

Over the Bar

by Rupert E. West

Bluefish are respected by modern anglers as among the hardest-fighting of all saltwater fish. The success of the anglers in the following account is especially notable since nowadays fly fishermen use wire shock tippets whenever going after blues. This story is part of an article that appeared in "The National Sportsman" in June of 1930.



Connett and Pruyn on the stern of the boat.

THERE is an old adage that goes something like this: "When the wind is in the east, it's neither good for man nor beast." Now there is more truth than poetry in that, especially to those who venture beyond the outer bar of Oregon Inlet in small boats in quest of such members of the finny tribe as bronze backs and blues.

While there may be other ways of spending a vacation, I doubt if there is any that offers more thrills than that of fishing off Oregon Inlet, and it was a moment of great elation for me when I received an invitation from Francis Pruyn to join him for a few days at Bodie Island Club for a try at the Inlet fishing.

Pruyn and Lynn Connett stopped on their way down and picked me up. At Point Harbor, where we were to take the ferry across to the narrow strip of Carolina Coast country, we were joined by Oliver Gilbert, a seasoned veteran of outside fishing. Arriving at Kitty Hawk, a little fishing village made famous by the Wright brothers as the scene of their first flight in a heavier than air machine, we were met by George Mann, keeper of Bodie Island Club. A thirty mile ride down the beach in the station wagon and we arrived at the club house.

We had no more than unloaded our luggage and gotten the kinks out of our legs from the ride, before George announced that supper was ready and ushered us in to a long table groaning with such tempting dishes as only the coast country of the Carolinas can afford. An hour later we were sprawled comfortably in the lounge room firing questions at George as to the prospects for the morrow's fishing.

I have never yet gone to sea at Oregon Inlet when there were not mountains of white water threatening to topple over on the boat. This day was no exception. We crossed the bar without mishap and there was a feeling of relief when we were beyond the breakers and in smoother water. We had gone

about a half mile to sea when George suddenly swung the tiller to port and we headed for the breakers.

"Get your tackle ready, fellows, small school of channel bass just ahead of us." Unfortunately we missed that school so George headed for the open sea again, and ran about two miles down the coast.

"Big flock of gulls to starboard," sang out Gilbert.

That was the best news of the day. Gulls meant fish. Thinking of course that we had at last struck the channel bass, we were soon in the flock of gulls. They were darting and diving all around us making an unearthly din with that cry peculiar to the gull. The surface of the water was covered with cut fry (small fish on which channel bass and bluefish feed) and the gulls were having a picnic.

"We're in a school of blues, fellows, change the squid," yelled George.

Still using heavy trolling rods with thirty pound test lines, we immediately changed to monatuk and eel squid. We had no more than gotten them over the stern before each of us had a strike. With a boat moving at four or five miles per hour, even a two or three pound blue is not easy to land.

Gilbert and I lost our first strikes but the fish were no more than off before we had others on. Pruyn and Connett landed theirs, two glistening beauties, and kept their lines inside until Gilbert and I had our fish aboard. The gulls were darting at our squid as they went skimming through the water, and several of the blues would follow the ones that we had hooked until we lifted them over the side.

"Those blues are small, if we can get in a school of tailors you fellows will have some sport," said George, leaving the wheel long enough to come aft to look them over. (A tailor is a bluefish weighing from two to five pounds.)

We had taken several of the small blues by following the

gulls and were fully two miles up the beach for the school was heading north, then George spied another flock of gulls about a mile off shore.

"Let's run over and see what they are after," he suggested and headed to sea again.

The wind was still blowing from the east and the seas were getting higher. I am never so enthused over fishing that I fail to keep an eye on the sea. I was wondering what the Inlet would be like when we started back. But George had an eye on those gulls and was determined to see what they were after, and we were soon in them.

"You'll get some real fishing now," he said as he throttled the engine and we sent our lines over the stern.

Connett took the first blue, placed his heavy rod on the top of the cabin and rigged a salmon rod with a small line, gut leader, and No. 1 drone, and sent it sailing over the stern. We, of course, expected to see him lose his tackle at the first strike, but he disappointed us by reeling in a three pound blue.

"There's no sport in shooting rabbits with an elephant gun," he said and placing that salmon rod alongside the heavier one, he darted into the cabin and came out with a light fly rod and trout line and a book of flies.

It was my opinion that Connett was changing the order of things by hunting elephants with a bird gun. The idea of taking bluefish on a fly rod from a moving boat with a heavy sea on in the Atlantic was absurd.

