

*Fishing the waters off Mexico's Baja:
You may find it more exciting when you have . . .*

Dessert as the Main Course

RUSSELL CHATHAM

IT IS DARK AND the veranda of the Oasis Hotel is cooled by soft breezes easing inland from the Sea of Cortez. Somewhere over in Loreto, dogs are barking. Close by, a young child's voice can be heard near one of the rooms below the dining hall.

"Mom! Mom! I can hear whales breathing!"

You shift your attention from the fishing tackle you'd been preparing to the featureless dark, straining to see what can't be seen. In a moment you hear the heavy expulsion of air—once, twice, three times. Three whales and they're very close. You wonder if they are the huge finbacks, second-largest animals in the world.

The moon is about to rise and you watch the sky become orange over Isla Carmen. The whales's breathing travels south and you imagine them cruising over inshore ledges straining sea water through their baleen teeth to get the plankton they live on.

The moon clears itself from the earth in an oblong burst of yellow-orange. The whales are out of earshot and cannot be seen. All you hear is the gentle lapping of wavelets a few yards away.

"Mom, there were whales here, really, I heard them breathe!"

"Yes, dear. Come to bed now."

RUSSELL CHATHAM's articles and artwork frequently appear in outdoor magazines. He is editor and illustrator of and contributor to *Silent Seasons*, a collection of angling stories recently published by E. P. Dutton of New York.

Illustrations by the author



IN THE MORNING the fishermen go out early. If you are staying at the Oasis, the guide will come to get you at your room. As you prepare to load your gear into the boat, another guest is ready to head out, and without humor, addresses his Mexican mentor.

"Captain, I'm really wondering about the gamesters. Do you think we could pretty much stick with the gamesters today?"

"Señor?"

"I mean these other fish make a nice fish stew and all that, but I'd like to see some gamesters. I want to show these Lefty's Deceivers to something that will burn line. Savvy?"

"Señor?"

The angler takes his seat in the long, open skiff and they start out, the 40-horse Johnson straining to push the heavy boat. A hundred yards from shore the boat stops and slowly swivels around. You see the guide bending over the engine. In a moment he holds a spark plug aloft, examining it against the morning light as carefully as Louis Pasteur looking for bacteria in his microscope. The sportsman slumps.

Now it is your turn to try for Isla Carmen and you get a full three fourths of the way there before your guide decides it's time for a spark-plug change. After that it is smooth, if slow sailing, until spark-plug concerns are overtaken by the sight of a thousand wheeling, screaming birds.

"Jello! Mucho Jello!" yells the guide. You understand immediately he's not advertising dessert when you see the aggressive boils and splashes of a huge school of California yellowtail feeding beneath the birds.

You expect the guide might be confused by your fly rod, but he is matter-of-fact about it, having, you later learn, taken many fly fishermen out to the yellowtail grounds. He knows to cut the engine and drift into the fish noiselessly.

