Early Saltwater Fly Fishing: "Music on the Reel Equal to a Brass Band"

THE SPORT OF FISHING SALTWATER with a fly is undergoing a contemporary explosion of interest as enthusiasts eagerly discover the excitement of fishing a vast ocean that offers tumultuous feeding blitzes by varied populations of fish species, most notably the striped bass (which is making a resurgence after decades of overfishing). It is interesting to trace the beginnings of this sport back as far as we can, using as a guide Paul Schullery's references from his book American Fly Fishing: A History. *We can witness, for instance, this strange use of a fly instead of bait to catch skip jacks, sea trout, black bass, "much to the edification of the incredulous ones," or the wonderment at a brand new fish one angler has come upon in Florida—a "bone fish."*

Traveling back in time, we glimpse a wilder world when methods of long-distance travel were rigorous: by horseback, carriage, or early trains. The state of Florida was still rather an overgrown jungle inland and its coast most exotic. In order to preserve the antique flavor of these excerpts as well as their historical integrity, I have been reluctant to make copy editing changes except when absolutely necessary. The flavor of adventure and discovery from an earlier time still thrills.

EDITOR

Oldest "Castor"

IN THE EARLIEST REFERENCE we've found to saltwater fly fishing, published in 1843, the correspondent writes to dispute a previously published column in the magazine Bell's Life in London, *and, as a credibility check for suspicious readers, states that his experience with ocean fly fishing goes back forty years—to circa 1800.*

To the Editor of *Bell's Life in London*:

Having read with surprise the article on "Steel Top Joints" for fly rods, I beg you will allow me to say a few words thereon, and to begin by stating that I have cast the fly for forty years and more, both in the ocean and the fresh, and must say that I consider the steel fly-top totally improper.

Old Castor

From *The Spirit of the Times,* October 7, 1843

Sea Trout

. . . THOUGH THE ARTIFICIAL FLY is by no means used for sea-trout [sea-run brook trout], with much success, before they are led by instinct to change the nature of their food with the element in which it is formed, yet it is customary in this sort of fishing to have a red fly, as it is called, but more strictly speaking, a caterpillar, permanently attached to the line. . . .

. . . We have now to mention a well known and by far most frequented spot in all these waters, called "Poket Point,"' in Waquoit Bay [on the south shore of Cape Cod, opposite Martha's Vineyard]. Its name like that of the bay, is no doubt of Indian origin, and agreeably to the custom already referred to, might have been given to it for the very simple reason of its poking out in so striking a manner as to form those singularly abrupt projections from the shore or main land, generally known by the name of "sand spits." Be that as it may, it is a very remarkable place, and for many years, has been no less the resort of the angler, than the great abundance of fine sea-trout which form the object of his visits. . . . At low water, there is a *wading-place* from near the point to the opposite shore which forms one side of "Child's River," the current of which sets against the point and adds to its advantages as a resort for the fish, especially if the wind happens to be in an opposite direction, for the froth which is consequently collected upon the surface, is what the trout, beyond all other fish, so much delight in, and they are seen at such times, jumping their whole length out of water, their bright broad sides glistening in the sun.

This state of things however, is not always the most favor-

able for fishing; for at such times it may be sport to the fish, but by no means to the angler; few in fact are taken upon the surface, and they evince little or no acquaintance with the artificial fly, that which we have heretofore mentioned being a sort of decoy, serving but to attract their attention to the more deadly bait.

From *Natural History of Fishes of Massachusetts* by Jerome V. C. Smith, M.D. (1833)

Striped Bass Fishing

WITH THE SOLE EXCEPTION of Salmon fishing, this is the finest of the seaboard varieties of piscatorial sport. The Striped Bass is the boldest, bravest, strongest, and most active fish that visits the waters of the midland States, and is, as I have before observed, to be surpassed only by the Salmon.

Everywhere, from the capes of the Chesapeake to the St. Lawrence, they run up the rivers to spawn in the early spring, and shelter themselves in the shallow lagoons within the outer bars during the winter. Everywhere they are fished for eagerly, and esteemed alike a prize by the angler and the epicure. In every manner they are fished for with success, and with almost every bait.

The fly will take them brilliantly, and at the end of three hundred yards of Salmon-line a twelve-pound Bass will be found quite sufficient to keep even the most skillful angler's hands as full as he can possibly desire.

The fly to be used is any of the large Salmonflies, the larger and gaudier the better. None is more taking than an orange body with peacock and bluejay wings and black hackle legs; but any of the well-known Salmon flies will secure him, as will the scarlet-bodied fly with scarlet-ibis and silver-pheasant wings which is so killing to the Black Bass of the lakes.

