Saltwater Fly Fishing Comes of Age

by Jerry Gibbs

The Summer 2012 issue of the American Fly Fisher *introduced the first of a series of articles tracing the development of saltwater fly fishing in North America. "Pioneers and Pioneering: The Allure and Early Days of Saltwater Fly Fishing" described the nascent days of the sport and the experimental angling and generative discoveries by its earliest practitioners from the 1700s through the middle 1900s. In this offering, "Saltwater Fly Fishing Comes of Age," we turn first to the period from the 1920s through the post–World War II years, during which saltwater fly fishing enjoyed nicely paced growth, followed by the decades encompassing the late 1950s through the 1980s, when the sport experienced a spurt of unprecedented development and rising popularity. Increasingly, saltwater fly fishers broke from traditional approaches of their freshwater brethren, inventing new ways of casting, embracing the rapid advancements in tackle spawned by new technology, and adapting to new fish species and environmental challenges previously never imagined. Today, of course, freshwater and saltwater fly fishing benefit one another through a bipartisan exchange of methods, tackle innovation, and willingness to explore without bias.*

The Developmental Years: 1920s–1940s

Despite decades of volatility—from the ebullient 1920s through economic depression and a world war—intrepid fly fishers continued to probe the possibilities in salt waters. They were aided on several fronts. New infrastructure, such as the 1928 opening of the so-called Tamiami Trail, which connected Florida's west coast to Miami, allowed anglers to easily access the tremendous variety of fish on both coasts of that state.[1] The 1929 founding of the Rod & Reel Club of Miami Beach, though initially weighted toward big-game tackle, included a fly-fishing division.[2] In 1930, the Islamorada Fishing Guides Association (later Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association) was established.[3] It furthered technical developments in marine fly fishing and helped visiting anglers locate professional guide service. The later 1930s and 1940s occasioned industrial breakthroughs with direct application to fly fishing, as we'll later see. Still, during the early 1920s—and even into the 1930s—there was serious need for better fly-fishing equipment.

The Need for Better Tackle

Dr. Gordon Hill, orthopedic surgeon and eventually Keys flats-fishing aficionado, remembers stories of his grandfather Clifford Hewitson arriving in New York from Liverpool in the early 1900s, soon to begin fly fishing the salt waters of Long Island Sound. Hill's father, Edmond "Pop" Hill, followed in his footsteps in the 1920s, and Gordon Hill began fly fishing there in 1938. Still without access to more modern tackle, Hill recalls numerous equipment problems. The still-in-use silk fly lines and linen Cuttyhunk backing required daily stripping from the reel and drying after use. Often Hill and his father would wind the backing around chair backs at the dining room table, with his mother demanding the stuff be removed before breakfast the next day. Silkworm "gut" leaders were the rule. Fly hooks began rusting in two days. Bamboo rod finishes peeled, metal ferrules corroded, and the rods would quickly take a scoliosis-like set in the salt air if not hung vertically from ceiling hooks. One saving tool was Hill's grandfather's stout greenheart rod. It was stiff enough for surf use and had brass tubular line guides and an agate/brass tip-top that resisted corrosion.



From James A. Henshall, Camping and Cruising in Florida *(Cincinnati: Robert Clark & Co., 1884), frontispiece.*

With most commercial fishermen at war, there was little competition for the fishery resources, and Hill remembers the fly fishing as superb.[4]

Dawn of Synthetics

Although new material technologies began appearing that would enable fly fishers of both salt and fresh water to solve problems limiting their sport, anglers were slow to embrace them. And despite advantages, the new synthetics were not without problems. Nylon (patented by E. I. du Pont de Nemours and Company in 1937 and introduced in 1938), which would slowly replace silkworm gut leaders, was stiff, subject to holding memory, and did not form secure knots.[5] Fly-line improvement would wait until the 1950s. Traditional mind-set played a part, of course, when it came to new fiberglass versus bamboo rods. Bias aside, early fiberglass had its problems, too. The first fiberglass rods were simply lacking in aesthetics. They were heavy and their actions were graceless—either clublike or overly flexible. It was not until the Shakespeare Company's 1947 Howald process produced tapered tubular rod blanks that fly fishers (some grudgingly) began accepting fiberglass material.[6] In the main, most saltwater fly anglers of the 1920s and 1930s continued to rely on their salmon (and sometimes even trout) tackle.

Rods

Although fiberglass began making inroads, bamboo was still king—especially in fly rods—despite the inherent drawbacks Gordon Hill previously noted. However, an improvement in the fabricating method kept bamboo in the saltwater game far longer than imagined. Here's what happened.

Somewhere between the mid-1930s and 1940, master outdoorsman Harold Gibbs began fishing for striped bass, mainly in Rhode Island's Barrington and Palmer river estuaries and on Cape Cod. Gibbs—who had been appointed administrator of fish and game for the state of Rhode Island in 1939 by Governor William Vanderbilt—was also a gifted miniature bird carver who sold his work to the Orvis Company of Manchester, Vermont. On one visit to the company some time in the 1940s, Gibbs spoke with owner D. C. "Duckie" Corkran about developing a rod specifically for stripers. Corkran brought in his designer/builder Wes Jordan. Jordan had been experimenting with impregnating bamboo with Bakelite (an early plastic), and here was an excellent application for the process.[7]

Although the Bakelite Corporation had tried impregnating bamboo strips in their test labs, Jordan found that assembling those strips resulted in a poorly performing rod. Determined, Jordan developed a process that slit bamboo cane in half, dried the pieces, tempered them over an open gas flame, then painstakingly split them into several strips that Jordan glued back together using phenolic resin-based cement. The reconstructed cane was then impregnated under controlled heat with a Bakelite phenolic resin. The next step was curing in an oven, allowing the bamboo pores to completely fill with resin, rendering it moistureproof, color fast, and resistant to extreme heat and cold. The process turned the rods a rich mahogany, which was further enhanced by sanding and buffing to a beautiful luster.[8]

The first rod Jordan made for Gibbs, who called it "The Original," was in all probability the first bamboo specifically designed for salt water. It was 9 feet long and designed for today's equivalent of a 9-weight line. Gibbs broke the rod in the summer of 1946 and returned it to Orvis for repair. At some point, Gibbs had Orvis built him a second rod of 8½ feet for 8-weight-equivalent. The two rods eventually led Orvis to create a series of saltwater-specific bamboo fly rods.[9]

Wes Jordan submitted a patent application bearing his name for his inventive impregnation process on 13 April 1946. The patent was granted 15 December 1950 and assigned to the Orvis Company. By 1954, all Orvis bamboo rods were impregnated.[10]



Harold Gibbs's relationship with the Orvis Company, outlet for his hand-carved miniature birds, led to development of what was likely the first bamboo rod specifically designed for saltwater fishing. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.



