

SOUTHERN ANGLING

WHERE TO GO AND WHAT TO CATCH

By William C. Harris

"The American Angler."

TO those who are looking for pastures new and with whom the expenditure of time and money is not a factor in an outing, I would suggest a trip to Tampico, Mexico, when in February, in fact, all the winter through, fishing for tarpon and other large fish is unusually fine, particularly at the mouth of the river opposite the city. Enormous sawfish are there, some of them fifteen feet long, and the fishing for jackfish (a close brother to the "yellow-tail" of the Pacific coast) is phenomenal, the fish varying up to four feet; the smaller fry, such as red drum of ten pounds, black spotted sea trout of five pounds, and the voballo or the crevalé of similar weight, are as plentiful as minnows in a rivulet's runway. Fair accommodation, we hear, can be had at La Barra, which is the watering place for Tampico and vicinity.

Coming north and to the eastward, the angling tourist should halt for a few days at the quaint old town of Corpus Christi, where the "Silver Kings" are found in adjacent waters of large size and in numbers; in fact, the largest tarpon on record (213 pounds) was taken on hook and line in that vicinity.

Passing still farther to the eastward, the angler will reach, in an hour or so from Corpus Christi, the well-known tarpon waters of Aransas Pass. All that has been written of this grand tarpon field has been verified by a personal visit of the writer extending over months, during which it was not unusual to see nearly every day six to ten tarpon leaping, at one time, into the air, either in disport or in the struggles of capture. In the Pass, the tide ebbs and flows at wild speed, and the boats of the fishermen are anchored on or near the edges of the relatively shallow bars. The line is cast fifty to one hundred feet out upon the rapid waters, where the lure is taken by the tarpon on the surface or slightly below it, with a dash, the leap following instantly upon the fish feeling the tension of the line. These aerial flights are repeated five or six times, each consecutive leap exhausting more and more the strength of the fish. The continued leaping of a hooked tarpon I judge to be the pure effect of fright and not solely efforts to throw the hook from its jaws, which would seem to indicate that our "savanilla" is better equipped with a nervous system than many other game fishes. My belief is based upon the fact that when

fishing for minor fish with light tackle, tarpon have repeatedly taken my lure, and at the first surge made by the fish the light leader was broken and the tarpon free from restraint. Despite this fact the Silver King leaped four or five times consecutively with a part of the severed gear hanging from his mouth. Under this frantic excitement of fear they invariably headed toward the Gulf and were seen no more in the estuaries; at least no record exists of their ever being caught with fragile and broken gear in their jaws.

Leaving Aransas Pass, of which Tarpon is the postoffice, the angling tourist will continue his eastern progress, halting at New Orleans for the excellent fishing for "green trout" (large-mouthed black bass) and the salt-water species that are taken in adjacent localities, particularly at Chef Menteur, twenty miles out, where sea trout, channel bass and sheepshead abound. Those who are fond of luring black bass (large-mouthed), white perch and strawberry or calico bass (usually called "bream" in the southern states) would do well to stop off at Eutaw, Ala., on their tour eastward to Florida waters, or at Biloxi, Miss., where there is grand fishing for all species (large and small) of the Gulf habitat.

Passing to the southeast, if the rodsman is fond of deep-water fishing for red snappers, he would do well to halt at Pensacola, twelve miles from which city the celebrated snapper banks are located; these furnish the bulk of supply for our Eastern markets. Around Pensacola, bayous abound in which nearly all the Gulf species can be taken.

Around Cedar Keys, particularly at Isola Bella (Beautiful Island), good fishing can be had; and further on to the southeastward, the Homosassa River, as far up as its sources, the great springs—in which tarpon may be seen disporting sixty feet below the surface, so crystal clear are the waters—furnishes excellent fishing, particularly to the light rod and the feathers. At the town of Homosassa and from the pier of the hotel, as many as thirteen different species of salt-water fishes have been taken with artificial flies by one rod in a morning's outing. The fishing localities of the west coast from Tampa to Key West and those of the east coast of Florida from Jacksonville to the same point are briefly referred to on another page.