With the fly, he is to be fished for with the double-handed rod, precisely as the Salmon; and when hooked, though he has not all the artifice and resource of that monarch of the deep, he is hardly inferior to him in agility, strength, and vigor of resistance.

It is singular that more recourse is not had to this mode of taking him, as in waters where the Salmon is not, there is no sport equal to it. Those who try this method will not, I dare to assert, regret the trial; they must, however, fish from a boat, as the width of the streams which Bass frequent do not permit them to be commanded from the shores, even with the double-handed rod.

From *Frank Forester's Fish & Fishing of the United States and British Provinces* by Henry William Herbert (1859)

Fly-Fishing on the Homassa

THE HOMASSA RIVER [in Florida] winds through a tortuous channel, and it is ten miles from its spring-head to its mouth. . . . At high water (for there is a considerable rise and fall of the tide) the various kinds of fish which inhabit these waters run up the river and hide in the grasses on the edge of the banks. Before leaving home we inquired whether we had better take our fly rod along, and were told that it would be useless in Florida. The same thing was afterwards told us at Jacksonville. Nevertheless we brought it. After several days of most excellent sport with the heavy rod and reel, catching sheepshead in great numbers, we made up our minds to try the fly rod. We had noted many likely spots along the river, and particularly the grassy banks opposite the house. We had also noticed that black bass (south "trout"), sea trout, skip-jacks, etc., were to be seen jumping at these places at certain times in the morning and evening, as if feeding, and we immediately resolved that these would be the most likely places to be regarded with a rise to our flies. The next evening the fly rod was brought out and limbered up, much to the edification of the incredulous ones. We selected one fly only for our cast—a large one, with red ibis wings, crimson molian body, and golden pheasant tail—which was tied on a No. 6 hook. With one similar we had taken many a bass at the north.

. . . This was only the beginning of our fly-fishing. We whipped almost all the best appearing places in the river, but found none where the fish rose better than just opposite the house. We took frequently a sea trout or weakfish of three and a half to four pounds weight on the fly, and when we happened to get hold of a skip-jack, there was music on the reel equal to a brass band. One day, when coming down the river, we cast the flies nearly opposite the pier at the old plantation. A school of about a dozen large cavalli [crevallé] rose to the fly all at once, fairly churning the water into a foam. They would not take the fly in their mouths, but simply rushed at it in a most frantic manner, and when the fly was drawn toward the boat they very nearly jumped into it. This continued for fully fifteen minutes, and was a sight never to be forgotten. . . .

HUNTINGTON

From *Forest & Stream*, July 20, 1876

Sea Trout

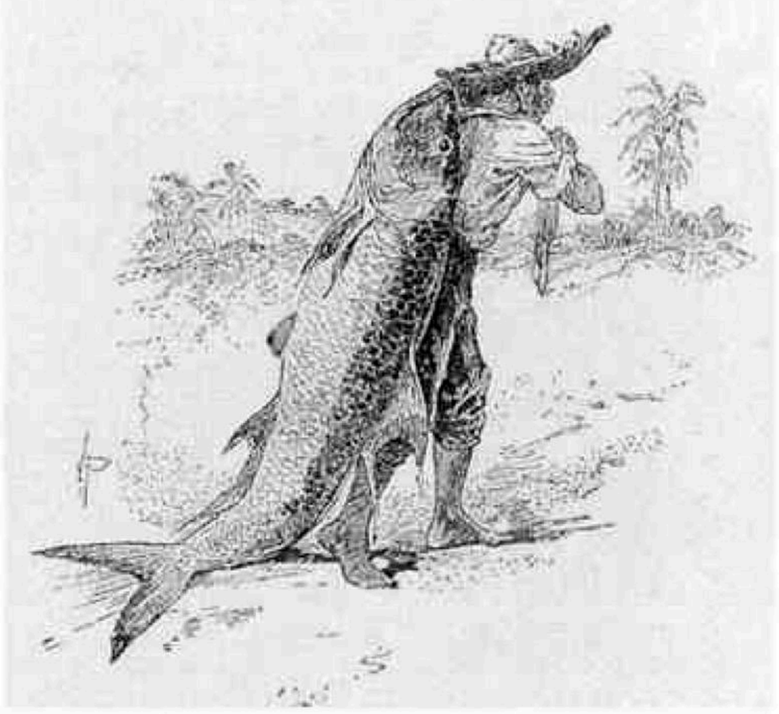
. . . WHILE THE FISH are still in tide water, and the fisherman is fishing from the rocks, the head of some bay into which flows a stream of fresh water, and the time of the lower half of the tide, are both desirable. The former as furnishing a variety of food, and the latter as contracting the fishing ground. The eddies of a swift current, and the hollows of a rocky bottom are both affected by the fish; although they are often found along a smooth sandy shore, chasing the minnows, and now and then dashing at a fly or sand-hopper thrown off the land. . . .

