

"Brackish is beautiful!" for North Carolina anglers, where a mild dose of salt keeps the largemouth hitting day and night.

Bass in the Brine?

JIM DEAN

AT DAWN, THERE WAS ALREADY a sharp ripple on the brackish water. Guide Bud Lupton didn't have to tell me what that meant. In another hour or two, we might be able to lean on the wind, and Currituck Sound would be 40 miles of whitecaps—too rough for any kind of fishing. This shallow and weedy sound, sometimes called the world's biggest bass pond, is located in northeastern North Carolina, separated from the Atlantic Ocean by only a thin strand of sandy barrier beach known as the Outer Banks.

The angler who seeks largemouth bass with a fly rod often approaches Currituck with the same sense of keen anticipation and tradition as the trout fisherman making a pilgrimage to Henry's Fork of the Snake. I know because I've done both and can attest that, for a fly-rod fanatic, one obsession can be as joyous as the other.

"Don't look so worried," said Lupton, as he cut the outboard on the 16-foot gray juniper skiff and jabbed the long ash pole into the water. Like most Currituck guides, he's poled a lot of fly fishermen and he knew what was bothering me. "If this blow will hold off a little while, it'll be good with the water high like it is. Let me get this thing turned around so's the wind is over your left shoulder and we'll drift this shore."

I picked up the nine-foot fly rod, stripped some line, and made a couple of false casts to check the range. "That's about right," I said.

"Good. Now put that fuzzy-looking thing right up on the edge of the marsh grass and drag it back into the water," Lupton said, leaning on the pole to hold the boat. "The bass will be along that undercut bank."

My first cast fell short by three or four feet. Bud shook his head and waved his arm towards the marsh. "On the grass."

The line uncoiled and the big bushy Marsh Hare landed on a tuft of grass. "Now crawl it into the water,"

Lupton said, "just kind of crawl it." I gave it a little twitch and the fly landed in the water a few inches from the bank. I let it sink a moment, then began to retrieve using short, erratic tugs.

"I'll move us along slow" said Lupton. "You keep hitting that marsh grass every two or three feet."

Again, I placed the fly in the edge of the marsh grass, then pulled gently so that again it dropped lightly—or crawled—into the water and began to sink. There was a broad flash under the fly. I felt a solid take and set the hook. Instantly, there was a massive swirl next to the bank and then came that almost sensual feeling of not quite being in control. The line slipped between my fingers and sliced the water in a long curl as the fish ran parallel to the bank.

"Hit him again just to be sure," shouted Lupton.

I struck twice more; the fish cleared the water in that ponderous, slow-motion way so characteristic of adult bass. For a moment, the bass was suspended in a shower of droplets, the fly a flash of yellow in the corner of his mouth.

"He might be legal," said Lupton. I caught a glimpse of his grin out of the corner of my eye. "Try to keep him out of that weed bed."

Too late. My bass was already in the milfoil, but he was tired. Lupton poled the boat to the spot, and I netted the fish along with a bushel of salad. He was, as Lupton said, a better-than-average fish, but at four-and-a-half pounds, he was hardly outstanding for Currituck and I released him.

There are bigger bass here. Six pounders are not uncommon, and the late Joe Brooks—well-known author of so many fine articles and books on fresh- and salt-water fly-fishing—holds the unofficial Currituck Sound record with an 11-pounder. It was caught on a fly rod.

Lupton and I fished the marshy banks for awhile, then switched to a nearby weed bed. Eurasian milfoil, an exotic water weed, was accidentally introduced into Currituck some years back, and beds of it now cover large parts of the sound. Though the weed has caused



Dawn on the docks at Currituck Sound finds anglers and guides loading boats for a day's pursuit of largemouth bass. Photos by the author.

problems, especially for navigation, it also hides an incredible number of bass.

The wind continued to rise until it was gusting 20 knots or more by mid-morning, but we were able to continue fishing by picking sheltered shorelines and weed beds that could be fished with a rear-quartering wind. When we finally quit shortly before noon, I had caught and released more than a dozen bass, most weighing between two and three pounds.

