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Spring 2017

I have what some in the clinical world might call an addictive personality. I prefer a "functioning addictive personality." Yes, I drink more than some might consider normal. I will say I have a way better time than most, and that's something. But, I don't drink during the day (on weekdays not including Friday), or to the point where others would be worried, as long as those others aren't addiction counselors. I smoke, but I smoke a pack a day, not three. In my experimental youth, I was not one to say no, but still somehow always had a clear picture of the line and never really crossed it, relatively. The same always went with gambling. I bet on football, horses, basketball, baseball, and occasionally on camel races in Dubai. The robot jockeys were more than I was willing to pass up. (I went through a weird steampunk phase for a while.) As much as I enjoy the thrill of winning, I never wound up in a gutter, pulling on the bottom of my pockets, weighing the supply and demand curves of plasma. I've always had a line, and either by luck or by upbringing, I've been able to operate on the fun side of just over. I'm blessed that way. At least I thought I was.

The other day I started taking a mental inventory of my spring fishing so far. Pre-spawn smallmouth in March. Too early? Maybe. That didn't stop me from casting for days looking for my shot-in-the-dark early season bronze piglet. Unfortunately, that road ran parallel to the Road to Nowhere. The black cad-dis hatch occupied my being for a good

month. Are they there? Are they rising? Is it blown out? In the end, I got one day with bugs flying and all they ate were nymphs. I've been blown out on two striper trips, and just spent three days and four tides in the Lowcountry looking for early season tails that only existed in my troubled sleep. I now realize that I have the worst gambling affliction of all: I'm a longshot better. If I were a calculating man, I would leave my gear at home 'til summer rolls around. At least there's some sort of consistency in the odds. No, spring fishing is like betting on a million-to-1 horse, or betting the Browns to win the Superbowl in the pre-season. The one time it hits is pure emotional nirvana, but all of those other bets that never pan out are liable to leave you in some church basement drinking shitty coffee, lamenting the life you used to have with the rest of the tortured souls.

So why do I keep banging my head against the immovable wall of probabilities? It's the rush, man. I have hit the jackpot on the "Spring Armed Bandit" before. Through pure luck I have caught the river between the storms, the April tail, and the horny smalljaw. Not often, but I have done it, and it was glorious. Like being kissed on the mouth by Jesus, with tongue. For those few pure spring moments, I've got a thousand that turn into utter drudgery. Is it worth it? I don't know, check with me next time it happens, but I'll bet you it will be. I'll give you 2:1.

*D. S.*



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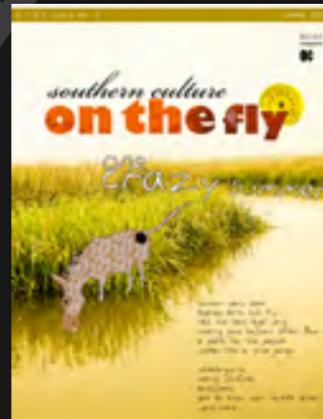
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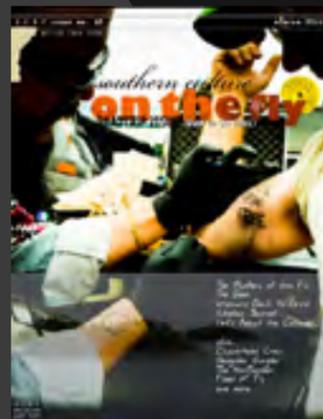
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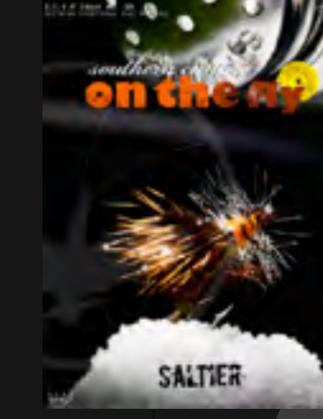
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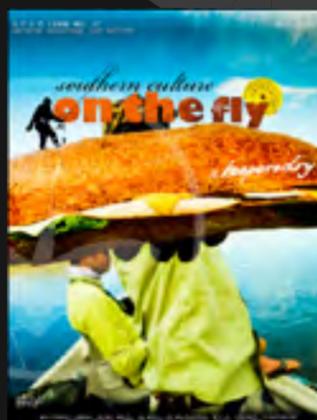
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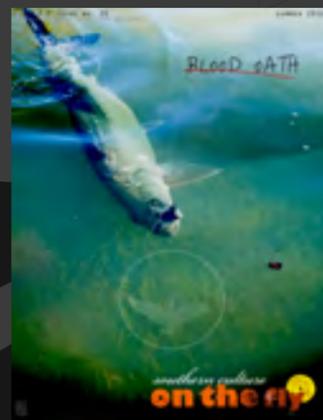
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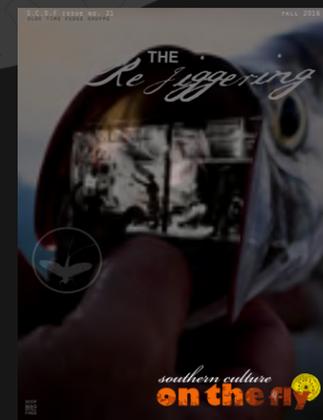
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# Haiku

with Steve Seiberg

Logs ahead at twelve?  
Shit, that one has  
fins, cast, strip.  
That snook is a dick.



# Howler Bros

## BROS





Six days of travel stripped to a few frenzied seconds: on Sudan's Red Sea coast, Josh Gallivan comes tight to a bluefin trevally while Stu Harley and Mike LaSota look on. Russ Schitzer © 2017 Patagonia, Inc.

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# The GULAG Estuary

By Christian Fichtel  
Photos: David Grossman

*“How do people get to this clandestine Estuary? Hour by hour fisherman go there, Salt Life-branded trucks steer their course there, and flats skiffs are blindly pulled to it—all with dozens of stickers to tell of their destination.”*

*-Alexander Solzhenitsyn (kind of)*



**This is a dismal place.** The winds blows a steady 20, the clouds can cover you as quickly as a rag doused in chloroform, and the rains beat your shoulders like lead shot falling from the sky. Why any man would enter these waters of his own free will remains a mystery to me. I have seen these fishless horrors, and I have returned a defeated man. This is my tale.

I've always thought of fishing the salt as a sort of unfair coin. Particularly for those of us that live hours from the coast, the number of uncontrollable variables stacked against us seem almost insurmountable. This situation is always helped by local knowledge and the assistance of friends, but I can't help but feel like I'm stepping up to the plate with two strikes already on the board. We flip that coin with each visit, and we flip far more tails than heads. May the odds be ever in your disfavor.





Carried south in a Toyota Land Cruiser only three years my junior, I took the lack of mechanical delays as a sign of good fortune. Blue skies and following winds surely foreshadowed a czar's greeting upon our arrival. I imagined the tails of countless redfish waving in the grass much like the servants of Livadia palace would have greeted Nicholas upon his ascension to the throne of Russia; I was mistaken.

The Land Cruiser was instead a steam train marching solemnly toward a Lowcountry labor camp. For three days, my casts accomplished nothing. I simply moved a pile of rocks from Beaufort to Savannah and then again from Savannah to Charleston. Three days, four big tides, and a single tailing redfish that cared nothing for the crab hucked into his path.

I have spent enough time behind these spartina grass fences to know that one's expectations are to be kept low. The daily monotony may occasionally be interrupted by a fight with one of the fish that guard these marshes, but a repeat of yesterday's bad dream is the more likely outcome. We notch our belts not with each fish landed but with each day passed. Beauty is found in the ordinary, and what can be called beautiful gets muddier with each added notch.

Beaufort was the same Lowcountry gem that I've come to love, and a solitary tail on the incoming tide was the only sighted fish of the trip. Savannah was windy until two hours before the tide. The winds settled, the sky cleared, and the water rolled in exactly as we hoped. Despite the nearly perfect conditions, the flat was as barren as the Siberian tundra. Day three in Charleston was wind, two monster tides, and not a fish in sight. The Lowcountry deals from the bottom of the deck; you only win when she lets you win.





*The Lowcountry deals from the bottom of the deck; you only win when she lets you win.*



When Charleston's evening tide had peaked, we crawled back into the Land Cruiser. This was our chance to run. The same creaking train that had carried us to the coast was now our means of escape. Under the cover of a moonless night, we slipped from the far-reaching lights of Charleston's Ravenel Bridge and disappeared into the solemn darkness of I-26. For five long hours we toiled, uphill, our freedom within grasp. Arriving in Asheville in the hours past midnight, I felt neither happiness nor relief. I just felt beaten.

When my alarm shouted me awake the following morning, mere hours after I'd closed my eyes, I headed to work as if nothing had happened. These familiar faces can't know of my ordeal, my false imprisonment, and I can't expect their sympathy. I can only attempt to suppress my masochistic urge to sneak back into my gulag estuary and be beaten once more.



*My most sincere thanks to Will Abbott (www.floodtideco.com), Chad DuBose (www.riversandglen.com), Chase Simpson (The United States Army), and Michael Bruner (www.finsandflies.com) for their incredible hospitality. Let's do it again.*



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## GUIDED TRIPS AND TRAVEL



**BENCH PRESS**

Mike Schmidt



MIKE'S MR MUFASA

Mike Schmidt  
**MR MUFASA**

**Mike's MR Mufasa**, originally "Mad River Mufasa," was designed to be king of the river. Similar to the "Meal Ticket," it is a fly that's meant to be fished around undercut banks, root balls and short, deep pockets. It's a fly that will get down quick and can be swum back at depth with a serpent swim or vertical jig. The MR Mufasa has the size and movement to entice fish out of their comfort zones to defend their turf or feed, and will maintain a solid silhouette throughout the retrieve. It went through some changes over a year on the water before I got the samples of the Fish Skulls from Martin at Flymen Fishing Co., and knew that they were the finishing touch.

In the seven years since, there have been advancements in many synthetic materials as

well as hook design and availability. This updated version of the MR Mufasa makes use of some of the new synthetics to add profile without too much bulk or weight. Also, hooks are now available that allow me to get away from the original "front hook up" design; it now rides both hooks down while maintaining the hook gap.

This step-by-step is the deluxe version, tied with both standard marabou as well as barred or Super 'Bou. I believe that it adds something to the fly as nothing in nature is a single color throughout. That being said I have not seen a measureable difference between this and the "all marabou" version when fished by other anglers. Perhaps the barring only really adds confidence for me, which translates to fishing it harder.

### **Materials List:**

**Front hook:** AHREX TP610 Trout Predator Streamer #2/0

**Back hook:** AHREX PR330 Aberdeen Predator S/E #1/0

**Thread:** Danville 140

**Connection:** Beadalon 19 strand .024"

**Beads:** 6mm plastic

**Body1:** Marabou

**Body2:** Super 'Bou, or Barred Marabou

**Body3:** Senyo's Aqua Veil Chenille

**Body4:** Schlappen

**Rubber Legs:** Grizzly Flutter Legs

**Body5:** Ripple Ice Fiber

**Head1:** Senyo's Laser Dub

**Head2:** Flymen Fishing Co Fish Skull, large

**Eyes:** 1/4" Oval Pupil 3D Eyes



1



2



3



4



5



6



**Step 1:** Place the AHREX PR330 Aberdeen Predator S/E #1/0 secure and level in the vise. Start the thread mid-shank and then tie in a single light marabou feather right on top of the hook shank and hanging approximately a full hook length off the back of the bend of the hook. On top of that, tie in a single Super 'Bou feather, extending a third of a shank farther back off the bend of the hook.

**Step 2:** At the rear of the hook, shank tie in both the Senyo's Aqua Veil Chenille and the schlappen feather by the tip. The schlappen should be tied in with the outside of the feather facing up, or so the curve of the feather cups the hook. Advance the thread to the eye of the hook, then palmer the Aqua Veil and schlappen forward together up to the eye and secure. There is no need for dubbing the shank as the chenille core will protect the schlappen stem and help to stand up the fibers.

**Step 3:** At the eye of the hook, tie in two equal length Grizzly Flutter Legs, running down each side of the hook shank. I find it best to tie in the legs by a mid-point and fold them back then secure with thread to ensure that they do not pull out. At the same point, tie in a pinch of Ripple Ice Fiber on top of the hook shank. The Ripple Ice Fiber should also be tied in by a mid-point and folded over itself, extending to about halfway out the tail.

**Step 4:** Finish the rear hook with a topping of Super 'Bou. Hold it in place on top of the shank at the eye of the hook and extending about to the back of the hook bend, then lightly push down with your index finger and thumb to roll the feather down each side of the shank a bit. Secure the feather with tight wraps forming a small thread head, then whip finish to complete the back hook

**Step 5:** Place the AHREX TP610 Trout Predator Streamer #2/0 securely and level in the vise. Make the connection using a four-inch piece of 19 strand .024" Beadalon. Take the length of wire and fold it tip to tip. Run your fingers back to the loop and give it a pinch being careful not to fully crimp the wire; this is just to mark the center point of the wire. Slide the eye of the rear hook onto the wire and it should drop to the midpoint; pull the wire back together and slide on two 6mm plastic beads. All braided wire will twist when folded; tying in the wire side by side on top of the hook shank will ensure the loop stays vertical in the back. Place the tips of the wire side by side about one eye width back from the eye of the front hook and secure to the shank using maximum thread pressure and crossing wraps. I like to use crossing wraps back and forth twice over the back half of the shank, then the front half of the shank, and finally the whole shank. Doing so under maximum thread pressure will secure the connection without the need for glue, though you can brush some on and it will not negatively affect the fly.

