The backcountry of the Florida Keys resembles a huge, sunken valley with many creeks, rivers, sloughs and lakes. Twice daily the tide washes across it, and the tarpon move with the tides. To catch them, you learn to . . .

Catch the Tide

CARL NAVARRE

OVER THE YEARS, FLORIDA BAY HAS BECOME a famous place to fish for tarpon with a fly rod. The bay, or backcountry as it is called locally, is a complicated body of shallow water located between the southern extreme of the Florida Peninsula and the ragged string of highway-connected islands known as the Keys. Viewed from sea level, the bay appears perfectly flat. It is an immense, empty reach of water that is troublesome to the eye due to its lack of consistent visual coordinates. Disguised by the tropical glare, the few mangrove islands that break the monotony of the seascape appear to float on the horizon between sea and sky where the complexities of light and perspective alter their shapes and spatial relationships. On a calm day with the sun in your eyes, a perpendicular object seen on the horizon may be a wading heron, a channel marker or a distant sailboat.

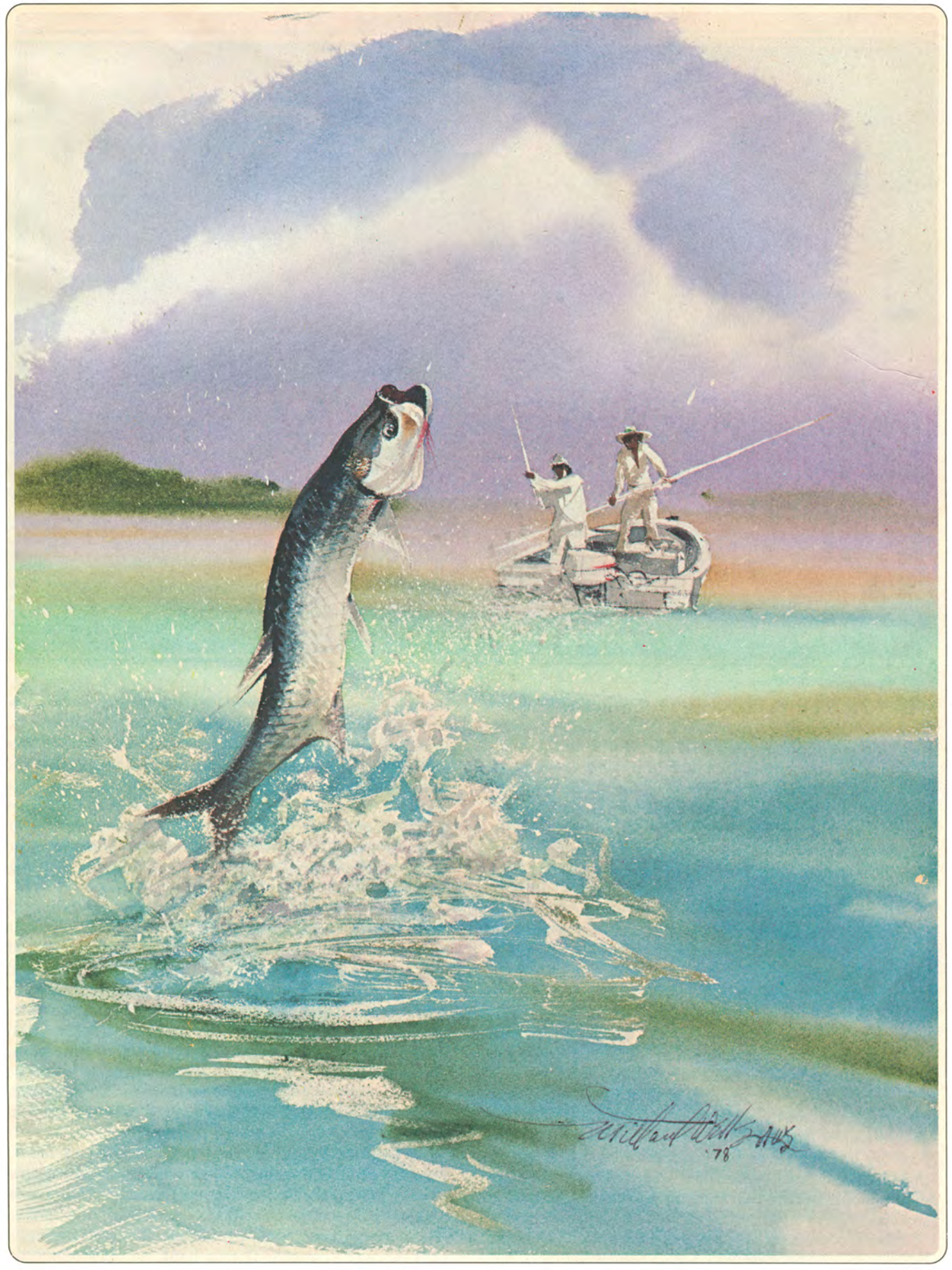
The view from the air is less disturbing, revealing a pattern of limestone-bottom basins separated by shallow banks or mudflats that are covered with seagrass. The radically varying water depths are indicated by different colors and hues. The banks are the shallowest part of the bay, and they are khaki. Exposed frequently to the sun by the tides, the grass on the banks yellows like a lawn during a drought. The deepwater basins are the color of jade. And the surge channels that cut between the flats are dark blue. A compass will not get you far in this jumbled environment. Navigation here is a matter of understanding the unique relationship between one key and another, and knowing the shape of the many banks and the position of each channel or ditch that will lead you across them.

