawfish measured 15 feet 8 inches, and its weight probably exceeded 1,000 pounds. Yet his body was eaten that night by "Big John," a dragon of a shark, with a local reputation of mythologic flavor, the story of whose life is not complete, but—I have hopes.

Harpooning sawfish is a sport covering a wide range of sensations. The emotions extend from gentle agitation to delirious excitement, and the sportsman may measure them out to suit his requirements as accurately as he can apportion the contents of his flask. Give the fish plenty of line and play him gently, and he will tow you with sedateness for miles. Shorten the line, pull the skiff up beside him, and if the bay is shallow, his struggles will deluge you with splashing water and his big weapon beat upon your skiff with a violence that will satisfy any normal craving for excitement. Better, then, be ready to drop to the bottom of the skiff, for that broad four-foot saw, with its fifty-two teeth, may sweep with the power of a pile-driver across the gunwale of your boat, with *hara-kiri* the probable result of getting in its path. One of my boatmen always refused to put me up to a sawfish. His sufficient excuse was, "The last man I did that-a-way to was my brother and the sawfish killed him."

The sawfish is found in all the streams and bays of the west coast of Florida, but it most abundant in



During the fracas he breaks his saw on the boat.



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the shallow waters east and south of Cape Sable. Many follow the channels that lead from Joe Kemp's Key and, as the tide rises, spread over the banks that lie to the eastward, feeding on the mullet and other small victims of their slashing saws. They can then be seen from a long distance and distinguished from other fish by the three big fins which they trail tandem above the surface of the water.

The sportsman stands in the bow of his skiff, with his harpoon ready in his hand, and is poled or sculled in the wake of the three fins. The first vain throw at the form beneath the fins teaches him that it was only the tail he had seen, the broad body and swaying weapon of the creature lying far in advance of the fins that appear on the surface. His next chance may come from a fish swimming toward him, which he only sees as the saw glides beneath the bow of his boat and a broad back lies beneath his poised harpoon. If he must have excitement, he strikes and gets it; if of a prudent mind, he waits for a chance to throw his iron into a fish from behind or beside those three fins, that the first rush of the quarry may be less embarrassing.

Harpooning the sawfish pays bigger dividends of legitimate excitement than most methods of fishing or hunting. Its successes are personal, justly belonging to the individual sportsman and not to the guide, who so often should be credited with the trophies of the chase which hang in fashionable halls. It may fail to meet that crude requirement, that to legitimize sport the carcass of the game, except-

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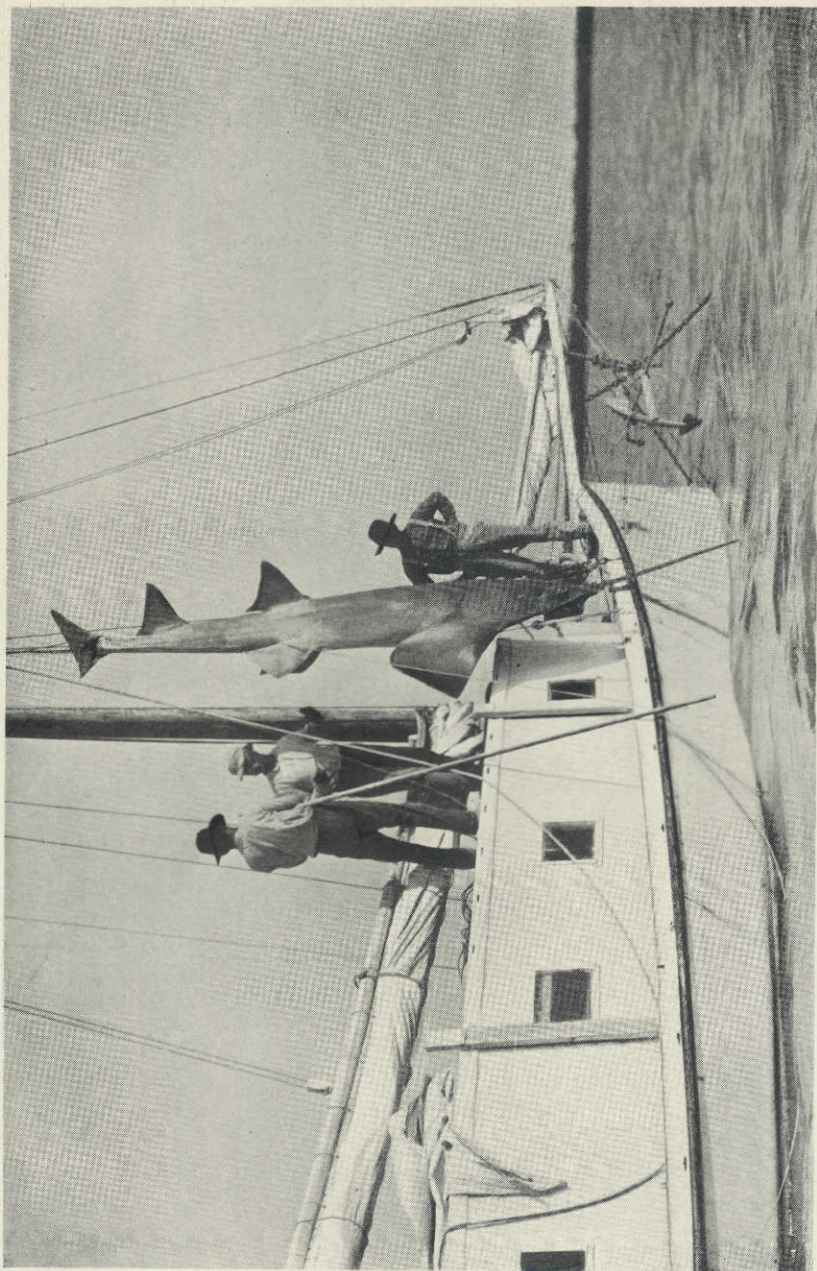
*Florida Enchantments*

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ing, perhaps, the fox or the anise-seed bag, must be eaten.

Yet the casuist might urge that its flesh feeds worthy sharks, and if the plea is denied because sharks ought to be killed and not fed, there remains the argument that the sawfish is himself a shark.





Our record fish. Fifteen feet ten inches long.