Connett looped on a bass bug and sent it swishing over the stern. It struck the water about thirty yards aft and had no more than struck before that light rod swung into an arc. I expected to see the line go or the rod break but Connett was no amateur with a fly rod. His rod and line held and the fish stayed on. I dropped my rod into the bottom of the boat and reached for the throttle and slowed the motor to about three miles per hour. The fight was on. The others immediately took their lines in so as to give Connett a chance. Then we watched the battle and gave a sigh of relief when he had worked the fish close enough alongside for Pruyn to reach out and lift him aboard.

It is my opinion that it was the first blue ever taken from a moving boat in a high sea with a fly rod.

"That looked like real sport, I'll have to try it," said Pruyn and the second fly rod was soon rigged and in action.

Pruyn was using a 9½ foot 5½ ounce rod with a Bob Davis bug. Gilbert and I decided to suspend operations and watch the tackle smash, but again we were fooled for again Connett and Pruyn both hooked and held their fish. Imagine if you will a fighting blue on the end of a fly rod in a raging sea. My respect for the fly fisherman was growing. Fighting every inch of the way, that wisp of a rod and thread-like line giving a foot there, taking a foot here, the fish were being gradually worked toward the boat, the rods sometimes bending until the tips almost touched the sea. It was a game where skill counted.

Gilbert and myself having only heavy tackle along, decided we would suspend operations entirely and watch Pruyn and Connett use those fly rods. "They're going to be out of luck if a channel bass happens to take one of those bugs," laughed Gilbert.

But after watching Pruyn take the fight out of a blue at the end of that fly rod, I wouldn't have been surprised to see him coax a half ton shark within gaff reach.

The seas were increasing and the boat was rolling considerably but with George at the wheel no one seemed the least uneasy. The boat was so rigged that it could be handled either by the tiller aft or the wheel forward, and George would come aft occasionally to watch the sport.

"Who'd thought a blue would take a crazy looking thing like that bug. I believe they'll strike at anything," said George as Connett hauled one alongside for him to take in the boat.

"I'll see about that," replied Pruyn and taking a book of



Pruyn playing a bluefish on a light fly rod.

flies from his pocket, he selected a Royal Coachman, looped on a gut leader and sent it sailing over the stern. The moment it struck the sea his rod swung into an arc and the reel went humming.

"Well I'll be d——," exclaimed George, and I gave a hearty second.

Pruyn then switched to a fly but for a reason unknown to us at that time he failed to get a strike.

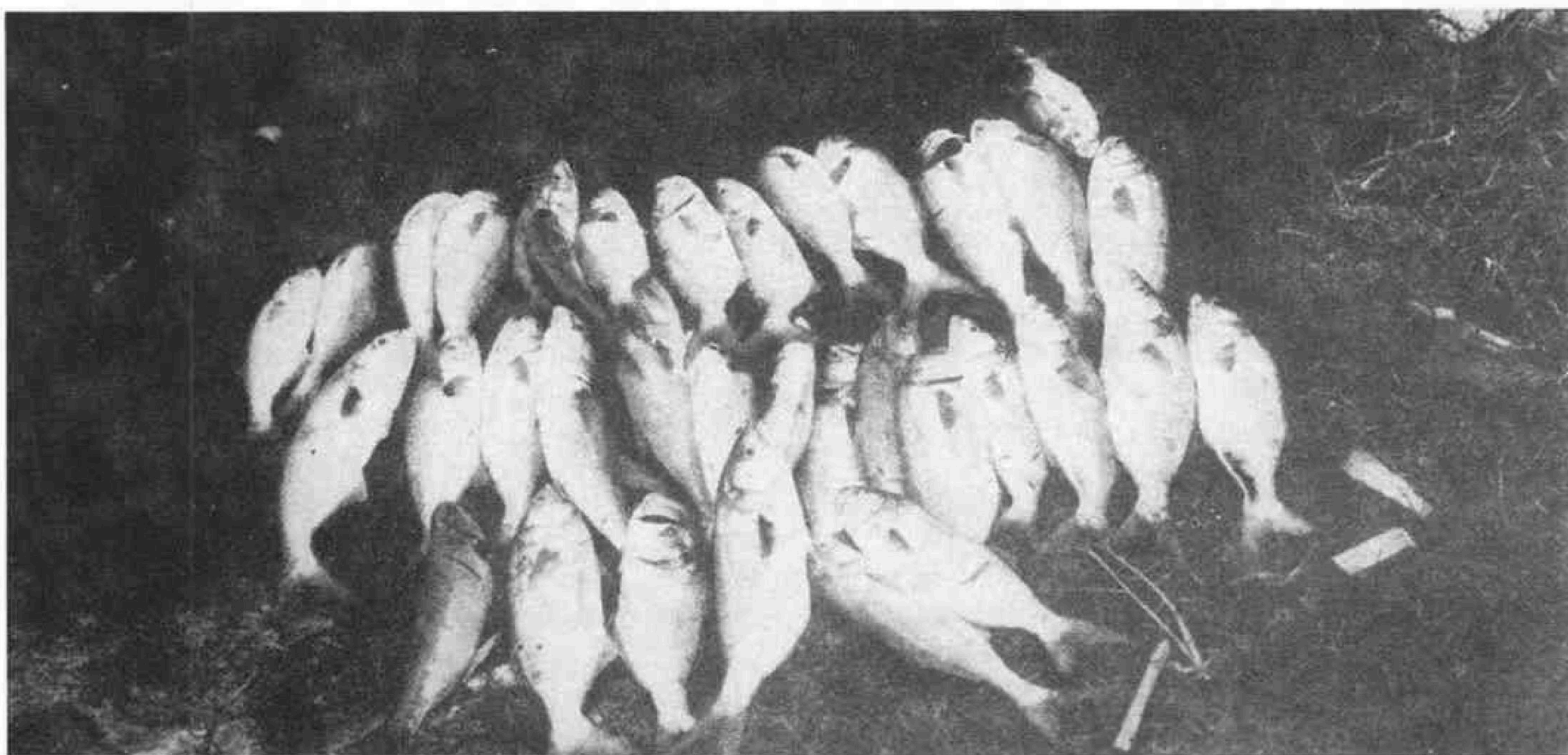
"They can't see that one," said Pruyn and changed to a Silver Doctor.

