

Fly Fisherman

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*It can be inexpensive, exciting and sometimes easy fishing.
That's how Contributing Editor Mark Sosin describes . . .*

Saltwater for Starters—I

MARK SOSIN
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

*Big tarpon like this one are one of the most publicized targets
for saltwater fly rodders, but are by no means the only ones.
Photos by the author.*



IT IS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME. Diminishing habitat and the increasing fishing pressure on our streams, ponds and lakes will encourage more and more fly fishermen to explore the potential of our oceans, bays, sounds and tidal rivers. Learning to fish a fly in saltwater not only adds a new and challenging dimension to the sport, but it makes one a better and more competent all-around fly fisherman in the process. The reason is simple. Light-wand enthusiasts on the marine scene have developed their own set of techniques; they don't have to trip over the tradition that sometimes limits the thinking and performance of their brethren who focus their attention solely on trout and salmon. When you blend the best of both worlds, the total effect is much more rewarding.

There are differences. When you work over a fish in a stream, you often have ample time to change flies, figure out the best approach, and contemplate the situation. Even a shoreline largemouth has laid claim to a stationary feeding station near a log or under the lip of a lily pad. Saltwater critters are usually on the move. If you happen to see the fish, you often only have seconds to get a fly in front of it. If you are blind casting, you must learn to read a different type of water and look for another set of signals.

Then there are tides. Predators have a rhythm for feeding and, in saltwater, part of this rhythm is often tied directly to the stage of the tide. Fish may concentrate in an area on a certain phase of the tidal pattern and then disappear until the conditions have run full cycle and the same tidal stage returns. Since most tide-water is not confined by narrow banks, the fish can be anywhere—not restricted to a few deep pools or the tail end of a run.

Wind can be another problem. Trees along the banks of a stream or next to the shoreline of a pond reduce the

MARK SOSIN is one of the world's most highly regarded saltwater fly rodders, and has devoted considerable time to teaching others the art.

effect of strong winds. Aboard a skiff in open water, there is no escape. That doesn't mean that the wind blows constantly, but it is a factor that must be countered when it does occur.

Casting in saltwater demands a bit more distance than it does in many freshwater situations. The steelheader has an advantage because he already knows how to glean maximum distance, but the trout angler who survives with 30-foot casts on tree-canopied Eastern streams must learn to reach out. Since the fish are on the move, false casting is a handicap. There simply isn't time to admire the tight loops and match the distance precisely before gently dropping a fly on the skin of the water. Nobody keeps score of your casts in saltwater. The idea is to get the fly to the fish; how you achieve this is up to you.

It is easy to become addicted to saltwater fly-fishing. Once an angler feels the surge of a powerful marine denizen on the end of the line, or works to get a fly in front of a cruising fish, he recognizes the potential of the sport and the skill involved. Although most articles involve fly-fishing for tropical glamour species such as bonefish, tarpon, permit, and, on the offshore grounds, sailfish, there is much more to saltwater fly-fishing.

The way to begin is to pick a time and place where you can be almost instantly successful. It is much easier to toss a streamer, for example, into a wolfpack of prowling bluefish than it is to drop a fly next to a tailing bonefish. In Chesapeake Bay and other East Coast es-

tuaries, one can often find small striped bass that can be taken on trout tackle. Mackerel are frequently overlooked as a fly-rod fish and whiting and pollack in colder waters will also take a fly.

Moving across the nation to San Francisco Bay, the basic steelhead outfit with a lead-core or a fast-sinking shooting head can be used to fool huskier stripers.

Down South, why not start with ladyfish, jack crevalle, mackerel, and even bluefish. Weakfish and their related species, the sea trout, both take flies readily.

Rods for Saltwater

A DECADE AGO, MOST WRITERS who had never tried saltwater fly-fishing automatically recommended a 9-foot fly rod with a 9- or 10-weight line (in those days it was GAF or GAAF) and a reel with at least 200 yards of backing. They emphatically stated that unlike freshwater fishing where several outfits were required, the saltwater devotee could get by with a single rod and reel. Time has proven these people wrong. Today's serious saltwater angler will have an array of rods, starting with a model suitable for trout and moving through the middle ranges to a fish-fighting tool that can cast a 13-weight fly line (and probably a 15-weight, if they were readily available).

If you decide to start with smaller species and select relatively calm days, you can certainly begin with the same freshwater fly rods you now own. Trout and light



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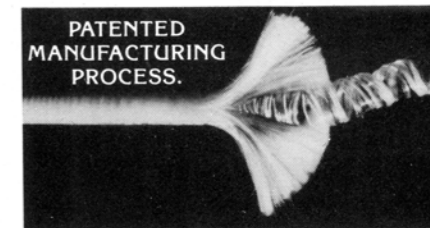
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A pair of West Coast anglers with a catch of bonito, one of numerous Pacific species available to fly rodders. Photo by Steve Van Der Woert.

Saltwater . . .

bass tackle are frequently the ideal tools for many of the lesser species. A one-pound mackerel will put a trout of the same weight to shame when it comes to a tug of war.

If you want to choose a fly rod for any type of fishing, start by analyzing the sizes of the flies you will be casting. In saltwater, you can forget dry flies, wet flies and nymphs. You'll be casting bucktails and streamers, plus an occasional popper in a handful of situations. Because they are often heavily dressed, marine flies are bulky and wind-resistant, requiring more power to get them to the target.