Right: Orvis rod designer from 1939 to 1970, Wes Jordan created the painstaking impregnation process that rendered bamboo rods moistureproof and highly resistant to heat and cold—desirable attributes for use in the marine environment. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.


Sara Wilcox

The headplate on this Pflueger Medalist is a conversion kit addition to make it a multiplier for saltwater use. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

Reels

As more fly anglers explored salt water, they soon learned that the reels of the day were as problematic as most nonimpregnated bamboo rods. None of the components—from the frame and spool (except for some early brass British reels) to drags, screws, springs, and other parts—stood up to the effects of salt water. Line capacity was also lacking. Some top anglers successfully used the better salmon reels—Vom Hofes were excellent, and Joe Brooks favored the top-quality Otto Zwarg Saguenay model—but midlevel salmon reels, especially those with an abundance of moving parts, were not practical.

Although they were never designed for salt water, single-action Pflueger Medalist reels were the average angler's standby for years and were constantly modified. In the 1930s, the largest Medalist was model 1496. A 1496½ appeared in the 1940s. (It wasn't until 1958 that the largest, most saltwater-favored model 1498 was added.[11]) The original Medalist spool was made of fairly soft aluminum, and the simple drag disc, along with the spool, would eventually disintegrate. Well-known Keys guide Jimmy Albright told of punching rivets in the Medalist frames to hold them together.[12] Californian Harry Kime took a page from Zane Grey's big-game reel design, affixing a piece of belt leather to the lower brace of the Medalist and obtaining drag by pressing the leather against the spool rim. Lefty Kreh, always the innovative tinkerer, cut out an oval-shaped opening in the side of the frame, enabling the thumb to reach in and apply pressure to the spool.[13]

Flies

Salmon and trout flies were still being fished in salt water, but some anglers were beginning to create patterns aimed specifically at marine species. It had become evident that those often intricately feathered and delicate freshwater fly creations were doomed to short lives when fished in the salt, even when not ravaged by tough, often toothy fish. It seemed less necessary for patterns to closely suggest specific forage, which freshwater anglers had learned to do imitating various insect hatches. Simple streamers of saddle hackle, bucktail, or a combination thereof soon became the norm, although some early tiers added favored adornments here and there—jungle cock eyes, for example—for their aesthetic qualities. Generic streamers of white or combinations of easily obtainable primary colors were good enough when saltwater fish were feeding on various baitfish, excited by chum, or prowling during low-light conditions and not particularly cautious. As the sport developed, though, astute anglers soon realized that general attractor patterns were frequently refused. Flies that were more suggestive of forage species on which game fish were or had recently been feeding were usually more effective. This was especially true during periods when fish were less aggressive. Harold Gibbs's suggestive Gibbs Striper Fly, which imitated a silversides baitfish, a bucktail fly first tied in the 1940s, is a good early example of intent to imitate key forage.

Early hooks were wanting for use in salt water. During the early 1900s, they were still non-eyed. Tiers created hook eyes as desired, first with gut, then switching to nylon as it became available, then switching to eyed hooks. During the mid-1900s, hooks used in salt water were primarily Z nickel and tin plated. They held up for awhile before stainless steel appeared, becoming the standard until high-carbon steel (alloyed with vanadium or stainless steel) models appeared in later years. Today, quality hooks are plated, commonly with black nickel, cadmium, or zinc. Carbon steel hooks tend to be stronger but less corrosion resistant than stainless steel. Carbon steel alloys allow hooks of finer diameter for the same or greater strength than high stainless composition.

Lines

Oil-impregnated braided silk fly lines were trouble enough used in fresh water; they did not float well and required fastidious maintenance. In salt water, deterioration accelerated. Hopes that braided nylon might supplant silk faded when various oil finishes were tried on the synthetic. It took until the early 1950s for true technological breakthroughs to change fly lines forever (we'll examine this subject further). However, one significant event in the assembly of line systems occurred in 1946. It was pure serendipity.

California Golden Gate Angling & Casting Club members Jim Green and Phil Miravalle were practicing for the annual distance event of the National Association of Angling & Casting Clubs (now the American Casting Association).

The usual system among distance casters consisted of 50 feet of heavy braided-silk fly line spliced to a length of 15-pound-test bait-casting line. That in turn was spliced to a polished, size-I fly line, which acted as the working shooting line of the system. During the cast, the bait-casting line was held in coils (the holding line). Green and Miravalle, seeking to increase cast distance, decided to try nylon monofilament in place of the size-I fly line. In their first effort, the nylon mono was tied to the holding line, which broke during a strenuous cast. Next, they tied the monofilament directly to the heavy fly-line head. The next cast fired out as though rocket propelled. The small-diameter mono reduced friction and obtained greatly increased distance.[14]

Word of the breakthrough was shared with a few Golden Gaters, but Green and Miravalle kept the secret into competition and swept the distance fly events at the national. Refinements on the basic design are still used by tournament casters, including multiple world champion Steve Rajeff. Soon mono-backed shooting tapers would find their way into practical fishing applications.[15]

Tournament casting competition using those multisection shooting-head systems gives us one little-known amusing story. It happened down on the Texas Gulf Coast where Jack Sparks, who'd been named to the All-American Fly Fishing Team in 1941 and 1948 (and who also fly fished salt water for redfish), was assisting Joan Salvato, acting as her gillie, tending Joan's shooting line. By all accounts, Jack was a glamorous character who sported a dashing Errol Flynn pencil mustache and typically appeared wearing a bandanna over his sleek black hair. "I was practicing my distance casting," Joan remembers, "and came back hard for a left-hand haul and hit Jack in the head and knocked him right over! I was twenty-one then, Jack was in his forties. I was living on the East Coast. He asked if he could *court* me—all the way from Waco, Texas!"[16]

Joan smiled sweetly, but said no.