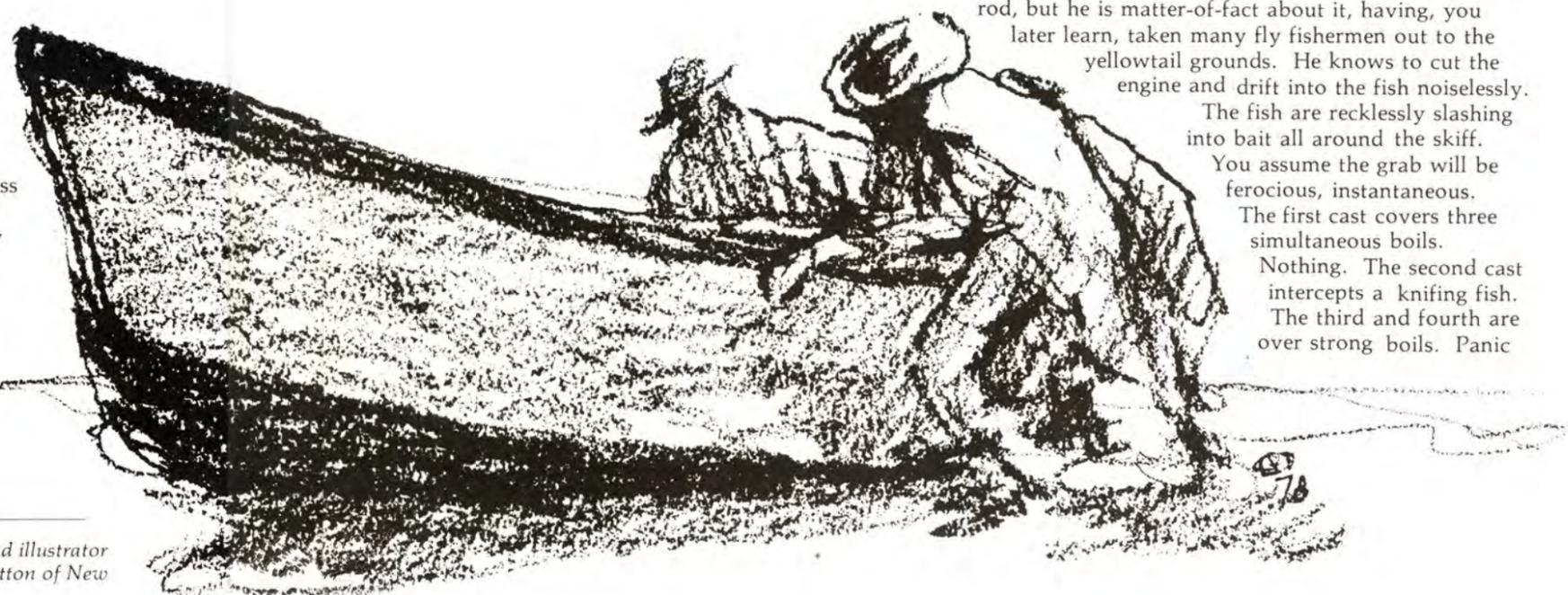
The fish are recklessly slashing into bait all around the skiff.

You assume the grab will be ferocious, instantaneous.

The first cast covers three simultaneous boils.

Nothing. The second cast intercepts a knifing fish.

The third and fourth are over strong boils. Panic



and loathing begin to emerge as the water around the boat becomes still, each cast appearing to have spooked its intended victims.

Forty yards away another school erupts with a roar. You motion to the guide, but he has already started the engine, sending the skiff toward the new school. Almost there, he again shuts down. You cast with renewed vigor, turning the streamer fly over again and again among clots of seemingly rabid fish. The same thing happens: As each fish is cast to, it vanishes. They know I'm here, you whisper to yourself with that sense of paranoia more normally associated with walking across Central Park alone at night. Somehow, they know I'm here!

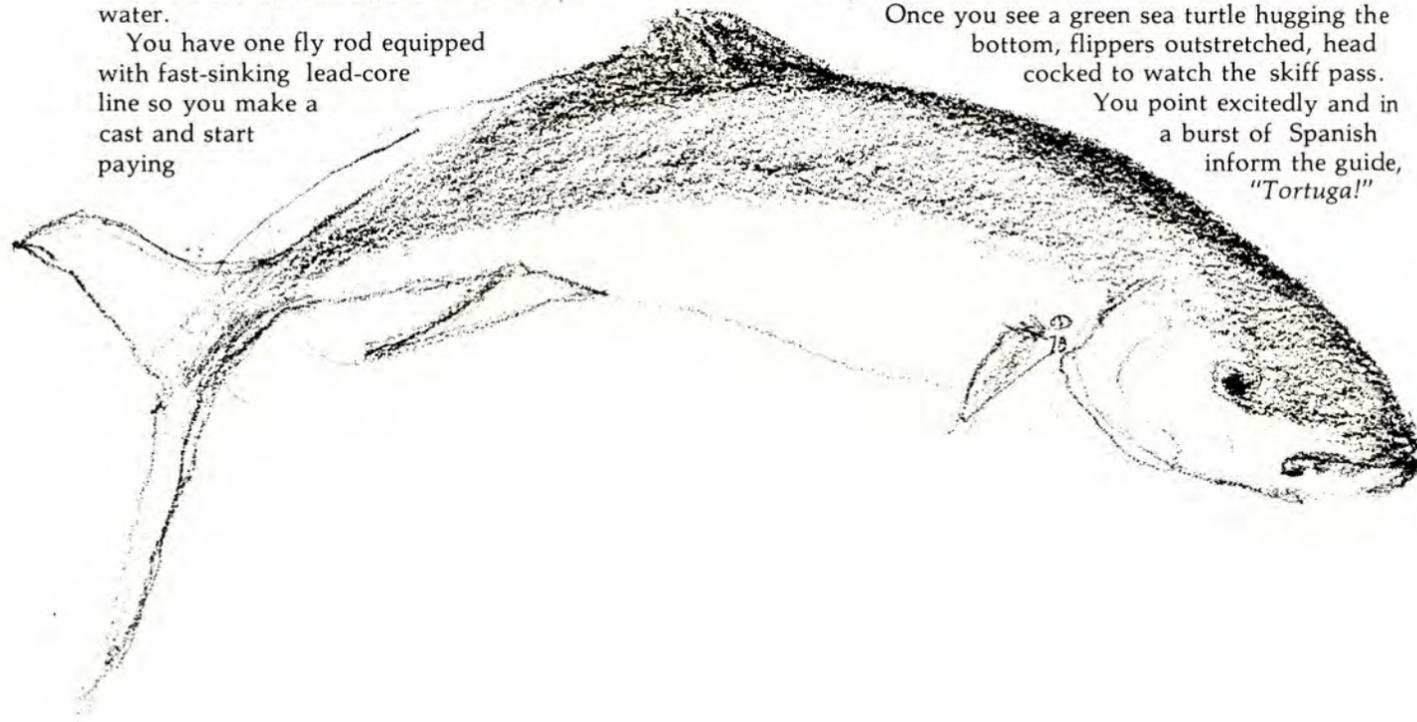
You churlishly and secretly hope that none before you has succeeded where you have failed. This is just how it is you tell yourself with a Don Rickles shrug. All the stories have been lies, fabrications flung in the face of hard reality.

