



Entering Saltwater Fly Fishing

By Jeff Currier

It was a snowy day in February 1986, when I shook hands and wished fellow employee Scott Sanchez (Chez) luck on his first saltwater fly fishing adventure. He was bound for Belize. At the time, I, like most fly fisherman, needed to break out the atlas to see where Belize was. It seemed odd to me that he was spending all that money to go chase saltwater fish, especially when the midge hatch was just beginning to peak on Montana's Madison River at Reynolds Pass. Nonetheless, he headed south for vacation, while I worked and headed north on my days off.

Two weeks, three snowstorms, and many a frozen hand later, I walked in to work after two more days of midging to find Chez home from Belize. I kicked the snow from my Sorels and walked over only to see him, brown as a berry, telling outrageous fishing tales. Only these weren't tales, but rather true stories about the most memorable fishing trip of his life. As I listened to Chez's miraculous exploits, my own rainbows and browns from past weeks seemed to pale in comparison. Despite my \$4.75 wage, I immediately began planning my own saltwater fly fishing trip.

One year later I found myself struggling to cling to a 10-weight fly rod attached to a wildly leaping silver king, the tarpon. I too had found my way to Belize. I found it to be so much fun that I went twice the year after, and within three years, began taking my summer trout clients along. Despite having little money, I had found a way to spend nearly half the year stalking the flats, popping the reefs, and dredging bulky flies through salty waters adding new species of fish to my life's list that I never dreamed possible.

Today, saltwater fly fishing is so popular that even remote fly shops thousands of miles from the ocean keep an inventory of saltwater tackle. Rods, reels, leaders, pliers, and assortments of flies for target species like bonefish, permit, redfish, sea trout, and tarpon, as well as East coast varieties such as striped bass, bluefish, albacore, and bonito are readily

available. One need no longer be surprised if the kid behind the counter in a Wyoming fly shop knows the details of catching sailfish on a fly. The same Idaho guides who put you on trout during summer can also put you on snook in the Florida Keys or mutton snapper in the Bahamas during the winter. Anglers that take annual trout trips to the Rockies now find themselves trying to squeeze in a second trip during the winter to some remote tropical fishery.

For those of you who have not yet entered the craze, I ask, why not? Yes, it is expensive. Most trips to lodges run between \$2-3000 a week without airfare. But what the heck, you only live once, and we aren't getting any younger. With all the great destinations to experience and a chance to fish in the dead of winter, why wait?

The answer seems to be equipment. Many freshwater anglers can't justify spending hundreds of dollars on heavier weight fly rod outfits. Excuses such as, "It's my first time, I don't know if I'm going to like it", or, "I'm only going to do this once", are unacceptable. Not going to like it! Only going to do this once! No fisherman has ever gone to their favorite trout pool only once, disliked screaming reels, or hated catching big fish. Consider the lifetime guarantees and high quality of today's equipment, and the prices are very reasonable. If you initiate an annual trip to the salt, it won't be long before you have all the rods and reels you will ever need, thus one less expense on future trips.

Once you have decided to plunge into the challenges of the salt you must select the proper tackle for your first trip. Now we'll examine the specifics of equipment selection. Saltwater tackle can be simpler than you think.

RODS

If you already fly fish in freshwater you likely have a rod adequate for many saltwater species. Believe it or not, a 5- or 6-weight rod can be great fun in saltwater. The 1- to 2-pound bonefish, baby snapper around marina boats, or lookdown fish under a dock light will test these light rods with their smoking first runs, but give in eventually. In rare instances when flats are calm, I have found that the delicate presentation of my 5-weight was essential in fooling weary bonefish. However, the light rod should never be the only one you take.

When winds prevail, (and they often do) a light fly rod will not be strong enough to accurately present a fly. Also, there are many larger species that require a stouter fly rod weight. In the Northeast, summertime schools of striped bass and bluefish terrorize baitfish up and down the coast, patrolling the surf and traveling into the river mouths and estuaries. Though many are small, the possibility of hooking a lunker is good. A striped bass of 25" or a scrappy bluefish will require an 8- or 9-weight fly rod.