Most of Florida Bay is in Everglades National Park. And except for the small marina at Flamingo and the few guides who work there, the only way to approach the bay is from the Keys. Since World War II, Islamorada has become a launching pad for anglers seeking big tarpon in the backcountry. Islamorada is principally formed by Upper Matecumbe Key—a long island that is barely wider than the Overseas Highway that connects it with Key West and Miami. Until Henry Flagler built his railroad to Key West, Islamorada was a windswept, mosquito-infested piece of real estate, fit for habitation only by pigmy rattlers, pelicans, ospreys and raccoons. Rum runners stopped there looking for a place to sit out a blow. In those days the few tough commercial fishermen who used the island never left their shacks after sundown; if they did, it is said, the mosquitos would eat them to the bone. Between the mosquitos, the awful heat and the hurricanes that have a history of hitting the island dead center, it was not a desirable place to be. Except for one thing: There were plenty of fish—especially tarpon.

THE HISTORY OF TARPON FISHING IS TIED to that era in the early 20th century, when wealthy industrialists and quasi-sportsmen roamed the globe in their own yachts, seeking large fish to conquer on rod and reel. Many of these sportsmen—Zane Grey was one of them—fished in the keys, and once there, discovered the tarpon.

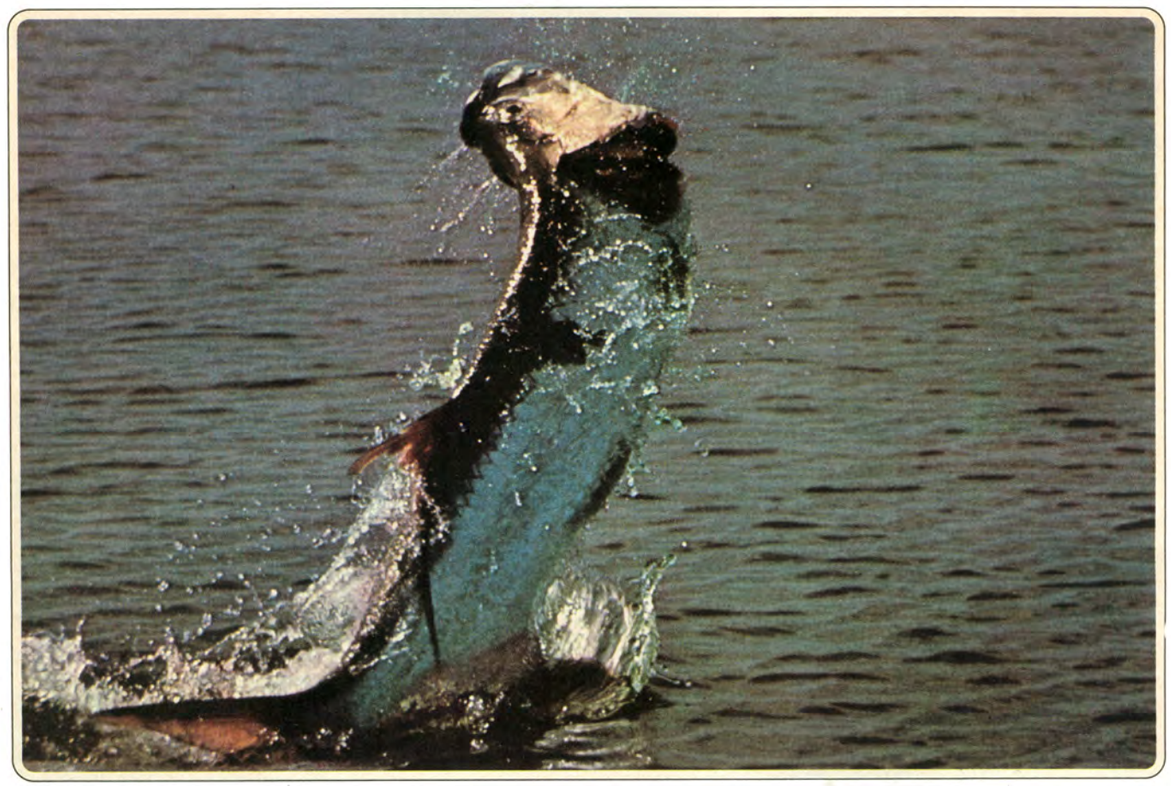
Among large, saltwater gamefish, tarpon are unique. They are frequently bigger than sailfish, wahoo and white marlin—fish that are found in deep, rough currents such as the Gulf Stream—and you can find them in water that is so shallow you can stand in it without getting your head wet. Furthermore, you can catch a tarpon with a fly in much the same manner as you would catch a trout, something that cannot be said of anything else of equal size that swims. Add to this the facts that a tarpon jumps like a gymnast on a trampoline and runs like a quarter horse; that to catch them you first hunt them in a manner previously reserved for birds and animals; that they are valueless as food, so you let them all go; and the sum is a bona fide sporting proposition.

