BACKCOUNTRY BONANZA

In the Ten Thousand Islands area of Florida lurk the fish that fly-fishing dreams are made of.

DOUG SWISHER

Away from the crowds, an angler casts his fly at sunset in Florida's backcountry near Naples. An angler holds a snook (left).

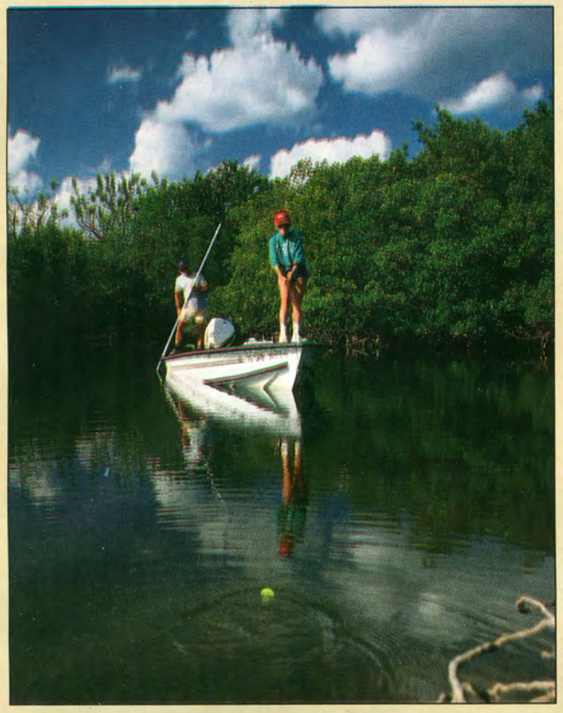
I MOVED TO MONTANA 12 years ago so I could enjoy all of the things that Big Sky Country has to offer—the scenery, skiing, hiking, wildlife, and above all, the finest trout fishing in the lower 48. Moving to the Bitterroot Valley has given me more enjoyment than I ever anticipated. The people are wonderful, and it's a great place to headquarter my fly-fishing schools. But I also spend much of my time in Florida. In fact, during the past three years I've been in the Sunshine State a little more than five months. Most of that time has been spent in the Ten Thousand Islands area around Naples and Marco Island.

It's not as if I just recently discovered saltwater fly fishing. Back in the early 1970s I joined forces with Captain Bob Marvin, and we ran one of the first schools headquartered in the Keys. Bob eventually moved to the Homosassa area and pioneered the giant tarpon fishery that is so popular today. I gave up the schools but continued to fish up and down the Keys from Islamorada to Key West, mostly for bonefish and tarpon. Then about five years ago, Bob moved down to Naples and started fishing the Ten Thousand Islands and Everglades National Park. On my first visit Bob introduced me to the "backcountry," and I've been hooked ever since.

All types of saltwater fly fishing are exciting and give me great pleasure. Whether it's wading the flats for bonefish, poling for tarpon, night fishing under the lights for snook, walking the beaches for jacks and ladyfish, or fishing the offshore wrecks for amberjacks and 'cudas, I get a charge from it all. However, if I had to pick one type of fishing, it would undoubtedly be fishing around the mangroves in the backcountry. The combination of action and solitude is about as good as it gets. And it doesn't cost an arm and a leg to do it.

Fishing for giant tarpon is what most anglers normally think of when it comes to the "ultimate" saltwater experience. Believe me, that *is* incredibly exciting. But there are a few problems with that type of fishing. You can sit on a flat for several days and not make a cast. Sometimes the tarpon simply don't show, and sometimes you're not in the right place at the right time. A good guide can help alleviate some problems, but even then, you must realize that the action can be relatively slow. If you're a millionaire and are booked for two weeks, it's not so bad. But if you're not too well heeled and only have a few days to fish, you might get antsy.

Wind can destroy your fishing out on the open flats. I remember being blown off the water five consecutive days back in the early 1970s on a week-long Key West trip. Solitude can also be a problem. With the popularity of the sport growing, I keep hearing more and more horror stories of fish being run off the flats by inconsiderate anglers.