**Step 6:** At the rear of the front hooks, shank tie in a veil of marabou. The tips should extend to about the middle of the rear hook shank and will help to cover the gap between hooks, ensuring a continuous profile when in the water.

7



8



9



10



11



**Step 7:** Slide the Fish Skull onto the hook until the eye is fully exposed, then mark where the opening on the head is on the thread wraps to help gauge where to finish the body. At the rear of the shank repeat Step 2, tying in and palmering forward Senyo's Aqua Veil Chenille and Schlappen together approximately 2/3 of the shank. This will leave you just a bit behind your mark for the Fish Skull.

**Step 8:** Tie in two Grizzly Flutter Legs extending down each side of the hook shank. On top of the shank tie in a larger pinch of Ripple Ice Fiber in Minnow Mix extending about halfway back on the fly, and on bottom a pinch of Ripple Ice Fiber in Pink extending about to the bend of the front hook. Again, both bunches and the legs should be tied in by a midpoint then folded over and secured. These wraps should take you past the marking you made for the Fish Skull and will form the start of the base for it to attach to.

**Step 9:** Tie in a veil of Super 'Bou circling the shank and extending back about to the bend of the front hook. At this point you should be about an eye-and-a-half back of the eye of the hook with one material left to add.

**Step 10:** Grab a pinch of Senyo's Laser Dub and prep it by pulling apart and stacking it a few times to align the direction and length of the fibers. At the same point you finished Step 9, you will tie in this pinch on top of the shank and by its midpoint. Repeat with a second stack on the bottom of the shank, then whip finish leaving half of the material out over the eye of the hook.

**Step 11:** The Senyo's Laser Dub will form the material mass up front to allow you to secure the Fish Skull. Gently massage the Laser Dub backwards and slide the Fish Skull back until the hook eye is fully exposed. Using your left hand to hold the material just behind the Fish Skull, without removing your left hand, slide the Fish Skull off with your right. Place a bead of Loctite Gel on the material behind the eye of the hook, from one side over the top to the other side. In one motion and without stopping, slide the Fish Skull until the back of the head hits your left fingers, at which point it will lock in place and the eye of the hook should be fully exposed. Finish by placing a small dot of Loctite Gel in each recessed eye socket and secure 1/4" Oval Pupil 3D Eyes.



*Mike's giant physical stature is only rivaled by his presence on the vise. His patterns have taken trophies from Michigan to Arkansas and everywhere in between. He ties, smokes cigars, and in general is one of our favorite gentle giants. Buy his flies and up your game at [anglerschoiceflies.com](http://anglerschoiceflies.com)*

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# MUD-STAINED KNEES

By Josh Parks

**We met the old man at Reliance Fly and Tackle.** It was summer, and Jim and I pulled in for a six-pack and lunch. This is a fundamentally weird place where bait fisherman crowd around small tables set inside what's become a respectable fly shop.

The store is set back from the Hiwassee River and marked by an ancient sign, crossed with a lattice-work of cracks and micro-fractures, announcing barbecue, as well as fly and spinning gear. Out front, old men rest on benches next to analog gas pumps. They're grizzled old-timers who wear stained, oily overalls and smoke cigarettes. They look like men who work for a living but are somehow sitting on a bench in front of a country gas station on a Tuesday morning. Once, while ordering lunch, I heard the owner discussing what I think was a metaphorical interpretation of the Bible to a captivated group of believers. It's hard to say.

This is a place where I buy more sandwiches than wooly buggers. Jim and I usually stop here after a morning of fishing, order sandwiches, and grab a six-pack of Sweetwater. We sit outside, crack open beers and joke about trout masturbation, hemorrhoids, and the desperate need to cast on a summer day.

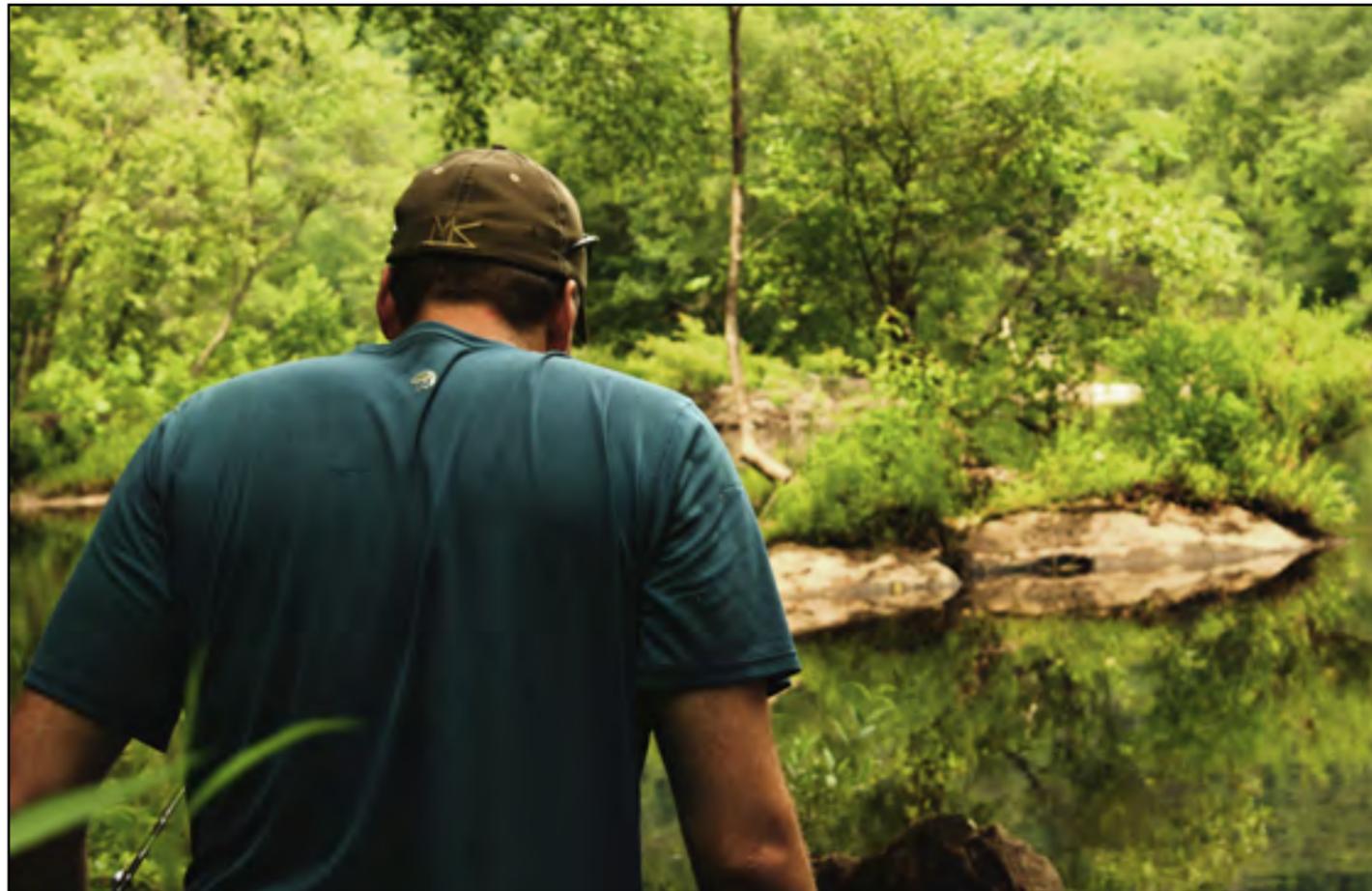
One summer, an older man, who appeared to be recovering from a stroke frequently joined us—always sitting a few tables away, smoking silently in the shade of the canopy. We never gave him much thought until the one day we heard a gravelly voice ask a simple question.

“Are y'all making this shit up?”



It took us a minute to connect the voice with the quiet man who'd been our distant company for a month. We invited him to sit with us, and he shuffled to the nearest table and lit a fresh cigarette and told us about fishing as a young man, long before old age robbed him of his strength. He'd fished the Hi-wassee for decades, casting poppers for bass upstream of the powerhouse and landing mythical trout caught only in the stories of old timers. They were simple stories. The ones told by grandfathers who walked uphill to school in the snow with a return home that was even steeper.

Our weathered companion sat with his good leg crossed tightly over its opposite and ashed his cigarette over the railing into the dead grass. We listened as he stared off at a youth lost a thousand yards away. He'd spent decades learning the river and knew each hatch, even though a simple brown-hackled



peacock would match most. He smoked quietly as we told him about our day on the water. The knowledge that he'd never cast a fly rod again was surely a heavy load.

We finished our six-pack and headed off to do that which he never would again.

That was over a year ago. And, though I assume he has since died, the old man stands out because of the memories he shared with us. There was a history there like an iceberg, and Jim and I only glimpsed the surface. Beneath it was a wealth of wisdom that can only be understood as feelings, never as conscious thought.

After all, fly fishing is only tangentially about skills. It has more to do with long hours on the water spent learning the intimate secrets of a given river. That's why the old timers always catch fish. They've paid their dues with melanoma and cataracts in exchange for consistent stringers of fish. Decades of experience have taught them to tie on a sulfur pattern when the dogwoods bloom. Hatch chart be damned.

The old man's weathered face and threadbare clothes clash strongly with a man a bartending buddy once introduced me to. All three of us fly fished, my friend assumed we'd get along famously.

But this guy took one look at the logo on my shirt and promptly turned back to his iPhone. His Columbia fishing shirt and Yeti visor marked him of the suburban class, the ones who look like Bill Dance in drag. He might have looked the part, but this guy was no more than an asshole in a fancy shirt. His problem wasn't necessarily a lack of skill, but a refusal to play by the rules. He might have learned the hatches and mastered the double haul, but he wasn't going to get dirty using those skills.

He just wanted a picture on Facebook, not a smear of slime on his pants.

I once spent two months trying to patch a cheap pair of waders clearly beyond their reasonable life expectancy. A patch job like that might not seem so crazy, seeing that nice pair can set you back three or four hundred dollars, and even those will eventually leak. Leaky waders may be a universal law, but sometimes, you'll cling to an old pair like a child's favorite blanket. My wife eventually put her foot down and made me buy a new pair. She couldn't understand why I was so attached to something that smelled like a stale whiskey fart. What she didn't understand was that you could read our story in the tapestry of mildew growing down each leg.

It's like my last truck. It was worn out, but the son of a bitch had character. It took me to places you can't get without a couple of stains or, if you're lucky, a few new dents.



*She couldn't understand why I was so attached to something that smelled like a stale whiskey fart.*

It's that authenticity of experience that draws me to fly fishing. To catch a wary trout or a bass (or even a simple bream, for that matter), an angler must become a part of the fishery. Matching a hatch is about much more than recognizing a bug floating down the current. It's about knowing the river intimately enough to arrive at the right bend of the river just before sunset and the white mayflies hatch. There's tremendous skill involved, but it's secondary to knowledge of the river that can only be earned with time.

While a picture might call to mind a given fish, a torn pair of shorts opens a sluice gate of memories. You'll remember casting small streamers to feeding trout from a small island before floating the next nine miles without boating a single fish. And what will matter the most will be the beers you shared with your buddies, not the one decent trout he landed. You probably won't even remember how big the fish even was. The most insignificant objects can convey these memories as the sparkling spots on a spawning brook trout. A picture might be worth a thousand words, but they don't have shit on a dirty pair of waders. The refusal of an eight-inch trout marks your heart with mud-stained knees.

I keep an old spinning rod on the rack in my garage. It's broken, and the rusted guides crumble like rotten sandstone when I jostle it with whatever functioning rod I plan to use on a given day. It's nothing special; just a knockoff Shakespeare I bought to take a younger cousin fishing. I picked it because I thought its orange color scheme would fit in with the University of Tennessee fans soaking fleshy nightcrawlers and sweet corn on the Hiwassee River.