Gulf coast anglers also prefer a beefier rod weight. Redfish, sea trout, and jacks all have great strength, and flourish in a variety of sizes. In fact, sometimes the extra power of an 8-weight isn't enough to tire a large jack crevalle. Therefore, as you get more addicted to the sport, you will probably want to invest in an even heavier rod.

I always have a 10- or an 11-weight fly rod ready to go. When flats fishing with an 8-weight, my 10-weight is rigged with a popper on solid wire. Poppers are excellent for barracuda and sharks. Many new saltwater anglers don't show much interest in fishing for these toothy critters, but a big barracuda or a blacktip shark will smoke any 3-pound bonefish, making it foolish to let them cruise by without a cast. The heavier rod weight opens up an entire new world of opportunities as well. Tarpon, snook, large jacks, cobia, snappers, grouper, roosterfish, albacore, and striped bass are all ideal fish for a 10-weight rod.

In the past few years, experienced flats and coastal fly fishermen have entered saltwater's final frontier-blue water. Blue water is considered offshore, and provides opportunity to pursue species that were once unheard of on fly rod. Dolphin (dorado or mahi mahi), tuna, wahoo, sailfish, and marlin all roam the offshore realm. A small dolphin can be handled on a 10-weight, but large specimens "bulls" and all the other species require

the big guns, 12- to 18-weight fly rods. Pound-for-pound, tuna are the toughest fish in the ocean. I would never want to battle one with less than a 12-weight.

REELS

Unlike freshwater, saltwater fly fishing reels comprise an integral part of your saltwater tackle. Saltwater reels must hold adequate fly line and backing for long runs and have a strong smooth drag for tiring a powerful fish. There are three types of reels suited to saltwater: direct-drive, anti-reverse, and the multiplier. The first two are single action and collect line at a 1:1 ratio. That is, every turn of the reel handle rotates the spool once. A multiplier collects line at approximately a 2½:1 ratio. Although the quick retrieval sounds appealing considering the long runs saltwater fish will make; multipliers have more gearing parts and thus a greater chance of failure. With the recent introduction of large-arbor direct-drive reels with a large circumference that collect line rapidly anyway, I recommend sticking with the direct-drive or anti-reverse.

A direct-drive and an anti-reverse fly reel each retrieves line as the spool handle is rotated. They differ when the line goes off the spool.

As the line leaves the direct-drive reel, the spool and handle spin at the same rate as the line leaves the spool. When line leaves the anti-reverse reel, the spool but not the handle spin, allowing you to hold the handle while the fish is running, just like a star drag conventional reel. Although smashed fingers is avoided, knowing when it is time to retrieve again is not as obvious. Each reel type has its advantages and disadvantages. Many experienced anglers prefer the extra drag feeling provided by the direct-drive reel. Less experienced anglers frequently choose the anti-reverse system that avoids sudden break-off caused accidentally by holding on to a reel handle that needed to spin.

Regardless of whether you choose a direct-drive or anti-reverse reel, be sure it has a sound drag. Smoothness is a major concern. A drag that “flutters” or is jerky can be a problem. A fluttering drag sticks and releases as line is pulled off the reel, often resulting in surprise break-offs. With a

smooth drag the line leaves the reel at a constant rate, making it nearly impossible for a fish to break off.

Ensure the reel has enough backing capacity. Most shallow water flats or estuary fishing requires a minimum of 150 yards of 20-pound backing. Larger species such as giant tarpon or blue water speedsters require a larger reel with a capacity of over 300 yards of 30-pound backing. The bottom line is simple, big fish require a big reel while smaller fish require a smaller one.

Clean your equipment after every day in the salt. Reels require the most attention. An old toothbrush, mild dish soap, and warm water should be used to thoroughly scrub every inch of a reel. Eliminating salt build up that eventually leads to rusty parts is important to prolong the life of your reel and reduce the chances of reel failure during a critical battle.