Undaunted by your failure, the guide unlimbers one of the stoutest boat rods in the world, held together, it seems, largely by friction tape. With this he flings a huge metal lure, badly straining his reel's gear system. When the jig lands he pays out line for an eternity.

When his lure hits bottom 200-odd feet down, he begins cranking and jerking like a crazed warrior around a night fire. Almost at once he grunts and begins pumping a fish. When it gets to the boat it is a smallish grouper. One of fishing's most disconcerting moments is at hand: seeing a fish hauled up out of the depths with its eyes popped out of their sockets because of the change in pressure.

On his next cast, using the same jigging method, he catches an 18-pound yellowtail. At this, he looks at you inquiringly and gestures toward the water.

You have one fly rod equipped with fast-sinking lead-core line so you make a cast and start paying



out line. It isn't long before you catch yourself at your own folly; it would take the better part of your whole vacation for the heaviest lead line in the world to sink down there. Then what? Even if you hooked something it would go instantly into a cave or else be indistinguishable from a section of coral reef.

The sea around you is now flat and polished. Not a fin is to be seen. Even the birds seem puzzled. The yellowtail are down.

You point toward the island and, using your voice to inflect the question, ask your guide, "snapper?"

"Sí señor. Mucho."

The north end of Isla Carmen is austere and craggy, formidable cliffs facing prevailing seas. Along its shores life is unfathomably abundant, from rocks covered with a kind of sea lice, or *cucarachas de la marina*, as they are jokingly called in Mexico, to coves teeming with fish that defy description.

In the first cove you come to a school of snapper booms to the surface sending a shower of baitfish up, then down like hard rain. The snapper are chunky fish, not very large, but certainly purposeful. They clear the water in peculiar, angular leaps, often appearing like dark silhouettes, upside-down, on end, always in outline like paper cut-outs.

You roll out some line, shoot a cast into the melee. Instantly a fish is on and the dark humiliation of an hour earlier is momentarily forgotten. You take two or three more even after the fish have quieted down, the surface stilled once more.

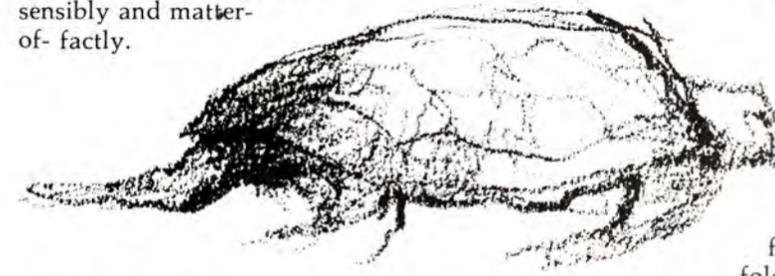
After this, the guide directs his boat slowly along the shore, stealthily investigating each point and cove. The water is absolutely clear so every nuance of bottom is at hand, every fish in plain view. You alternately troll and cast your fly, hooking any number of fish.

