



The Outgoing Tide



©John Field 2014 | First published by Sexyloops, Tuesday, 29 September 2015

I had been wintering and fishing in Florida since I was a teen. I would visit an old sporting goods store in West Palm Beach called Keiser's Sporting Goods as one of my rituals whenever I arrived back at my family's winter residence in Florida. This store had a wide-ranging variety of fish and animal mounts and antique tackle on display. Since it was located near the eighty-one year old West Palm Beach Fishing Club, some notable anglers had passed through its doors.

In the '90s, it changed ownership and I got to know the new owner, Jay Dewing and fly manager, Phil Beebe. Phil was a native Floridian about my age and played and taught trombone when he wasn't working or fly fishing. His wife Nancy taught music at a nearby college. Phil had a kayak and fished where he could, then bought a skiff so he could reach good spots with speed, fish while standing and bring a passenger.

Phil's boat was a Hell's Bay Whipray, previously owned by Andy Mill, skier and tarpon angler, who had just been divorced from the famous tennis player, Chrissie Evert. The boat bore an engraved brass plate in the cockpit with the name; Andy Mill and the hull build number. It was about as light as a glass boat could be with a poling platform and a forty-horse tiller outboard. Shallow draft enables you to get places, no other boat can.

When Phil and I started fishing together, I was making monthly trips to be

with my father at his bedside, who was under the care of private nurses. I made sixty trips in five years while I lived in New York and always added a few days of fly fishing to restore my spirits. It's ironic I found a copy of *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*, by Howell Raines, in my dad's library. I was already living it. Many nights I would leave my father in the care of his Jamaican nurses, Phyllis or Sheila, then Phil and I would go snook fishing while dad slept.

Phil learned all the good snook spots in the Intracoastal Waterway between Palm Beach and Stuart, as well as the Loxahatchee River, the Ten Thousand Islands off Chokoloskee and the Sabastian River. His main species of interest were spotted sea trout and snook. Many old-timers pronounce the name of this fish, sn\ü\k. He particularly liked night fishing for snook, which could be found minutes from home.

We fished all of these places and they revealed wonderful lessons of wildlife and waters. The remaining wild places in Florida are breathtaking and the magic hour lighting is beautiful because of the seemingly endless horizon and sticky air. Snook are one of the wonders of its salt and brackish waters. Snook are a very worthy adversary because they are handsome and have some attitude. They look like a southern version of a striped bass, but only have one black stripe following the lateral line. They have an under bite, giving them a tough-guy appearance. They have a raspy mouth that can abrade through monofilament or abrade your thumb if you hold them by the lower lip. They pull well when hooked and sometimes jump.

Snook live inshore and ambush from the cover of mangroves, rocks and docks. This makes them challenging to pursue, since fly placement is key. The object when fighting them around structure is to keep them from retreating and breaking you off. They are highly pursued as table fare and unfortunately the season opener around September 1st, also coincides with spawning. Their aggregation makes them easily targeted around river inlets. Our major interest was fishing for them in summer under the lit docks and bridges in the Intracoastal Waterway. Some of the docks and bridges are lit to help prevent collision and aid navigation. Others are intentionally lit to attract fish.

If an intense light is located about five feet or less and directed on the water, it will attract the entire food chain, including snook, tarpon and other interesting fish. One of them is the lookdown. They're in the pompano family

and have the most chrome-like skin of any fish I've seen. An outgoing tide coinciding with late night darkness is the best time to fish because it moves the most forage to waiting predators. The boat traffic and wakes are minimal, the wind is usually down and the fish feed confidently. The night weather however is usually very hot and humid with persistent little gnats called No-see-ems that attack your scalp at your hairline. Repellent is required. Dock lights are usually positioned at the end of a dock and there are usually boats or personal watercraft up on lifts, or docked in the water. Dock lines are sometimes a problem if they cross your target area.

As you're motoring along, you check for active fish at lit docks by looking for surface activity or even floating bubbles on calm water, indicating splashing within the last thirty seconds or so. Seeing fish blasting shrimp and baitfish out of the water leaves little question. But if there are no signs of feeding, you keep on running.

When you see signs of feeding fish, you must idle-in slowly and hold-off under power; until you can reach the dock with your cast. You can also drop anchor and fish. The farther away from the boat you can make your presentation, the less you will put-down the fish. They don't go anywhere; they just stop feeding until the threat is gone. Many anglers use electric trolling motors on the bow or mounted on the trim-tabs to get into and hold position. Their effectiveness depends on the current speed.

The snook usually hold deep and hide in the shadows until they attack. The target of your casts should be toward the shallow side of the dock or under it, allowing it to sink with the tide, sweeping the fly under the light and then you strip back in. If they don't hit before the fly leaves the lit area, try again. The tide can be running like a fast river and you swing or strip your flies near or under cover without snagging the dock pilings. If you're not careful, you might also snag a dock line or personal watercraft cover with your fly when casting. That can cause quite a lot of friction between you and the property owner.

We usually use a seven-weight outfit with a clear intermediate tropical fly line for average size fish in the 25-30" range. I have been ambushed by much bigger fish and been "taken to the wood" and ended up the hook stuck in a dock piling. When you're targeting bigger fish, when bigger forage like mullet is present, or live chumming during the day, heavier tackle is recommended. Sometimes the biggest fish appear on an outgoing tide that peaks just before

dawn.

I recommend a 7-9' fluorocarbon leader of 12 or 15lb test including a foot or two of 40# shocker for the small fish, or straight 40# fluoro from the fly line, for the big ones. Selecting flies is a localized thing depending on many factors. After trying a variety of recommended flies and colors, my go-to fly was an all white polar fiber minnow about 3" long, on an Owner Mosquito hook. When you encounter the mullet run in fall, you have to use a close imitation in a matching size. If you're fishing mangroves, I recommend a weedless fly tied inverted or with a mono weed-guard.

I haven't been snook fishing since my dad past away and we sold his place. Now I'm just a tourist angler. I've been thinking of contacting some of my Fort Meyers area guide friends to experience the night snook fishing on the west coast of Florida. I hear the fish are much bigger there. I'd better do it before my outgoing tide runs out.

I have no fishing photos from these night trips because we didn't want to use a flash and advertise our presence to dock owners or other anglers. I did however provide a photo of that simple, effective fly we used.