Carl Navarre is FFM's Associate Editor.



Watercolor by Millard Wells, A.W.S. From the Thomas Evans collection.

Catch the Tide . . .



Photos by Bob Stearns.

Like any other coastal town in America with more than one hotel and a charter fleet, Islamorada proclaims itself the sportfishing capital of the world, and a sizeable number of tourists are taken in by this every year. Yet after Easter, the atmosphere of the place changes. Bougainvillea burst along the hedges with great puffs of red and purple, and mix with oleander and hibiscus to brighten the drab roadsides. Winter is over, and most of the tourists have gone home. The offshore charter fleet begins preparations to leave for Cozumel, Bimini, Havana and St. Thomas. And the skiff guides—who have been bonefishing all winter—wait for a spell of hot, calm weather when the tarpon will magically flood into the backcountry.

Tarpon are not yet commercially valuable, and there is a scarcity of scientific knowledge about them. Yet, year after year they arrive in the backcountry with such regularity and in such large numbers that local fishermen and guides have developed theories of a migration. Where the tarpon come from and where they go remains a matter of personal speculation. But the record shows that they first appear in March and are gone by late July. The early fish—those that show up in March and April—are filled with milt and roe, and many people believe that they have come to the bay to spawn.

There's something mysterious about witnessing the migrations of different creatures, something that has the power to quell the acquisitive instincts of hunters and fishermen, and that renders them simple observers. Listening to flights of geese pass overhead on a crisp autumn night affects me in a nostalgic manner that has nothing to do with the fact that I like to hunt geese. And standing in a skiff off Oxfoot Bank watching hundreds of tarpon roll in from the Gulf of Mexico affects me in the same way. It's a sight that exceeds the boundaries of sport. You can *watch* tarpon for hours without thinking to pick up a rod.

