

Saltwater Fly Fishing the LAST HORIZON

There are still big waters which have never felt the slap of a fly, great fish who have never sampled the succulent man-made menu traditionally reserved for the fresh-water elite, and many tens of thousands of fly-rodders who have never known the unique thrill of seeking their quarry in the salt . . . fly-fishing's last horizon.

Lefty Kreh

AS A FLY FISHERMAN, WOULDN'T IT BE NICE if you could find a place where you would never have to ask permission to fish the waters? Where there was no season, no bag or size limits?

And some of the fish might weigh as much as the angler, fight like hell, and run off all your line if you don't do everything correctly?

Such a fisherman's heaven would also not have any hatches you would have to worry about matching, and the scenery would be beautiful. Finally, and perhaps the greatest wish—you would have the waters pretty much to yourself; on some days seeing no one, yet still casting to and fighting strong, wary fish.

This sounds like paradise, yet it is with us now.

All of the above requirements can be met when you fly fish in salt water.

THIS IS FLY-FISHING'S NEW FRONTIER. Admittedly, as early as the 1850's British anglers marched to the sea with their

Kreh's guide steadies his launch against the tidal drift as fly-rodder Bob Stearns sinks his fly to a feeding bonefish off of the mangroves of Turneffe Island, British Honduras. All photos by Lefty Kreh.

salmon gear and caught bass and pollack with their gaudy flies.

Dr. Henshall, the great bass angler and writer of the past century, even spent some days along the west coast of Florida in the late 1880's fishing for baby tarpon and redfish (channel bass).

Fly fishing was well known among a small group of Miami fishermen in the very early 1930's. Elmer Radloff, Eddie Wood and several others were bothering a few species even then.

And, Homer Rhodes, Jr., one of the real pioneers, made

"Lefty" Kreh spawned in fresh water, but his excursions back there became fewer after he discovered saltwater fly fishing. Author of the new *Fly Casting with Lefty Kreh*, he is probably the most solid authority on saltwater fly fishing in the U.S. today.

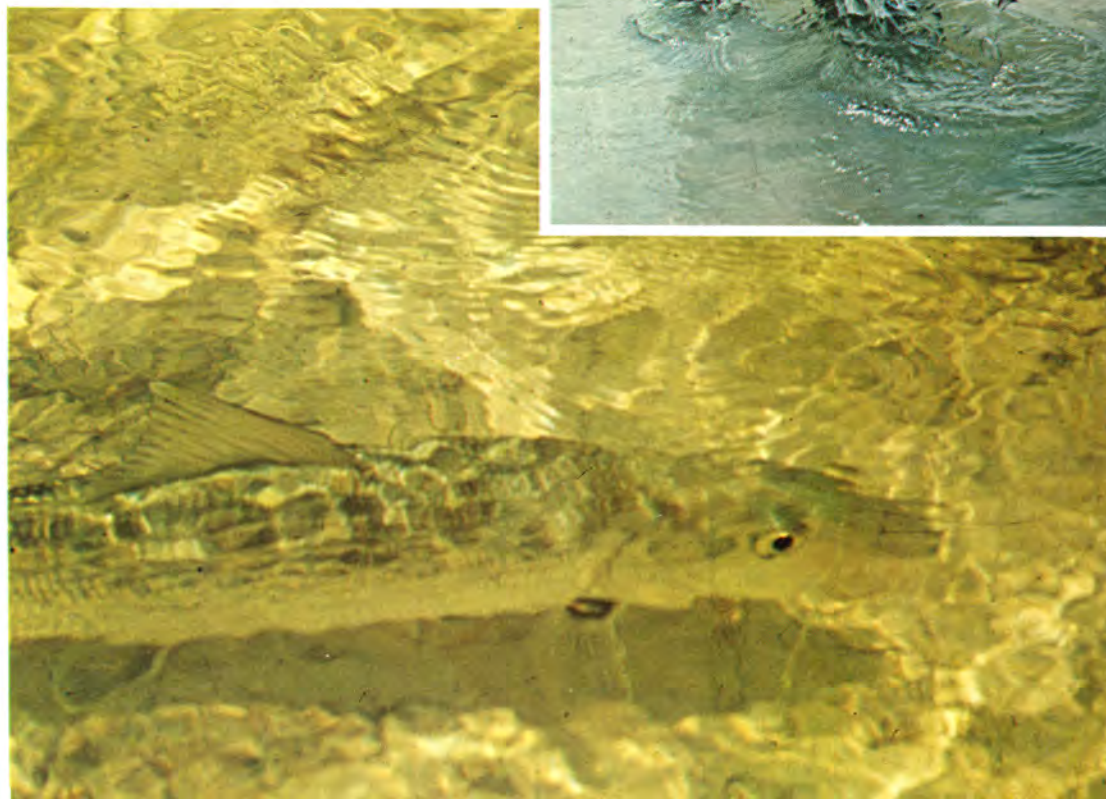




Clear water, white sand and a running tide to keep the bonefish moving across the flat in search for food—these are some of the factors which add up to one of fly-angling's greatest thrills.