From *The Game Fish of the North* by Robert Barnwell Roosevelt (1884)

The Bluefish

. . . THEY AFFORD EXCELLENT SPORT on a rod and line, being among the strongest and boldest of their kind, taking the fly readily, and making fierce and well-sustained rushes; but from the localities they usually frequent, they are mostly taken with a hand-line from a sailboat. An artificial squid of bone, ivory, or lead, is trailed along at the end of forty yards of stout line, from a boat dancing merrily over the waves under the influence of a fresh mackerel breeze. The boatman's business is to watch for a shoal, which can be seen by their breaking, and when he has found it, by repeated tacks to keep the boat in or near it; the fisherman's duty is to haul in steadily and regularly immediately on feeling a bite, and to get out his line again as soon as possible. The fish dart forward, and throwing themselves out of water, turn a complete somersault, when, if the line is not taught [sic], they will throw the hook out of their mouths. The dashing of the waves and flying of the spray, the rapid exhilarating motion of the vessel, the fresh sea-breeze, the rapid biting and fine play of the fish, make a day pass pleasantly if they do not afford scientific sport. . . .

From *The Game Fish of the North* by Robert Barnwell Roosevelt (1884)



Illustrations from *The Century Magazine* (May 1891)

Striped Bass

THE MOST SCIENTIFIC and truly sportsmanlike mode of taking striped bass must be admitted to be with the fly; which, unfortunately, can only be done in the brackish or fresh water. Like salmon, they will not take the fly in the salt creeks and bays, and thus, though the sport is excellent, it is confined to few localities, and those difficult of access. Fly-fishing may be done either with the ordinary salmon rod, or in a strong current with the common bass rod, by working your fly on the top of the water and giving a considerable length of line. The best fly is that with the scarlet ibis and white feathers mixed, the same as used for black bass; but bass may be taken with any large fly, especially those of gay color. Excellent sport is frequently had in this way from off some open bridge, where the falling tide, mixed with the fresh water, rushes furiously between the piers. . . .

From *The Game Fish of the North* by Robert Barnwell Roosevelt (1884)

Fly-Fishing for the Marines

. . . AS MIGHT BE IMAGINED, fishing with the artificial fly can be practiced and enjoyed to the fullest extent, where fish are so abundant [on the Florida coast]. I took many different species, both fresh-water and marine, with the artificial fly, in the vicinity of Fort Capron. While they did not run so heavy as those taken with bait, they were quite heavy enough for the fly-rod. For instance, I took crevallé of five pounds, sea-trout of ten pounds, red-fish of five pounds, blue-fish of four pounds, "snooks" or sergeant-fish of six pounds, bone, or lady-fish of two pounds, black bass of eight pounds, and tarpum [sic] of ten pounds, in addition to species of less weight.

The best time for fly-fishing for the marine species in Florida is from sundown until dark, or later if the moon is nearly full. At this time the predatory fish are in the shallow portions of bays, and at the mouths of creeks, in the brackish

water, feeding on the mullet, which swarms in countless numbers in such places.

The angler must be well concealed behind clumps of scrub palmetto mangroves, or canes, to insure success; or, if fishing from a boat, must keep in deep water and make long casts inshore, near the sand bars and shoals. After casting, he must trail his flies along the surface, and permit them to be submerged, at times, for a depth of several inches.

His tackle must be strong and serviceable. I used a twelve-foot, twelve-ounce, ash and lancewood trout fly-rod, and a remarkably good one, by the way, which I often found rather light for large fish. A grilse rod would be more suitable for fly-fishing for the salt water species; for there is a strong possibility of occasionally hooking a monster weighing twenty pounds or more.