Once in the backcountry, tarpon travel, rest and feed according to certain traditional patterns. Looking out over twenty square miles of identical water, you find it hard to believe that there are distinct routes and holding positions for fish; but tarpon favor certain areas just as dependably as trout, salmon or bass. Elementally, the backcountry is not unlike a huge, sunken valley with many creeks, rivers, sloughs and lakes. Twice daily the tide washes across all of it, and the tarpon move with the tide. You have to find a tarpon before you can catch one, and to find one you have to hunt.

Tarpon are sought by two time-honored methods: the ambush and the stalk. Most often, ambushing tarpon means anchoring the boat on the edge of a bank or channel where tarpon are known to travel on a certain phase of the tide. Stalking tarpon involves poling a skiff through a basin or along a bank, actively searching for fish. The ambush is the more passive of the two methods, although for the fly fisherman it has many advantages. Ambushing means waiting, and in my experience, waiting for anything suggests a certain amount of boredom. Yet an ambush also predicts the course of action: The boat is positioned, and the angler can reasonably expect the fish to approach from predetermined directions. This means that the casting area is well-defined, and the angler can experiment with the effects of wind and tide on his presentation. Stalking tarpon requires quick reflexes and on-the-spot decisions. When stalking tarpon, you must be ready to cast a variety of distances from a moving boat.

TYPICALLY, A DAY OF TARPON FISHING BEGINS on a dock in the dark. While the guide stows your tackle, fuels the skiff and packs the cooler with ice and drinks, you stand on the wooden planking, slapping at the mosquitos that have escaped the DC-3 that periodically strafes these islands with insecticide. Every morning, the big question is the wind. You hold your breath and try to listen to the palm fronds. If the easterly trade wind is up, the palm fronds will scrape together with a furious rattling sound. If it's calm, you'll be able to hear the buzz of the mosquitos around your head and the whine of trucks speeding toward Homestead. You pray that it will be calm all day, but you know that this rarely happens.

Then you climb into the skiff, and the guide blasts away from the dock at what must be considered a perfectly insane rate of speed—due to the darkness and the fact that the boat can be wrecked by hitting a submerged automobile, a metal stake, an outcropping of coral rock or an abandoned crab trap, all of which are out there—waiting. And you think: *Only a fool or an expert would go this fast,* and you hope your guide is the latter. The sun will peak over the rim of the Gulf Stream and tint the drifting cumulus a vague pink. And by the time you reach the Pederson Keys, you will see white-crowned pigeons, spoonbills and man-of-war birds leaving the roosts nearby. Sooner or later the guide will cut back on the throttle, and the skiff will coast to a halt. The guide will pull his long pushpole from the chocks, hoist himself to the platform over the motor and say: "Let's just take a look around. There was some tarpon here yesterday."

You stand on the front deck and strip out as much line as you can handle comfortably. The necessity for long casts when fly-fishing in saltwater has been grossly overstated by the popular sporting journals. If you can cast 50 feet accurately and quickly, you will hook tarpon. So you coil the line loosely on the deck, make a few practice casts to be sure the line shoots smoothly, then hold the fly in your hand, leaving enough fly line trailing in the water beyond the rod tip so that you will be able to roll-cast the fly, pick it up and shoot it toward

a target without a false cast. Then you scan the water for signs of fish.

If you are a trout fisherman, the first thing you will notice about fly-fishing for tarpon is that everything is bigger. The fly rods commonly used are the biggest ones available. A rod designed along the lines of a good snooker cue will work fine. The flies are tied on heavy hooks and are big enough to resemble beaver-pond brook trout. The fly line will feel like a rope compared with what you use when dry-fly fishing. The delicacy of trout fishing is absent. But because you will present a streamer to a fish that you see, it's the same sport—only magnified.

The guide poles the skiff quietly through the basin. Beneath the boat you see beds of dark turtle grass and schools of pinfish that shine like coins on the bottom. You pass over starfish and large blue crabs that raise their claws angrily and walk backward when you poke at them with your fly rod.

"I guess we're in the right place," says the guide. "Fish at ten o'clock."

You look at ten o'clock and see nothing. The water mirrors the sky and is blank. But you stare at the surface and finally become aware of a slight movement.

