

Says Lefty "Jaws" Kreh. . .

Don't Wait for the Movie!

LEFTY KREH

TYPICAL OF THE THINKING of northern fly fishermen when they come to the saltwater flats of Florida or the Caribbean is that of Jim Gilford, who visited me while I lived in Miami. Jim, an old friend, writes an outdoor column for the Frederick (Md.) *News-Post*, and he had come down to sample some of the fabled flats fishing he had heard so much about. Most of all, he wanted to try bonefish and tarpon, since these are the fish that get the most publicity.

We caught many species of fish, but frequently I suggested to Jim that he try for sharks. Frankly, it didn't seem like a good idea, judging by his negative reaction.

One day we were in the Marquesas Islands, 25 miles west of Key West. This is a circular set of mangrove clumps and sandy islands, with air-clear flats that can hold huge permit, tarpon, mutton snapper and, of course, big sharks. We were there on a spring high tide, the right time to fish certain small spots where tarpon get up under the red mangrove roots to cruise or rest. I had the boat in close, and Jim, a fine fly caster, enjoyed hooking, losing and some times landing these 20-30 pounders that jump like they have springs in their tails.

When the tide began to ebb, the tarpon dropped back into a nearby channel. Although it was possible to catch them by casting blind, I don't like to do that kind of fishing unless it's necessary.

I saw several blacktip sharks searching a white sand patch for food and moved the boat over there with the pole. Staking out the boat, I retied Jim's leader, putting on a short section of #5 solid trolling wire and a bright, yellow-and-red streamer that was adorned with a few strands of silver mylar.

Pulling the pole from the bottom, I moved the boat up on the flat. Jim stood on the casting deck, ready.

"They sure look sluggish, Lefty," he said.

I nodded, "You wait until you hook one."

Jim suddenly crouched. Coming directly toward the boat was a shark about five feet long—sweeping along with slow, powerful surges of its large tail.

Jim made a perfect cast, dropping the fly right next to the shark, which slashed sideways with its mouth and

gobbled the fly. The shark had stopped swimming, so Jim set the hook hard several times.

The shark remained in one spot, and I heard Jim grunt, "Hell, what's going on?"

"You wait until that damn shark knows he's hooked, Jim." I had shown him how to form a circle with finger and thumb to handle line coming off the deck and clear it through the guides, should a fish run swiftly. He had done a beautiful job of clearing line on several tarpon, as well as other fish.

Jim jerked the rod back hard again, and the shark exploded with a powerful tail sweep that boiled the water into muddy clouds. The fish tore across the flat toward a distant channel.

Holding the rod high, Jim formed a ring with his fingers and desperately cleared line. In a matter of seconds, I heard him curse in pain.

"Got yourself a line burn, huh?" I laughed as the shark began to convince Jim that he had tangled with someone who could put up a real argument. We chased the shark with the boat, fearing it would strip all his line. I guess it was 20 minutes later when I lip-gaffed the shark, removed the fly with my pliers and watched it swim away.

I never had to coax Jim into shark fishing again—he was sold.

I have been fortunate in spending many hours on the water with some of the best saltwater fly fishermen in the world—Joe Brooks, Al Pflueger, Jr., Stu Apte, Flip Pallot, Mark Sosin, and many others. Almost to a man, they agree that a big shark on the flats is perhaps one of the finest trophies you can take on a fly.

There are many reasons for this. A big shark can be tough to locate and then getting into casting position can be tough too. Their poor eyesight makes it difficult for them to see your offering, so the fly presentation must be just right. Also, a big shark is a hell of a big beast in the water. It's all muscle, and when you hook one in shallow water, it looks like a runaway snow plow.

I'm not thinking about catching them in deep water; that's not nearly as much fun. The advantages all lie with the fisherman and against the shark under such condi-



We'll let Lefty retrieve this streamer without our help! The location of the shark's mouth well behind the snout requires that the fly be presented to the side of the head and not in front as with most other fish.
Photos by Lefty Kreh.



Florida Keys guide Steve Huff of Marathon gaffs a thrashing shark which went for Mark Sosin's streamer.

tions. It's in shallow water, on the flats in Florida, the Bahamas and Central America, where they battle in such a manner that any fly fisherman who loves a challenge will seek them.

Weather can affect shark fishing. Several years ago, there was a severe cold spell in Miami (the air temperature dropped that night to 29 degrees) which occurred during a spring tide, when the waters dropped extra low to expose many flats along Florida Bay, near Flamingo in Everglades Park. The bay waters on the incoming tide surged over these exposed flats, which had been chilled far below normal and thus acted as refrigeration coils as the warmer bay waters flowed over them. The tooling waters killed enormous numbers of fish, but the two most affected were perhaps the two least expected to be—sharks and jack crevalle. These two muscular fishes, that are really tough in a fight, died by the hundreds.