Evidently the Doctor was just what they wanted. At least they could see it and went for it and how. A White Miller was tried with the same good results. Both Pruyn and Connett had found that the fly had to be bright enough to show in the blue water. The moment the flies would strike the water the blues would come for them. Butts down, tips almost trailing in the sea, the fight would be on. Gain a yard, lost five, fighting with rod always, until Mr. Blue, the gamest of fish to his inches that ever swam the sea, was near enough to lift over the side.

They had taken probably two dozen of those blues on flies and with the ones that we had taken with the drones, we had a nice catch.

I was still in doubt as to what the surf might be doing at the Inlet and was ready to suggest that we go in. I was saved that suggestion by the sea itself as at that moment we topped one of those blue rollers and went sliding off its crest at an angle that sent tackle, fish and everything else that was not tied down, skidding about the bottom of the boat. We were then about a mile north of the Inlet.

Pruyn and Connett, both propped to keep from being pitched over the side, were fighting a blue each. I throttled the motor to a slower speed until they could get them aboard.



Then with that look of satisfaction that can come only to a man who has taken a fighting blue on a single snell fly at the end of a five ounce rod in a raging sea, Pruyn said, "We're through for today," and signaled George who opened the throttle and swinging head on into a mountain of blue water that broke into silver spray that swept the boat from stern to stern, we were again headed for the Inlet.

That east wind was doing its stuff. We could see a raging wall of white water clear across the Inlet. Even in the best of weather when the sea is moderate, there is just a narrow channel that is safe to go through. Even then only those who know the Inlet will take a chance.

As we neared the Inlet I saw a wonderful sight. The tide was ebbing and the green water from the sounds was pouring into the sea. Where these waters met just outside the breakers, the colors were clearly defined, seemingly they refused to mix. At the risk of being washed off the cabin, I managed to make a picture of the water at this point. Strange to say, though the line was as fine as that of a draftsman's pencil, on the one side the sea was twice as rough as on the other.

"It's the current against the wind," explained George.

As we drew near the Inlet I noticed that George would glance aft occasionally watching the sea and leaving the wheel he came aft to the tiller where he could be near the motor. Fortunately our skipper knew the sea. As we headed into the Inlet he throttled the motor to half speed and with a wall of

white water on either side of us we started through. A giant comber caught us about midship and it seemed to me that we were carried fully a hundred yards on its crest before we slipped off into its wake. George, his sinewy hands grasping the tiller, glanced aft and swung the boat so as to catch the next one just right and once more we were balanced on a sea, that had it not been for his skill would have sent us on our way to Davy Jones's locker.

We were not more than ten minutes crossing the bar but to me it seemed an hour, and when once we were in the smoother waters of the sounds, I renewed my resolution never to cross the bar again, one that I knew I would break at the very next opportunity.

I am sure no one who has witnessed the taking of blues on a fly rod can resist the temptation to have a try at it himself. Just to feel the pressure at the butt of a five ounce rod and to gauge the tension of that frail line as Mr. Blue tries to smash it. And this I know, a blue will take a fly if it is a bright color; you can land him if you know how; and we had them in the boat to prove it.

Once we were back at the club and had those glistening beauties on old terra firma and Pruyn and Connett had put their fly rods away with an added touch of respect, I made a pact with Gilbert that we too would have a try at the blues with fly rods some day, even if the wind were east.

