

The Evolution of Boats for Fly Fishing in Salt Water: Doing More with Less

by Bob Stearns

LIKE ALL GOOD boats, those that specialize in sportfishing essentially develop through a process of evolution rather than invention. It is an evolutionary progression that undoubtedly began when the first human decided there had to be a better way of getting around on the water than sitting on a log—which constantly tried to roll over—and using a stick for propulsion.

The first big step surely came when someone finally discovered that digging out the log's interior not only made it considerably less likely to roll, but also allowed the dry transport of game, fish, and other necessary items. It follows that in modern times, those of us who enjoy recreational angling also began to make what we considered essential changes in our watercraft to better suit our particular requirements. A case in point is the evolution of specialized boats that have incorporated many unique exterior and interior designs to make them more suitable and efficient for the saltwater fly fisher.

ADAPTATION AND MODIFICATION

When it comes to fishing boats, the process has always started with the adaptation and modification of existing watercraft. For example, the immensely popular drift boat of the western United States is a superb fly-fishing platform for covering long and often unwadeable distances on streams to reach desired locations. Historically, the drifter is a highly practical adaptation of the Banks dory, a simple wooden rowboat designed to be carried aboard a larger seagoing vessel and dropped overboard for two or three crew to fish primarily for commercial purposes. The first inland sportfishing version was also built from wood, but with some necessary changes in the hull for easy navigation of rapids and shallow water, plus interior changes to accommodate the needs of the fly caster. Today it is also available in aluminum, fiberglass, Kevlar, and possibly other materials as well.

It should be noted that many existing boats need no modification for fly fishing. Over several decades, I and many others have caught large numbers of sailfish and other offshore game fish from the cockpit of larger blue-water fishing craft, using a bucket to hold the loose fly line until the time came to make the cast. This system works because such boats typically have lots of open aft-cockpit space that provides the fly caster with plenty of room. In stark contrast, the inshore angler fly fishing from a much smaller boat typically has relatively little

space to work with—unless, of course, essential modifications are made to create a workable platform.

My own first bonefishing experiences occurred in the Florida Keys during the early 1950s. We used plain flat-bottom wooden rowboats in those days. I was not using fly tackle back then, but nevertheless appreciated the fact that my guide had created a casting platform by spanning the open space between the front seat and the bow with a piece of plywood. Sometimes the open space between the rear seat and the transom was similarly converted by

Photos by Bob Stearns



An empty 5-gallon paint bucket was used for fly-line storage during offshore fly fishing aboard a larger blue-water boat.



The interior of the author's Hewes Redfisher, built in 1976. It had no inner liner or built-in storage containers, and the otherwise bare cockpit floor was covered with outdoor carpet to reduce noise.

An ultralightweight 17-foot flats skiff with a tunnel hull. It is built using Kevlar carbon layers with foam in between and floats in less than 6 inches of water with two anglers aboard.



became a 16-footer by moving the transom 2 feet forward. From the very beginning, new features were constantly being added, such as the elevated poling platform on the transom, which allowed the person doing the poling to see incoming fish at a greater distance and thus have more time to position the boat to assist the angler in making the cast.

Finally, in 1989, Hewes sold his boat company to another builder in Fort Pierce, Florida, and retired.

Today the race to build lighter and quieter flats skiffs continues, using vacuum-bagged hulls constructed of Kevlar carbon as the two outer layers with stiff, high-density foam as the inner core. There are several companies that specialize in

these so-called technical poling skiffs, which are capable of easily getting into less than 5 inches of water with two anglers and gear aboard, and of reaching 30 miles per hour or more with 40 horsepower or less on the transom. These very specialized high-tech boats do not come cheap: a fully rigged boat with motor and trailer can run upwards of \$40,000, depending on how the buyer wants it configured. By comparison, the original fiberglass Bonefisher of the early 1970s with 115 horsepower on the transom sold for about \$6,000—but then it also drew a lot more water, it was harder to pole, the hull was not nearly as quiet, and it required a lot more fuel to cover the distance.