Sharks will not expose themselves to chilly waters. They remain on the flats all winter but will vacate them during brief cold snaps. If you plan a trip to the Keys or the Caribbean, you can expect to see plenty of sharks on the flats some time during your stay.

Tackle for sharks can be almost anything you have brought along. I've taken many smaller sharks on trout tackle. For bonefishing, I prefer to use line sizes #6-8 and matching gear because I think you can catch more fish on this light equipment. If you want to battle sharks less than five feet long with such tackle, it can be done—but done gently.

For average shark fishing, fish from three to five feet, an 8 to 10-weight outfit is perfect. The reel, in any case, should contain at least 150 yards of backing and have a decent drag. You can use any leader you chose, but it is vital to place wire tippet at the fly.



A collection of effective shark flies and some solid, coffee-colored stainless wire for tippet.

Shark! . . .

The type of wire is important, too. My son Larry and I spent several hours one summer day fishing Snake Bight, a big flat in Florida Bay near Flamingo. On spring high tide, huge sharks, some better than 200 pounds, cruise these flats gobbling up crabs, small fish and ambushing mullet. The sharks are easy to spot. Portions of the back will be out of the water, with the entire dorsal fin above the surface resembling a sailboat.

Both of us had hooked and lost two sharks and then a really big one, well over 200 pounds, came down the flat, moving in that characteristic, undulating manner. I dropped a big streamer fly next to the fish, which saw it immediately, was hooked, and tore across the flat, tearing up the grassy bottom and scaring the hell out of every fish within 200 yards.

I held on desperately as Larry tried to pole the boat to a nearby channel, but the wire parted and I lost the fish. Those five big sharks taught me a vital lesson.

We had been using 40-pound-test braided wire. All five sharks had eventually gone through the wire. During the fight, the teeth of the fish would gradually cut one strand after another, until we would lose it. Other fly fishermen who have caught many large sharks experienced the same problem, and now we all use coffee-colored, stainless-steel trolling wire (single strand). For most situations, #5 or 7 wire is ample.

The type of fly used for shark fishing is of paramount consideration. Most of us think that a shark that is interested will hit any pattern you throw at it—if it can see it.

That's only part of the problem. Just as important is that the angler be able to see the fly.

The eyesight of a shark is incredibly poor. They depend upon their senses of smell and sound to get most of their food. When you present a fly to a shark, it must be cast so it will ride right alongside the eye—not in front of the fish. The mouth and eyes on a shark are set well back from the snout. A streamer fly that moves along in front of the fish is never seen by the quarry and is a waste of your time.

If you should make a cast where the fly falls directly in front of the fish, pick it up immediately and make another presentation. I can't emphasize too much that the fly needs to be placed and kept alongside the eye. Generally, after the correct presentation, the fly must be retrieved for a few feet alongside the eye of the shark until it sees the lure, homes in and can strike at it.

You simply have to know where that fly is all the time, so you must be able to see both it and the shark. The answer to this, of course, is to make the fly relatively large and of a bright enough color to contrast with the bottom.

For larger sharks, I prefer a fly about 5-6 inches long and heavily dressed. Dressing the fly heavily accomplishes several things. It makes it easy to see, and the fly does not sink too quickly. Sharks on the flats are rarely in more than four feet of water, and a sparsely dressed fly that bombs for the bottom either tangles in the vegetation or has to be retrieved too swiftly to keep it alongside the eye of the fish.

The heavily dressed fly has another advantage. It doesn't take but a single trip for even a novice fly fisherman to recognize that slapping a big fly on the water near a shark will often get its attention. Sparsely dressed flies won't do the job. You want a pile of feathers and a big hook to plop down with a splat, making sure the fish hears it. I'd like to caution that splashing a fly directly on top of a shark can have the reverse effect and scare the fish. You need to make the fly hit close, but not too close, to the cruising fish.

Almost any pattern works, but bright colors seem to be the best choice, since almost any bottom where you find sharks is dark in color, with the exception of light sand, where visibility is rarely a problem.

My own preference, and that of a number of others, is a combination of either red-and-yellow or orange-and-yellow. Either color combination is highly acceptable to the sharks and can be seen well, even on overcast days. Next in preference is either a bright green or blue topping of deer hair (especially the fluorescent-dyed stuff) on a Lefty's Deceiver style of fly. This makes a good smack on the water and sinks slowly.

I prefer strong, stainless-steel hooks, and rarely tie shark flies on any other size than 3/0-5/0 (with well-sharpened points).

Popping bugs generally frighten more sharks than they entice. And, since poppers float, the shark usually pushes away the bug as it surges forward to take it. Either the nose and head, or the water shoved in front of the fish, causes a missed strike. Use poppers only if streamers won't work.