Ten pounds of bone—the only time you'll get a good look at the "gray ghost of the flats."

Lefty must have set up this photograph of a bonefish with a tranquilizer dart. Seemingly translucent, the bone requires a trained eye to spot; usually you're casting to a shadow.



his living fishing for snook with a fly rod along the new road that cut across the massive Everglades, called the Tamiami Trail.

"I used to drive slowly at night," Homer said, "with my fly rod rigged and hanging out the side. The car lights would show where the frogs were migrating across the road in huge numbers. You could always tell by the large numbers squashed by car tires.

"I'd get out at such places and work my streamer flies against the other side of the canal. I often brought home a carload of snook—and people paid good money for snook".

But these pioneers were few, and no one paid them much attention.

BROOKS PUT SALT IN OUR DIET

JOE BROOKS WAS THE MAN who got the ball rolling. It was he who ignited the fire that is beginning to burn brighter.

Joe was manager of the year-round Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament, the largest fishing contest in the world. It encompasses all of southern Florida (including the Keys, the Ten Thousand Islands, the Everglades, and the lower mainland), the western Bahamas, and even the Dry Tortugas.

As manager of this prestigious tourney, Joe got to know all the top guides and fishermen. He heard rumors of bonefish being taken on a fly.

In June of 1946 Joe, with Allen Corson, the outdoor writer for the Miami Herald, went to Key Largo to deliberately take bonefish on a fly.

There is no question that several people had already caught one on a fly. But no proof has ever been substantiated that they did it deliberately. Joe did, and returned to write about it.

His timing was perfect—1946 was the year that millions of servicemen were home for the first fishing season in a long time. They thirsted for excitement and when they read the glowing stories about Joe's experience with the "grey ghost of the flats" they were hooked.

They poured into the Florida Keys by the thousands.

Most of them never caught a bonefish—certainly few of them did unless they went with a guide.

But they caught barracuda, snapper, grunt, tarpon, ladyfish, snook and a dozen other species. In turn they were hooked, too.

Saltwater fly fishing finally began to grow. Joe continued to inflame thousands and thousands of anglers, as he moved from Florida to Africa, Central America, South America, even Australia. His rod and his enthusiasm were unlimited.

By the late 1950's many guides in the Keys specialized in fly-rodging for bonefish and tarpon, and the anglers came in unending streams. Camps in Central America, South America and distant places began to spring up to accommodate the saltwater fly fisherman.

But, many went to the salt with the long rod, only to return either empty-handed or disappointed.

Why?

Primarily because they approached saltwater fly fishing in the same manner as they had their fresh-water fishing. Unfortunately, that is not the way it works. A tarpon doesn't worry about line drag, and a bonefish is going to eat anything it can swallow on the flats that looks good—no need to match the hatch.

Perhaps the most disgusted fishermen I've met who sampled saltwater fly fishing and didn't like it were those who were excellent trout fishermen. They had pretty well con-

quered their angling world, and most had assumed that they were now all-around expert fishermen. That wasn't the case, and some became disgusted, but those who accepted the challenge found that saltwater fly fishing was tremendously exciting.

There's no denying that deceiving a wary trout with 7X leader and a #24 fly is exhilarating. But the main chore in catching almost all trout, salmon, bass or other fresh water species is to get the fish to take the fly. Actually, the battle, in most cases, is not that much in doubt.

But fresh-water fishermen who tested the saltwater species soon discovered for themselves that a bonefish is spookier than any surface-feeding brown trout—and once you hooked the fish you could lose a fly line and your backing—and your sanity—if everything didn't go right.

When the man went home and told stories about fish that ran off enough line to stretch a city block in length he was scoffed at—but it's true.