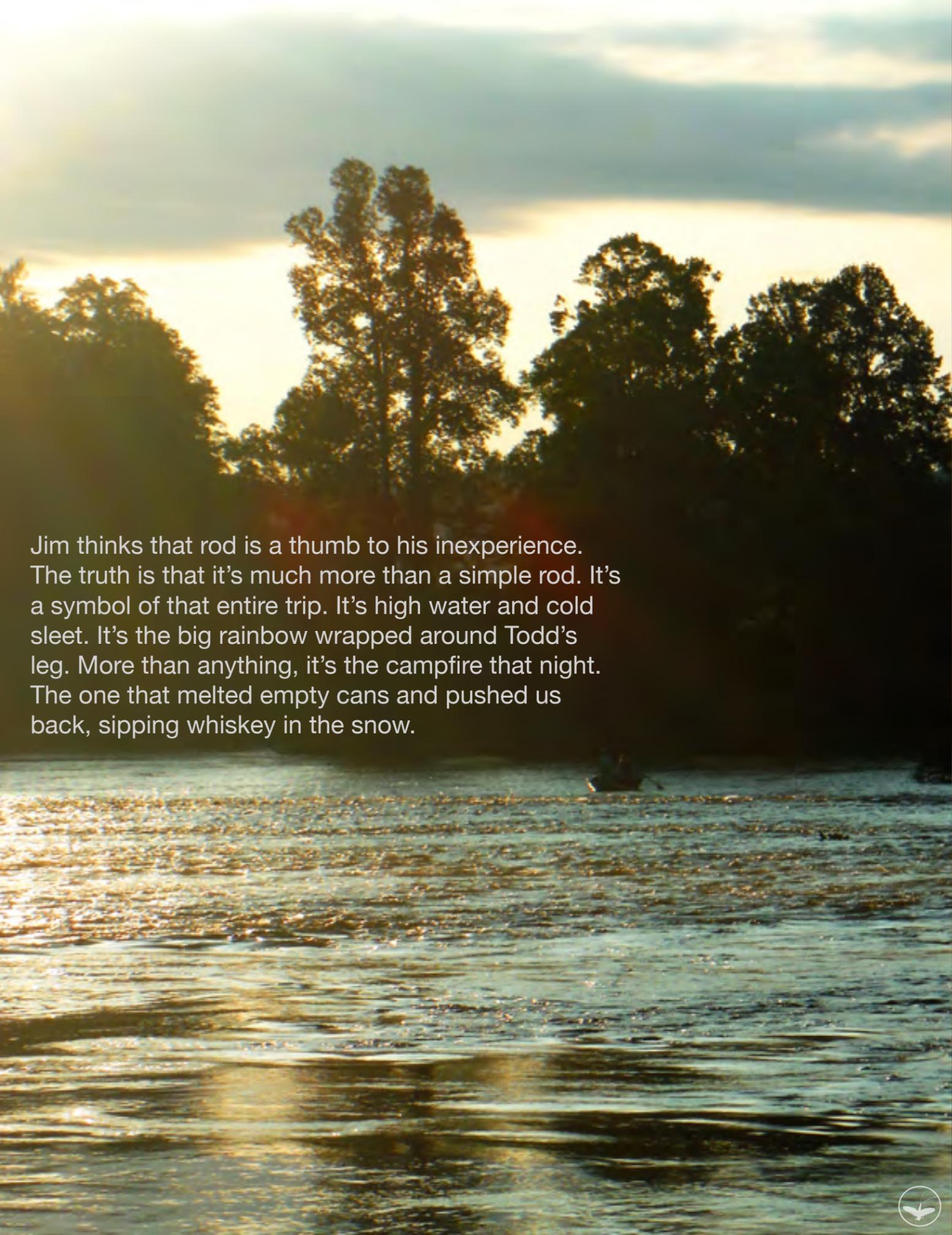
That rod, however, was also a merit badge from the time I took

Jim on his first fishing trip. It was spring break, and we went to the Hiwassee to escape the stacks of papers we'd spent the semester grading. We teach a lot of freshman composition, and stacks of papers weigh as heavily on the mind as the backpack on the back. Jim learned to cast on that rod and promptly broke it before he caught a single fish. When I look at that rod, though, I remember the whole weekend, not just the one big fish I tangled with.





In fact, no picture would do that weekend justice. The closest I came to seeing the fish was only a red flash, crimson in its fury, swirl around someone's leg before it snapped my leader. We'd been fishing in freezing rain, so we called it quits and drove back to our campsite. There, we built the biggest campfire I've ever seen. We piled on log after log until the fire was hot enough to melt beer cans and whiskey bottles. There was too much sleet and snow for a picture at that point, but when I see that rod, I remember a fire so big, the heat forced us back into the weather where we sat in the drizzle with our jackets open.



Jim thinks that rod is a thumb to his inexperience. The truth is that it's much more than a simple rod. It's a symbol of that entire trip. It's high water and cold sleet. It's the big rainbow wrapped around Todd's leg. More than anything, it's the campfire that night. The one that melted empty cans and pushed us back, sipping whiskey in the snow.

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**PETER PERCH**  
*and the fish.*



PETER PERCH

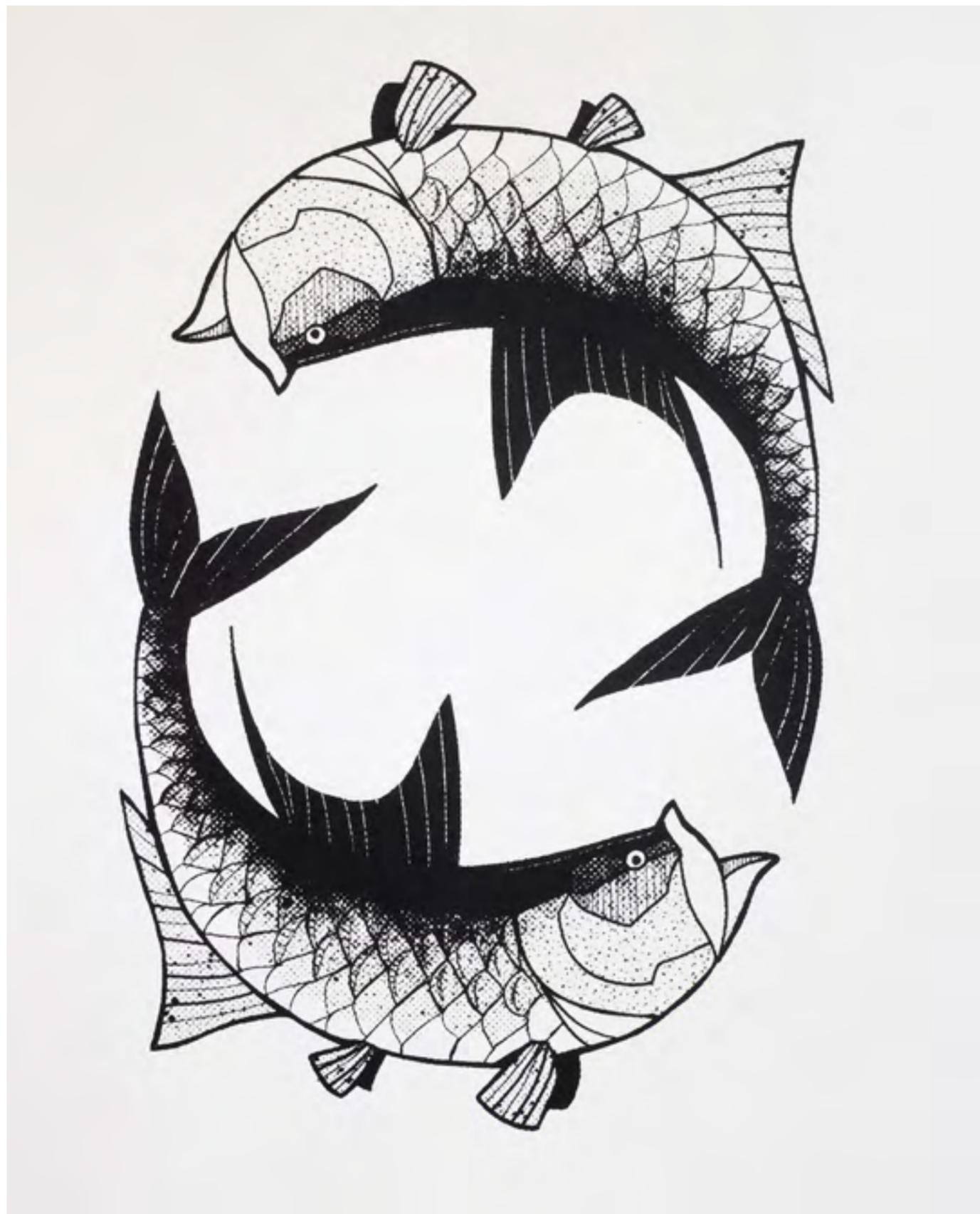


Previous: Perch Mural, 2015, Gent Belgium, 4.5 meters  
 Opposite: Brogue Trout, 2016, Screen print on Ivory board, 32x26 cm

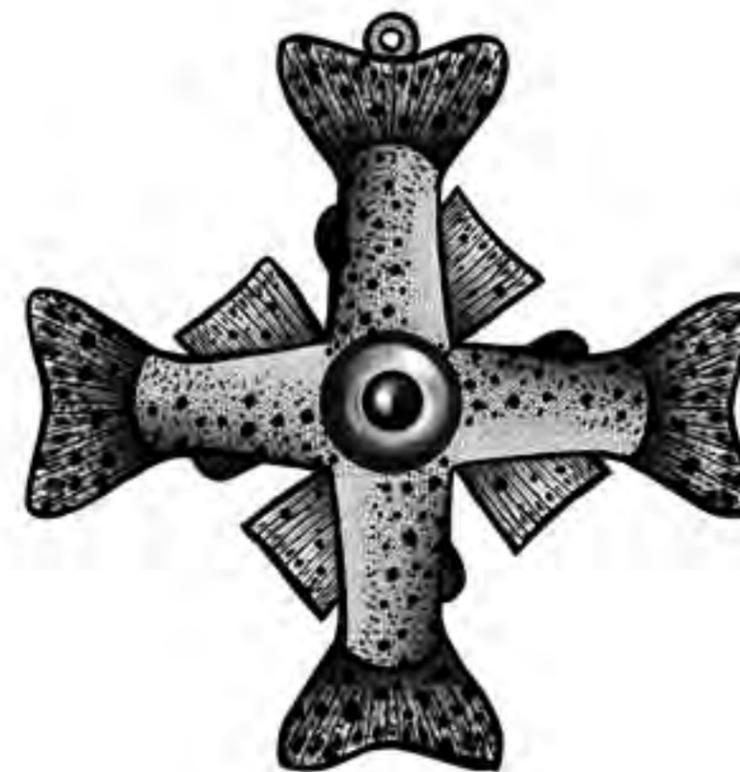


Let's dispense with the obvious. No, Europe is not the South. Peter Perch resides near Amsterdam, not Sicily, so we can't even make a not-so-clever play on him being a southern European. We don't care, it's our magazine and we can do anything we want (as has been proven time and time again). So suck it. Now back to our new friend, Peter. I've always been a big believer that art should speak to the viewer. When you look at a piece, it should hit you like a lightning bolt from Van Gogh himself. Peter Perch's art does that for me. He creates art and concepts that visually extrapolate the way my brain thinks. Quirky, technically sound, and sometimes crossing into the wonderful world of the profane. His illustrations are loose and poignant, while his ink and paint are beautifully tight. Being able to operate on those two different sides of the room is what really drew us to his art. The desire to get a sneak peek at his brain before his stuff blew up is why we had to reach out. Take a little tour inside the mind and art of Peter Perch with me, won't you? Enjoy some complimentary stinky cheese with your Nutella.





Tarpon Circle/ Infinity Tarpon, 2016, Screen print on Ivory board, 32x26 cm  
Tongue Carp, 2015, Illustration for Monkey Climber (Belgian based carp magazine)  
Trout Cross, 2016, Screen print





**1. So Europe....what's that like?**

*Pretty fishy... Prostitution, drugs and nymphing are legal here, you should come and see.*

**2. Which came first: the fish or the art?**

*As a kid, I fell into a fish tank and that's where and when I got my fishy super powers. I have been fishing or drawing fish ever since that day.*

*Bum Bass, 2015, Screen print, 32x26 cm  
Snook with Feet, 2017*

**3. How many different mediums do you have going on at any one time? It seems like a lot.**

*My core technique is a mix of brush and ink drawings, spray paint, and screen printing. But recently I have refound my love for photography, watercolors, and oil paint. But all of it starts in my sketchbook that is always by my side.*

**4. Are you formally trained as an artist or self-taught?**

*Hard to believe but I am actually formally trained as an artist and I still do a lot of self-development every day to keep my skill level high.*

**5. What do you fish for mostly at home? Where would you want to fish if time and money were no longer a concern?**

*So my most preferred target species is European seabass from May 'til October. After that I start chasing pike, perch, and my new love, Baltic sea trout. We also do a lot of streetfishing in Amsterdam, which is a lot of fun. The canals are absolutely full of big zander (walleye) and perch.*