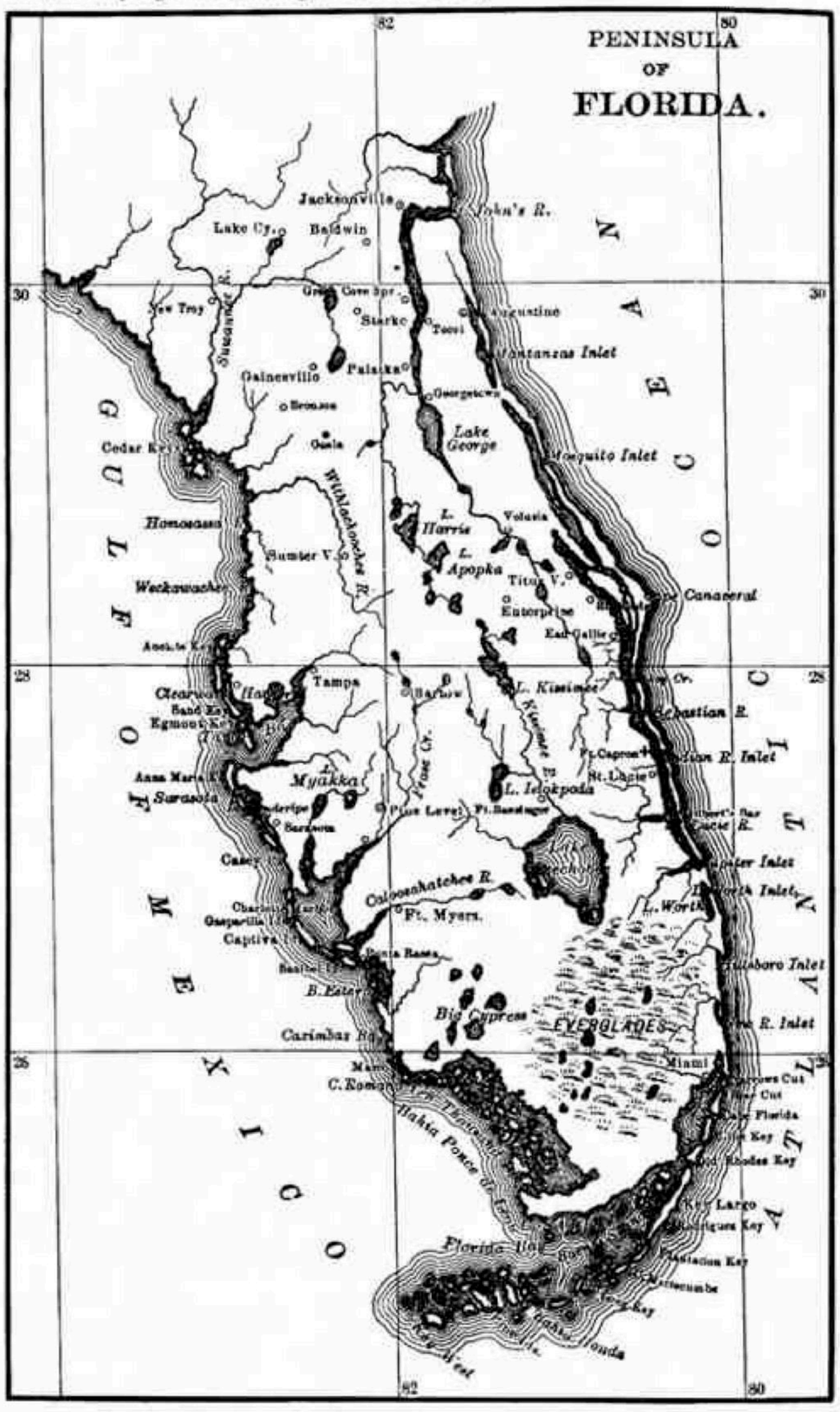
I often took some of the afore-mentioned species while fishing for black bass and when using bass flies; but when fishing especially for the marine species, I used flies of my own tying, made without much regard to any particular pattern. I tied them on Sproat hooks from 4-0 to 6-0 in size, using a combination of colors, and usually with white or gray-ish wings, as the fishing was mostly done at dusk.

Bright feathers are easily procured in Florida from the numerous gay-plumaged birds, so that the angler will be at no loss for material for tying his flies. Two flies I remember as being particularly taking: one with upper wings of white ibis and lower wings of the mottled feathers of chuck-will's-widow: another with top wings of white egret and lower ones of pink curlew *(roseate spoonbill)*. The coachman, oriole white and red ibis, silver gray, and other flies with white or light-colored wings, are good ones to pattern after in tying flies for this kind of fishing. They should be of good size, about the same as salmon flies.

I might add that, on one occasion, I took an alligator "on the fly," using a fly made of tying the wings of a common tern or sea-swallow on a shark hook, with the tail of a gray squirrel for the hackled body; but, as Rip Van Winkle says: "This one don't count."