"See 'em?" the guide asks. "Nine o'clock now, about three casts away."

You look again and notice ripples forming. In one spot the water appears to shake as though a discreet earthquake had occurred underneath. Then a wake forms—like the wake behind the boat, only much more subtle—and a silver head lifts out of the water and rolls lazily back under.

"That's not the lead fish," the guide says. "Throw twenty feet ahead of that one."

You roll-cast the fly and lift it behind you.

"Further right," the guide says. "See them there?"

You don't see them, but you correct your cast and shoot.

"Good cast," says the guide. "Now strip it, about two feet at a crack. Long and slow."

You strip twice like that, then the guide tells you to strip faster because the fish have turned. You strip as fast as you can, and suddenly you can see the fish in the water: four long dark shapes, moving slowly. The lead fish lunges forward. The line is tight in your hand, and you strike back hard.

Then the fish is in the air, turning end-over-end, so close that you'd swear you could touch him. The loose line jumps off the deck, and you work frantically to clear it through the guides. The reel buzzes, and the rod bends over in a preposterous arc. The fish changes direction suddenly, and the line shears through the water, making a sound like silk ripping. Sweat begins to pour off you like juice squeezed from a fruit. The fish jumps suddenly, swinging his head from side to side, and the line goes slack. As you reel up you realize that you're out of breath. The guide is laughing, not at you, but because he's happy. He begins to pole. "Get ready," he says. "There's another school of fish out there at three o'clock."

You look in that direction and see a disturbance on the surface. Then you hear a splash behind the boat and turn in time to see two fish roll simultaneously. You want to cast, but the guide tells you to forget them: They've seen the boat and spooked. In the distance you can see fish rolling almost constantly.

"Daisy chainers," the guide says, and he begins to pole hard to reach them. A cloud covers the sun, and it's impossible to see into the water. Then the sun reappears, and the guide snaps, "Nine o'clock, thirty feet."

You spot the fish and slam the fly in front of them, but it's too late, and they bolt away stirring blossoms of marl from the bottom. The humidity makes your shirt stick to your chest, and it's hard to keep your hand dry enough to grip the rod properly. A cormorant flies low over the basin, and tarpon make huge boils on the surface, spooking away from the shadow. The circle of rolling fish is within casting range, and the guide digs his pole into the bottom and stops the boat. "All right," he says, "let's catch one of these suckers."

DURING TARPON SEASON, ISLAMORADA IS a single-minded town. At every bar, motel, gas station, restaurant, grocery store, tackle shop, beauty parlor and dock you will hear people talking about fly-fishing for tarpon. The mechanics of the sport are discussed endlessly—and sometimes hysterically—in an attempt to produce some iron-clad methodology for going out in a small boat and trying to catch one of these big fish with a fly. Grown men have fought each other over the question of whether the Grizzly Coachroach is better than the Black Death Streamer. In the skiffs, discussions of rod design and line tapers fill the slack moments between fish sightings. Men tie knots, test them, break them and tie them again until their hands bleed. Anglers who carry Seamaster reels sneer at those with Fin-Nors. It's a battleground of heresy versus orthodoxy, and only the fact that catching one of these fish is so spectacular, so supremely satisfying, makes it all palatable.

Yet beyond the mundane rigors of equipment are those discussions that concern actual places. As with any trout stream or salmon river, certain productive locations are named, and talked about so frequently that they become legendary. The backcountry is no different, and names like Nine Mile, Buchanan, Sandy Key, Palm Lake and Man of War sprinkle conversations with a magic that is the product of memories. When joined together in Islamorada, stockbrokers, lawyers, politicians, plumbers, undertakers, insurance salesmen, even strung-out hippies, will talk about a certain indistinct tidal basin, or a skinny mudflat that stinks at low tide, with the same familiarity that they would discuss a movie or a restaurant. And when they do, you can hear the awe in their voices, because they have all been there, seen the tarpon roll and pass by, cast to them, hooked them, fought them and lost them. And I'm willing to bet there is not a man among them who's not ready to go back.

One more thing: The best time to go is June.