

***DIVERSITY*, THE LOUISIANA SALT WATER**

FLY FISHERS “SPICE OF LIFE”

By Tom Tripi

Let's see, this is the second day of a long weekend; rain and wind made the first day unfishable, while the following morning was perfect – cloudy and light, five knot winds. I'd been out since first light and just started to get into a groove. My last three casts resulted in three different fish, all on the same fly. Yea, that's about right for a day like today, but should I try a fourth cast? Considering where I was fishing, it probably would have resulted in a duplicate of one of the first three fish I landed or perhaps just a “trash fish” like a sheephead or black drum. But, when you're hot, or more precisely, when the fishing's hot and you're in the right place at the right time, who cares! Backtracking for a minute, I was using my Mohawk Spoon, a 2/0 spoon-type fly on a “heavy” six-weight rod. My first cast resulted in a nice black bass or largemouth (thought it was a redfish at first), it was 18” long and very healthy. The second cast got a small speckled trout or spotted weakfish, only a pound and a half or so; a typical, larger schooling spec. And the third was everyone's main goal, *sciaenops ocellatus* or *Mr. Redfish*. What was amazing was that I was fly fishing in a canoe anchored in one spot, and all casts were in the same general location, an approximately 25' wide crystal clear flats area just outside a wooded cypress swamp backwater. That

particular area is near Lafite, just south of New Orleans. There was little tide movement that day and the water was only 18' deep. The area consisted of a grassy bedding area with open sandy bars and a few oyster beds. It was **redfish heaven!** However, I was still thinking about making that forth cast. But what about those troublesome trash fish? They are very common in these waters. I didn't want to break the streak I had running. I began to think however, if I could just catch a dozen sheephead in one outing, I would have been elated, but just long enough for my arm to recover so I could get out there and repeat the process. You may not know this, but a five to eight pound sheephead on light tackle is one hard fish to land. And what about black drum? Well, a fly fishing world record was recently set near here for that so called trash fish; it was 47 pounds and was taken on a 20 lb. tippet. Nevertheless, just try your everyday five pound "Black" on a six weight; you'll know what tackle busting is all about!

Well, I decided not to make the forth cast, just too risky for this area; after all, I might have had to make two casts in order to get the next fish. So I moved to a new spot, and kept my third "three casts - three fish on one fly" streak of the season intact. As you probably guessed, fly fishing is a game for me. I have not killed a fish in about 15 years, and sometimes I cast hook-less flies, working just for the strike only. So, in this case, you can make the next cast, but you must take a different species on that next cast, or your streak is broken. If you move to a new spot, you then start a new streak (hopefully). I've only had one four fish streak; the fourth in that case was a nice ladyfish.

The next quandary, where could I move too? There was a lot of water to read in this area, without a lot of paddling and pole pushing. Behind me, the bay opened up into a rig-head (Christmas trees) studded area that connects directly to the Gulf of Mexico. But I was scheduled to fish that area in a few days. That bay area is a great body of water to fish. It has shallows, holes and dredged underwater channels that go down to 40' or so in areas. That means in winter it's an ideal area to fly fish, as reds and bass migrate to deep water when it's cold, and migrate to sunny flats when it's warm to grub for crabs, snails and small clams. It's good, clean salty water with everything from jacks and cobia to small sharks and bonita. But I don't like working in open water in a canoe, even though it was an 18 footer. So I opted to work the mangled shoreline in front of the cypress swamp.

The underwater structure of a cypress tree swamp is a real "jungle"...snarled, twisted root structures called cypress knees are all over the place, there are long, twisted roots that run in and out of the water like garden hoses, and there are dead falls all over the place. I was a mere 100 yards from where *redfish heaven* was, but now, I was in *bass heaven*. I was also only 300 yards from really open water. I anchored my canoe about 50' from the shoreline between a row of trees. Because I lose four or five anchors a year, I now use a four pound brick and heavy hemp line as an anchor. The bricks won't hurt the environment when lost, and the hemp rots away.