THE ambition of every angling tourist is so centered upon catching a tarpon, that many of them when visiting southern waters, neglect the sport furnished by smaller fishes on comparatively light tackle. We know no grander or more fruitful pastime with the rod than surf fishing for channel bass, mostly called "red drum" in the South. The fish abound on the west coast of Florida, in fact, all along the north shore of the Gulf, on the west south to Tampico, and doubtless, are found in equal numbers in all Mexican waters, and those of the Isthmus. The customary method of fishing for them is to wade waist deep and cast from the reel, so that the lead falls just beyond the curl of the outer breaker. The breaking foam of the surf-rollers will often envelope your body, saturate your clothing (generally a bathing suit), and many times at the same instant, a drum of twenty pounds or more will seize your mullet bait. If this happens, the result is simply the "survival of the fittest." You find yourself fighting the fish and fighting the breakers at one and the same time, and the combat resolves itself into one of brawn, the sturdy fins frequently gaining the victory. In this contest the strongest man can only hold his own for an hour or two, which period, however, brings an ample harvest, if only two or three of the bass are killed, as their flesh is delicious and their fighting qualities almost incomparable.

With a six-ounce tournament-built split-bamboo rod, a No. 9 cuttyhunk line, 1-0 hook, gimp-snooded, and mullet bait, the lady or bony-fish, a big-eyed herring, is certainly the peer of any fish of its size in waters wherever located. This fish is a near relative to the tarpon, and from that fact its game qualities may be considered hereditary. It is found along the northern shores of the Gulf and on the east coast of Florida, and here and there a straggler comes as far north as Buzzards Bay, Mass. The lady-fish, when it feels the restraint of the line, is out of the water on the instant, and repeats so quickly and continuously that a brother angler described its actions vividly when he caught his first specimen and said to me, "That fish is dancing on his tail." This peculiar action is shown no matter on what tackle it is caught. When trolling with a large spoon or restrained on a delicate fly rod, it gyrates all the time. There is another known as the "bone-fish," which is seldom taken in waters other than those of Biscayne Bay, Fla. It is said to surpass the lady-fish in acrobatic prowess.

ONE of the most pleasurable outings in Florida waters is had on a fleet sailing yacht, trolling for Spanish mackerel. These fish frequently enter shallow waters, feeding upon small fry, particularly in the pockets made by a rising tide along the beaches of the Gulf. When they are found under such conditions they afford invigorating work, with delightful sensations, if captured on an eight-ounce rod, and a large bright fly, reinforced and snooded with ductile wire. But is it infrequently that they are found along the beaches or in the mouths of the passes, so that trolling for them is the only certain method of making a good score. From the stern of a free-going yacht, a dark mottled pearl squid at the end of a hundred feet of line, is the most attractive lure. I write "dark mottled squid" advisedly, as a recent experience convinced me that it was more effective than the usual silver colored pearl lure, and decidedly more so than the ordinary lead squid used for blue-fish or large weak-fish.

The sheepshead may be said to be ubiquitous in the shore waters from New Orleans to Key West, and from thence north to the St. Johns River. They seldom weigh over six pounds, while those caught in the North are not often so light in weight. In Florida they are seldom eaten, but often used as baits for sharp and saw-fish, and as a rule, are looked upon as pests by rod fishermen when angling for what they deem to be choicer fish. The sheepshead is a vigorous biter and is excessively fond of the fiddler crab, which is the universally used lure. These little crustaceans swarm along the shores of the creeks or bayous in the South. I have seen them so numerous that every footstep unavoidably crushed dozens of them.

The spotted sea trout or southern weak-fish, a close brother of our northern weak-fish, squit or squeteague, is found almost everywhere in the shallow waters of the Gulf and comes in great shoals into the mouths of passes or inlets, where they voraciously take the mullet or live minnow baits, as well as a gaudy artificial fly. They also run into the shallow beach pockets at high water with their dorsal fins above the surface in their eagerness for food—minnows that seek the shallows for protection from their eager enemies.

