

# FLY FISHERMAN

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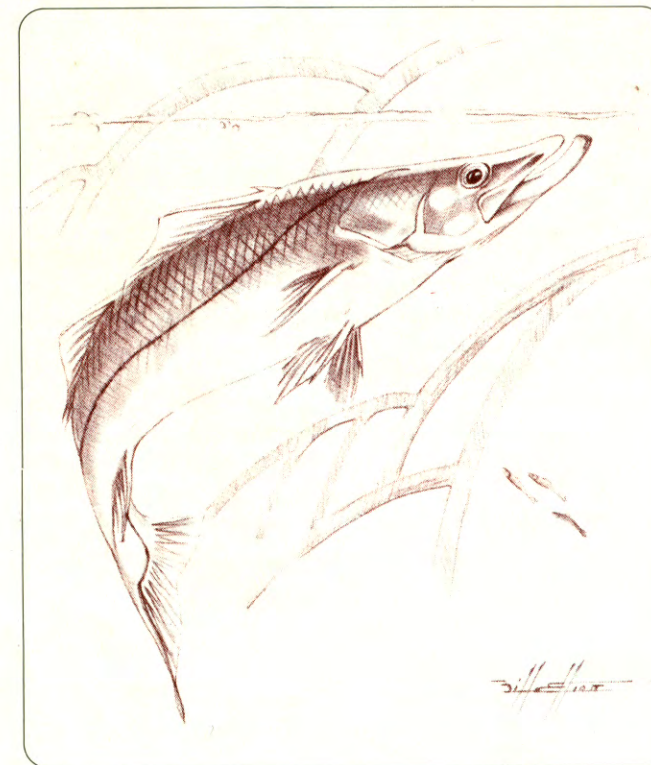
## The Seasonable Angler

NICK LYONS

### A Snook for Christmas

**W**E MUST HAVE WANTED a Christmas in Florida badly, or perhaps Christmas wanted us, for the day we arrived on Captiva Island so did raw winds, rain, and the threat of frost. The Sunshine State was gray; it was cold enough to snow. We weren't sure whether to cry or leave and settled for three whiskey sours at the Mucky Duck.

Jack Koontz, a fledgling thirty-year-old guide we'd met on Martha's Vineyard — and liked enormously — had urged us to come. He was guiding on Captiva for the winter and his reports about the beauty of the island, the fine shells to be found, and the fish he'd been catching were sorely tempting. Besides, Jack was lucky and



you go with luck. On the first day he guided at Martha's Vineyard he and a party of three men from Boston found a school of migrating striped bass and bluefish gorging themselves on menhaden. In four hours they boated nine bass, the largest forty-eight pounds, and twenty bluefish, two of which went seventeen pounds. They

were all taken on the surface. When a man is lucky like that you stay near him, especially when he writes that he and Doug Fischer, a seasoned Captiva guide, had found a secluded pond where they caught and released twenty-four snook one afternoon.

Snook. The fish began to haunt me as Mari and I drove south. We'd made all our plans the evening before, jumped into the old Mercury wagon, and raced from winter. Mari thought we were going for the sun; I was on the trail of snook. Our children were scattered for the holidays and we would miss a Christmas at home for the first time in eighteen years — without a tree, without those carefully selected and wrapped presents — but perhaps we'd find something in the sun. Snook. Art Flick had told me about them; he fished for them with streamers and poppers on the mideastern coast of Florida. He compared them to brown trout — wary, selective, hard-fighting — and by the look in his eye when he spoke of them I knew I could easily lose my heart to the fish with the funny name. Mari liked the name "robalo" better, especially when I rolled the "r." Robalo — of the razor gill. Robalo — lover of tangled mangroves. I intended, without fail, to get me a snook for Christmas.

I had to settle for the whiskey sours that first bleak day on Captiva, when the temperature dropped to the high thirties and the winds gusted up to thirty miles per hour. You could not fish from the shore and you could not put a boat, even Jack's sturdy Aquasport, on water so choppy. "Do you think we brought this weather?" asked Mari. "We managed to bring a hurricane to Martha's Vineyard."

"Probably," I said. "But I'm still going to get me a robalo."

Two days later the rains stopped, the winds dropped to only 15 miles per hour, and there were patches of sun.

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR NICK LYONS will head a New York-based publishing operation bearing the name of Nick Lyons Books. A new U.S. subsidiary of the London-based publishing firm of Benn Brothers, Ltd., Nick Lyons Books will develop titles in the angling, outdoor and general nature fields. The British firm, one of the U.K.'s largest publishers, itself carries a substantial list of angling books. Nick will continue his regular department in FFM, "The Seasonable Angler."