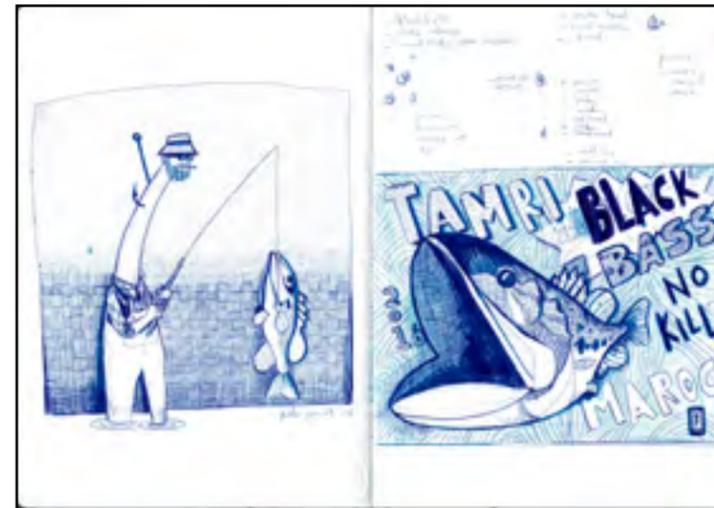
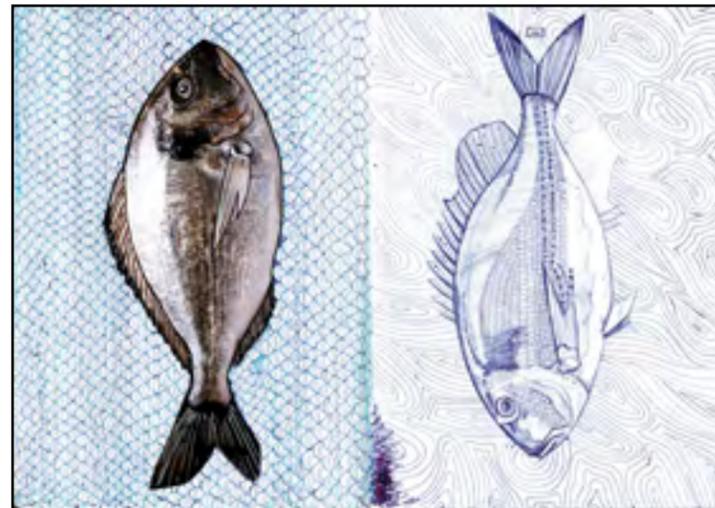
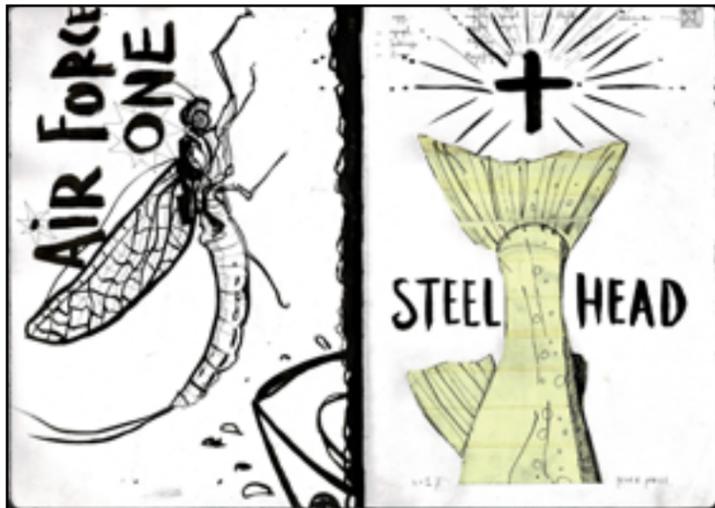
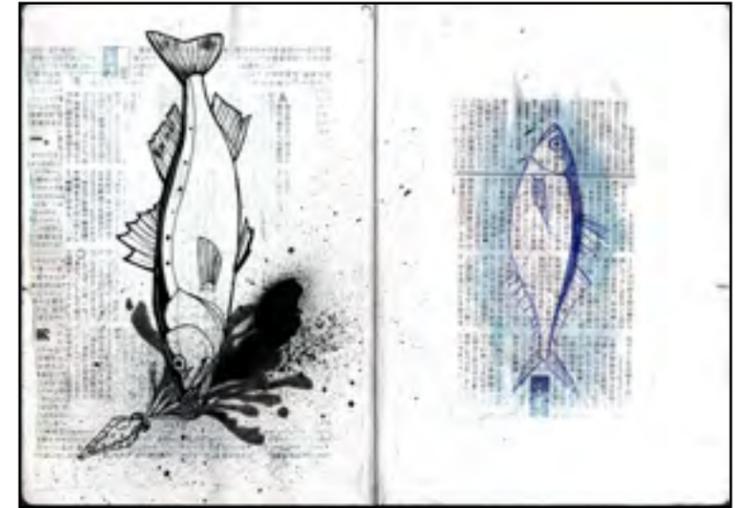
*So first of all, I think fishing is great everywhere and that you need to be able to get your kicks out of your local fish. That being said, if I had the money, I would just travel around and just fish and paint. A big part of why I paint is to be able to experience the fish that are out of my reach to catch. I like to say I travel in my sketchbook.*

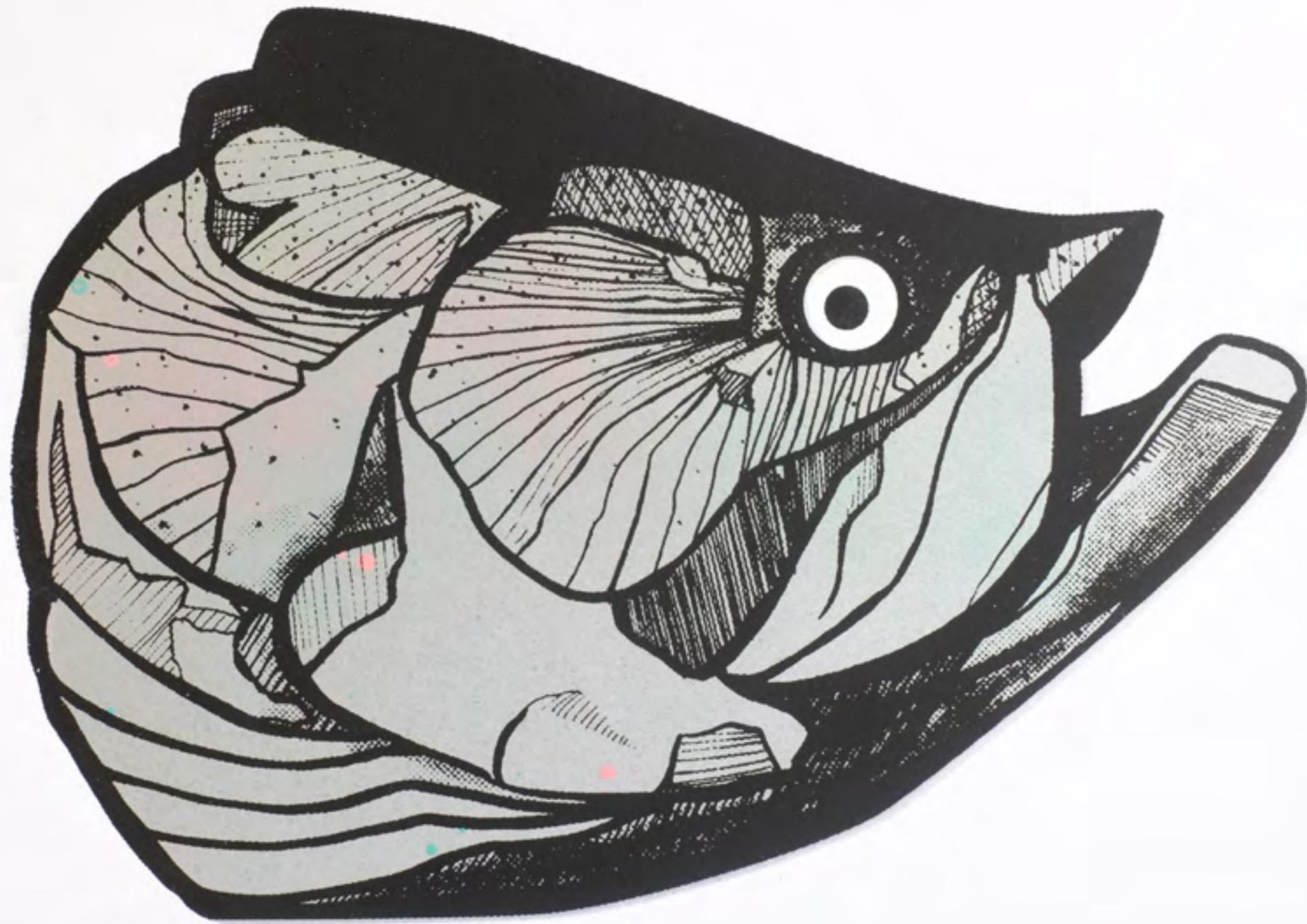




Black Bass, 2016, Digital painting, 40x30 cm  
Zander With Feet, Mural painted in Amsterdam, 2015, 6 meters  
Karl Lagerfish, 2016



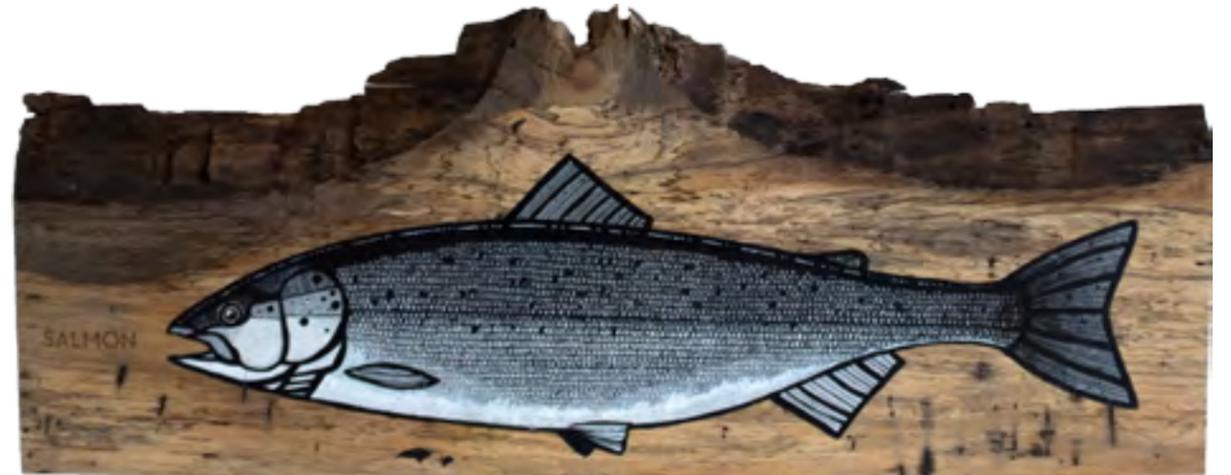




Tarpon, 2016, Mixed media screen print on Ivory board, 32x26 cm



Golden dorado, 2016, Spraypaint & acrylic on spalted padoek wood, 22x24 cm



Salmon, 2017, Spraypaint and acrylic on wood, 75x25 cm  
 Sea Run Brown, 2016, Spraypaint and acrylic on broken paddle, 88x20 cm  
 Pike on a Paddle, 2016, Spraypaint and acrylic on paddle, 88x20 cm



6. There's a certain level of whimsy in your illustrations. What influences the crazy side of your art?

*Insanity and creativity runs in our family. I tap into both of these to create my art.*

7. Do you Euro nymph? Would you be willing to teach me?

*I don't really Euro nymph much because I like to chuck streamers into skinny water. But I do have a cousin who's pretty good at it who would be more than happy to teach you. more than happy to teach you.*



8. Who's your favorite American?

*Jim Sherraden of Hatch Show Print in Nashville. I attended a letterpress workshop by Mr. Sherraden about 15 years ago that turned out to be pretty influential in my work.*

9. Do you also hate Canadians?

*I am very sorry to inform you that I have A LOT of Canadian family all over the place. You can't pick your family, right?*

10. If you could fish one time with anybody past, present or future, who would it be?

*I would fish with my grandfathers again. Sorry for the emo answer.*

11. Is Perch really your last name, or is it your art name, or do you just like the alliteration? I like the alliteration.

*Nope, Perch is the first fish I ever caught, so my nom de plume became Peter Perch. Of course the alliteration is nice, too.*

12. Is there a David Hasselhoff Day where you live?

*No, I am not German. I am looking for freedom, though.*

13. How can we as ignorant Americans procure your art?

*Go to the Internets and type in [www.peterperch.com](http://www.peterperch.com). Click at the shop link and order away. I also do commissions.*

14. Favorite music? I'm assuming techno or speed metal...or yacht rock.

*Music and art go hand-in-hand for me. I started drawing "commissions" on my friends' bags, shirts and bedroom walls when I was about eight, and these were usually copies of metal and punk album covers. I recently did the album art for my cousin's and fishing buddies' band, the Paceshifters, so that has been playing a lot in the studio lately. We also share a studio where we screenprint out art and merch.*

15. If you came to visit America, would you call me? Could we hang?

*Sure, wanna go fishing in June? I have to be in Panama June 15, and I could swing by Florida on my way home!*



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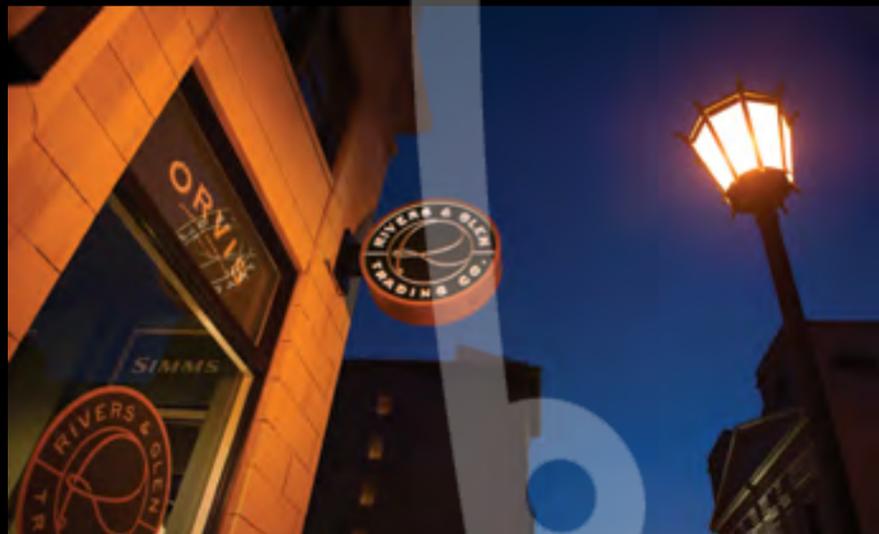


