

Bucket-list game and fish: Tarpon

I started creating my outdoor bucket list when I was around 10 years old. My sporting life consisted of fishing for trout in the creek by our place and hunting rabbits, pheasant and doves on nearby farms. It was not until someone gave me a copy an Outdoor Life magazine that I made my first deposit in the bucket.

The magazine was from 1967 and featured a story about a man, named Stu Apte, who spent his days fishing in the Florida Keys for an unbelievable fish called a tarpon. The magazine had pictures of 100-pound silver tarpon, chasing flies in gin clear waters, and I knew this was something I must do. Apte set more than 20 fishing world records, with 12 of them being tarpon.

The Atlantic Tarpon, or *Megalops atlanticus*, just to make your day, does not have a commercial value, which means it has not been studied much and little is known about their life cycle, migrations and habits. They have little to no food value as their flesh is very dark and strong tasting making it nearly inedible. They can be in front of you one second and gone the next. Tarpon are fickle eaters, often turning down every offering you put in front of them. They can shut down and “sulk” on the bottom for days on end.

So, what is the attraction? When they appear in the inshore waters of the Florida coast, and at times in Texas, fishers from everywhere want to test their mettle, spirit, strength, stamina and tackle against what is one of the toughest fighting fish on the planet. Tarpon are known for ferocious eats on a fly in very clear and shallow water (often 5 feet or less), blistering runs challenging the best reels, and an aerial show one is likely to never forget. I have seen a person fight a fish on 50-pound class tackle for over an hour, and lose.

Tarpon have a very bony mouth, making hook sets difficult at best. Most tarpon throw the hook clear after a jump or two, leaving anglers to say they “jumped a tarpon.” They shake their gills and twist their bodies as they clear the water. Anglers must learn to bow their rod to a tarpon when he jumps, to create slack or the line is quickly broken. This is fittingly referred to as “bowing to the silver king.”

In our part of the world, Atlantic tarpon range



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

from north of Virginia to south of Brazil, occupying the waters of the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. Tarpon have a cousin in the Pacific side known as the Indo-Pacific tarpon or *Megalops cyprinoides* for the scientific folks.

Tarpon are a living dinosaur, having been here for over 100 million years. The first tarpon caught on rod and reel was a 10-pounder landed in the 1880s. It wasn't until the 1950s that the true value of tarpon as a sport fish was discovered when an angler landed one on a fly rod that topped 115 pounds.

The current world record for a tarpon stands at 286 pounds, 9 ounces, caught in 2003. There have been many stories of released fish weighing more than 300 pounds. The current fly rod record stands at 202 pounds, 8 ounces, taken in Homosassa, Florida.

One unique feature of a tarpon is they have an air bladder that serves as a pseudo respiratory organ. It is lined with capillaries that can remove oxygen from the air. This allows tarpon to survive in waters that are very low on oxygen content, such as tideless estuaries. Juvenile tarpon has to “air breathe” to survive, so you will see them roll on the surface quite often until their gill system develops.

When you are in a battle with a tarpon on your fishing rod, as the tarpon tires, he may roll and gulp air into that air bladder. This additional oxygen is one of the reasons the tarpon is such a strong fighter.

The average life span of a tarpon is close to 55 years. One tarpon in captivity made it to 63 years old. There are stories of 100-year-old tarpon. It is believed that the tarpon life cycle begins offshore with a ritual of males and females swimming in a circle, called a daisy chain. The female will lay up to 12 million eggs.

The larval tarpon are transparent, ribbon-like creatures and drift back to shore on the currents, eventually finding their way into backwater estuaries, sometimes in water



This aerial show is what tarpon are famous for. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

that is brackish, for the first year of their life. They will then move to other habitats, in the general area, favoring deeper waters near mangrove shorelines and cuts for the next several years.

As they mature, the adults may migrate for long distances, usually in schools, throughout the rest of their lives. These fish may return to fresh water, swimming up rivers, in search of baitfish. Some tarpon will not migrate, choosing to stay in one area their entire life. The famous mullet run along the Atlantic and Gulf coast occurs annually, and you can bet the tarpon migration will follow.

Since tarpon have no food value, they should always be released after the battle, sometimes requiring you to nurse them a bit at boat side, gently rocking them back and forth. You can purchase a Tarpon Tag for around \$50, which will legally allow you to keep a tarpon but there really is no need to do that. All a taxidermist needs to create a trophy mount for you are an estimate of the measurements and a picture if available. Remember, that monster 180-pound tarpon might be older than you.

I have a fishing buddy in Colorado that thinks anyone who fishes with flies larger than size 18, and with a rod that is more than a 3-weight, lacks moral character. For the record, chasing adult sized tarpon with a fly is going to require 3/0 to



Here, I release an 80 pound tarpon after a battle on a fly rod. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

5/0 hooks, with a piece of 100-pound test monofilament leader, all on a 12-weight fly rod.



The amazing ride of life took me to the Florida Keys, where I spent more than 20 years learning how to fish, and tarpon became my specialty, releasing over 1500 tarpon. I met, became friends with, and fished with Apte on several occasions. The man is truly a legend among fly fishers and the world of tarpon. He is still in Islamorada today and I

bet he can still put a fly on a tarpons nose whenever he wants.

If you are interested in testing your mettle, shoot me an email and I will “hook” you up with some of the best guides in Islamorada. They are usually booked a year in advance, so decide early. April through July can be an exciting time. Give tarpon a try if it's on your bucket list. I bet they become your favorite too.

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