There are no greater fighters than the snappers of which there are several species in southern waters, the greatest of which is the mangrove or red-spotted and the gray snapper with lightish spots. Both of these fish

call for great skill in boating as they are apt, when hooked, to seek the protection of the mangrove roots so thickly found along the shores where these fish are most numerous. A sturdy rod and strong water gear is necessary to dislodge them from their retreats.

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS.

FROM time to time queries come to me from young anglers, as well as from those of experience and honored years, all of whom seem to infer that a disciple of the art, whose angling life is now being "rounded up," should be able to respond to any queries, and they sometimes take the form of conundrums, as to the habits, habitat, traits and idiosyncrasies of every creature that flirts a fin. Only the other day a letter was received from an observant and ardent angler, in which was the query:

"Can fish talk to each other?"

Watch a stickleback, a warrior mate, for he is a knightly one with his bony cuirass and spears of acute spines, when he takes his position as guardian outside of the elaborately constructed nest. Every now and then, he will be seen to approach the nuptial couch, and his little head, will bob up and down as if in conversation with his mate—the "yes" or "no" or the "how are you this morning, dear?" in fish talk fashion—and then this doughty gasteroid will give that propeller-like tail of his a hundred revolutions to the minute and dart around and away to combat with spawn-eating foes, real or imaginary.

Note a vast school of herring or menhaden, sometimes a mile or more in extent, swimming placidly and in perfect form of discipline on or near the top of the water, when like a flash, presto! they are gone, and nothing is seen but a frothy churn, little white caps, here and there, on the surface of the sea. From the leader, hundreds of rods distant from the rear guard, some mysterious note of alarm, how communicated we know not, has been flashed among the host and heeded instantaneously. No simultaneous impulse of self-preservation or intuition of danger could have permeated so vast an army, on the instant—orders came like a flash of wireless telegraphy, and the ruffled water became as dead and barren as a burned prairie.

But be these things as they may, the element that fish live in prohibits an intelligent acquaintance with their habits; the physiological laws that govern them cannot be determined, and conclusion based on analogy is at best conjectural. As to the development of their emotional nature we are at a loss to appreciate its

extent and quality; but if we are ignorant as to the workings of their "inner life," as anglers we credit them with all the better and worse sentiments and qualities of human nature: they love, they hate, they fight and fraternize; they appear to reason *a priori*, are cunning and even thrifty; they can climb a tree and burrow into the earth; make land voyages and have ocean ranges of thousands of miles, and again we find them as house-dwellers and workers with stone and wood.

BUT all correspondents are not disposed to delve into the mysteries of fish life. One, intent on practical things, queries as to the best places to visit and best lures to be used in his contemplated visit to Florida in February, wanting particularly to know about fly-fishing opportunities and the best waters to indulge in it. To this correspondent we suggest, as the nearest point to Jacksonville, a visit to the Hillsborough River near New Smyrna for the usual run of semi-tropical fish, including the large channel bass, locally called "red drum." A week or two there, and then down the east coast to the Indian River, making headquarters at St. Lucie. After which he should go to Key West, take steamer to Tampa, fish around that city and then take a bay steamboat to Manatee, thence to Sarasota, where he will find excellent fishing in the bay of that name, and good fly fishing in adjacent creeks—Phillippi's and Billy Bowleg's—on the incoming tide. Thence to Punta Gorda and to Punta Rossa, thence to Marco, at all of which places he will find big fish, tarpon included, particularly at the last named locality, and in the neighboring creeks opportunities for fly fishing. He should be careful to use large salmon flies tied on ductile wire snoods and leaders.

Another correspondent contemplating an early outing after sea trout, wants to know where to go for them. If time and expense is no object he should visit Newfoundland, making St. Johns his headquarters, where he will meet on every hand genial sportsmen who will cheerfully furnish all detailed information required. Several of the Nova Scotian streams furnish excellent fishing for sea trout, and these fish swarm in waters adjacent to Tadoussac at the mouth of the Saguenay River, particularly in the months of July and August. Nearly all the streams flowing into Chaleurs Bay give good fishing for sea trout, and our correspondent would do well to make Chatham, N. B., a delightful Canadian town, his headquarters. Want of space alone prevents replies to several other correspondents, those who have not yet received answers by mail.