That's a good catch anywhere, and the fly fisherman may consider it extraordinary, but when conditions are favorable at Currituck, the fly caster can tangle with 20 or more bass a day. Just as important, the fly rod is not a sentimental choice here. Let's face it, when largemouth bass are the quarry, you and I may sometimes choose a fly rod for reasons that have little to do with catching fish. But in this case, I picked the nine-footer because I knew from past experience at Currituck that it would be highly effective.

ANGLERS TEND TO THINK OF CURRITUCK as being unique, but actually there are a number of similar bass waters up and down the Eastern seaboard where the bass-minded fly fisherman can find classic angling rich in its own traditions.

These waters, like Currituck, are brackish (slightly salty) and affected by either moon or wind tides or both. Colington Harbor, on the eastern end of Alber-

marle Sound, lies to the south of Currituck, while Back Bay (actually a wing of Currituck) lies to the north in Virginia. Farther north, many embayments and river mouths off Chesapeake Bay offer similar conditions. When I was in the service in Baltimore a few years back, I fished Northeast River at the head of the bay as well as other shallow and weedy brackish-water bass spots—some practically within sight of the city. In my opinion, the Chesapeake embayments are not as productive as Currituck or Back Bay, but unless there have been major changes in recent years, there are still plenty of tidal bass spots being overlooked.

Brackish-water largemouth bass fishing also exists in other estuarine areas from New Jersey to Florida and, if you live along the coast, it would be well worth your time to see what might be available locally. For example, while Currituck is the best known of North Carolina's brackish-water bass fisheries, there are other areas that offer similar fishing. I've had fair to good luck in Eastern and South lakes off Albermarle Sound, in parts of the Alligator River system, and in embayments and river mouths off Pamlico Sound. Such potential also exists in coastal South Carolina, Georgia and Florida.

What these places usually have in common—besides brackish water and tides—are banks lined with marsh grass, weed beds, relatively shallow water, rafts of lily pads and stumps (especially in river mouths), and large-

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The author plays a Currituck largemouth that took a Marsh Hare worked off the grassy banks.

A selection of the author's favorite ties for the Marsh Hare, developed by Tom Loving during the 1930's.



mouth bass that have been largely by-passed by the rapidly increasing hordes of modern bass anglers.

Fly-fishing in these areas can be highly effective at times if you use the right tackle and techniques. Don't be tempted to use light tackle. Most estuarine bass water is big and fairly open, and long, powerful rods are needed. My favorite outfit is a nine-foot rod which takes a #9 weight-forward line. On really windy days, I use a 10-weight outfit. Rarely have I found it practical to use lighter than an 8-weight line. Both of my bass sticks are glass, but if you're fortunate enough to own a powerful graphite rod, this is the place for it.

I use single-action reels backed with 20-pound-test dacron, but quite frankly, you aren't likely to need the backing. Only one bass has ever taken me into the backing on a reel, and that fish was a seven-pounder that inhaled a #12 Black Ant on a light rod and 4x tippet in a farm pond. Dense weeds and heavier flies call for stouter tippets in brackish water. A 6-8-foot leader

tapered from 30-pound-test at the butt to a 10-pound-test tippet is a good choice.

Few thrills can match the surface strike of a sizeable largemouth, and you'll certainly want to carry an assortment of cork-bodied or balsa popping bugs and deerhair bugs. Though I use small bugs occasionally, it's been my experience that the larger bugs—sizes 2-3/0—work best, especially on big bodies of water like Currituck. Bass also usually prefer a noisy popper, but sometimes a bullet-nosed cork slider or a quietly worked deerhair bug or frog will work better when the water is calm. One of my favorites is the Tapply Deerhair Bug which has a flat face and emits a soft pop or gurgle when worked.

Despite my affection for surface bugs, it's the sub-surface fly that often scores best. I carry traditional streamers, various types of muddlers (especially marabou) and semi-weedless Keel flies. Still, in my opinion, the finest subsurface bass fly for these shallow, weedy waters goes by the unlikely name of "Marsh Hare." That's the one Lupton called a "fuzzy-looking thing." Certain patterns closely resemble a baby muskrat, which I think explains the curious name.