NATIONAL SPORTSMAN

Over the Bar

by Rupert E. West

In the June 1930 issue of National Sportsman, *Rupert E. West described fly fishing for channel bass and bluefish off the coast of North Carolina.*

Development Along the East Coast: Stripers and Blues

Harold Gibbs was not the only angler fishing for striped bass and bluefish in New England. Through the 1940s, charter captain Phil Schwind of Cape Cod was using large, white-and-yellow and white-and-green bushy streamers with great success. In the late 1940s, Paul Kukonen of Worcester, Massachusetts, designed numerous saltwater patterns and was an early advocate of using short 4- to 6-inch wire tippets for bluefish. Farther down the Atlantic coast in New Jersey, veteran outdoors writer and *Saltwater Journal* host Mark Sosin remembers fly fishing in salt water during the 1940s. His father would chum using live grass shrimp on outgoing tides along jetties at Barnegat Inlet, and once fish were in the slick, cast and retrieve a freshwater Mickey Finn streamer for both weakfish and striped bass.[17]

Along the North Carolina coast in the 1930s, a few anglers were catching small bluefish on trout tackle, the flies being typical wets or even bass bugs. The June 1930 issue of the *National Sportsman* carried a story on this saltwater fly sport penned by Rupert West, according to fly-fishing historian Paul Schullery, who maintains that lacking the instantaneous networking of today's anglers, the North Carolinians "thought they were the first to do it, suggesting that it was still easily possible to be unaware of other saltwater fly fishermen."[18] The Tar Heel State anglers hadn't a clue as to what was going on in the Chesapeake Bay.

Chesapeake Bay angler Tom Loving is best known for creating tidal-water largemouth bass flies, such as the Gerbubble Bug and Marsh Hare, but he and his friends were pioneers in fishing for striped bass and American shad in the bay in the 1920s and 1930s. Loving introduced soon-to-be-famous angling author Joe Brooks to the area's largemouths and stripers by 1928.[19] Brooks, who calls Loving one of his mentors, describes bay fishing with Tom like this: "[Loving] tied a big bucktail for striped bass and he also tied a two-hooked shad fly which he used in brackish water for shad. We fished the grassy flats of Chesapeake Bay, casting to the banks and islands along sandy bars. . . . In those days we had the whole place to ourselves and fish were everywhere."[20]

According to Brooks, Loving's simple white bucktail with hackle on the shank is believed to be the first fly specifically tied for striped bass.

The Bonefish Question

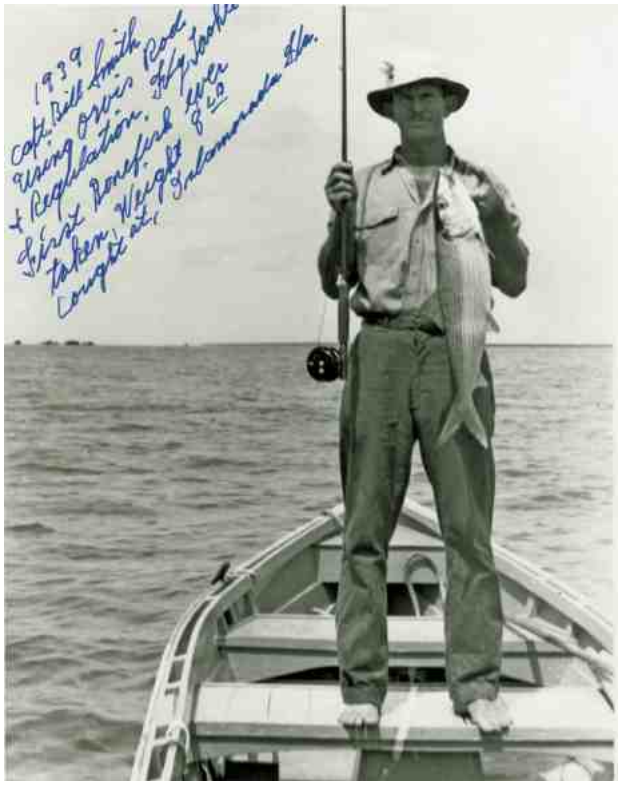
While anglers in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic were focused on striped bass, bluefish, and weakfish, down in Florida activity was building around one of the soon-to-be glamour species for fly fishers, especially those intent on sight fishing. Early catches of bonefish were accidental, the first recorded (1924) being that of retired legislative lobbyist/conservationist Holmes Allen of Miami. Using a white crippled minnow fly in Card

Sound, he was wading hip deep for snook. His rod was an inexpensive bamboo. The streamer, white with red hackle, was tied to a 5-foot leader of 2-pound-test gut.[21] Interestingly, Allen's description of his fly indicates it was originally designed to float or at least remain in the surface film. Allen describes the fly as "nearly going under each time you moved it. Then this crazy fish [Allen and his fishing partner, Hayes Armstrong, routinely called them that] shot out of nowhere, grabbed the fly and took off."[22] Many years later, *Field & Stream* angling editor A. J. McClane would write of purposefully fishing bonefish with a dry fly despite the fish's inferior (downturned) mouth, obviously designed for feeding on the bottom.[23]

Colonel L. S. Thompson of Red Bank, New Jersey, was regularly fishing for bonefish off Long Key in 1926 with guide J. T. Harrod, who chummed the fish using shrimp pieces. He used both fly and bait, believing any bonefish caught on a fly at higher-tide stages was simply an accident (he concentrated on baby tarpon then) and that bonefishing consistency could only be had by fishing lower tides.[24]

Honors for the first specifically targeted, sight-fished fly-rod bonefish traditionally go to Keys guide Bill Smith. Smith and his wife, Bonnie, built a top-celebrity client list through the 1930s and 1940s (including baseball great Ted Williams), but the first bonefish to which Bill guided his client George Crawford (composer of the then-official Army Air Corp song) brought humiliation.[25]

Smith's "fly" was built using fine stainless-steel wire wrapped around the hook shank, a red-and-white hackle wound behind the eye, the ends of the wires jutting out behind. These twin wire tails were used to attach a piece of trimmed white pork rind. Crawford took two bonefish on the creation. Smith and Crawford were weighing them in at an Islamorada grocery store when George La Branche (author of *The Dry Fly and Fast Water*) happened in. La Branche was a tradition-bound trout/salmon angler who regularly wintered in south Florida and who was convinced that bonefish were far too skittish to be taken casting a proper fly. He asked to see Smith's fly pattern and instantly exploded. "You call this thing a fly?" he roared. "A fly is made from wool, silk, feathers, hair! You can't use pork rind on a fly!"[26] La Branche continued berating Smith, asking him why he hadn't tied on some of the pig's feet, too, and used the entrails for chum.



Captain Bill Smith sent this photo to the museum in 1991. His handwritten caption reads: "1939 Capt. Bill Smith using Orvis Rod & Regulation Fly Tackle First Bonefish ever taken, Weight 8 lb Caught at Islamorada, Fla."