Once you see a green sea turtle hugging the bottom, flippers outstretched, head cocked to watch the skiff pass.

You point excitedly and in a burst of Spanish inform the guide, "Tortuga!"

In halting English he tells you he has not seen a turtle in a very long time. You recall hearing or reading that as long ago as the turn of the century, a thousand green sea turtles were being shipped every month from lower Baja to San Francisco. Now they are all but extinct. Even here in this dry, nearly uninhabitable, forsaken land, this frontier, all is not well with Mother Westwind's children.

One resident of Loreto, an American who retired there for the fishing, speaks sensibly and matter-of-factly.



"They used to say the Cortez grouper, the big ones — fifty, sixty, seventy pounds — were inexhaustible. Now those giant groupers are a thing of the past. There are still lots of grouper but they're smaller. Hell, those big guys are forty or fifty years old. How many of them can you catch and still expect there to be more?"

With respect to the yellowtail the story is a bit different. Migratory, they spend the winter in the region of Loreto and Mulegé where food is abundant. As a species, then, they are never really being pulled from their living rooms as are the resident bottom dwellers.

What makes yellowtail an interesting fish for salt-water fly casters is that they are pelagic, living and feeding largely close to the surface. Much like the tuna, they are built for tremendous power and speed. This fact can also make them hard to catch. Unless they are already in a feeding frenzy, it is nearly impossible to interest them in something as slow-moving as a streamer fly. You suspect as well, that while in a calmer mood, the fish are quite cognizant of fraud baits.

THAT EVENING ON THE PIER at Loreto you see a knot of people gathered. They are watching several young boys who are fishing there. You see that the youths take their fishing pretty seriously, seldom smiling or joking among themselves. Each has a length of monofilament line with a lure attached. This he swings about his head, letting go so that the line coiled at his feet follows the lure far out into the bay. Each also has a smallish pile of fish.

A man you met earlier at the hotel is on the pier. Seeing you, he walks over. "Say, aren't you the fellow with the fly rods? Why don't you try it off the pier? Catch all kinds of fish."

"What kind are they?"

"You name it."

"I can't name them. I've never been here before." "This is the place for those fly rods. These little guys here."

For a moment you think it might be fun to try but you don't because you understand the boys are making what for them constitutes a living off this pier. They aren't sportfishing. You consider the morning's frustrations and for just a moment think the man is right; the fly rod is for the little guys. But then you remember why you came to Mexico.

THE MORNING IS A carbon copy of the one before: perfect cloudless sky, windless. Off the beach near the Oasis, pelicans are soaring and diving into schools of tiny fish. In formation, five or six of the big birds veer and fold in unison, twisting toward a chosen target. You notice how small the baitfish are, inch to an inch and a half. How is it that such large birds are interested in such small prey?

On the run to the fishing grounds a tremendous school of porpoises passes the boat. Playful as usual, the hundred or so mammals dive sharply under and around the skiff as if to invite it to join them wherever they're going. In the distance you begin to see the birds sparkling in the morning air like precious gems.

Looking through your tackle an idea surfaces: Could the yellowtail be feeding on tiny baitfish like the pelicans? You find a small silver, blue and white bucktail about an inch and a half long and rig it on a long, absurdly light leader.

Just as he had done the previous day, the guide cuts his engine and eases into the yellowtail, which are feeding at least as furiously as before. Today, though, you see several tiny baitfish skip out ahead of some powerful swirls. With determination you false-cast the shooting-taper until several boils appear near the boat. You drop the fly on them and pull fast. Instantly the water seems to careen and bulge, and instead of retrieving line you are losing it straight down.

At the sound of the captain's voice you turn and he is grinning broadly, showing some gold. "Bravo señor! Jello!"



FLY FISHERMAN

PRE-SEASON • 1979

Volume 10 • Number Two

January/February • Price \$1.50



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