The traditional flats boat as we know it today was originally designed to be used on the clear shallow-water flats of south Florida, the Keys, and, more recently, the Bahamas, but it continues to spread to other areas of the United States and even other parts of the world. The basic application remains the same: stalking and sight casting to game fish visible in shallow water. To this end, it has become popular for skinny-water striper fishing in New England, as well as for red drum (redfish), spotted sea trout, tarpon, and other species throughout the southeastern and Gulf coasts. I could have even used such craft for stalking salmon in Alaska.



Fishing the Flats

Not all boats used today for fly fishing in shallow salt water are of the more traditional flats configuration. Canoes, for example, have been used for many years in a variety of ways, either as is or modified with the addition of such extras as side-mounted floats for additional stability. I've caught lots of redfish, snook, bonefish, and small- to medium-size tarpon from basic flat-bottom canoes with just enough keel to pole in a straight line in spite of a crosswind. Both the angler and the person doing the poling can stand up comfortably in the wider versions of such craft.

Aluminum jon boats, 12 to 17 feet in length, have been modified for this type of fishing for many years and are still in use today. Even more recently, there has been an explosion in the use of kayaks, both one- and two-person versions; not great for stand-up fishing, so the angler either casts while sitting or gets out and wades. And then there are the newest



A 16-foot aluminum jon boat built up in the same manner as the Alum2 skiff. Modified coolers are used for both storage and as elevated platforms for better visibility.

craft on the saltwater scene, the stand-up paddle board: these can be fished from a standing position, as well as parked for wading. None of these

offer anywhere near the all-around capability of a more traditional flats boat, but they certainly fill applicable niches.

Draft, for obvious reasons, is always the foremost consideration for every dedicated flats boat. There are two ways to reduce draft on any particular design without making it too wide to pole easily: change the shape of the bottom to make it flatter, or reduce the overall weight of the boat and its contents. Hewes's first draft-reduction attempt

was the Redfisher, which appeared in the middle 1970s. He used the same basic hull as the Bonefisher, same hull construction materials, but no inner liner (a hull within a hull), no built-in storage lockers under the stern platform, and a smaller, lighter center console. It was less expensive than the Bonefisher and worked well enough to reduce draft

(with two anglers and gear aboard) from 12 inches to about 9 or 10.

Still not satisfied with the results, Hewes soon found out about a new material that had recently been introduced into the bass-boat market. Known as Kevlar, it was also used for combat body armor and radial tire cords because of its light weight and great strength. In the late 1970s, Hewes contacted Kevlar manufacturer DuPont and, with their assistance, the first Bonefisher was built by directly substituting Kevlar 49 for fiberglass, laminate for laminate. This resulted in a 10 percent decrease in hull weight. Good, but not enough, especially because Kevlar increased the cost of building the boat by about 10 percent.

Always willing to experiment, Hewes developed a still lighter hull by eliminating all unnecessary layers of Kevlar—a further weight reduction of nearly another 10 percent. This allowed the use of a smaller and less expensive engine, which burned less gas and got better mileage. Thus it was possible to get the same range while carrying less gas. The end result was a Bonefisher that now drew 8 to 9 inches and poled like a dream.

Over the years, more new Bonefisher models were introduced, including an 18-footer without transom bait wells and a cut-down version of that same hull that



One of many bare hulls converted for flats fishing by adding a rear deck and center console. This Capri 16 came from the factory with the flat gunwales and recessed foredeck.



Featured in the September 1999 issue of Men's Journal is the original guide's version of the Hewes Bonefisher, actually built in 1970. Only a few were built of that model; it was discontinued by 1975.

production model appeared, the fiberglass Hewes Bonefisher. The hull was adapted from the Wildcat, a popular fiberglass waterskiing boat he was already building. A 16½-foot modified vee hull, it both was fast and provided a soft, smooth, and dry ride in rough water. Following the suggestions from several fishing friends and guides, the Bonefisher's length was increased to 17½ feet by adding a pair of transom bait wells. This addition also increased the length of the running bottom by one more foot, thus contributing significantly to riding comfort and decreased draft for shallow-water use.