Withering under the dressing down, Smith knew there was only one way to recuperate his standing in La Branche's eyes. A couple of months later, using a proper fly he'd tied himself, Smith took a good bonefish that was witnessed by guide Bert Pinder and his client, a man named Norfleet. The year was 1939. As for George La Branche, it was after the war that Frankee Albright (Bonnie's sister) guided him, an elderly man by then, to his first bonefish on a fly.[27]

The 12-Pound Curse

Although pioneering anglers had been catching (mainly small) tarpon on flies since the late 1800s, with A.W. Dimock and son Julian having double-teamed on what was surely the largest fly-caught tarpon by 1911,[28] as yet no standards had been established on what should be considered fair play in the saltwater branch of fly-fishing sport. On 1 March 1929, the Rod & Reel Club of Miami Beach was founded. Rules were written regulating all angling categories, including fly fishing. No leader heavier than 12-pound test was to be used. No protective wire or heavier shock/abrasion monofilament tippet were allowed. The club was responsible for establishing, in 1935, the Miami Metropolitan Fishing Tournament (now the South Florida Fishing Tournament), which adhered to the same rules. For years, leading fly fishers would follow the club-established "book," which relegated the taking of very large or toothsome fish to extremely difficult or nearly impossible. Although many anglers ignored such self-limitations, leading traditionalists continued to stick with the regulations. Joe Brooks was one such adherent. A classic tale involves Brooks, who was fishing tarpon with Jimmie Albright in 1948.[29]

Brooks hooked an estimated 50-pound tarpon, and an hour into the fight, Albright suggested that the angler better bear down on the tarpon or they'd be there all day. Brooks replied that he thought he was using as much pressure as the 6-pound tippet could take. (One can imagine Albright rolling his eyes heavenward.) Of course, there was no heavier shock tippet. Albright relates that they had the fish on for six hours, following it across Florida Bay until the skiff's motor ran out of gas. The 6-pound tippet was not up to the job of towing a boat. End of story.[30]

In 1955, the Rod & Reel Club's rules were amended to allow 12 inches of heavier shock/abrasion material between the class tippet and fly. The result was the establishment of two fly-rod categories: fly light (no heavy shock/abrasion tippet) and fly heavy (allowed shock/abrasion tippet). Many traditionalist fly anglers were unhappy, but a new era in saltwater fly fishing was opened.[31]

Stirrings on the Left Coast

Saltwater fly fishing on the West Coast had yet to catch fire, but Joe Brooks's September 1948 catch of a 29-pound, 6-ounce striped bass in Coos Bay, Oregon, began to kindle interest. With that catch, Brooks established the 12-pound tippet record for the species, one that would stand nearly twenty years.[32] Brooks was "less interested in the record . . . than in the fact that he'd caught the fish on a balsa-wood popper made to order by Bill Upperman of Atlantic City, New Jersey."[33] At that time, Brooks would not have used a heavier shock/abrasion tippet even if the rules had already been amended, but by 1958, in his *Complete Book of Fly Fishing*, Joe was suggesting

100-pound nylon shock tippets for billfish and tarpon, and wire for heavily toothed species.[34]

Brooks was well acquainted with wet head lines and shooting heads favored by West Coast salmon and steelhead anglers, but it is international tournament caster Myron Gregory who is credited as first to regularly use lead-core shooting tapers in salt water. He assembled his systems incorporating monofilament shooting line, fishing them not only for San Francisco Bay striped bass but also for kelp bass along the rocks and jetties on the California and Oregon coasts, beginning in the late 1950s or very early 1960s.[35]

Sinking shooting tapers—initially assembled by anglers and eventually available in various configurations from manufacturers—influenced saltwater fly fishing wherever the sport is practiced. In the early days, though, they were the primary arrows in the angling quiver of West Coast anglers who took the lines inland for anadromous fish and south to Central America's saltwater venues.

Early Conservation Efforts

Forward-thinking anglers like James Henshall, A. W. Dimock, Mary Orvis Marbury, and George Trowbridge were already releasing fish and speaking to resource conservation in the 1800s, but in 1930, a band of professionals struck a powerful note for marine fish conservation at what was ground zero for the sport. That year, the Islamorada Fishing Guides Association (later the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association) was founded. Captains who would become famous in the development of the sport in the Florida Keys were already fishing there before the organization of the group, working odd jobs when they did not have charters and seeing firsthand troubling indications of the exploitation of their fishery. The association is responsible for many conservation initiatives, including the eventual closing of Everglades National Park to commercial fishing.[36]

The Explosive Years: 1950s–1980s

From the late 1950s through the 1980s, saltwater fly fishing experienced runaway development. Communication—first in print, then through electronic media—sparked new ideas. Rising-star anglers appeared: writers, educators, showmen, guides, and some who made their presence known in all categories. As they had embraced freshwater fly-fishing subjects, artists and photographers began producing beautiful and exciting works reflecting the unique world of near-shore and offshore saltwater angling with the fly rod. Exchange of knowledge led to development of new and ever-better tackle, and new ways of doing things, from tying knots to casting.

Rods

Tackle continued to improve from the late 1950s onward. Fiberglass rods became the norm, but some anglers continued using their treasured bamboos. A number of the earlier fiberglass fly rods were overly parabolic for use on truly large fish. The use of stiffeners to be inserted during the fighting were tried but obviously impractical. Thankfully, designs were improved. The Great Equalizer rod made by J. Kennedy Fisher for Scientific Anglers was the first and best-for-its-time fish-fighting tool. The two-piece fiberglass rod had fiberglass spigot ferrules and weighed in at 9 ounces. It beat fish but was an arm killer for any extended casting. The Great Equalizer was not part of Scientific Anglers original System glass rods introduced in 1969 but came several years later. Outdoors writer/TV host Mark Sosin, responsible for the rod's name, was also responsible for keeping the fighting grip above the fore grip, primarily to indicate that this was indeed a new breed of fly rod.[37]

In 1973, Fenwick introduced HMG—the first high-modulus graphite rods—in spinning and casting models; fly rods appeared shortly thereafter. Graphite was all the buzz when shown at the American Fishing Tackle Association's (now American Sportfishing Association) trade show that summer.[38]

Despite justifiable enthusiasm, it soon became evident that all was not happy in graphite land. The high-modulus carbon fiber material being used in early rod manufacture often broke under heavy fish pressure. It was even more susceptible to breakage from the angler error of "high sticking" (raising the rod to near vertical position), which put excessive strain on the tip section. A happy exception was found in the lower-modulus material from which Orvis produced its early graphite rods, making them more durable and forgiving. Better resin systems were developed and continue to be improved to this day. New generations of carbon fiber material were introduced. Together, those two factors allow using less fiber without strength reduction. The result is extremely light, yet powerful rods—ideal for saltwater applications. For some fishing, graphite (and occasionally boron) is blended with fiberglass to produce composite rods where extra strength is needed, notably in the butt sections.