FLY LINES

Although there are many different fly line tapers, only two types belong in the salt, weight-forward (WF) and shooting tapers (ST). Both are designed to make the often-required quick cast. Just as in freshwater, saltwater also requires either placing your fly on the surface or below, therefore both floating and sinking lines are used.

Weight-forward lines are available in a variety of styles with specialty names such as saltwater taper, bonefish taper, tarpon taper, striped bass taper, blue water taper, and even billfish taper. Each of these varies in length and in the amount of concentrated forward weight. The bonefish and tarpon tapers are excellent lines for fly fishing in hot climates. The core is made of braided monofilament and adds stiffness to the line keeping it from softening and wilting under broiling tropical sun. These lines may be too stiff for colder climates. The best all around taper is the “saltwater taper” which is designed for quick casting and driving bulky flies into the wind in all climatic weather conditions.

For “blind casting”, or covering water and not casting to a specific fish, it is helpful to make long casts that explore a variety of depths. This is when shooting tapers (also called shooting heads) are nice. A shooting head is a 30-foot or less section of weight-forward fly line that is attached to a running line. Running line is a very thin level fly line, 25- to 35-pound

monofilament, or braided monofilament. The thin diameter of the running line minimizes friction while traveling through fly rod guides, allowing for long casts.

A shooting taper may be a floating line or a sinking line. Most sinking shooting tapers are measured in grains. A 200-grain shooting taper is light and sinks at a slower rate than a very heavy 800-grain taper. Separate shooting tapers are not nearly as expensive as entire fly lines making it affordable to carry a variety of lines to attain a variety of depths.

LEADERS

The stiffness of monofilament leader material is important for proper performance of a saltwater outfit. There are soft, medium, and stiff monofilaments available. Soft monofilament-the choice of trout anglers-is not a good choice for saltwater. Stiffer leader material is necessary for turning over a leader with large flies. Leader abrasion is more of a problem in saltwater so tougher monofilament is necessary.

Climax, Rio, Umpqua, Orvis, Ande Tournament, Jinkai, and Hard Mason, are just a few manufacturers that offer pre-made leaders designed for specific saltwater fish species. These same manufacturers also offer stiff monofilament for building your own saltwater leaders.

FLIES

Flies vary depending on the variety of fish you are after. It is always best to use a fly that imitates whatever the gamefish are feeding on. Saltwater fish are opportunists and will take advantage of most easy meals, they do however, have their favorites. Bonefish and permit feed primarily on shrimp and crabs. Patterns such as the Crazy Charlie, Snapping Shrimp, and the Del Brown Merkin Crab work very well. Streamers imitating the local baitfish are always a good bet whether casting to bluefish in Cape Cod or snook in Costa Rica. One such streamer, the Lefty's Deceiver, has probably fooled nearly all saltwater gamefish species at one time or another.

ADDITIONAL EQUIPMENT

There are several additional items that can be useful during your saltwater ventures. First of all, never go anywhere without adequate rain gear. Have

tops and bottoms even when fishing in tropical regions. If you are going to the tropics, wear light-colored, reflective clothing. A hat and polarized sunglasses are essential not only to protect your eyes from the sun but they remove glare from the water allowing your vision to penetrate the surface.

Other items such as a good pair of pliers that can be used to remove a hook as well as cut wire and heavy monofilament, a hook hone, insect repellent, sunscreen, reel oil, spare leaders, and leader materials are a must. Your saltwater destination will determine whether or not you will need flats booties or waders, a stripping basket, flashlight, and vest or fanny pack.

CONCLUSION

Today, every time I board a plane and head for the salt I think about my first trip to Belize. At the time it was a risky trip that I could barely afford, but it opened the door for some of the most enjoyable fly fishing trips of my life. If you like to fly fish in freshwater then surely you will like the salt. Don't let anything hold you back from the fastest growing part of fly fishing!