



The writer, with flyrod, brings a tarpon to hand in an East Central Florida mangrove impoundment.

know right where to put the fly and, if you spend enough time there, even when the next roll will occur. Although blind casts can be effective, leading a rolling fish gives you the greatest likelihood of the tarpon seeing your presentation at an enticing angle while preventing your line from spooking another.

CURRENT

Current can play a major role in the tarpon ponds. The drainage ditch backwaters these juvenile tarpon frequent often have culverts connecting them. When the tide is rising or falling, the current entering an otherwise stagnant pond can stack up the pool's tarpon. In this scenario dropping your presentation and dancing it in the current "cane-pole" style proves highly effective. Outside of current producing sites, hesitating the bait at the shore and even bobbing it up and down can make a fish you didn't realize followed your pattern in commit as well. It will feel a little like cheating for a purist fly guy but when a tarpon inhales your pattern, practically beneath your toes, the stigma seems to wane.

EXPECT THE JUMP

Once you've fooled and hooked one, the fish is apt to go berserk. In these tight quarters you'll need to fight the fish aggressively while allowing him to tire enough to be handled without injury to the fish. Pulling low and directly down the back of the fish will tire him and keep your line mostly clear of the snags he races for. Always be expecting the jump. This of course is the time most will come loose. You'll want to maintain tension with just the top 40 percent of your rod during a jump to allow extra give to the erratic headshakes and cartwheels.

Often times the fish will rocket out of the water directly away from you. Keeping a light drag that is ready to be palmed will keep the fish from breaking off when jumping away. When fly-fishing, and if the fish isn't on the reel, be prepared to give some line as many break off due to a clamped-down pointer finger. Said pointer finger will take quite a beating, so don't think it too soft of yourself to use some tape or fly fishing finger protectors. **FS**

Finding Happy Rollers

A welcome surprise in creeks, mangrove ponds and other small waters.

By Hunter Bach

One of the great delights of light tackle targets is the juvenile tarpon. Small ones are not overly picky and put on a fantastic display once hooked. Success can be achieved with conventional or fly tackle, depending mostly on the preference of the angler, making the silver princes available to intermediate anglers while still being sporting enough for the seasoned pro.

LOCATING THE NURSERY

When tarpon spawn, the eggs are fertilized in open water and hatch into larvae that migrate into stagnant backwaters where low oxygen levels deter predators and limit competitors. Manmade mosquito ditches, created to regulate insect populations back in the 1950s and '60s, offer just those conditions, making them fantastic juvenile tarpon nurseries. Naturally occurring creeks and marsh ponds leading into estuaries produce the same atmosphere and hold fish. Many of the best spots are overgrown and difficult

to access or cast within. Even a tiny trickle of a drainage ditch in a suburban neighborhood, far from the coast, could be a place to find baby tarpon. They will surprise you.

BUBBLES AND READING THE ROLL

One thing to look for, on prospective ponds or creeks: Watch for tarpon rolling, something they do to take air into their swim bladder, a respiratory adaptation. You might also spot bubbles on the surface, left over from those rolls. If I don't see bubbles or rollers, I think it's best to keep on looking unless it's an area you know has some fish from previous experience. Even then, finding areas with rolling fish and rising bubble trails typically means these fish are feeling secure and

apt to feed.

When you find rollers, take note of their body language. If they are aggressively rolling, so it almost looks like a feed, slapping their tails as they turn back down, it's good to sit back and give them some time or even keep looking because those fish know something's up. Not until they start slowly rolling will

they be worth your time and the potential loss of flies and lures to mangrove branches.

When you do find what I like to call "happy rollers," you're in business, but don't rush in just yet.

Watching for a few minutes is not only entertaining, it provides an advantage. The fish know their home and each individual has its favorite routes. If you pay close attention you can judge where a fish is traveling when it rolls, allowing you to

Small plugs and jigs work well for spin and baitcast anglers.