The Fenwick HMG fly rod was introduced in 1974. The company's launch of graphite rods in 1973 ushered in a new era of rod construction. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

Reels

Reels with truly effective drags and excellent corrosion resistance and line capacities came in the 1950s: Gar Wood Jr.'s Wedding Cake reel, picked up by the Tycoon Fin-Nor Company, and Bob McChristian's Seamaster of 1953 were the leaders. These reels were expensive and usually difficult to obtain because of limited production.[39] More moderately priced reels came in the 1970s. The Pflueger Supreme 577 and 578 and the Shakespeare equivalents were models with good drags and spools that enabled them to stand up to large fish. The Supreme had a flip-lever switch for stripping out line, bypassing the drag, after which you again flipped the lever to fully engage the drag.[40]

In 1976, after Fin-Nor stopped producing the Wedding Cake design,[41] popular Florida guide John Emery introduced an exposed-rim, ventilated-spool, barstock reel for tarpon. It was big, heavy, and strong, with a massive drag. It was silent both going out and cranking in. Emery was encouraged to build a slightly smaller model, which he began designing with some improvements, such as the foot attachment and fewer loose parts after the spool was removed. Emery died before the new model was finished. His son, John Jr., completed the new reel in the early 1980s, following Emery's specifications. There were plans for a bonefish-size model that never saw fruition.[42]

Also in 1976, Keys guide George Hommell and Billy Pate brainstormed with master machinist Ted Juracsik (the man who eventually designed the Tibor reel series) about building a reel based on Pate's concepts. Juracsik created the antireverse Billy Pate Reel in tarpon and then bonefish size. For a time, the World Wide Sportsman shop in Islamorada was the only source for them.[43]

Between 1977 and 1991, Frank Catino, who currently guides from Florida's Space Coast to the Keys, offered two models of excellent saltwater reels in tarpon and bonefish size. They had to be ordered in either right- or left-hand retrieve styles. The reels were made in Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.[44]

With the Pflueger and Shakespeare reels discontinued in 1982[45] and anglers still tinkering with the Medalist, the market seemed ready for a simple, solid, reliable saltwater fly reel at a more reasonable price than the top-end brands were commanding. While he was a consultant for Scientific Anglers, veteran outdoors writer Bob Stearns suggested to then–Scientific Anglers Division Manager Howard West that there was need for such a reel, one that would sell for $100. One day West suggested they sit down and design one when the two were finished tarpon fishing. At his kitchen table, Stearns provided specifications for a simple, direct-drive reel with plenty of backing capacity, a counterbalanced spool, and a reliable drag system. Several sizes were worked up, small 4–5-weight-line models all the way to 12–13-weight-line models. To keep the price down, molded aluminum—no machining or anodizing—would be the only option. The finish would be flat black.[46]

The early 1980s saw the first production models, but over Stearns's objection, the company used Teflon for the drag material. If it became wet, it would hydroplane, and the drag would slip. Eventually, the material was changed. The System 2 reels were rugged and well built, and they worked. By preference, Stearns continues to use them for everything from bonefish to tarpon, billfish, and tuna. The System 2 reels continue to be produced, but prices have climbed since the 1980s. Today they run from approximately $150 to $200, depending on size—still a bargain.[47]

Sara Wilcox



Fin-Nor's Wedding Cake reel was one of the earliest designs with truly effective drag and excellent corrosion resistance. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

Lines

Fly lines advanced with the discovery that polyvinyl chloride (PVC) would adhere as a thin coating over tapered braided nylon line core. In 1953, the Cortland Line Company introduced the first line using this technology, marketed as the 333 and billed as the "unsinkable fly line." Still, manufacturing the tapered braided core of these lines was a slow, tedious process. To make a standard 30-yard double-tapered line, the braiding operator was required to make 96 thread changes. An operator could produce only eight such tapered cores during an eight-hour shift.[48] That soon would change.

With a background in chemistry from association with the Dow Chemical Company, Leon P. Martuch devised a method for tapering the PVC coat over a more easily constructed, level-braided nylon core. Martuch, throughout the 1950s, had been experimenting with cores and coatings in his kitchen. Coating durability was tested initially by dragging sections of line behind cars while driving to and from fishing waters. Martuch was granted a patent for his process in 1960. Tapered coatings, extruded through a diaphragmlike opening to specific diameters, were not only



Dan Blanton's Whistler fly, dubbed for the sound generated by the pinhole eyes as it sailed through the air, is typical of the more densely tied West Coast saltwater patterns. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

far more cost-efficient, they provided more flexibility in producing a broad range of specialized tapers for different fishing situations. Other manufacturers soon developed their own methods for producing tapered coatings, and through the 1960s and 1970s, line manufacturers dueled fiercely for market share.[49]

West Coast–favored shooting tapers, especially with the head section of lead core, led to another concept that was less complex and therefore found greater acceptance by more anglers. In the 1970s, angler Jim Teeny convinced a major line manufacturer to create a fly line that incorporated both the head and a fine-diameter shooting line as one unit. The concept became what we know today as the integrated line. These lines became widely popular on both coasts, but interchangeable looped shooting heads, both homemade and commercially manufactured, continued to be used.[50]

West Coast: Anglers and Inroads

Sinking shooting tapers increased in use along the California coast. Angling author Nick Curcione describes outings with the earlier-mentioned Myron Gregory, who pioneered fishing from a 14-foot cartop skiff, casting the surf and swells around rocks at Point Lobos, California (now a preserve). "We took our lives in our hands," Curcione says, "It was like *Victory at Sea*."[51]

Dan Blanton, who also enjoyed *Victory at Sea*–style forays with Myron Gregory and who grabbed the West Coast limelight as an innovator and communicator at the start of the 1960s, has arguably done more to popularize Pacific-side saltwater fly fishing than anyone. The Morgan Hill, California, outdoor writer-photographer and website host also pioneered Central American fly fishing, hosting trips on which fly-fishing luminaries from both coasts participated. Del Brown was one of those. Designer of what is surely the most popular permit fly, Brown only became enthralled with Keys fishing for the species after his wife asked him to find another venue less dicey than some of the Central American destinations he'd been visiting. Brown went on to take more than 500 permit before he was done. Blanton originated several fly series for West Coast needs, more densely and fully tied patterns than typically used in the East. His Whistler series is classic.[52]