You can also tie a dead fish, any kind that you caught on the flats, to about 25 feet of heavy line and allow it to



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trail behind the boat. Sharks apparently either smell the fish or hear it bumping along the bottom and move in to locate it. Keep a watchful eye behind you, and when the shark is near the bait have someone pull it away and then make your presentation. Chumming with fish oil or ground-up fish can lure sharks too, but then it becomes difficult at times to interest them in the fly.

There are certain places where sharks will usually congregate. Rocky points and sandy holes are two such spots and local guides almost always know these areas. Be sure and recognize which tidal phase the sharks favor in that particular location because a good low-tide spot may be devoid of sharks on a high tide.

There are some situations, especially in Florida Bay and the Everglades "back country," where floating grass may be a considerable problem. In such situations, a weedless lure is advised. This can be done in two ways. Either you can use Keel hooks or one of the weedless hooks that have a flexible weedguard attached.

You can tie your own weedguards on stainless steel hooks during dressing or when fishing. Tie some #3 or 4 wire on the head of the fly and bend it down to form a weedguard that protects the hook point; cut off any excess. This allows you to build any pattern on a non-rusting hook.

When fishing for sharks in extremely shallow water—and I think this applies to all spooky types of fish—loud

talking can be detrimental. The less water a big fish gets into (almost any large saltwater fish), the more likely it will be to spook from a foot scraped on a boat deck or other similar noise. Use a silent approach on big sharks in shallow water.

Ideally, the boat should be within 40 feet of the fish when you cast and at an angle to the shark so that the fish approaches you slightly from one side. This allows you to toss the fly accurately next to the fish and, by retrieving, keep it there. Should you over-cast the fish, don't rip the line from the water and startle the shark, but instead bring it into the air with a gentle lift. With most sharks, you'll need at least three to five casts to get that perfect one.

Sometimes you see a shark and assume you can just pole the boat over and make a cast. Only after you have tried to catch a swimming shark by poling a boat after it do you realize that the apparently slow-moving fish is actually swimming at a rapid speed, and trailing one can usually be a futile exercise.

There are several methods of getting a shark to come to you, however. One is by shaking the rod tip violently back and forth in the water. It doesn't work all the time,

Since almost all casts to sharks are less than 40 feet, you really don't have to worry about throwing a bulky fly a long distance. I've caught many sharks with a cast of less than 15 feet.

But, if you see a shark which obviously is not going to come within casting range, try dipping about half your fly rod under water and waving it back and forth rapidly. It works enough times to warrant trying it.

It also pays to know just where you are fishing, at least the general layout to avoid trouble after the shark is hooked. An example would be the feat which Norman Jansik, a Miami light-tackle artist, performed several years ago to cop the Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament's coveted Shark Trophy.

Jansik knew of a mammoth shark which prowled a certain small basin off Sandy Key in Florida Bay. He also knew he was in for a hell of a fight if he hooked the fish on 12-pound-test monofilament with a short wire shock-tippet between him, the fly and the trophy. So, he took a water bucket with a transparent bottom which allowed him to examine the entire underwater area planned to battle the big fish in. He charted every hazard.

He went back the next weekend and promptly hooked the beast and, after an hour-long battle, he landed the fish. Whenever the shark attempted to get near one of the obstacles, his boatman would maneuver them so they frightened the shark away from it. That, more than anything else, probably resulted in his catching a shark of better than 130 pounds and earned him the trophy.

I'm not suggesting that you go that far to reconnoiter your battle ground, but it would be wise to look around when you approach a flat, noting where you will have to avoid letting your shark go during the fight.

Once the shark has been hooked, it is vital to know in which side of the mouth the hook is impaled. If the fish has the hook driven in on the right side, then you want to be playing the fish from that side. A shark's skin is like sandpaper and was sold at one time for finish work on fine furniture. If you fight the fish from the opposite side and the line is drawn across the body constantly, it will usually be sawn through. This may seem like a fine point but with a big fish it's vital.

When a shark is to be landed, let the guide do it. Remember a very important point. A shark has no bone structure; it is all cartilage and can curl back on itself. You will frequently see a novice shark angler holding up small sharks by the tail. *Don't do it!* That shark can roll up like a yo-yo and take a hunk out of you. Also, a shark should never be regarded as dead until it is *positively* dead. That assumption should never take place in your boat. Never put one in your boat. An hour later it may rule against your decision, come to life and create all kinds of hell. It's happened plenty of times. There's no need to be frightened; a little care will prevent any problems. I know many people who wade and catch sharks on the flats, although I can't generally recommend this to anglers not thoroughly familiar with the habits of sharks.

The next time you go to fish the flats in Florida, the Bahamas, or Central America, plan on fly-fishing for sharks. It just may turn out to be the most exciting part of your trip. —

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