From *Camping and Cruising in Florida* by James Henshall (1884)

From *Camping and Cruising in Florida* (1884)



An Englishman's Experience of Florida Fishing

by Alfred C. Harmsworth

. . . I HAVE TRIED most of the popular winter quarters of my own people, and have usually found that fishing either with fly or float is rarely enjoyable in any of the Egyptian or Mediterranean holiday places. As many American readers will know, there is sport to be had on the streams in the Italian Riviera; Cyprus has fairly good sea and river fishing if one happens on the right place, and the Nile has fish in plenty, though few seem game, and so far as I am aware, only two kinds rise to the fly. . . .

Tarpon fishing is quite a new sport. Up to March, 1885, no large tarpon had ever been captured with rod and reel. . . . The tarpon is essentially a sea fish, but . . . for the pursuit of small fry it will ascend rivers for a considerable distance. Very little, however, is known as to the habits of the fish, and I find that many experienced anglers contradicted each other flatly on many points with regard to its capture.

On the morning following my arrival at Punta Gorda I arose early and put in a couple of hours "trout" fishing. The fish I caught were not trout, but as they had spots on them and were fairly game they were therefore so regarded. . . . It has silver sides, a dark bluish, greenish back, with rows of black spots above the lateral line. The head is small, mouth fairly large, and for a minute or two it fights well.

My fly was a silver doctor, to which I added a largish white feather. What particularly surprised me in Florida fishing was the enormous amount one could catch on favorable days.

From *Forest & Stream*, January 5, 1895

The "Bone Fish" of Biscayne Bay

BELOW IS A MOST interesting exchange of information nearly a century ago from two early issues of Forest & Stream *on the newly discovered sport of bonefishing. In the first letter the writer wonders what is this beautiful new Florida coastal fish he has caught using bait; a correspondent, "Maxie," writes back in the very next issue to inform readers that this is a bonefish and that there is even more satisfying sport using flies to catch these marvelous creatures.*

TO THE EDITOR:

For the past two winters, skillful fishermen among the Northern tourists, whom I knew personally or by reputation among mutual acquaintances, have been reporting with enthusiasm the discovery in Biscayne Bay of a new game fish which is to surpass all the other ministers to piscatorial amusements. Some went so far as to say that the tarpon is superseded as the king of fish; as expressed by one of them who kills annually more than fifty tarpon, "the tarpon is not in it."

. . . The bone fish is new to me, and so far as I can ascertain is taken only in Florida, at Biscayne Bay and probably southward, though as to the latter fact I have no information. A guide did tell me that it is abundant in Cuba, where it is called what he pronounced leetha, or "the swift."

. . . The bait is surf bugs or sand fleas. . . . The strike is a slow nibble or mumble, and it requires quickness and discretion to hook the fish. But when he is hooked, which is by a sudden, slight motion of the wrist, the aspect of the contest changes from apathy to fierce activity. There is a lightning-like run of perhaps 100 yds., then a return nearly to the boat, then an equally extensive run which cannot be checked, and then zigzag rushes and flourishes here, there, and everywhere until the fish is exhausted, and finally lifted into the boat by the line—no gaffing or other ceremonial; there is no leaping or jumping—all honest fishwork, below the surface and in his own element. I have taken small-mouth bass of similar weight and length, and brook trout not so large, and they simply do not compare with this fighter. There is no fish (of his class) which can be named with him. Comparison with the tarpon is absurd. They are not in the same category unless it be in beauty.

. . . Now is this fish a new discovery? Mr. Hulings . . . tells me he took the pains last year to stop over in Washington to consult the Fish Commissioners, and all the satisfaction he received was a disquisition verbally upon the lady (or "bony") fish very common in Florida waters and in no way related to this fish. . . .

What is this fish, and how is it to be classified?

F.S.I.C.

From *Forest & Stream,* April 4, 1896

TO THE EDITOR:

In your last issue I notice an interesting description of the bonefish of Biscayne Bay, Fla., and also an inquiry as to its classification . . . As he says, sand fleas, fiddler and hermit crabs are the most successful baits, but I have derived more sport from using a medium weight fly-rod with large, gaudy salmon or bass flies. Jock-Scott, butcher, scarlet-ibis and parmachene-belle are my favorites, all tied on No. 8-0 hooks with twisted gut loops. There is some excelled advice to fly-fishermen intending to visit Florida contained in Dr. Henshall's *Camping and Cruising in Florida,* and in the collection of papers made by C. F. Orvis and A. N. Cheney entitled "Fishing with the Fly," but the bone or lady fish, mentioned in these works, is a totally different fish in appearance, habits and habitat.

I will add that there is great and almost unknown sport in store for the Northern angler who will go to Biscayne and depart from the conventional bait and "billiard cue rod" and experiment with the fly along the sandbars and mangrove shores.

Maxie

From *Forest & Stream,* April 11, 1896