Other West Coast anglers contributed greatly to the sport: author/painter Russ Chatham was first to break Joe Brooks's striped bass record in 1966 with a 36-pound, 6-ounce fish.[53] (Chatham was honored for his artistic vision and writings by the American Museum of Fly Fishing on 30 September 2010.) Chatham cut a wide swath across California salt waters and rivers for anadromous fish. Lawrence Summers and Bob Edgley pioneered fly fishing for large blue sharks (with the always possible bonus mako) in Monterey Bay. Their effective chumming regimen for sharks quickly found its way to the East Coast.[54]

Then there was the incomparable Harry Kime, whom natives of Baja's Loreto called "Unga" after a Mexican Tarzan-like cartoon character. The Orange, California, angler became a legend from the 1960s on for his over-the-top fishing antics that put to rest any thoughts of limitations to the sport of saltwater fly fishing. For example, he successfully fished out of Escondido Bay south of Loreto, Mexico, in a float tube (belly boat) until cautioned about the area's plentiful sharks. He'd regularly fish alone for virtually any large saltwater fish from small aluminum boats in the open ocean. He once hooked and boated twelve tarpon on twelve casts. He fought his fish relentlessly, commonly on straight, extremely heavy, non–International Game Fish Association (IGFA) leaders. He caught billfish alone. Once, off Loreto, again alone in a 15-foot boat, he cast to and hooked a 13-foot, estimated 200-pound striped marlin that gave him twenty-seven (by Kime's count) leaps along with body-length wallows. He beat the fish in an hour and a half, but had it alongside the boat with no way to bring it in. He was bare-handed; billing the fish would have resulted in serious hand injury. Gaffing, alone like that, was also a bad idea, but Kime began to try it. He failed on several attempts until a piece of sargassum wrapped his leader (for once not a heavy connection because he had been fishing for dorado). The leader parted. He was sixty-five years old at the time.[55]

Angling Leaders: East Coast

The Teacher. In ancient Greece, an oracle was consulted for wise counsel on all important matters: opinion, prediction, precognition. Fly fishers of every age have essentially cast Lefty Kreh into such a role, whether he likes it or not. From modest beginnings, and having survived fighting in World War II's Battle of the Bulge, Kreh's career spans that of newspaper columnist, magazine and book author, exhibition caster and shooter, lecturer, inventor, and raconteur of a seemingly endless supply of jokes. It is likely that he would prefer, above all else, to be thought of as a teacher. (Kreh was honored by the American Museum of Fly Fishing on 6 March 2013 for his iconic and innovative contributions to the world of saltwater fly fishing and the angling industry as a whole.)

Joe Brooks introduced Kreh to fly fishing, igniting a career that spans six decades, during which his unique techniques and tackle innovations quickly

advanced the sport. Ever the tinkerer searching for better ways, Kreh took issue with centuries-old casting style. In the 1950s, he began teaching a radical new approach to fly casting—one that markedly increased distance, helped counteract wind effects, and made the process far easier—all to the good of saltwater sport. Perhaps the most personal look at Kreh's career is found in his autobiography, *My Life Was This Big*.[56]

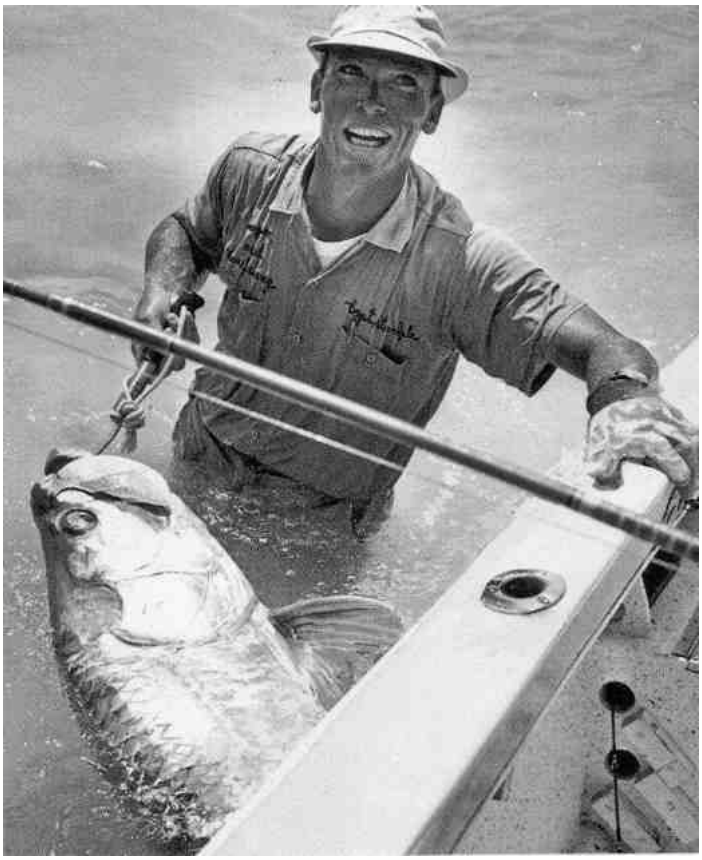
The Bionic Poler. In 1957, a Navy-trained jet fighter pilot and just-furloughed PanAm third officer decided to do what he loved best: go fishing—but professionally. Stu Apte, age twenty-six, moved into a one-room shack in Little Torch Key Trailer Park to launch his business. By 1962, Apte's reputation as angler and guide was soaring. He was on the water 330 days a year and fishing for himself on the days he had off.

Apte brought a fighter pilot's acumen, aggressiveness, no-quit mind-set to his fishing. Add to that the visual acuity that combat pilots like Apte (and his eventual pal Ted Williams) possess, and you have a wicked predator. Apte's growing guide reputation from the lower Keys—regularly winning the Miami Metropolitan Fishing Tournament tarpon fly division in the 1950s and 1960s with client Ray Donnersberger, and doing it on a radical new fly design—began to stick in the craws of veteran guides. "I just worked harder; I had something to prove," Apte will tell you. "I was willing to pole harder. I became known as the bionic poler."[57]

Apte's fish-fighting style was radical, too. Rather than typically bending the rod by raising it upward, he pointed the tip to the fish's side, sometimes even thrusting the rod a couple feet beneath the surface, pulling the opposite way from the direction the fish was headed. At close range, pulling toward the tail, attempting to move the fish backward or to roll it, increased fighting effectiveness. The method eventually became known as "down and dirty" and is used by top anglers worldwide.[58]

Apte's tarpon fly also became a standard. The design with hackles tied in at the hook bend to flare outward greatly reduced fouling of the feathers. It debuted in 1958. Also, Apte began using ever-smaller flies, especially in clearer waters—a trend that has continued to this day. At the time of his 2005 induction into the IGFA Hall of Fame, Apte had set forty-four light-tackle and fly-fishing world records,[59] but was also responsible for guiding at least one other well-known angler to his own record-setting marker.