 PETER  
PERCH





LIVE LIFE IN THE CURRENT



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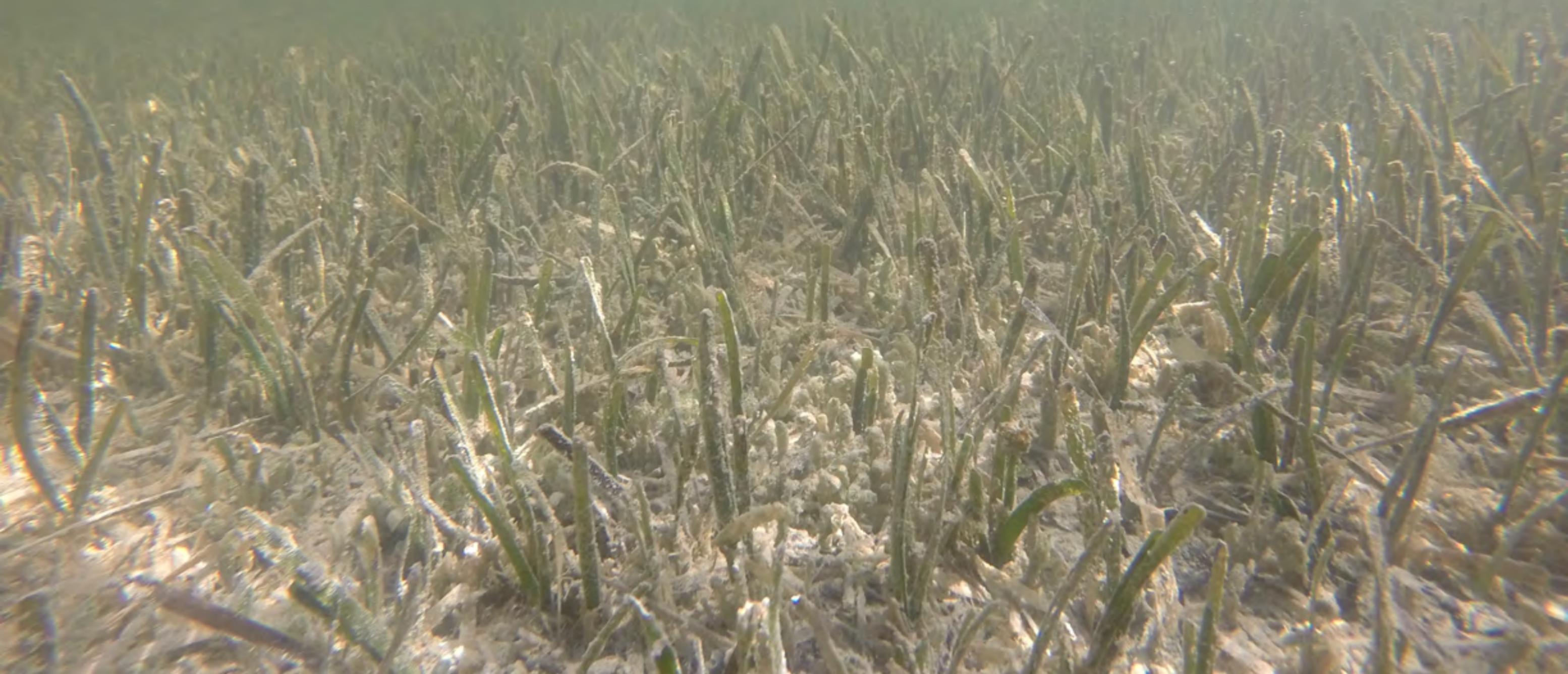
*strategizing*  
Aaron Adams

FLIES from a Fish's Perspective



There's really only one approach anglers can take to tying flies - from a human perspective. We can't get into fishes' heads to see things from their points of view. But that's no excuse for the standard approach to fly tying. We can incorporate into our fly tying strategies what has been learned about how fish use sight and sound to find and eat prey. To some extent this has been done in the freshwater world, where conversations about how trout perceive and evaluate flies are common among trout anglers. Not so much in the salt-water world, where more often than not it's "it looks buggy, should catch fish."

My fly tying strategy is based on the science that is available on fish vision and hearing, and how light and sound behave in the water. I'll list the factors I use in fly tying, in order of priority, and then share some of the knowledge about fish vision and hearing that brought me to this point. In order, the factors I use in my fly tying strategy are the movement of the fly in the water, the fly's profile (the shape that is seen from below or from the side, or silhouette), and finally, color.



## SOUND AND HEARING

Sound is at least as important as vision to fishes. This is because sound travels 4.5 times faster and also travels farther in water than it does in air, so is important at both local and far distances.

A sound wave is a pressure wave that includes two linked components – pressure and particle motion – that are difficult to separate, so for the remainder of the discussion I will use the term “pressure” to refer to both. These waves displace particles as they travel through air, water, or other medium. Low frequency sounds tend to travel farther than high frequency sounds.

Pressure waves are also generated by objects moving through the water – whether a swimming fish, a scurrying prey, a moving boat, or wading angler. These waves travel through the water in the same fashion as sound waves. This is why stealthy anglers are more successful when wading than those who move quickly across the flat, pushing a wave of water as they move. This also explains why a fish reacts to a fly that plops loudly into the water.

When sound travels through water, its intensity diminishes

with distance. This is because the wave is weakened by scattering and absorption. Scattering is the reflection of the sound wave in directions other than its original direction of movement. This can be caused by structures such as rocks, and by the bottom or water surface, both of which are different densities than water. This is especially true in shallow water, where the bottom and water surface are close to one another, and greatly limit the distance that a sound wave can travel relative to the open ocean. In deeper waters the bottom and water surface aren't as influential, and sound can travel farther. Absorption is the conversion of the sound energy to other forms of energy, and doesn't differ between shallow and deeper water.

Fish have two means for detecting these sound and pressure waves (and the associated particle displacement) – an inner ear and a lateral line. A fish's inner ear is composed of a series of fluid filled canals and chambers. The inner walls of the chambers are lined by cells with hair cells – hair-like extensions that protrude into the chamber. In these chambers are small bones, called otoliths. As the otolith moves around in the chamber, the cilia detect the movements and send a signal to the brain.

As a sound wave travels from the water to the otolith, it is moving between substances that have different densities. This causes the sound wave to change shape, and causes the otoliths to vibrate differently than the rest of the fish. The vibration of the otoliths stimulates the cilia, which sends a message to the brain. The brain then has to determine whether the sound is of consequence, and whether it is from a prey or preda-



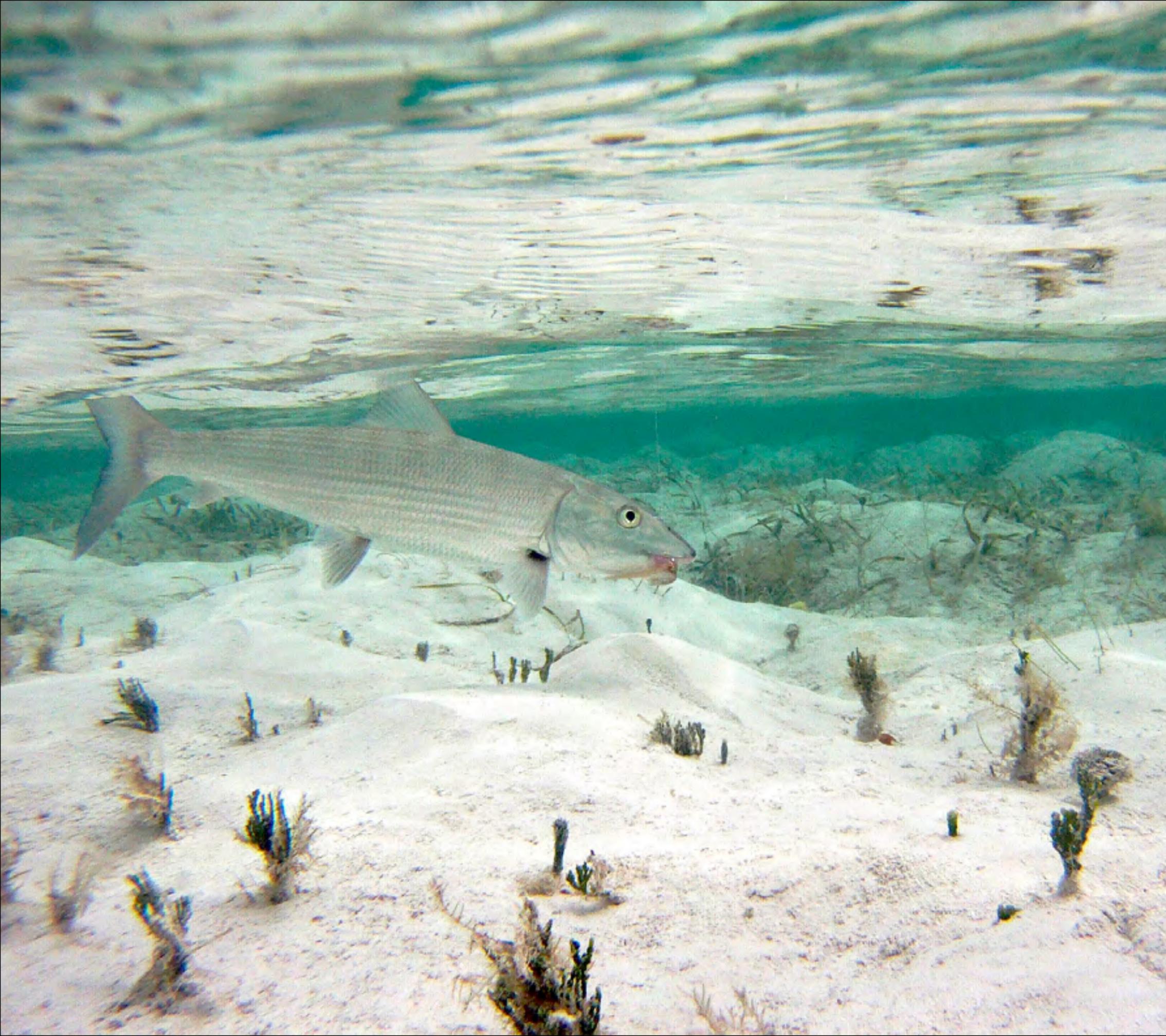
tor. The sound waves traveling through the fluid within the inner ear can also be detected.

Some fish use their air-filled swim bladders to increase their hearing ability. The air within the swim bladder is compressed by the sound waves, so is more sensitive than the inner ear. In many fish, the swim bladder is connected to the inner ear, which allows the air

bladder to act as an amplifier of sound (the swim bladder acts like a transducer, reradiating the pressure components of sound as particle motion to the otoliths). Even in many fish without a direct connection between the swim bladder and inner ear, an extension of the swim bladder is close enough to the inner ear to at least partially amplify sound. The inner ear system of fish is good at detecting sounds at both close range (30 feet or so) as well as from distant sources (a mile or more).

A great compliment to the inner ear system of fish is their lateral line system. The lateral line is a series of pores, through which specialized cells extend. The lateral line extends along the length of the fish, from just behind the head to the base of the tail. Sticking through the

pores are specialized cells, called neuromasts, that contain sensory cells embedded in a jelly-filled casing called a capula, which extends into the pore. As pressure waves pass over the fish, the capula is moved, which in turn moves the sensory hairs within it, which sends a signal to the brain. The lateral line detects the particle motion aspect of sound from near sources, 30 feet or less.



## THE BASICS OF LIGHT IN WATER

Before we get into what fish are able to see, we first must understand how light behaves in water. Visible light (the portion of the light spectrum that we are able to see) is composed of many different wavelengths (colors). The general makeup of these colors is red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, plus all of the small transitions in between. Beyond either end of the visible spectrum are wavelengths of light that we are unable to see – infrared on the outer end of the red end of the light spectrum, for example, and ultraviolet past the violet end of the spectrum. Each of these colors has different wavelengths, which means they interact differently with the material through which they are passing. The color with the longest wavelength is red, and wavelengths become shorter toward the violet end of the spectrum. In general, the longer the wavelength, the faster the light is absorbed in water. I say ‘in general’ because there is more than just water molecules in water, there is a lot of other stuff which also influences the behavior of light in water.

In clear, open ocean water, and to a lesser extent on tropical flats, the color red is no longer visible below a depth of 20 feet or so. Orange and yellow are lost soon after. By the time a depth of 30 feet is reached, blue and violet are pretty much the only colors left. Despite what you read in marketing materials from tackle companies, this doesn't mean that things that are red disappear in deep water, they just take on shades of gray.

This all changes when the water is not clear, when there is plankton or sediment in the water. Many coastal waters contain a lot of plankton, which absorbs short wavelength light (such as blue). Since longer wavelengths, like red, are absorbed by the water, green becomes the dominant color remaining in coastal waters because it penetrates to the greatest depth. In coastal waters with a lot of suspended particles, estuaries for example, green is also absorbed and scattered (bouncing off suspended particles in the water), which leaves red, orange, and yellow as dominant remaining light wavelengths, at least as far as they can penetrate into the water. This is why orange and yellow is one of my favorite color combinations when fishing tannin-stained estuary waters in the tropics and subtropics.