Mangrove roots (above) provide cover for baitfish, snook, tarpon, jack cravalle, and sea trout that dart out to snatch your fly. My favorite fishing rig (below) is a Water Otter, a miniature rafting frame attached to two 6-foot pontoons. My favorite topwater approach is to use hair bugs or poppers (bottom).

Backcountry Fisheries

NOW THAT I'M SPENDING a much greater percentage of my fishing time in the backcountry, I find I'm catching a lot more fish than I ever caught on the flats and on the more open water. There are several reasons why this is true.

The backcountry consists of thousands of mangrove islands which provide incredible cover for the various species which inhabit the area (mainly snook, redfish, ladyfish, tarpon, jack crevalle, and sea trout). The mangrove tree has huge looping roots that allow the fish to swim through myriad tunnel-like passages under part of an island. In fact, at high tide a snook can sometimes navigate 20 to 30 feet inland and, in some cases, swim all the way across an island and out the other side. The branches of the mangrove tree provide shade and overhead cover, which are especially important at low tide. Some mangrove islands are positioned in such a way that the tide creates a fast-moving current that digs out huge undercut banks. Besides offering excellent protection, the mangroves also provide great holding areas for food.

Other important characteristics in the make-up of the backcountry include: sloughs—holes or pockets that catch food on changing tides and provide excellent places for fish to hold; rips—a spot where a fast current goes around a corner or drops over a bar; oyster bars—great areas that hold food such as mollusks, snails, shrimp, crabs, and small minnows; creeks—dead ends with tidal flow only; tributaries—small fresh-water flows from the Everglades; rivers—large fresh-water flows from the Everglades, navigable with a large boat.

There are other features: lakes—small bodies of water, 10 to 20 acres with a tributary entrance and exit; grass beds—turtle grass is most important and common, holds food and provides cover for fish (the best beds have good tidal flow that flushes out plant and animal life); flats—areas of shallow constant water depth that can be miles long or as small as your living room; glory holes—a combination of all the "good stuff," such as large sloughs or rips on a river or tributary, and good on both incoming and outgoing tides.

If you're adept at reading trout streams, you should do all right when it comes to reading the water. Fish are pretty much the same wherever you go; they need food and cover. In a trout stream, the keys are knowing how to find seams (areas where two currents of varying speeds come together) and when and where the food is available. In a trout stream some of the best seams occur in areas where there are obstructions in the current flow, back eddies, and where shallow water suddenly drops to deeper water. Rips, sloughs, bars, grassbeds, and flats are the saltwater equivalents.

Knowing the hatches is essential to the trout fisherman. Knowing the moon phases and tides is important to the saltwater angler, but tides are undoubtedly the most confusing issues to the novice saltwater fly fishermen. I recommend reading up on these subjects when you have time, but don't let your lack of information keep you from trying your hand at the salt.

DOUG SWISHER PHOTOS

Oyster bars (above) hold fish foods such as mullusks, snails, shrimp, and crabs and attract snook (left), a prime target of fly fishers in the Ten Thousand Islands area.

You should hire a guide or go with a knowledgeable friend the first time out, so you can rely on them. Everyone has his own ideas about the moon and tide. From my experience, I like to stay away from the full-moon period, at least for daylight fishing, but I fish as much as I can the week before the new moon appears.

As for the tide, I generally, but not always, seem to do best the last two hours of outgoing and the first two hours of incoming tides. Also, as the tide gets higher and higher, I follow it inward as it exposes more and more food.

When considering the time of year to go saltwater fly fishing, you should give careful thougth to water temperature. It's best if the water is over 70 degrees, but if it goes over 85 degrees, fish early morning and late evening. In the Ten Thousand Islands the best fishing months are April through November. The heat of July and August can be rough on fishermen, and December through March can be spotty fishing because of low water temperatures.