Once you have decided on relative fly sizes, you must next figure out the line size that will carry these flies to the target. Then, it's a relatively simple matter to match the rod with the line size you need. There is an exception. Some of the saltwater denizens grow to tremendous proportions, and the fighting characteristics of a rod become the primary consideration. Most fly rods in use for fish over 50 pounds, for example, will probably handle a 12-weight line or even a 13-weight. Therefore, there is seldom a problem with a rod of that power casting any fly you want to throw.

Buy the best fly rod you can afford. In spite of what some cane manufacturers insist, you will find that glass or graphite rods hold up better in a corrosive atmosphere and require much less care. Check the guides and fittings on a rod to make sure they won't rust or pit. An extension butt is handy to have when playing a fair-size fish, but many anglers make the mistake of using one that is more than two inches in length. They also subscribe to the removable feature. Veteran saltwater fishermen use a 2-inch extension that is either permanently fitted in the rod or, in the case of removable butts, they just leave it in. That way, it's there when it's needed and the shorter butt does not snag the line on a cast.

If you do decide to buy a rod for big fish, be sure to check its reserve power. With about six inches of line extending past the tiptop, the rod you select should be able to lift at least a 5-pound weight off the floor and still have something left in the butt for even more

power. Without a fish-fighting tool of this dimension, you would be handicapped in trying to boat a big fish using a 12-pound-test tippet.

Just the opposite is true when an angler fishes 6-pound-test tippets. In that situation, it takes a lighter and more flexible rod to cushion the strain on the lighter tippet. Even for big fish, one must use a rod tailored for an 8- or 9-weight line with 6-pound-test leader tippets. Heavier rods will cause the leader to part early in the battle.

Reels

SALTWATER FISH RUN LONGER DISTANCES than their freshwater counterparts, making line capacity on a reel more significant. It becomes a matter of judgment. If a fish can trail 200 yards of backing before stopping, then you had better plan on spooling more than that on the reel you select. Most species won't run that far and you can get by with smaller reels and less capacity.

There is another consideration, however. You will be playing most fish directly from the reel and almost all the reels in use are single-action (one revolution of the handle produces one revolution of the spool). A large amount of backing effectively increases the reel-spool diameter, and more line can be recovered for every revolution of the handle. That can be an advantage in playing a fish.

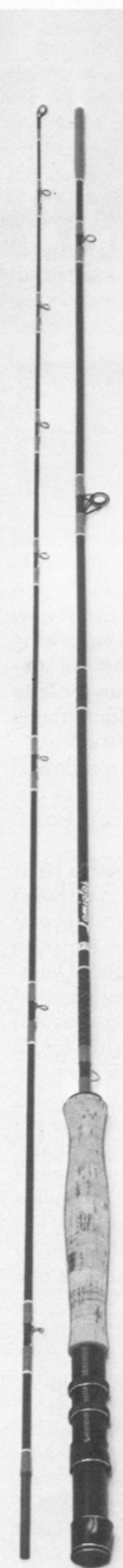
Some saltwater fly reels are extremely sophisticated pieces of machinery, hand-crafted out of bar-stock aluminum and built with a drag system that is superb. Other reels don't offer as much, but they are less expensive. It becomes a matter of judgment and need. No one can argue that there is pride of ownership in the best. On the other hand, not every saltwater fly rodder needs a reel that costs between \$150 and \$300. There have been countless fish caught on more moderately priced reels. You will also discover that there is an intermediate reel or two that is underrated, has an excellent drag, and really does the job for the money. Interestingly, there have been at least three new entries in the market for top-quality saltwater fly reels within the past year.

If you intend to do a lot of fishing for big fish, one of the super reels may be a worthwhile investment. However, don't fall into the line capacity trap. It may be nice to have hundreds and hundreds of yards of backing on a reel and it does make cranking easier, but a lot of fish have also been taken on reels that only hold 200 to 300 yards of backing.

Dacron is the preferred backing on a fly reel, because it doesn't stretch very much and will not spread a reel spool. Although a lot of fishermen use 18-pound-test backing (20-pound class), some of the veterans still prefer 27-pound-test (30-pound class) when they are chasing fish over 50 pounds. The margin is just too close between a tippet of 12- or 15-pound-test and backing of 18-pound-test. For small fish and corresponding fly reels, it's possible to use 12-pound-test Dacron backing.

In our May Early-Season issue, Mark Sosin will be covering lines, leaders, flies, casting, and how to fight fish in the salt.

THE EDITORS. 



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F704	7'	4-5	2 1/4
F763	7 1/2'	3-4	2 1/2
F764	7 1/2'	4-5	2 3/4
F765	7 1/2'	5-6	2 7/8
F804	8'	4-5	3 1/4
F805	8'	5-6	3 1/2
F806	8'	6-7	3 5/8
F865	8 1/2'	5-6	3 3/4
F866	8 1/2'	6-7	3 7/8
F867	8 1/2'	7-8	4 1/8
F906	9'	6-7	4 1/8
F907	9'	7-8	4 1/4
F908	9'	8-9	4 5/8
F968	9 1/2'	8-9	5
F1008	10'	8-9	5 3/4
F1068	10 1/2'	8-9	6 9/16
F911T	9'	11-12	6 7/8
F912T	9'	12-13	7 1/4

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