Large, slightly recessed decks were added to both bow and stern. The gunwales were a minimum of 12 inches wide and completely flat. Both decks were also designed for storage underneath. A very few early models had the side-mounted steering station often preferred by the guides of that era, but the center console model quickly won the popular vote by a huge margin.

Hewes was never completely satisfied with any boat he was building. There *had* to be not only a better way to build it tomorrow, but also a way to make it even more fishable. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, I received a seemingly endless series of you-gotta-see-this telephone calls from Hewes, many of which resulted in a visit to his small factory in Miami or a long boat ride with test equipment instead of fishing tackle.

center console or side-mounted steering station. The space under the front and rear decks, and also inside the center console if there was one, was soon claimed for storage purposes. Eventually wide, flat gunwales—with horizontal rod racks underneath—were added to provide a stable platform along the entire length of the sides to facilitate landing and releasing large game fish. Certainly a 6- to 7-foot 100-plus-pound feisty tarpon can be a real handful in such situations.

Outboard engines were also getting larger and faster, allowing these newly adapted boats to range farther from the dock and cover more distance in a day's fishing.

But each and every one of these boats was essentially custom built, and no two were finished exactly alike. Some of these one-offs performed well; others, not so much. Many were not that well constructed and failed to withstand the rigors of saltwater use for more than a year or two.

BOB HEWES

Boat builder Bob Hewes changed all that. During the middle 1960s, Hewes had been building a semi-open 17-foot fiberglass general-purpose fishing boat called

the Tarpon, which was okay for inshore use, but not at all suitable for fly fishing.

Hewes also enjoyed fishing himself and liked the visual experience of flats fishing. He decided to design and build his own flats boat, and in 1969 the first



The 1984 16-foot Kevlar version of the Hewes Bonefisher, with Bob Hewes at the helm. Note the elevated poling platform on the transom.



The Alum1: A 16-foot semi-vee aluminum utility boat before it is converted into a flats boat.



In the Alum2, the middle seat (second seat forward from the transom) has been removed to create an open cockpit. The two front seats are spanned with ½-inch marine plywood to create a spacious forward casting platform; the rear platform is created in the same manner.

Bonefishing with the new flats skiff, the Alum3.



guides who preferred to pole from the bow while the angler stood in the stern. The thought of using that casting platform for fly fishing never occurred to most of us (including me) until I finally saw the late Joe Brooks working his magic from the same type of boat a few years later and suddenly wanted to try it myself.

Although the flat-bottom skiff, if not too large or too small, actually does make a workable fishing platform for all forms of light tackle, it has several serious drawbacks. First and foremost, it rides in rough water like a wet jackhammer. And because the outboard motors of the day were limited in horsepower, it was also slow, which made the agony of a

long open-water crossing a seemingly endless and miserable journey. There was no real storage space, which usually resulted in a thorough soaking for each of us and every item of gear we had aboard—and that allowed the acidic effect of salt water to damage a lot of exposed tackle and other equipment not designed for the harsh environment.

But by the middle to late 1950s, a few serious anglers and guides began searching for something that was faster, rode smoother, and still poled easily on the flats. The first efforts consisted of taking an existing hull of the right size and shape (in the eyes of the potential user) and converting it into a flats boat. Bare hulls,

often bought directly from some manufacturer in unfinished condition, were built up as desired. Some of these bare boats were little more than bottom, sides, and transom with no interior work completed at all.

Of course, the development of the overall design so popular today did not happen all at once. It was an incremental process over more than a decade, during which various ideas were introduced. Some were accepted and are still in use today; others did not make the cut.

The concept of a raised deck as a fishing platform in the area of the bow and a similar deck as a poling platform in the stern were the first steps. Then came a