THE MARSH HARE has a rather interesting history. It was developed in the early 1930's by the late Tom Loving—originally of Chester, Virginia, and later Baltimore—for use on bass in weedy farm ponds and estuarine areas, particularly Chesapeake Bay. Loving, who also tied ladies' brooches using feathers, designed many flies (including early patterns for shad). He introduced Joe Brooks to the Marsh Hare and the kind of bass fishing it could produce. Indeed, Loving was a major influence on Brooks, and no doubt helped Joe gather information for his now-rare book, *Bass Bug Fishing*, published in 1947. Brooks brought the Marsh Hare regional fame and first introduced it to Currituck Sound.

The Marsh Hare is a heavily palmered and unweighted pattern which is sometimes tied with alternating bands of color on the body. Tufts of calftail are tied in at the shoulders, and the tail is usually a matched and flared pair of saddle hackles. Loving's original patterns were tied with wire weed guards on 2/0, 6xL hooks. I vary the sizes (often using smaller Marsh Hares), but I consider the weed guards essential for places like Currituck. Unweighted, the fly casts well, alights delicately, and is a slow sinker. When retrieved in short twitches, the palmered hackles breathe. It is absolutely deadly when allowed to sink beside an undercut marsh bank or along the thinning edge of a weed bed, but it can also be fished rapidly, skimming through the weeds near the surface.

A Marsh Hare, or similar weedless fly, is virtually the only practical choice for the denser mats of weeds (where even surface poppers and Keel-hooked flies hang up), and unlike some weedless flies, it has good hooking qualities. A light-wire guard and a sharp hook help. You can buy a good variety of standard poppers and streamers in most tackle shops, but you may have to mail-order such items as Keel-hooked Muddlers, deerhair bugs and cork sliders. Orvis has a good selection; Dan Bailey carries some deerhair bugs that are

good, and other mail-order firms may also have good bass bugs. Unfortunately, I know of no commercial source for the Marsh Hare, so you'll have to tie your own.

A word on color may be appropriate. Though bass are not as selective as trout, certain colors seem to work best. As a general rule, I like white, yellow, silver, and black for poppers and deerhair bugs (natural deerhair is also excellent). For the Marsh Hare, any number of color combinations have worked, but two have been especially effective. One has alternating bands of red and yellow with white calf shoulders, while the other is brown with black or white shoulders. I suspect the brown Marsh Hare may be mistaken for a baby muskrat since the animals are abundant in estuarine waters.

IT'S BEEN MY EXPERIENCE that the time of year you fish can be especially critical in brackish waters. Spring is far and away the best time in the mid-Atlantic states where I do most of my fishing. I usually begin in March, but late April and May are best. Midsummer can be erratic, though success usually increases with the return of cooler weather. Even so, fall is generally not as good as spring.

It is important to fish favorable tides. If, for example, the wind is out of the north for several days, it can blow a lot of water out of Currituck Sound. When the water is low, fishing is usually poor along the undercut banks. Weed and grass beds away from the banks may still produce, but not as consistently as they do when the water is high. Old hands like to see three or four days of southerly winds prior to a trip to Currituck. It's important to know which wind directions and moon tides create bank-full conditions where you plan to fish.

If you've been fortunate enough to time a spring trip when the water is up, you'll want to concentrate your efforts on the marshy banks and the weed beds. Accurate casts are often necessary to put the fly against the edge of the marsh. With weedless flies, you can try Lupton's trick of casting onto the marsh grass, then twitching the fly into the water. Small openings in the mats of weeds are also good spots.

I usually work the Marsh Hare slowly just beneath the surface using an erratic retrieve so that the hackle and flared tails will breathe. On the other hand, surface poppers almost always work best when they are retrieved with a rapid succession of noisy pops. This is especially true if there is a ripple on the water. By the way, these tactics also work well on weedy inland ponds and lakes.

A word of caution is in order. Estuarine areas are often shallow and relatively open and they can get rough quickly. A seaworthy boat is a necessity and a guide will be invaluable if you can find one. Currituck has lodges and guide services available, but this seems to be an exception on brackish bass waters. Guides at Currituck, by the way, usually provide the boat and they are accustomed to taking fly fishermen. You can get a list of guides and lodges at Currituck by writing Joel Arrington, Travel Development Section, 121 West Jones St., Raleigh, N.C. 27611. In other places, you may have to resort to trial and error to find the best spots.

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