During the week in May 1961 when the world fly-rod tarpon record was broken three times and finally set by Joe Brooks with a 148-pound fish that held the mark for ten years, Stu Apte was the guide. The fish flipped Apte into the water three times as he tried to gaff it. Apte himself broke Brooks's record in 1971 with a 154-pound fish.[60]



Stu Apte was flipped three times into the water before he succeeded in gaffing Joe Brooks's 1961 world-record tarpon. A decade later, Apte took the record himself. From the collection of the American Museum of Fly Fishing.

Blue-Water Trailblazers. In the mid-1960s, the thought of taking a billfish on a fly rod seemed impossible—but not to Dr. Webster Robinson and his wife Helen, who were experimenting with flat-bottomed poppers with top guide Lefty Reagan. Reagan had developed the bait-and-switch teasing game for other species. Initial attempts on Atlantic sailfish failed. The Robinsons traveled to Piñas Bay, Panama, and on 18 January 1962, with Helen on the teaser rod, Web Robinson cast to, fought, and boated a 74½-pound Pacific sailfish, the first billfish to be caught on a fly. Robinson went on to manage a 145-pound striped marlin in 1965. Top light-tackle/fly angler Lee Cuddy took care of the first Atlantic fly-rod sailfish, catching it in 1964.[61]

Proving that both angling and boat-handling skills can compensate for underwhelming tackle, in May 1967, Lee Wulff, guided by the Keys' Woody Sexton, managed a 148-pound striped marlin off Salinas, Ecuador. He used an inexpensive fiberglass Garcia rod and a reel with essentially just a clicker for drag. It was one of the longest-standing records in the annals of saltwater fly fishing,[62] finally being broken by Tom Evans in 2004 with a 153-pound, 12-ounce fish.[63]

Although tarpon were Billy Pate's all-time passion, at one point the internationally acclaimed angler launched a run to be first to take Atlantic and Pacific sailfish and all marlin species on a fly. He almost made it. A Pacific blue marlin, the last in his quest, was hooked off Quepos, Costa Rica. Pate fought it at least seven hours late into the day, when the captain demanded it be broken off or they'd never reach port in the coming darkness. The story goes that Pate offered to buy the boat in cash if they continued letting him fight, but in the end, the skipper refused.[64] That marlin was estimated at 400 pounds. Pate was first, however, to win all the major south Florida tarpon tournaments (only Andy Mill has duplicated that as of this writing).

New England's Pacesetters. Although a handful of well-known anglers were sometimes fly fishing (along with using

spinning and bait/plug-casting tackle) for striped bass, bluefish, and other inshore species, especially along the shores of Cape Cod, two anglers stand out as pioneers in fly-rod sport in the Northeast.

During the 1960s through the 1980s, Connecticut angler Lou Tabory, largely fishing from shore for striped bass, inspired countless enthused fly anglers while proving that expensive boats, guides, and exotic trips weren't needed to experience the finest kind of fly fishing in salt water. His regular two-hand line retrieve and use of a stripping basket for virtually all his fishing (many times for tarpon on occasional trips south) became almost de rigueur for saltwater fly anglers on all coasts. Tabory's 1992 book, *Inshore Fly Fishing* (Lyons Press), became the early go-to for striped-bass anglers.[65]

Also in Connecticut, Captain Jeff Northrop, founder of Northeast Saltwater Flyfishing, began stalking the flats of the state's eighteen Norwalk Islands as early as 1968. Based at the mouth of the Saugatuck River in Westport, Connecticut, Northrop opened the first flats-boat dealership north of Florida in 1987. His use of those shallow-water skiffs opened a previously ignored regional fishery. Northrop fishes migrating striped bass around the mouths of seven rivers flowing toward the Norwalk Islands beginning in early spring, follows up later with large bluefish, and ends his year with little tunny and sometimes bonito.[66]

Salty Fly Rodders

Saltwater fly fishing's profile was greatly raised with the founding of the Saltwater Fly Rodders of America, launched in 1964. The brainchild of Fred Schrier (an ad sales rep for *Salt Water Sportsman* magazine) and Cap Colvin (tackle shop owner in Seaside Park, New Jersey), the organization's mission was to teach anglers and expand the sport nationally, even internationally. A motley crew from New England to Maryland, including Frank Woolner (editor of *Salt Water Sportsman*), Lefty Kreh, Mark Sosin, Joe Brooks, and many more formed the first chapter, humorously called the Choon Gum Chapter, meaning duffer or rank beginner. At a board meeting in 1965, key proposals were raised to establish rules and ethical guidelines of the sport. Mark Sosin volunteered to write rules for saltwater fly-rod world records, which were presented in April 1966 at the club's first get-together. Gentleman that he is, Sosin acknowledged input from Joe Brooks, Kay Brodney, Charles Waterman, Stu Apte, Lefty Kreh, Lee Wulff, Jim Green, mechanical wizard Louis "Bub" Church, and other members.[67]

Growth was remarkable. The organization sent information kits to interested anglers. It also pioneered a series of educational clinics, spotlighting celebrity anglers like Lee Wulff, Lefty Kreh, Mark Sosin, Charley Waterman, Leon Martuch, Stu Apte, and others. The group's newsletter, the *Double Haul*, ran nearly fifteen years. In fewer than eight years, the organization boasted 3,400 members from around the world. At maximum size during the late 1960s, the organization had thirteen chapters from Florida to New England (including the District of Columbia) and California. There were individual members in twenty-seven states and in Australia, Bermuda, Canada, Libya, Mexico, and the Virgin Islands.[68]

In 1974, Fred Schrier fell seriously ill. No one could be found to devote the time and work needed to keep the organization functioning as it had, and sadly, it disbanded. In 1986, IGFA accepted saltwater fly-fishing world records from Mark Sosin and began administering them. But the impetus of the organization continued to expand the sport in an ever-widening gyre worldwide.[69]

Then, in 1987, former Chapter One president and board member of the old organization began opening his home on Tuesday nights to anglers seeking to exchange knowledge, tie flies, and swap stories. Eventually, attendees at the open house session grew too large for Bob Popovics's home to contain. In 1992, Popovics rounded up those enthusiastic anglers into a newfound organization: the Atlantic Saltwater Fly Rodders, based in Seaside Park, New Jersey. In many respects, it followed the tenets of the old Saltwater Fly Rodders of America, especially in eschewing politics and conservation battles to focus totally on the exchange of knowledge and the education of anglers in every aspect of saltwater fly-fishing sport.[70]

