

CHAPTER IX

Catfish as Scavengers

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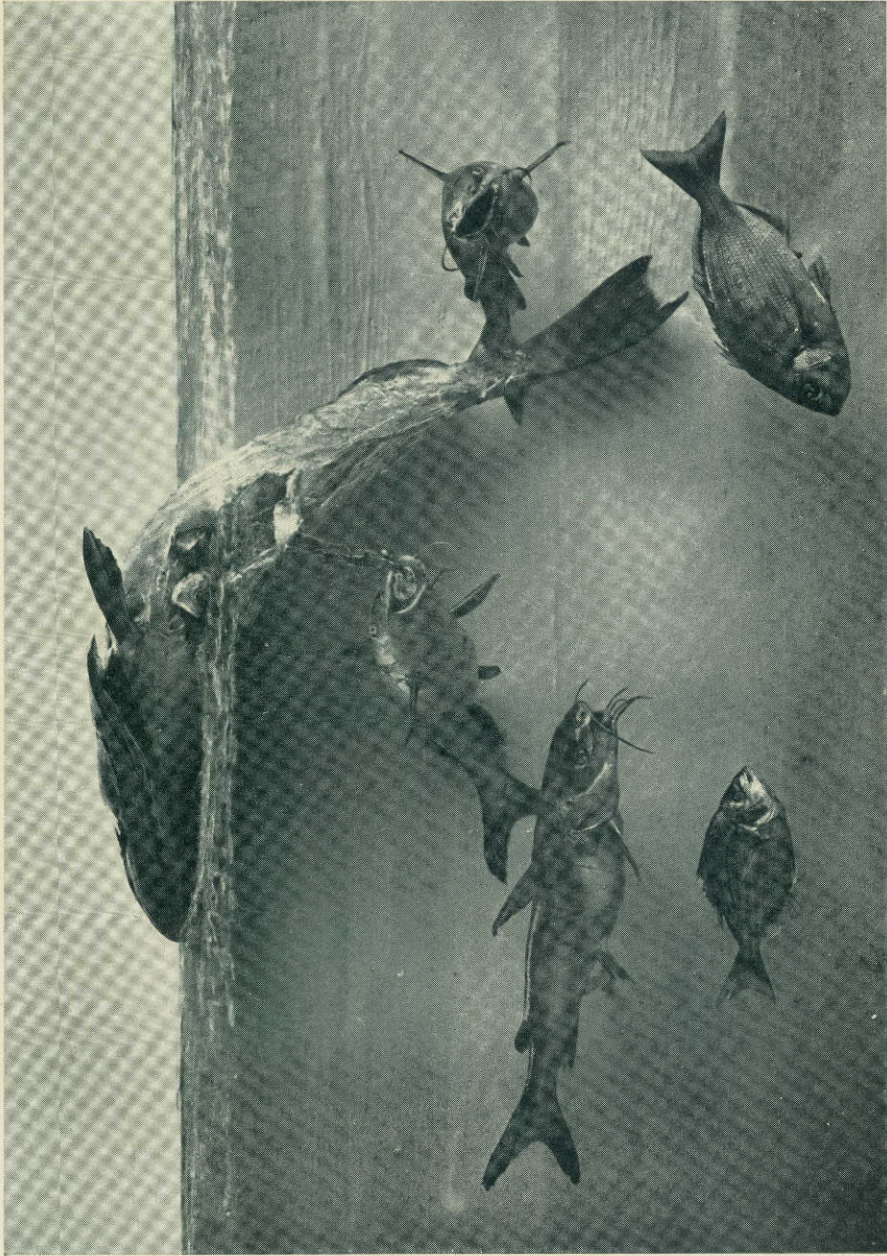
WITH the exception of the sharks, which, vermin as they are, give a measure of sport under favourable conditions, I have now disposed of most of the really big game of the Florida coast waters, and it remains to draw the reader's and intending visitor's attention to the number of other sea-fish that on occasion give excellent sport in those latitudes. I have often thought that in the all-absorbing ambition for the record tarpon some of these humbler fish, which would themselves create a sensation in English waters, are too consistently neglected. The sharks shall receive notice where their low standing as vermin relegates them, at the end of the book.

It may be complained, particularly by those who have never been on the spot, that I have passed too lightly

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over the real art of tarpon fishing, made too little of its difficulties, laid too much stress on the simplicity of success. Well, these are matters of opinion. I never, in my own tarpon experiences, found a single instance where real skill and expert knowledge were nearly so important as brute strength and endurance, and I write only of what I know. Those who like detailed instructions in the art of tarpon fishing should consult the back files of *Forest and Stream*, the great American fishing paper, and in these they will find innumerable excellent articles and letters on the subject. In a quite recent volume, for instance, I find an admirable series of tarpon papers from the pen of Mr. J. A. L. Waddell, and I append, as a specimen of the detail with which some of these writers lovingly handle their subject, Mr. Waddell's twelve ways in which a tarpon may be lost by the careless or ill-starred.