These patterns of light attenuation (light being absorbed and reflected/scattered) also occur horizontally. This means that in clear, open ocean, tropical water, if a fish is 30 feet away from your red fly, it won't see the red color. So important considerations when choosing colors for flies are: how far away will the fish be when you make your fly presentation, and what wavelengths of light will be strong enough to reflect the colors in the fly?

Light traveling through water is attenuated in many ways. Some light is reflected by particles that are suspended in the water. This reduces the amount of light that continues to pass through the water, so reduces the intensity of the light at greater depth. Other light is absorbed by objects, such as rocks, and the light is converted into heat. Light is also absorbed by plankton, which use it for photosynthesis. And still more light is absorbed by the water, which once again is converted to heat. At one extreme, in murky, plankton-filled coastal waters, light doesn't penetrate very far. At the other extreme, in tropical oceans light penetrates for hundreds of feet.



The scattering of light by particles is an important concept to understand, even when fishing apparently crystal clear waters of a bonefish flat. This is because the light that enters the water reflects off suspended particles, scattering light in all directions. So water that seems to be gin clear from the surface is not so when viewed from below. The next time you fish what appears to be a clear flat, put on a SCUBA mask and stick your face underwater. You'll be surprised at the amount of light scatter. This results in decreased ability to see colors when looking horizontally.

As light hits the water surface, some is reflected back into the air, and some enters the water. When light enters the water, it is refracted (in a sense, it is bent). This is because air and water are different densities, so light travels faster in air than in water. When the angle of the water surface changes in relation to incoming light, such as on a wavy water surface, the relative angles that the light are refracted change, which creates the undulating motion of light and shadow underwater. The undulating mix of light and shadow may be one reason many prey have vertical barring or blotching as camouflage.

The amount of light play underwater can have an influence on how well objects are seen by fish. In general, I think that on days with wave action it is harder for fish to see small objects – they can become lost in the mix of light and shadow that results from the refraction of light through the multiple angles of the water surface. So on days with wave action, try using larger flies. In contrast, on calm days when there is less underwater light play because the light is being refracted at mostly the same angle, small flies may be more appropriate.

How a gamefish visually detects its prey depends a lot on the relative positions of the gamefish and the prey. For example, although the scattering, absorption, and other factors affecting light in the water may limit color visibility when objects are viewed horizontally, these same factors mean that the silhouettes of



prey are easier to see when viewed by a gamefish from below. This is because light falling down from the sun is 100-1000 times brighter than light emanating from below, so a gamefish viewing a prey from below against the sun can see that prey's silhouette regardless of the prey's coloration. In fact, research has shown that the conventional

wisdom that the white ventral (belly) coloration in aquatic animals makes them less visible from below is false. This is because the amount of light from above is so much brighter than light from below that the downward light overwhelms any color or reflection from the underside of the prey, thus producing a silhouette.

The scattering of light presents even more of a challenge in murky or muddy water. There are so many particles in the water that light is reflected in all directions, making visibility very difficult. To get a better grasp of this, think about driving through a fog bank at night. You can see more with your low beam headlights on because less light is being reflected back at you than when you have the high beams on. Dark objects tend to show up best in murky water conditions because they provide the maximum contrast

against the otherwise murky, backlit background against which a light colored fly won't stand out. This is a major reason black flies are productive in murky water. It's also true that larger objects can be spotted from farther away, so in these conditions you may want to consider using larger flies.

## FISH VISION

The eye of most gamefish is similar to the human eye – it has a cornea, lens, and retina with rods and cones. Gamefish



are able to regulate light entering the eye through a pupillary aperture, which acts similar to the iris in the human eye via contraction and dilation. Some fish also have behavioral characteristics that place them in situations with light levels to which they are best adapted, such as moving up and down in the water column during the night and day, or feeding exclusively during the day or night. Other gamefish have flaps that are used to moderate the amount of light entering the eye. This is often the case for fish that feed on the bottom – they have a flap that blocks

some of the bright light from above so that they have better vision as they focus on the bottom (this is similar to anglers reducing glare by using a wide-brimmed hat and side flaps on sunglasses to reduce side-glare when sight fishing on the flats).

Within the retina are specialized cells called rods and cones. These cells contain pigments that absorb the light and send signals to the optic nerve that connects to the brain. Rod cells are best suited to low light conditions, and provide sensitivity

to light, especially to images in low light. During high light intensity conditions (daylight), many rods are protected by a specialized pigment that shades the rod cells. This is when cone cells are most important during daylight conditions, and are most responsible for color vision and visual acuity. As light levels change, the ratio of active rod and cone cells changes to maximize vision. This is not an instantaneous process, which is why it takes a while for eyes to “adjust” to drastic changes in light levels.

In general, a fish species' vision is the result of the habitats to which the fish is best suited and the fish's behavior. A species of fish that feeds nocturnally or is limited to regions with murky coastal water, for example, will have eyes that are highly sensitive. This species does not need much light to see its prey and surroundings, but this comes at the cost of visual acuity. In contrast, a species that is adapted to clear water with high light intensity, like tropical flats, will be less sensitive to light but have better resolution (in good light conditions, the species will have good visual acuity). In addition, fish that specialize in feeding in high light conditions tend to have eyes capable of processing fast moving images, such as a Spanish mackerel chasing a scaled sardine. In contrast, red drum are adapted to generally murky estuarine and coastal waters with lower light levels, so likely have lower speed vision.

Also related to fish habitat and behavior is the field of vision; that is, where a fish is looking. Since cone cells are responsible for visual acuity and color, they are typically most dense on the part of the retina that

is exposed to the portion of the field of vision that is most important to the fish. For example, fish that look upward for their prey tend to have high concentrations of cone cells on the lower region of their retina. Similarly, tuna, which forage in open waters, have cone cell concentrations that focus on forward and upward portions of the field of vision.

So the mixture and locations of rods and cones tells us the level of visual acuity a fish has, whether they can see fast movements, if they are more likely to feed during night or day, and where in the water they feed. The amounts and types of cones tells us which colors fish are able to detect. I'll leave it to you to research the colors that your favorite fish can detect, but here's a teaser: red drum see green rather well, and also blue, orange and yellow to a lesser extent. Spotted seatrout see purple and blue rather well, green to a lesser extent, and red not well at all. Tarpon have better vision than humans - they have high visual acuity, can see well in dark and light conditions, can see all of the colors we can see in the visual light spectrum, and can detect ultraviolet.





## TRANSLATION TO FLY TYING STRATEGY

When strategizing the creation, selection, and presentation of flies, I start with the basics and add on components if the situation requires. Step one is to determine the conditions in which I'll be fishing. Do I need to be prepared for murky or clear water, backcountry water that is tannin-stained or the crystal clear water of a tropical flat? It's always a good idea to have flies for sunny as well as cloudy days. What about the species I'll be targeting – are they adapted best to feed in bright or dark conditions, clear or murky water? The answers to each of these questions is critical to designing, selecting, and presenting flies in coastal waters.

Let's start with murky coastal waters, because I think this situation allows the most basic approach. Since underwater visibility is greatly limited, gamefish primarily use their lateral line and inner ear to locate prey, and vision becomes important only at close range. For this reason, a fly's motion and sound are the most important characteristics to consider. A whistler with a full, webby hackle collar pul-

sates with every strip, sending out pressure waves that can be detected by gamefish. Similarly, Mangrove Muddlers and other similar patterns that push water as they are stripped can be located by gamefish in murky waters. Of course, poppers can be very productive in poor visibility conditions – the “pop” sends out strong pressure waves, followed by weaker pressure waves from water drops splashing down. Plus, you can alter the strength of the popper's pressure waves by changing how strongly you strip the fly.

In murky water conditions, it's important to work the fly slowly. This gives a fish the chance to find the fly. Your strips of the fly can be varied – from strong and fast to gentle and slow – but you should give ample time between strips to allow the fly to stay in the water for a sufficient amount of time. Keeping the fly in the water longer allows time for the waves generated by the fly to travel through the water and be detected by the fish's lateral line or inner ear, for the fish to determine the source of the movement, move toward the fly, and once close enough, visually identify the fly and eat it.

Once the fish determines the source of the movement, and locates the general location of the fly, it has to see it. Remember that in murky water with a lot of suspended matter in the water, light is reflected off all those particles, so things are backlit in almost every direction. Generally in these situations, light-colored flies are tough to see because they have little contrast from their surroundings. In fact, a lot of prey fishes, such as mummichogs, in murky water are very lightly colored so that they are more difficult to see. In these situations, darker flies are usually best because they contrast the most with their surroundings, and stand out well against a backlit background (i.e., provide a good silhouette).

Since sounds/motion and contrast are most important in these situations, color and detail are secondary considerations at best. Since the fish is using sound/motion to find the fly, much light has been attenuated quickly, and much of the remaining light is reflected to make most objects backlit, I think it's most important to focus on fly profile and action

– does the fly have a shape, size, and movement of a prey the gamefish expects to see?

Murky water is on one end of a continuum that covers the range of relative importance of sound and sight to gamefish pursuing prey (and flies). Other conditions present similar challenges for gamefish to locate prey, such as nocturnally feeding fish. Dusk and dawn are a bit along the continuum, where the relative importance of sight changes over time. This should be reflected in your flies and how you present them. Under each of these conditions (dark of night, dawn, and dusk), gamefish rely heavily on motion/sound to locate prey, and the relative importance of sight changes with the changing conditions.

At night, there is so little light that sound/motion and contrast are the only factors I consider for flies. A fly that moves water can be located by a gamefish, and since I expect a nocturnally feeding fish to be adapted to seeing in low light conditions, I use a black fly that contrasts well with the star- or moon-lit sky to a fish feeding from below.

At dawn and dusk, the gamefish is exposed to constantly changing light conditions – at dusk there is less light with each passing minute, whereas at dawn light is increasing over time. When fishing for tailing red drum in late evening and into dusk, I usually start with

ferent challenge. Light is initially very low, so flies that move water and provide good contrast are essential. As light levels increase, however, color can become important very quickly, so even the flies that rely on motion and contrast for low light dawn conditions



should have appropriate colors. The importance of light at dawn changes quickly enough, I believe, that if you rely on changing flies to keep up with these

a fly that contains flash of colors that red drum can see. Gold or copper and green flash on tan or brown flies are my favorites. As dusk approaches, I often switch to a fly that is darker and moves water, such as a muddler, seaducer, or even a surface fly such as a gurgler.

Dawn patrol provides a bit of a dif-

light changes, you will be forever behind the curve. This is why, when fishing at dawn for tarpon, I usually tie on a purple toad – the toad provides the motion necessary for tarpon to find the fly in low light conditions, purple provides sufficient contrast in low light (though not as good as black), and as light levels increase, tarpon are able to see purple.



At higher light levels and clearer water, the relative importance of color in flies is greater. But even under the best of conditions, remember that light is lost just as quickly in the horizontal as it is in the vertical. Your fly still must have the motion, size, shape, and contrast to entice the fish to investigate the fly and get close enough to the fly to see color. Then at closer quarters the colors you use for the fly help to close the deal. This is where knowing what portions of the light spectrum gamefish can see comes in handy.

Another important component that helps sell the deal in close quarters when sight is most important is pattern on the fly. One of my favorite ways to add pattern to flies is with a permanent marker. This is especially true for bonefish and permit flies, where vertical barring on shrimp flies or blotching on crab flies is effective. In baitfish patterns, the patterns created by contrasting colors - like a black back to a blue side to a white belly - is as much about the pattern created by the contrasting colors as it is the colors.

So there you have it, a straightforward strategy for creating saltwater flies - focus first on motion so that the fly sends out the pressure waves that will attract fish, then the fly profile to match the conditions and prey, then color and pattern to close the deal. And best of all, it's based on scientific research of fish, light, and sound.

*Aaron Adams is Director of Science and Conservation for Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, and a Senior Scientist at Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute of Florida Atlantic University. He's authored three books that translate fish ecology research into angler's terms, contributed chapters to Chico Fernandez's books on bonefish and redfish and Jim Klug's book on fly fishing in Belize, and authored numerous articles in fishing magazines. This article contains text that appears in his book **The Orvis Guide to Fly Fishing for Coastal Gamefish.***



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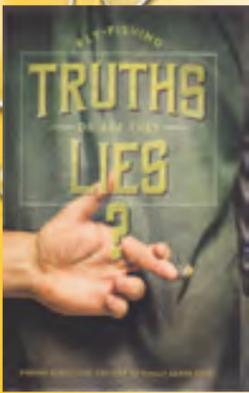
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SHAPED BY WATER  
ON BROOK TROUT & BROTHERHOOD

By Michael Garrigan

Photos: Justin Steiner and Michael Garrigan



We came together deep in the mountains of western Maryland like three rivers meandering, rambling, and converging after years and miles of being apart. Justin weaved his way upstream out of the north. Jeff rambled his way out of the west, downstream out of West Virginia. I came in from the east out of the fog of work with hopes of brook trout on dry flies and reconnecting with old friends.

Ten years ago, far up in the North Maine Woods, Jeff and I worked on the Baxter State Park Trail Crew, grew our first mustaches, and tore out our Redwing steel-toe logger boots on countless miles of dark green trails that all seemed to reach out to some small sandy pond and a few moose. I reconnected with him after reading an essay he wrote about fly fishing and the peace it brought him after an untimely death. I was struck by the words, the sentiment, and the painting of light coming through the church windows. I couldn't quite shake the idea that we never fished together, so we picked a watershed halfway between us and set a date.