Popovics, who has been fly fishing in salt water for more than forty years, played a key role not only in founding the new club, but sharing innovative fly-tying techniques and patterns that have taken saltwater flies to a dynamic new level. The originator of both new epoxy- and silicone-based flies, Popovics is known for groundbreaking baitfish-imitating patterns like the late-1970s Surf Candy, as well as Siliclone, Ultra Shrimp, Bob's Banger, Cotton Candy, Shady Lady Squid, Pop Lip, and 3-D. Later innovations were his Bucktail Deceiver and Hollow Flies. All collectively come under the umbrella Pop Fleyes, which spawned Bob's two tying videos and a book, *Pop Fleyes*, coauthored with Ed Jaworowski. Bob is a frequent seminar speaker at national sport shows and is on the advisory staff of many top manufacturers of fly-fishing equipment. Lefty Kreh calls him the most innovative fly tier he knows.[71]

The Once and Maybe Future Tarpon Kingdom

If there is a Camelot in the world of tarpon fly fishing, it must be Homosassa on Florida's west coast. Although the area figures in the very early history of North American fly fishing from the 1800s on, the modern era of fishing in the area

Jerry Gibbs



Bob Popovics's innovative fly-tying techniques and use of epoxy and silicone in numerous groundbreaking baitfish-imitating patterns has cast him as one of the finest saltwater tiers of our age.

Jerry Gibbs



Billy Pate about to release a bonefish on Behring Point, Andros Island, Bahamas, March 1986. Pate was staying at Charlie's Haven, Charlie Smith's (inspiration for the Crazy Charlie fly) first lodge.

began in the early 1970s and is as fleeting as that idealistic dreamland of Arthurian legend. Plug casters Harold LeMaster and Kirk Smith of L&S Lure Company (makers of the famed MirOLure) were probing the waters north of the area's Pine Island, where they ran into huge schools of tarpon. The duo introduced Lefty Kreh to their secret area, and Lefty became the first to take tarpon on flies there in contemporary times. Another mutual friend of the L&S anglers, rod maker Gary Marconi, became privy to the fishery and began working it with another dedicated Florida saltwater fly fisher, Norm Duncan. Guides Steve Huff and Dale Perez learned about it from Duncan. Huff brought international fly angler Tom Evans to the place. Stu Apte learned about Homosassa from his client Ray Donnersberger but says it was Kreh who really excited him over the area's potential. So enamored was Apte over the incredible numbers of truly huge fish there that he refused to guide, opting to fish and trade off poling duties with friends. The word was out, and shortly the great fly anglers and guides descended.[72]

Billy Pate became a regular, as did Al Pflueger, Carl Navarre, Ted Williams, and Captains John Emery, Bill Curtis, Dale Perez, Steve Huff, Jim Brewer, Cecil Keith Jr., Eddie Wightman, Hank Brown, and Lee Baker. They were joined by local guides like Captains Earl Waters, Steve Kilpatrick, John Bazo, Jimmy Long, and Billy Hampton. During the area's heydays, Apte remembers boating two IGFA-record fish in one day. Other potential records never made it to the books as they were broken daily. Numerous 200-pound fish were swimming in the schools of thousands of fish, and of course Big Mama was the grail all the anglers sought. Many are certain they hooked such a great fish, but something always went wrong. May was the high month of the season, with the fishing extending somewhat into June.

Like other tarpon-obsessed fly anglers, Pate spent every May for years seeking the elusive 200-pound fly-rod tarpon in Homosassa, setting 16-pound tippet records there twice, the latter mark standing for twenty years. He was proudest of the fish he hooked, fought, and lip gaffed alone. That tarpon taped 2 inches wider than his then–world record, but sadly, it was slightly short to break the 200-pound mark. Pate was sixty-eight at the time.[73]

But the great Homosassa fishing did not last.

The 1970s saw the finest fishing. Numbers of fish caught began declining markedly in the 1980s and were terribly down after the 1990s. This is not to say big fish were absent. The gathering of the stars of fly fishing's tarpon world, the camaraderie, and the celebratory parties Billy Pate regularly threw at the Riverside Inn had gone, but hopeful anglers still came, casting their flies to what fish were there and into that wonderful part of history.[74] And then on 11 May 2001, off Chassahowitza, one huge tarpon was inspired to engulf a fly that had been presented by a twenty-five-year-old law student: James Holland of Vancouver, Washington. Holland, while on vacation with his father before heading to a summer internship, was fishing from the boat of local Cedar Key guide Captain Steve Kilpatrick. When the fight with that big fish was over, so was a quest of many years. The tarpon, the Big Mama that glided so long through the dreams of so many anglers, had been caught. She weighed in at 202 pounds, 8 ounces.[75]

Theories abound as to why the numbers of huge fish stopped coming to the area. High on the list is reduced flows from the copious springs feeding the Homosassa ecosystem, thus reducing salt and fresh water mixing and altering forage bases—especially blue crabs. Florida's limited aquifers have been under assault by exploding human population for years. Increased shrimping along the coast could have added to the forage decline. And simple increased boat traffic in the area has certainly not been good. Could the great tarpon schools return? Fly anglers everywhere dream and keep a watchful eye. Today, more than rumor, word from those who are fishing the area again say that more fish are coming.

Swelling Tides

There are some who say that saltwater fly fishing reached its zenith in inventive equipment design and technique by the end of the so-called explosive decades spanning the 1950s through the 1980s. Those years inarguably produced a blitzkrieg of equipment advancement never before seen, as well as innovative approaches to all phases of fly fishing in marine environments, but saltwater fly fishing today continues to enjoy steady refinement and occasional startling changes in every facet of the sport.

Equipment is undergoing ceaseless improvement. New fishing grounds continue to be explored—both exotic and closer to home. A new cast of young anglers—many of them women—are pushing the sport to new levels of performance: ever-larger fish are being caught on the fly, and anglers are contriving new wrinkles to improve success in the game, especially on more demanding and difficult-conditions fish. Since the 1990s and now into the second decade of the new millennium, saltwater fly anglers and the numerous organizations and businesses relying on the sport and its enthusiasts are increasingly shouldering the responsibility of conserving the marine resources and communicating the knowledge, culture, and history that will keep saltwater fly fishing thriving. The American Museum of Fly Fishing ranks high among them.

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