The Gamefish

THERE ARE SIX SPECIES OF FISH in the backcountry that are the prime targets of saltwater fly fishermen: snook, tarpon, redfish, ladyfish, jack crevalle, and sea trout. Occasionally you'll catch a snapper, mackerel, sheepshead, or small barracuda but not often. I love the tarpon mainly because of their jumping ability, but my favorite saltwater fish of all is the snook. They are excellent fighters, jump like a bass, are unpre-

Continued on page 83

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Backcountry . . .

Continued from page 47

dictable, and hit a surface bug harder than any other fish. The black stripe and streamlined shape give them an appearance that really sets them apart.

Redfish are like freight trains and provide an incredible battle on light tackle. I don't know of any other fish that moves so far to take a fly. When they make up their mind, they come ripping in from 40 feet away. If ladyfish came in ten-pound packages, you could probably never land one. Most come in the one-pound size range and put on a wild aerial display. Jack crevalle are built like bulldogs, pull twice as hard, and never give up. Sea trout don't normally fight as hard as the others, although a five-pounder can give you a real tussle.

Your First Trip

ON YOUR FIRST TRIP to the backcountry fishing in the Naples area, I strongly recommend you hire a guide for the first few days. I always spend part of my time with Captain Bob Marvin (3620 23rd Avenue S. W., Naples, FL 33964, (813) 455-7548) each time I go down to the Sunshine State. Over the years I've been guided by dozens of good guides, but this man is something else when it comes to the guiding profession. The most difficult part of the saltwater game is finding the fish, and Bob has a tremendous ability to find them. He has lived in South Florida all of his life and knows the area like the back of his hand. His knowledge of the moon phases and tides and, more importantly, how to apply this information to finding fish is incredible. Even though I've been guided by Bob dozens of times, I learn something new every time we go out.

After a few guided trips, you may be ready to try your own thing. When Bob introduced me to the backcountry several years ago, I really got the bug bad and decided I had to work out a way to do more of this type of fishing. The problem was finding a way I could afford. Day after day with a guide can get expensive, so I've tried a variety of economical methods whereby I can fish the mangroves on my own.

A few years ago I drove down from Montana and brought one of my small inflatable boats I use when I guide on the Bitterroot. It worked fine with a little two-horsepower motor and a set of oars. A canoe is also good, especially if it is used with a small gasoline or electric motor, although it can be a bit unstable when you're wrestling around with a ten-pound snook or a jumping 50-pound tarpon. Float tubes don't

Continued on page 84

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Backcountry . . .

Continued from page 83

work, because you're fishing water that can be less than a foot deep at low tide.

Now I have a small boat and a Water Otter that I keep permanently in the Naples area. The boat, a 12-foot

DOUG SWISHER PHOTO

Jack crevalle are built like bulldogs, pull twice as hard. and never give up. Florida's backcountry provides a combination of good action and solitude.

Coleman Crawdad, is molded out of a super-tough plastic material and weighs only 90 pounds, which makes it easy to handle on either a roof rack or in the back of a pickup truck. I mount both a two-horsepower gasoline engine and a high-thrust electric motor to the transom. The boat has oars, but I use the thruster for most of my close-in maneuvering.

My favorite rig is the Water Otter, which consists of a miniature rafting frame attached to a pair of six-foot inflatable pontoons. I put a little half-horsepower motor on it, and I can cover 10 to 20 miles a day in the salt. This little device has added more enjoyment to my fishing than you can imagine. It's not for everyone; I recommend it mainly for fishermen that cast well, are in good shape, and are more independent and adventurous in their fishing habits. The motor is normally used for the long hauls, and I use flippers for fine-tuning my exact position. Sometimes I don't use the motor at all and cover five to ten miles with just the fins.

When I float the rivers in Montana with the Water Otter, I always have to arrange a shuttle or pick-up at the downstream takeout. In the salt that's not a problem: The tide moves in one direction for six hours and then reverses and moves the other direction for six hours. I catch an incoming tide in the morning near Marco and work my way back into the mangroves for several hours or more, sit and eat my lunch at high tide, and then work my way back to the car. Using this system, I often cover ten miles or more with just my flippers.