1. By failure of the hook to penetrate a soft place.
2. By the cutting of a hole in the mouth, from which the hook drops when the line is slackened.
3. By breaking or corkscrewing the hook.
4. By breaking the line, owing to :—
 - (a) its deterioration.
 - (b) fouling of line by overrunning of the reel.
 - (c) tangling of something by the reel handle.
 - (d) too severe application of the brake or reel handle in order to stop the fish.



DEAD GROUPEE BEING DEVoured BY CATFISH AND BREAM.

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5. By breaking of the snell.
6. By breaking of the rod, generally in the tip, but sometimes in the butt.
7. By carelessness of boatman in gaffing.
8. By attack of a shark.

It remains to put before the intending visitor to Florida some of the commoner but yet interesting sea-fish, less game than the tarpon, less immense than the jewfish, that will under a variety of conditions, and on days when the tarpon itself is out of reach, afford excellent sport. These notes are not, of course, addressed to the expert naturalist; indeed, they are for the most part very brief, and serve chiefly to introduce my photographs, which may, perhaps, claim to be the most characteristic series of the kind yet published.

THE COMMON CATFISH (*Galeichthys felis*)

As the turkey buzzards on land, so the catfish in the sea act as scavengers that we could ill dispense with. The sharks, on the other hand, with their fiercer and more predatory instincts, may rather be compared with the eagles among birds. These catfish are, as may be seen from the photograph, not beautiful to the eye. Neither, for the matter of that, is the condor, yet it is, perhaps, of more use to South America than the humming bird.

We here see a trio of catfish busy on the carcass of a monster grouper that floats dead on the surface; and what

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would become of such polluting offal but for services such as are rendered by these useful scavengers, one shudders to think. These catfish have no scales, their bodies being shiny, and sleek to the touch, but the fisherman must beware of insidious spikes hidden behind the fins. Any one familiar with the salmon will not fail to notice a similar adipose fin on the back of the catfish, in front of the tail, and the other distinctive feature is the growth of whiskers, in reality sensitive feelers, on the head. Many catfish are found only in the rivers of the warmer regions of the globe, and German and Austrian anglers have their own siluroid in the giant wels of so many continental rivers and lakes.

In the picture will be seen a couple of sea-bream, apparently hovering around to pick up the leavings of the larger fish, and, for this or some other reason, sea-bream are very often caught in company with catfish.

Catfish and buzzards are not the only scavengers of that coast. No tarpon that is wanted again should be left on the shore, for no sooner are you out of sight than every hole and cranny in the sand above high-water mark gives up its ghostly crabs, elfish little body-snatchers that creep stealthily, and quickly eat their way into the soft parts of the fish. Ghost-crabs they call them thereabouts, and phantom-like they look when disturbed and tearing seawards with their attenuated white legs held on high.



GAFF TOPSAIL CATFISH SO CALLED FROM THEIR FLYAWAY FINS, AND YOUNG HAMMER HEAD SHARK.

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THE GAFF TOPSAIL CATFISH (*Ælurichthys marinus*)

In the gaff topsail catfish there is not merely an extraordinary development in the "whiskers," but the back fin also carries a long threadlike growth not unlike that in the tarpon. All these catfish frequent sandy grounds, and are rarely found in the clearer coral waters. The present species runs to greater weights than the last, and it is as a rule found both farther from land, and in deeper levels. As they are all inoffensive scavengers, and by no means the fierce creatures they look, it is difficult to account for their being so often hooked by tarpon fishers, except by the probability of their endeavouring to suck the baits off, and getting foul hooked.

All catfish are active at night, which might be thought to account for their popular name, only that they are on the feed all day as well. It is nevertheless a pretty sight on hot nights when the sea is highly phosphorescent to throw morsels of fish or meat into the water, and watch the balls of fire darting in all directions as the catfish and others dash to their repast.

In the picture will be seen a baby hammerhead shark (*Sphyrna zygaena*), a rather interesting personality, for it had not long been born when photographed, and had not in fact developed the singular "hammer" of a later stage, its eyes being still flush with the sides of the head, and its only distinction from the more typical sharks lying in the extraordinarily prolonged snout. I give a photograph of an adult hammerhead later on.

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THE SHEEPSHEAD (*Archosargus probatocephalus*)

I mentioned the sea-bream in writing of catfish, and one of the commonest of the group on that coast is the sheepshead, so-called, I imagine, from the solid, sheeplike teeth that can even crunch the mangrove oysters, in the neighbourhood of which these fish are so fond of foregathering. These growths of oysters on the red mangrove always attract the notice of visitors unused to the spectacle. The best bait for these bream is a fiddler crab, a crustacean found in every lagoon thereabouts, and owing its name to a singular habit of waving its large claw (only the male has this disproportionate limb) exactly as if it were drawing a bow across a fiddle. As the sea-bream are fond of company, playing one is generally the prelude to a good bag of them. They bear little resemblance to their namesakes of rivers and ponds, for they are not so slimy or sluggish, but on the contrary more spiny, and have the dark band markings and game fighting manner of perch. They feed not far from the bottom, and must be struck sharply the moment they bite, and for their size they play very well. They can be taken in immense quantities.



SHEEPSHEAD IN APPEARANCE SOMEWHAT LIKE ENGLISH PERCH, THEIR FRONT TEETH RESEMBLE THOSE OF A CHILD.