Since this was a new area dominated mostly by bass and reds, I decided to continue a testing program on a new pattern, the Deceiving Popping Spoon. The pattern is tied on a saltwater keel hook and combines three proven concepts in one very effective fly - the ever popular gold spoon, the typical deceiver, and the popper. (The only other version of this fly I've tied is called a Muddled Deceiving Spoon – you can probably figure out what that fly is like, but that's another story.) This particular fly was the black/gold/chartreuse combination, as shown in the photograph. The water was three to four feet deep, and quite clear, it was 8 AM, but the sun was still behind the tree line. Bass were working the surface right next to a large set of cypress knees, probably taking advantage of a hatch of dragonflies. This was a one cast- one fish situation. If you hooked one nice fish, all other fish would be spooked due to all the commotion. I was casting a fairly fast 9' eight weight, an Orvis Long Belly weight forward line and a hand made 11' leader with a 1X tippet (no loop connections anywhere). I made a long, arching curved cast, out to about 50', way behind the cypress knees. I quietly retrieved to within three feet of the knee, then let the fly stay in a stationary position for at least 30 seconds (a timed 30 seconds). Then I gave the fly a slight pop/gurgle and let it rest 15 seconds, and repeated the popping. That second pop is always the charm; a nice bass came out of the water and hit the fly hard, making all sorts of fuss on the surface. That was good, he was staying on the surface; if he went deeper, he'd get lost in those cypress snarls, and would have likely broken off. So I kept the rod tip high, the line tight and made him ride the surface until he

came closer to the canoe. He was still thrashing when only a nets length away from me. So, I just relaxed the tight line and he was gone, a clean, simple release. I repeated the process for three more fish along the shoreline, got two smaller fish to the canoe, and lost a big one to the roots. Bass that inhabit these fringe bay/marsh areas are strong and robust; very typical for this environment. However, although there's a lot of food in the brackish water food chain, and great cover, few bass get over four pounds. One way, if you dare, to get a really big brackish water bass is to try fly fishing an area like this at night, during a quarter moon. It's a little spooky, until you get one of those really "Big Bass" that only venture out after dark. The problem at that point is this, you're in bass country, you think it's a big bass on the line, but it's **so big**, are you sure? Just don't try to do a hand pick-up of an "unseen" brackish or salt water fish at night, at least not in Louisiana! The photograph speak\ for itself; that's a seven pound bowfish. He has a mouthfull of fine, but nasty teeth.

Well, so much for that quick morning run into the backwaters marsh. Four species were landed, as I did get a black drum. The next day of my long weekend included a scheduled a run into the open bay, to work those rig heads. My host and I were concerned about the ever present late morning and afternoon thunderstorms which were forecasted. They are major problems on open, shallow water. We decided to make a quick run to a few nearby rigs located in about 10' of water, in hopes of getting a few of the big reds or specks that we heard were in the area. We were outfitted with nine and ten weights with sinking

lines and heavy, nine foot leaders. The fly of choice for my companions, Clarke Lozes and Mark FeBornstein, were typical 2/0 chartreuse deceivers; mine was a weedless 2/0 popping spoon fashioned on a gold worm hook. Because of the storm threat, we only stayed outside a short while, not long enough to make anything happen. We did notice a school of big jacks working the area as well as schools of bonita, both great quarry for fly fishers. We were still near the edge of the bay, but worked the edge of the marsh/grass flats area just before it drops off into deeper water. We were into the reds fairly quickly, they like that close cover. A trout, two nice reds, a sheephead and a black drum, all were taken within a few minutes. All were respectable, but not the big fish we were after; I could only muster a three pound red and a few school trout. The latter were caught on an old fashion Nine-Three streamer fly, tied on a No. 6 stainless hook; a very effective pattern for me in these waters. I usually carry a dozen of these flies in all sizes; but the most effective is a No. 2, tied full. The Nine - Three imitates a myriad of small minnows and immature game fish that thrive in this edge environment. I use a short, two inch strip, hesitate and strip again method in my retrieve. The pause allows the streamers' long hackle to wave and flutter, while the fly drops slightly in the path of retrieve. Trout find the method irresistible, and usually strike during that pause/drop. Another fish that loves this pattern and stripping method are bluefish; but they usually dominate the barrier island surf around here.