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Jack said the snook would be too deep, in deep-water holes, but the sea trout might be along the edges of the weed beds. We tried for them for an hour, and Jack got two, several pounds each, but the wind made casting difficult and Mari was huddled so far into her down jacket that I thought she was hibernating. We settled this time for a long lunch at Cabbage Key, a very special place with hills of shells the early Indians had stacked and a restaurant with a screened porch shaded by a mammoth Cuban laurel with twenty trunks. Since the winds were still strong, Jack took us to an isolated beach he'd found, with extraordinary shells. We found scallops and oozing sea urchins that would dry into domes like Byzantine mosques, and starfish, whelks, unbroken sand dollars, a huge horse conch, tulips, banded tulips, fighting conchs, and a lovely apple murex—almost more than we could carry in our arms and pockets to the boat. On the way back we saw a strip of sand crammed with the rare white pelicans and then were treated to a glimpse of three porpoises making toiled and rhythmic rolls.

But no snook.

From Timmy's Nook we saw a gill-netter bring up thirty of them, along with mullet and sheepshead and a few trout. They were beautiful fish, the first snook I'd ever seen—with backs of green-gold, bright silver bodies, a sharply tapered snout, and that famous long curved

lateral stripe. "I'm going to get me a snook for Christmas," I told Mari, "if I have to stay here until June."

"I'll settle for a new suit, wrapped, with a ribbon, under a tree," Mari said. "I miss our tree."

Friday the 24th was raw, gray, and windy at the start, so Mari slept late and I bundled up and went out with Jack. Within an hour the skies opened, the winds died, the sun blazed down on us, and I caught my first bluefish on a fly—about two pounds, arrogantly strong for its size. Jack said that no one threw back blues but it would be a nice gesture to do so with my first caught on a fly; I readily did so—and later that day also returned the first sea trout I caught on a fly, a small shiny one that came to one of Jack's yellow streamers, tied on a Keel Hook. He calls the fly the Koontz Self-Deceiver. It worked as well for trout as it had for bluefish—and I enjoyed drifting along that shallow weed bed, casting the fly far ahead of us, and retrieving it in short tugs.

"Any chance of snook?" I asked.

Jack said the tide was wrong and that they were in the deep holes. When the weather warmed, they'd come into the mangroves and you could take them when the falling tide began to sweep baitfish out. The sea, which had seemed so vast and incomprehensible to me, was becoming—like the streams and lakes I knew—a lawful place. Jack said he was still learning—there was so much to learn and only Lefty Kreh knew it all—but "change" seemed the best place to start. Fish fed on changing tides, where baitfish became vulnerable; sea trout were in the darker areas of the bay, where the sandy bottom changed to patches of weed bed; redfish were at the points of mangrove outcroppings, where the



tides caused swirls and eddies; bluefish—as everywhere—were under the birds. You had to look for signs, changes; you had to learn to read the tides and the contours of the bottom. The sea began to make a bit of sense.

Christmas day broke raw and windy again, and we slept late and talked about Christmas mornings past—nostalgically—and about trees and presents, and I gave Mari a little shell necklace. All I wanted, I told her, was a snook. "Maybe," she said, "there are no robalo who care to become your Christmas present."

"It does look like a grim, gray Christmas," I said.

We met Jack after lunch and, miraculously, the sun broke through, the winds calmed again, and he said we'd be able to try that little pond he and Doug Fischer had found, connected to the bay by a narrow canal. We could just catch the falling tide and there was a good chance we'd catch us some snook for Christmas.

The pond was no more than a jagged half acre, quite deep and nearly surrounded by tangled mangroves. Mari found a patch of sand near a clump of towering old palm trees, and lay down to take the sun. The air was warm now, in mid-afternoon, and there was no wind. It was a beautiful spot.

Restless and a bit overanxious, I wandered down the canal, which was narrow and overhung with mangroves, casting the Koontz Self-Deceiver on a short line and drawing it back with quick little stripping tugs. Nothing.

I tried to think like a snook but had to admit that I had no idea how a snook thought. Still nothing. And nothing at the broad pool where two canals met; and nothing on the way back to the pond. I tried a bass bug and some freshwater streamers and even a large wet fly but these were clearly outside any self-respecting snook's canon of thought.

When I got back to the pond, I saw that Jack had taken one, a fine five-pounder, and he was thrilled with it.

"Your turn," he said, and told me to cast across the pond, up as close as I could to the overslung mangroves. My new double-haul worked—after a fashion—and I managed three or four casts to within a foot of the brush. "Even closer if you can," Jack whispered. "They'll lie right up in the roots and hanging branches. And let the fly sink for a second or two before you start your retrieve." I did so. On the third cast, the line stopped, I felt the telltale tug, there was a roll on the surface, and I had my first snook on a fly.

That my robalo was the size of most trout I caught bothered me not a whit. I smiled bright as the bright sun in the Christmas sky. I avoided the razor gills, slipped the Self-Deceiver from the fish's jaw, and gently returned it to the pond.

"You got your robalo," Mari said.

"Fairly, on a fly," said Jack.

"Wrapped in silver, with a long lateral ribbon," I said, still smiling, "for Christmas."

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