A few days later, Justin contacted me wondering if I was free to take him out fly fishing. As college roommates, we bonded closely over beer and bicycles. We stayed in touch over the last decade through e-mails, a scattering of letters, and mix CDs. Life and work kept us from being as close as we once were. Nevertheless, we quickly fell into the comfortable rhythm that close friends share. I was stoked to hear that he was getting into fly fishing, sure it could give us something to reconnect over, and convinced him to come down to meet us with the allure of easy, beautiful fish on dry flies.

Long drifts slung with three-weight rods quickly became the rhythm of the weekend. Somehow we all met at the campsite within minutes of each other, quickly said our hellos, and with the afternoon pushing up over the mountains, headed to the stream. With bugs in the air and rods set up, Jeff took his gear and headed upstream. Jeff is a no frills kind of angler. He's got two rods without any fancy cursive branding, one medalist reel, and some flies in an old army ammo can—classic garage sale finds. His waders are a combination of long johns and Carhartt pants, and his boots are approach shoes for climbing. After 10 years, his distinctive style has only gotten more idiosyncratic. To watch someone approach a pursuit without being bogged down in zingers, brand names, reams of tippet, and its intricate vernacular is refreshing. Keep it simple. Be out on the water. Be in the moment.

I started Justin off with a dry-dropper rig, and showed him how to read the water, where to cast, and the delicate balance of line control and natural drifting. Within the first set of riffles, Justin quickly landed a handful of brook trout. Looking up as he released the fish, Justin said with a big grin, "This does not suck, man."

"No," I chuckled, "it certainly does not."

We worked that way upstream, Justin finding confidence with each brook trout caught. It's been 10 years since we were this close; riding our bikes through dark spring nights in Pittsburgh, weaving in and out of traffic, watching the lam-

bent lights of the city shutter past buildings and bridges. We pounded our bikes up steep hills from bar to bar and through Frick Park in search of solitude and wildness. Never found in the city itself, but only on those long rides where the blur of light and wind would create a landscape of mountains all



leading to one of the three rivers that define the city. Without ever planning it, we always ended up along one of those slow moving bodies of water. Water began shaping us long before we recognized it.



That night, with the susurrus of Big Run as our soundtrack, we built a big fire, cooked steaks, and shared stories of the past 10 years. The amount of bourbon sipped increased as the temperature decreased. Fish we have caught and lost, streams we fished, forests we ventured into, people we used to know, all centered around the fire, water shuffling in the background. We could've been speaking in tongues or muttering nothingness. It didn't matter; it was a long day of working the water together that ran through us and was doing the talking.

The gray morning's only light filtered through the dark green Hemlock shadow, scattered throughout

budless maple and oak. With the temperature dropping near freezing the night before, the birds were quiet. We stretched out of our warm sleeping bags and toward a heavy breakfast of bacon and fried egg sandwiches filtered down with rough black coffee. We decided to trek up some tributaries to explore new water and stay away from the crowds for the day. Spring is a few weeks behind, so the trilliums and trout lilies were only beginning to sprout. We found a few fish and by lunch, it was time for Jeff to head back home. We said goodbye and promised to do this again soon. It won't take randomly reading a magazine piece to reconnect us; we have water to fish.



*Fish we have caught and lost, streams we fished, forests we ventured into, people we used to know, all center around the fire, water shuffling in the background.*



Justin and I went back to where we fished the day before to explore more water. By the time we got there, the air was filled with caddis, midges, and mayflies. We came to a long, slow pool with sporadic rises. Justin told me to take it, so he could watch my approach. The sun was at our backs, reaching the end of its own drift, so I stayed back from the water, aware of my shadow.

I slowed everything down, letting my fiberglass rod fully load before making my forward cast, certain to let the orange stimulator slowly drift down to the water, keeping it from slapping and splashing. Its hackle rode off the water, a little bright dot on a canvas of limestone and rhododendron. My line slack, yet taut. I casted into the moment and didn't leave until I landed a handful of brookies out of the pool, never once spooking them.



Before turning back to the car, we stopped and shared a sip from our flask, watching the woods gather the last bit of light for another cold night and gave thanks to the good water for shaping our evening into a totem we'll carry with us to other waters. All the little tributaries of experience that had run into our lives over the last few years finally made their way into the present moment, deepening the current that connected us.

Driving home, back east through Cumberland, Md., I was struck by how the town is shaped by the meeting of waters. The houses, streets, and the people are blended into the valley and watershed. I admire places that, instead of damming it up or trying to control water in some way, embrace it and let it shape their lives. My relationship with Jeff and Justin is the same. We have let the water give us direction. We have been shaped by water. Our friendship is the confluence of waters, of brook trout caught on dry flies late in the evening and steaks cooked rare over hot coals after a full day of fishing. Even though our paths diverge, I know they'll rejoin after they're done meandering through valleys and collecting from their tributaries.



*Michael Garrigan loves living along the Susquehanna River with his wife and dog (Whitman) where he spends his time fly fishing for trout and small mouth bass, writing, and teaching high school English. He also publishes a combination of words and photos at [www.raftmanspath.com](http://www.raftmanspath.com).*



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*Bonefish in the Keys:  
The Canary in the Coalmine?*  
By Alex Woodsum

I peer into the dusty water, scanning for subtle signs of movement or color that betray nearby bonefish.

A nurse shark swims lazily by the bow, unfazed by the skiff bearing down on it. A fresh mud appears in thick, gray ribbons, but we only see the flutter of a ray's wings propelling itself in pursuit of morsels. It's late afternoon, we are nearing the end of the flat and have yet to spot a fish, and have only had a few shots all day. A ripple in the water catches my eye, and a school of 30 bonefish suddenly comes into focus, dark against a brown bottom. They advance in formation, leaving tiny mud puffs as they dig for shrimp and crabs. The wind comes up over my right shoulder, and my back stiffens as I begin my cast, expecting the wind to plunge the fly into it. It lands well and several of them light up, one coming up triumphantly with the fly. After landing this solid six-pounder, we get into two more schools and actually manage to land two more nice-sized bonefish over the next half-hour—a great day in the Keys and more bonefish than I've seen since I moved here six years ago.



There is a consensus among guides and anglers that there has been a significant decline in the bonefish fishery, both in average size and numbers of fish. Bonefish stories from experienced guides and anglers who have fished the Keys longer than I are most illustrative of the changes. Bill Horn, author and former Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife and Parks, has been fishing the Keys for 43 years:

*Late April, twenty years ago in the Middle Keys, I was fishing solo with Captain Bus Bergmann. The tarpon were AWOL, and after hours staring at empty water, Bus pointed with his pole to a nearby bar, and offered, "That can be good for bonefish on this tide." I stowed the 12-weight, rearmed myself with a 9 and an experimental bright orange Clouser dubbed "The Navel."*

*We neared the edge, when a smoky puff of mud bloomed 50 feet out at 11 o'clock. I caught a glimpse of Coke bottle green and heard, "going to 9, 45 feet." I fired out the fly, let it sink and began a hop and stop retrieve. On the third hop the line snapped tight and a fish surged away. Clearing the few remaining feet of fly line, the backing knot clattered out of the guides and chartreuse backing melted off the spool. 150 yards away, the fish stopped and the rod tip bounced as he shook his head. A big one. My heart was in my throat for ten minutes until the net sagged and the built-in scale read 10.25 pounds. My first, and only, double digit Keys bonie.*





*Bus repointed the bow toward the bar. Hungry bones flooded the flat, and in fairly short order we had the hooks in another half dozen fish, landing or losing in equal measure. And as quickly as it started, the tide slacked and the fish were gone; the finest short episode of bonefishing in my Keys' flats fishing career.*

*Not long after, the bones disappeared from the area. Every few years, Bus and I check it out with wan hope that fish are back. We looked again this spring, realizing 20 years had passed since that morning. Will this great fishery ever rebound, or is it consigned only to the wistful memories of those of us with gray hair?*

*Mark Krowka, a legendary captain who has been guiding for well over 30 years in South Florida and has won dozens of tournaments and caught hundreds of*

*grand slams, shared an amazing story about fishing a tournament in 1996:*

*Miamian Tony Arias and I were feeling pretty good about the two double-digit bonefish that were "lounging" in the comfortable release well of our vessel. It was the fourth day of the five-day Islamorada All Tackle Bonefish Tournament, and with this pair of whoppers, we would successfully fill up all five of the allowable weight fish slots. The second day, a low pressure system had taken up right on latitude 25, and blew steadily over 30 knots, with medium to heavy rains, and no end in sight. Three other boats were ahead of us in line at the dock to weigh their big bonefish before releasing them. For much of the '80s and '90s, this waiting game was the norm. The full field and plentiful supply of large bonefish created tense drama.*



*The All Tackle is now over 50 years old. Capturing big bonefish, which Islamorada was (and still is) famous for, and adding release fish (under eight pounds) was not enough to win. Catching VERY big bonefish was the only way, but because of all of the anglers fishing the fruitful "downtown" Islamorada area, sometimes a seemingly solid performance was not good enough.*

*At the end, we had our five weight fish, including a couple of 11's and a fish over 12, and over a dozen releases. And we finished in 5th place. 5th place? Jose "Pepe" Lopez, with veteran captain Billy Knowles, had set the all-time tournament record with some 12 and 13 pounders and a pile of releases. All during a spell of weather that would keep most anglers at the dock.*

*That was just how good bonefishing was up until that year. Causes of the decline, particularly the general absence of those wide-bodied, monster bones are still head shaking mysteries. Thankfully, our stock, particularly in the middle Keys, has been increasing for three or four years. And encounters with the large bones that helped put Islamorada on the fishing map are become more frequent once again.*

These stories are common, and bonefish may be the delicate “canary in the coalmine,”...



These stories are common, and bonefish may be the delicate “canary in the coalmine,” their decline a potentially ominous sign of greater issues. The loss of huge swaths of seagrass, declining water quality and the recent disappearance of redfish and other species from areas where they were once plentiful seems to confirm that. Deer, wading birds and many other animals in the Everglades have also been seriously impacted by the changing water flows and water quality that are also impacting Florida Bay and the Keys. There’s a theory that large-scale netting of bonefish north of Cuba several decades ago could have impacted the Keys population, since bonefish spawn offshore and their larvae drift in the ocean currents for several months. Hopefully with the netting stopped, some of the population will rebound. Still, the significant water quality issues merit addressing. A bill just passed the Florida legislature that would build a reservoir to store and clean fresh water coming from Lake Okeechobee, hopefully a sign of progress to come.

There are encouraging stories emerging of late that indicate the bonefish population may be recovering. Large numbers of small fish have been reported in the Lower and Middle Keys and recently, Captain Jared Raskob and his angler, Mark Richens set the all-time points record for the Spring Fly Bonefish Tournament, notably catching two bonefish over 14 pounds, among many others. Anglers and guides wait anxiously to see if the positive trends last, but recognize that there is a long way to go before the overall fishery is restored. As the birthplace of flats fishing, it is the desire that people will continue to rally to protect and restore the remarkable Florida Keys fishery, and observe changes in the bonefish fishery in the context of the larger issues at play.



[www.TheFiberglassManifesto.com](http://www.TheFiberglassManifesto.com)

*Alex has been an avid angler all her life, and dedicates much of her time to giving back to the fisheries she loves. Growing up in New England, she spent time trout, bass and striper fishing. After moving to Florida six years ago, she now spends most of her free time in the salt. After a number of years working with BTT, Alex is currently working on the Now or Neverglades Campaign, as well as The Conservation Angler, Appalachian Mountain Club, and Fay Ranches among others.*