The most important feature of the Water Otter is that you can easily put yourself in *exactly* the right position for proper presentation—and it can be done without making noise or disturbing the fish. I often get close enough to see the snook lying in the shade.

Backcountry Tackle

THE TACKLE REQUIREMENTS FOR FISHING the Ten Thousand Islands are simple. I use 9-foot graphite rods in the 7- to 10-weight range, with the 7-weight getting most of the work. The main thing about rods is to bring at least one or two backups. Modern technology has produced fly rods that have wonderful actions and that are super-light but unfortunately prone to breakage. In the past year and a half, my son Randi and I have broken 11 rods between us. Two snapped while I was far back in the mangroves on my Water Otter. Luckily both times the butt section broke so I was able to complete my day of fishing using the tip section. Now I always strap a pack rod to the Water Otter.

A floating, weight-forward fly line is my choice for most backcountry fishing. Occasionally I use a Scientific Anglers Monocore slow sinker. When it comes to reels, I don't get fancy. Ninety percent of my fish have been taken on a manual click-drag reel that can be palmed. The Scientific Anglers System reels are my favorite. I've taken tarpon well over a hundred pounds on them. I keep my leader system simple, too. One of my 12-pound flat-butt leaders nail-knotted to the end of the fly line works fine. To the terminal end of this setup I add a 20-pound test, 12-inch bumper with an Albright knot and then tie on the fly with a loop knot.

If I had to pick only one color for my saltwater flies, it would be white, especially for subsurface patterns. I tie lots of white streamers, mainly in the Aztec, matuka, Woolly Bugger, or bucktail styles, sometimes adding small dashes of color. Crystal Flash is dynamite when mixed in with the yarn, hair, or feathers, but it should be used sparingly.

There are two newly developed flies that are beginning to take up more space in my fly box. One is the poly-head type that has a soft plastic material molded around part of the hook shank. Often bead-chain or lead eyes are embedded in the plastic. It's simple to add some hair, hackle, and Crystal Flash to create an effective fly. The other is a crab pattern, that has outfished all the others by a large margin.

Continued on page 90

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Continued from page 85

The lightly weighted version has been sensational in the shallow backwaters.

Sometimes you *must* fish subsurface patterns to be effective, especially when the water temperature drops, but it's a lot more exciting to fish on top. My favorite topwater approach is to use either hair bugs or poppers. The poppers usually attract more strikes, but the hair bugs, because they're soft, have a better hookup percentage.

If you've ever worked a hair bug or popper for bass and have stripped streamers in a stream for trout, you'll do fine in the salt. There are a couple of techniques, however, that should add to your effectiveness. One is a basic method of casting and presentation that has probably *doubled* the number of backcountry fish I catch, especially snook. It is best done out of the Water Otter but can be accomplished out of any boat. The normal procedure of covering a shoreline is

to cast directly toward or at a right angle to the mangroves from a moving boat and then strip the fly out. Since the snook are almost always back under the mangroves, this technique results in poor coverage—your fly covers only a small percentage of the shoreline. To greatly increase your chances of putting the fly close enough to the fish to get a strike, throw a reach cast or a reach curve that puts most of your fly line parallel to, instead of perpendicular to, the shoreline. Then, when you retrieve, more shoreline is covered.

The other technique is simply a teasing or an attractor method of fishing two flies. You can use any combination you want, but the one I use the most has a streamer tied at the terminal end and a popper about two feet in front of the streamer. On days when the snook are hard to move with a subsurface fly alone, this rig often scores big.

With the staggering increase of pressure on our trout streams, it has become evident that many of us will have to look elsewhere for exciting fishing and a bit of solitude. The backcountry of the Ten Thousand Islands offers a good place to start.

DOUG SWISHER guides and conducts fishing schools in Montana in the summer and saltwater fly-fishing schools in Florida in winter. His latest book, coauthored with Carl Richards, D.D.S., is *Emergers*, published by Nick Lyons Books.

Pre-runoff Rockies: Exceptional Springtime Fishing

MAY 1991
Volume 22 • No. 4
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