WHAT TO USE WHERE

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED in getting into saltwater fly fishing, you must decide where you are going to fish. If you fish the striped bass of the San Francisco Bay area, you'll need a #10 rod and a shooting head line (fast-sinking or lead core) to match the rod.

If you fish the striped bass from North Carolina through New England, the same rod, or one in size nine, with a weight-forward line, plus a lead-core shooting head, will do nicely.

If you plan to fish in Florida or Central America, and you don't want to tangle with giant tarpon, or cobia, amberjack and other big reef species, you'll need two rods to be properly equipped. A #8 rod and line and a #10, matched to the line, will do nicely. In Florida you will need a floating line and a fast-sinking high-density line.

As in all fly fishing (with the exception of very large powerful ocean fishes and tarpon) the line size should be determined for the job before you make any other tackle selections.

For example, if you fish for bonefish, you should know that rarely do experienced bonefishermen use a fly dressed on a hook larger than #1. Most of the time they use #2 or #4 and many are even going to #6—which is my favorite size (unless the bonefish are in water deeper than three feet).

You don't need a heavy line to toss a #2 to #6 fly to a fish that is easily frightened. In fact, heavy lines dropping on the water's surface have flushed many bones.

For such work you want to go as light as a #6 line. At best, unless you expect a lot of wind (which makes bonefishing very difficult) you need only a #8 line.

But, if you want to toss large feather streamers to big striped bass, snook or cobia, you need a line heavy enough to transport the flies—maybe a #10 or even a #11.

You should determine where you want to fly fish, then get some local expert to tell you the size flies he is using, and the wind problems. From this information you can select your line, then your rod.

One of the most important points to be learned by fly fishermen is that they should not buy a saltwater-taper line unless it is completely justified.

Saltwater taper is a misleading name for an excellent fly line of special construction. It is a special purpose tool, and is to be used when you need to get into action quickly, while holding the fly in your hand.

When you sight-fish while drifting or poling the area and

looking for working fish, you must stand with the fly in your hand, ready to make a cast as soon as the quarry appears.

The saltwater taper is a line with the weight-forward section pushed up near the front of the line, so you can hold most of the weight outside the rod tip, ready to swing into action. Because most casts are short, and the line is tossed as soon as the fisherman sees the fish, the front taper is heavier than normal, so that it aids in turning the fly and leader over better on short casts.

However, all of these refinements for speed-casting operate against the fisherman on normal casts. If you are not sight fishing, and most saltwater fly fishing is not sight fishing, you don't want a saltwater-taper line, but a conventional weight-forward line.

The weight-forward line is constructed to give you the optimum requirements for good casting. It is infinitely easier to make long, correct casts with the conventional, rather than with special saltwater, weight-forward taper.

Reels come under important consideration, too, in salt water. If you fish for bluefish, striped bass, redfish, or other fish which really don't fight too hard, or run too far, a reel like the Pflueger Medalist is fine. The 1498 model, with 250 yards of 20 pound backing and a weight forward line of the correct size will let you fish for most salt water species, and certainly all of the inshore north of Florida.

If you plan to fish offshore for dolphin, billfishes, king mackerel, amberjack, cobia and other husky fighters that can melt line from your reel, you need a well-made fly reel, with a solid spool and a good drag.

The Sea Master, Fin-Nor, Valentine, Feurer/Taurus and Pflueger Supreme fly reels all meet the tests rather well, although they are expensive (\$60-150 range). Be wary of any reel with too many moving parts. They don't hold up in saltwater work.

LOCATING YOUR QUARRY

THERE ARE MANY WAYS to find fish in salt water. The very best technique, if you can afford it, is to go with a guide who is experienced in saltwater fly rodding. You can learn more in one day with him than you could in weeks of self-discovery.

Secondly, if you can find a local fly rodder who will take you, that's about as good as a guide.

Third, be certain you go fly fishing for your quarry at the right time of the year. The middle of the winter will see few bluefish or stripers in the bays of New England, and summer waters will be devoid of king mackerel in southern Florida.

Among the best indicators of fish activity are birds. Birds make a living off eating small baitfish. They know that predatory fishes (the kind you seek with a fly rod) will push the hapless bait to the surface, where the birds can pluck their food from the water. Look for circling, diving birds—then get there fast, before the fish "sound," or dive for the deeps.