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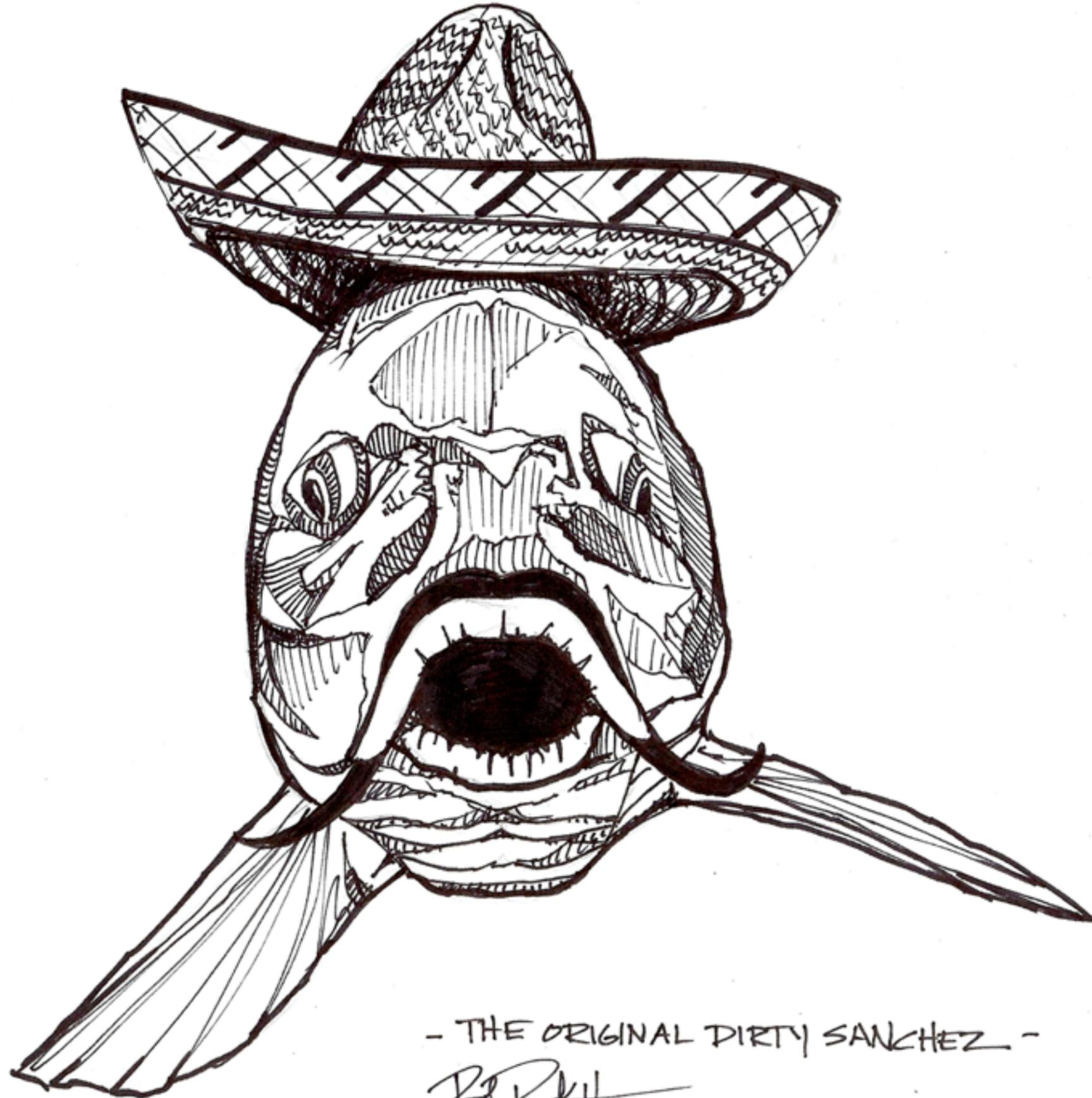
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The Back Page Retrospective with Paul Puckett



- THE ORIGINAL DIRTY SANCHEZ -

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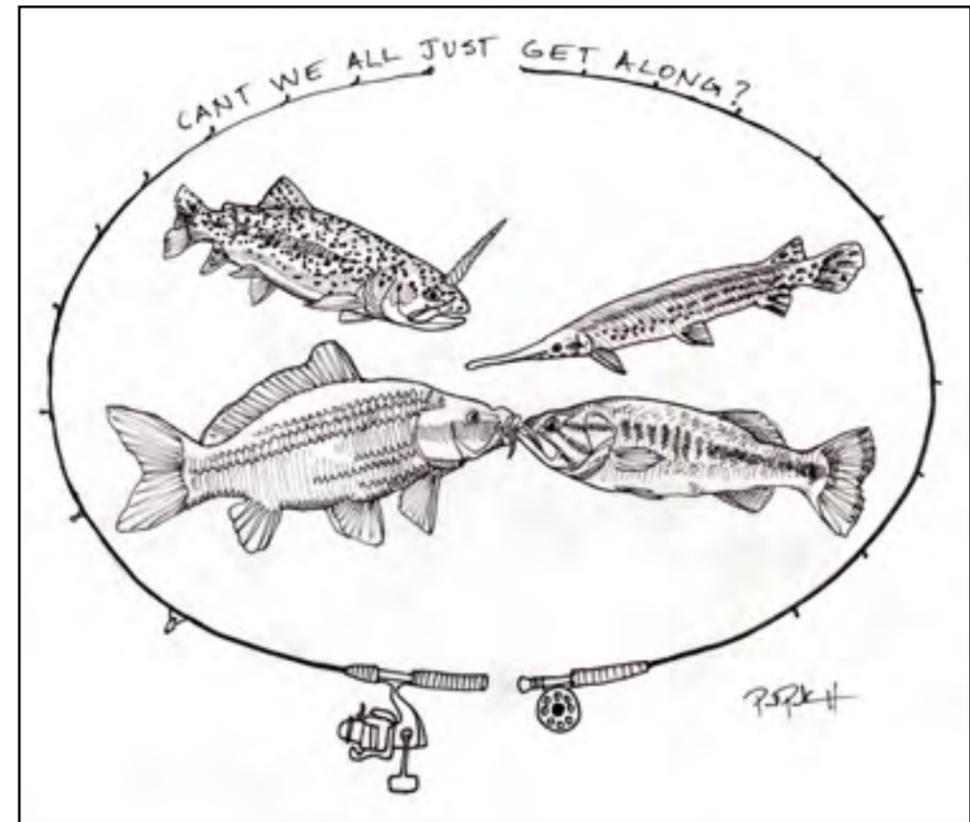
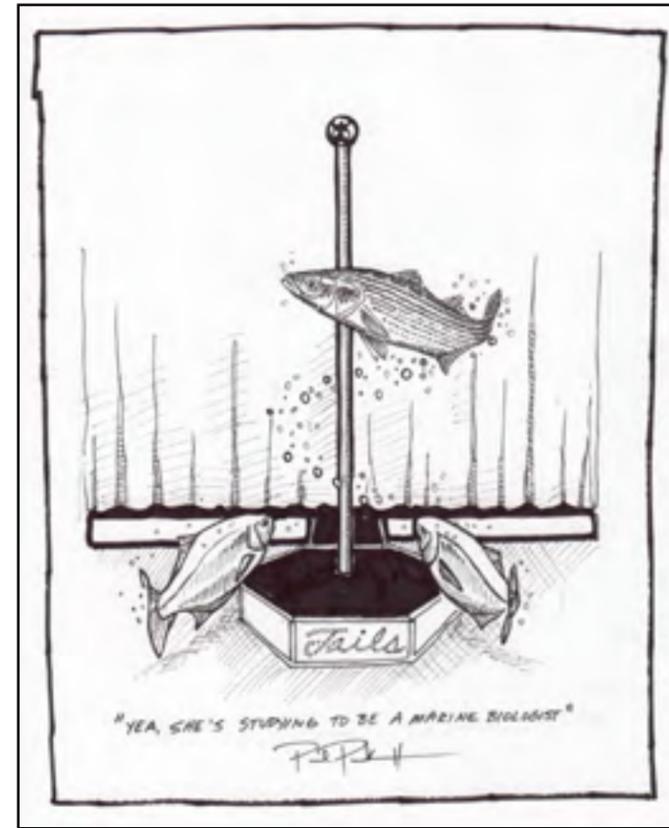
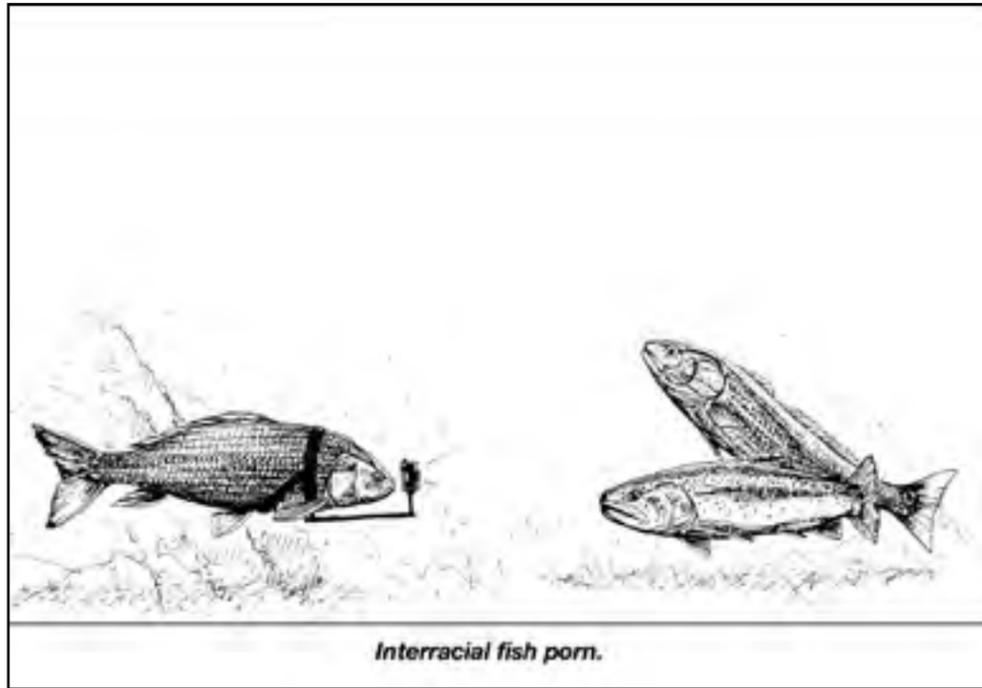
Paul Puckett is a lovable lout, a libatious ginger-headed leprechaun, and a Texan. Paul's artistic talents have been lauded by far more classier than I, but for the last few years he has been gracious enough to bestow upon us one cartoon per issue (one more reason he's one of my favorite artists, and arguably the best big spoon in the biz). The following pages are not only the finest collection of fly fishing cartoons ever curated, but a window into the soul of our generation's greatest fly fishing humoristic illustrative mind...if that was actually a thing. From the crevices of my deepest, darkest corners, thank you, Paul. Thank you.

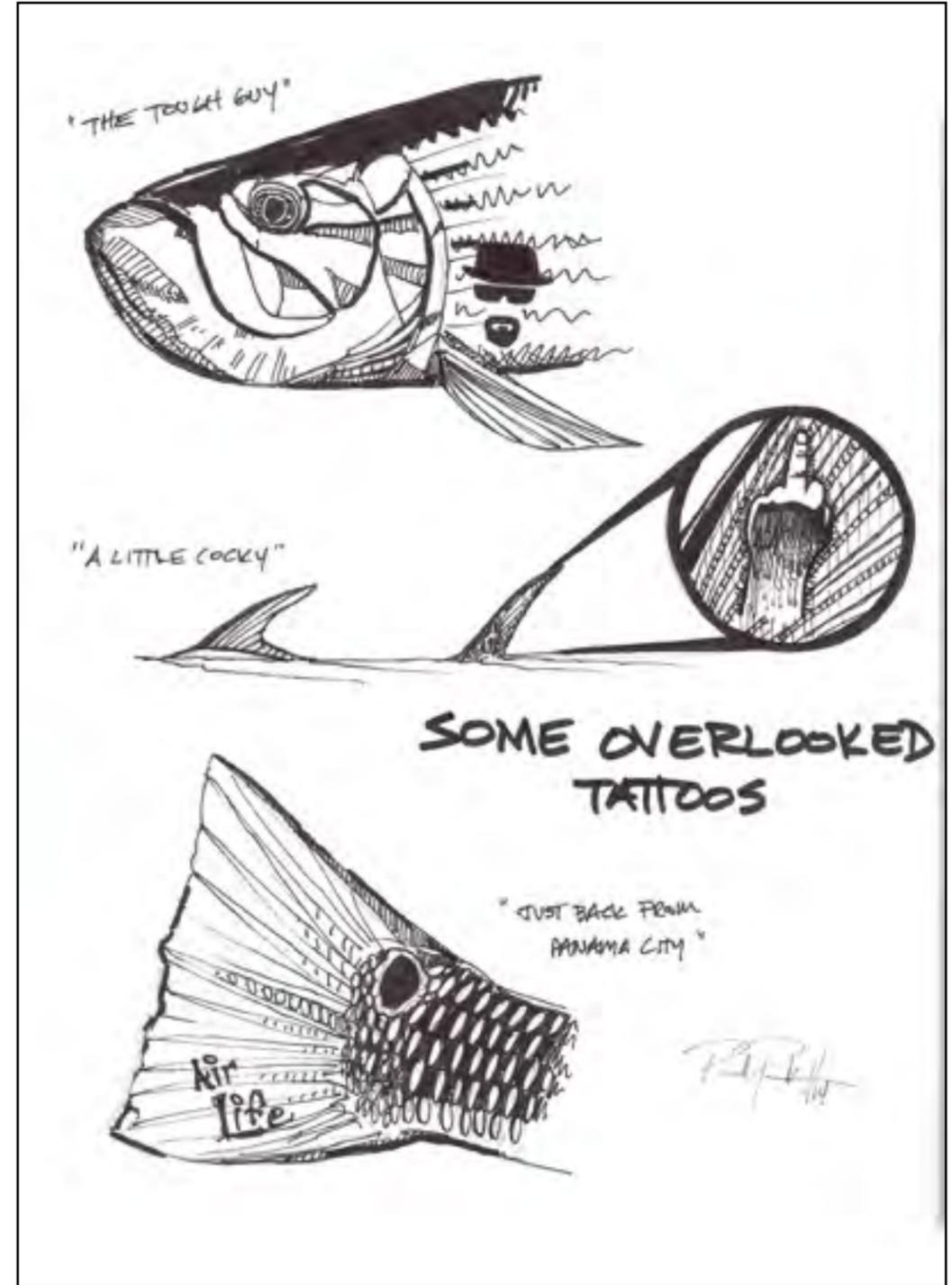


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*Paul Puckett*









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