



Monthly Dose of Tarpon



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When I first started fishing for tarpon in the Florida Keys, word of mouth said; the best fishing was in May around the Bahia Honda bridge between Bahia Honda Key and Big Pine Key. One of my respected sources even said, if you don't have wind, the first days are best, because the fish haven't been harassed yet. I guess everybody has to start somewhere. So I hired guides and fished the migratory tarpon that accumulate in the deep water of the Bahia Honda Channel and pour-out onto the flats to the north and south in spring and early summer. I learned how to cast in wind, lead a fish, entice the strike and tire a fish quickly. Guides and peers said, a fly angler is doing well if they land one fish a day. This is a crowded scene and the fish can shut down because of pressure. The strings of fish swimming over white sand stand-out and don't get a chance to rest.

Besides all the milk runs, I've had the fortune of fishing with adventurous guides too. Their curiosity makes them discover new fish locations, habits and fishing techniques. Most won't share their knowledge with strangers and will only share with someone after spending time together and building trust. They don't want others messing up their secret spots, destroying wild creatures or taking credit for their work. Who would blame them.

So, with time on the water together with the right people, I've learned there

are a lot more tarpon fishing opportunities than meets the eye. The biggest is the Florida backcountry. These fish are there year round, as opposed to the Ocean-side migratory fish that mainly use the beach and flats as a highway. The tarpon of the Gulf of Mexico are not in the shallows the whole year but do come up when the water temperatures are above 75 degrees. That's where you get those surprise appearances of tarpon on warm late winter or early spring days. The migratory fish average 75 pounds and the backcountry, or Gulf fish, average about 110. The other breakthrough I learned was their behavior.

Conventional guides would insist on an early launch so an angler could get a shot at a rolling fish at sunrise as the schools moved in the channels. The glare on the water is almost blinding then, especially going east toward the sun. I didn't enjoy this, even when it works, since it's basically blind casting to a school. Instead, I prefer sight casting to a fish I can see.

When I first fished with a young unconventional captain named Bruce Chard, he had a different strategy that I really liked! We'd have a nice breakfast and wait for the morning clouds to burn off and the sun to light the water. The ramps were empty and we would motor out around the islands and poll into backcountry basins full of laid-up tarpon. These fish are the big ones and they lay in ambush for prey.

The key to spotting fish without spooking them is starting upwind and floating as slowly and quietly as possible. You use the push-pole to hold position, or slow the drift, in order to spot the motionless fish. Since they're at the surface, they often give themselves away by spiking, or revealing their tail and dorsal fin above water.

Bruce taught me how to draw strikes from half of the fish I cast to! He said, lead by ten feet and cross their noses by three feet. He said he tried the conventional way, so the fly didn't "attack" the tarpon but they weren't reacting when seeing it with only one eye. Crossing them didn't scare them at all and they saw the fly with both eyes. The big floating tarpon came to life and with a swish of their tail, they propelled themselves at my fly and inhaled it! If my fish didn't make too many laps around the basin, the remaining fish relaxed and let us pick another fish. Otherwise, we'd move on.

One year, Bruce had a couple (famous) guys cancel a block of split day and night charters and asked if I'd be interested. The daily plan was to fish for

four hours at night and four hours during the afternoon after napping. I took the days I could and since I've seen sharks eat tarpon where we were going during daylight and there are more at night, I brought my 14wt outfit. That was to help bring the tarpon in fast and release them in better condition, so they might avoid the sharks. Bruce learned the night game from Captain Jake Jordan who was also guiding nearby on the same nights and communicated with Bruce by radio.

We launched at Bahia Honda in the dark and motored out to the Gulf side to wait. We passed conventional tackle charter boats returning from their night trips with lack-luster reports. We loved it. It didn't take long before we heard and saw a big school of tarpon blasting shrimp. It sounded like someone rolling bowling balls into the water from the bridge. I cast my fly on a clear intermediate fly line across the current and started stripping, when I felt the yank of a good tarpon.

Bruce turned on his Q-Beam and his Yamaha and started chasing the running fish. Most of them would go through the portals to thread the bridge, headed for the ocean. I got to see their jumps in the light and my heavy tackle brought them in quickly. To avoid sharks getting the fish or himself, Bruce had me palm my Tibor Pacific reel spool with the rod-tip pointed at the fly, while he gunned the throttle, causing the twenty-pound leader to pop. This leaves the steel hook in the mouth of the fish but the hook corrodes away quickly. We caught fish night and day for three days. My most memorable fish was caught with a really long accurate cast in front of Lois Key, locally known as Loggerhead. I think that fish would have weighed 130lbs. We were still getting some backcountry fish into July. That was the year I was interested in catching tarpon every month of the year and I asked Bruce about the tough month of August. He didn't have a spot but he knew someone who did.

Bruce introduced me to a friend who had a reliable school of tarpon in August but they only marauded at night. His name was Captain Jim Perry who lived alone in his beautiful Japanese styled home, with dock, on Middle Torch Key. He had a six-foot long barracuda named Barry living under his dock that awaited his daily fish hand-outs. Jim spoke in a deep baritone voice and made me promise I would not share his secret spot, or visit it without his knowledge.