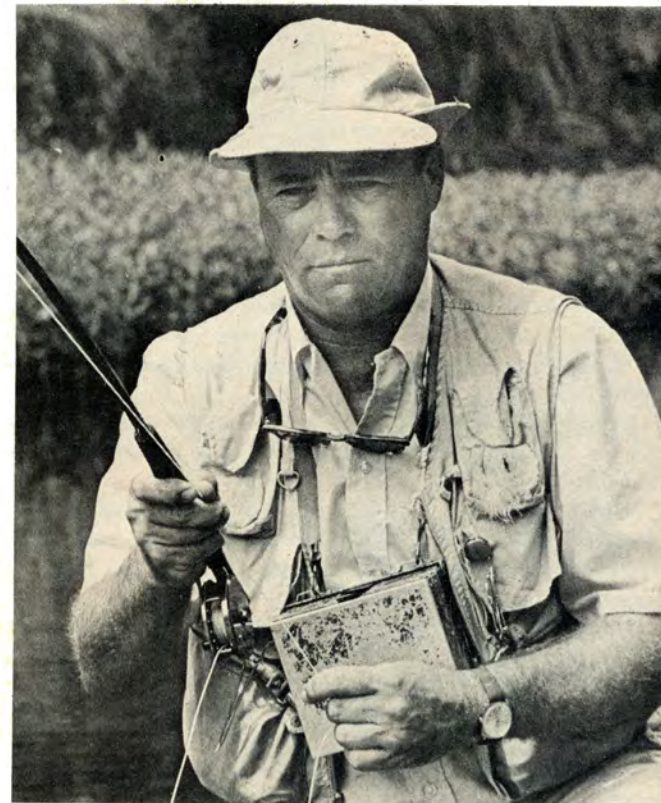
Another method of finding fish is to locate a narrow channel that drains a large bay. On the lower stages of the falling tide the baitfish that have tried to stay in the bay will be swept out through the narrow opening. Predatory fish lie at the bottom of this funnel and accept flies or bait readily.

Floating grasslines often harbor all sorts of baitfish and crabs. Fish know this and cruise such weedlines. You should work these grasslines, casting Keel flies to the grass, to prevent tangling.

Various type of rays (the eagle, spotted- and sting-rays)

come up on the tropical flats and pound their "wings" against the bottom, frightening shrimp and other small edibles from the muck and grassy bottom. Locate the mud streak made by the flopping ray, then get to the upstream end of the muddy line (where the ray will be working). Cast a fly across the head of the streak of mud and it's usually like tossing a wine bottle into the overnight tank of a jail.

What happens is that other fishes—redfish, snapper, snook, jacks—hover over the ray. As the ray roots up small shrimp, crabs and other food from beneath its wings, the much quicker fish snatch it up before the ray can get it. When you throw a fly at the head of that mud streak, that snapper,



We dropped this one in primarily to establish Kreh's freshwater credentials—which are impeccable, should any novice fly fisherman wonder.

snook, redfish or jack will hit it before it thinks about it.

Buoys in harbors and channels, oil platforms or clumps of drifting debris often have large fish in the shade beneath. Check such places with several casts. I can't remember how many nice cobia I have caught off the markers in the harbor at Key West, not 300 yards from the boat docks.

There are so many ways to fish in salt water, and for so many types of fish that if you haven't tested this new fly fishing world—you owe yourself the favor.

Frank Woolner, an old friend and editor of *Salt Water Sportsman*, once gave a talk on saltwater fishing to a group of fresh-water anglers. I remember him saying that, so far as he was concerned, fresh water was something cowards put in their drinks.

Frank is an excellent fresh-water fisherman, of course, and no one suggests that you give up the thrills of taking a salmon down through a falls, or forego watching a bass bust the surface wide open as it takes a bug, or a trout gently sucking down your tiny floating offering. But once you have battled some of the saltwater species on a fly rod, the world is never quite the same. ■

FLY FISHERMAN



Lefty went to his home waters in lower Chesapeake Bay for this 10½-pound bluefish, taken on a 6-pound tippet—a challenging way to land one of the East Coast's greatest gamefish.



Don't look at old Lefty, just at a world's record jack crevalle boated on 10-pound tippet and a streamer fly. Have you ever towed a submarine into dry dock with a rowboat?

Just a "baby" barracuda nesting back in the mangroves, but Lefty knows that it might be teething. "Crick" tarpon, ladyfish, snook, sea trout, redfish, snapper, shark, stripers—all these and more constitute the fly-rodder's saltwater fare.



SPRING
SPECIAL
1975



SPRING SPECIAL / 1975
Volume Six • Number Three
Price this issue—\$2.00

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