On the first trip, we idled away from his dock and used a Q-Beam to illuminate

the driveway markers he installed to show the route through mangrove lined channels. After a fifteen-minute run on plane, he dropped anchor on a channel edge across from a small island. The no-see-ums and mosquitos were horrific but I had a natural repellent that worked most of the time and 100% Deet for emergencies. The temperature in the Keys at night in August can be as high as ninety and you are never dry.

Jim told me to listen for the feeding sounds of the school if they arrived and we sat waiting in the dark talking and getting to know each other. It was about thirty minutes until we heard the commotion from the tarpon and I cast a streamer across the channel and started stripping it in. There's nothing more sudden than a grab in the dark. I strip-set the hook and cleared line on my 12wt outfit so I could fight the fish on the reel. It's not sight fishing but the mystery of night fishing allures me.

After a series of runs and splash jumps, Jim kindly unhooked the fish and we repeated the process four more times that night. On another night anchored on that channel, I was surprised by catching a big permit we estimated at 43 pounds on a tarpon streamer. I returned a few more times the next year into September. That fall, Jim told me he wanted to sell his house and boat and move back to Wisconsin to be closer to his family.

The funniest day we had together was earlier in summer when I called him to try his day spots. We were staked-out on the corner of a flat waiting for tarpon and the visibility was poor due to clouds. We couldn't see fish if they did come through. Jim said, go ahead and blind cast. Not wanting to seem lazy or a quitter, I commenced casting. I think since captains knew I was a tournament caster who didn't mind practicing, they took advantage of me when conditions sucked. Captain Steve Bellefleur had no guilt asking me to cast my 12wt for hours in the fishless time between active tides and Jim asked me to blind cast for tarpon in the event they went around a shallow flat resembling a baseball diamond. Well, it started raining uncomfortably and Jim didn't flinch. I looked over and said with a wink, if you stop pretending you're guiding, I'll stop pretending I'm fishing. He laughed and we got the hell out of there as it started thundering. The fall is lackluster for tarpon but better for bones and permit.

If I wanted to catch tarpon in October and November, I usually had to settle on Lower Keys baby tarpon. I used to look forward to December when I fished with Hollywood, Florida Captain, Doug Lillard. He is famous for night

tarpon fishing the five bridges in the Intracoastal waterway from North Miami to Key Biscayne. The outgoing tide flushes the shrimp toward the ocean and the fish hide in shadow to ambush the shrimp attracted to the bridge and dock lights shining on the water.

Doug's fly of choice was a lead-eyed rabbit leech on a 1/0 Daiichi hook. The fish that show up early in the season average around forty pounds and get mixed with bigger fish later, then in February, until they move south in early spring, the fish are mainly 50-75 pounds. So you start off the season fishing with an eight-weight outfit and go bigger in relation to the size of the available fish.

Doug had an arrangement with a parking lot operator near Eighth St. in South Beach, near a Publix supermarket and a night club, so he could park his truck and trailer after launching at the public ramp. We would see the young partiers getting carded as we launched along-side shrimp boats operated by Cuban immigrants. It only took us five minutes to reach the MacArthur Causeway Bridge from the launch. His tactic was simple, repetitive and deadly.

Doug would idle up-tide to a central bridge abutment, shut-off the outboard and jump on the bow to grab the concrete piling with his hands. I grabbed my rod and climbed-up next to him shoulder to shoulder, waiting for tarpon. I prepared the tackle by stripping off about ten feet of line and holding the hook bend between the index finger and thumb of my line hand. Doug knew which direction the tarpon would come from and they would swim parallel to the bridge on the edge of the shadow. Since this was often just under the bow, casts were more like a flip of the leader. I learned not to immediately set the hook to prevent the tarpon from cutting the line off on the bridge.

Instead of setting the hook immediately, Doug would just push the boat away from the piling and sit at the console to start the motor. The tide would move the boat through the bridge with the hooked fish calmly drifting along at the same speed like a dog on a leash. When we were about 75 feet down tide from the bridge, I would set the hook, causing immediate jumps and runs. Tarpon seldom swam back upstream through the bridge and the fights were pretty predictable. This fishing continues through January.

February is a good month to check the Everglades. As the mullet start schooling up in the Everglades bays, like Whitewater Bay near Flamingo, the

big tarpon start feeding. Doug also guided me there. It's blind casting in muddy water but the fish are around 100 pounds. You might find laid-up fish too on Gulf side bays as we did.

The fish we were fishing for all winter from North Miami to Key Biscayne, start moving south in March. The first stops on the tarpon train are Key Largo, Plantation and Islamorada. Doug took me to the famous Pocket on the Buchanan Bank, west of Islamorada. It's a classic impassable structure migrating tarpon must travel around. It's full of action and it's like pass shooting at ducks. I've also fished the mullet muds of Rabbit Key Basin nearby with another Captain, Randy Brown, now of Ennis Mt.

After many years of putting the whole picture together, I finally learned it takes a village to find and catch tarpon every month of the year!