

Tarpon Fishing Trip June 21 thru June 24, 2019

Mike Mathias

With great anticipation, I drove my car to the long term parking lot at 3 A.M., to get my 6 A.M. flight for a return to Tampa, Fla. where I will be on a 4 day Tarpon fishing charter, with my good friend Tony DeRobio.

Fortunately I have some air miles with United Airlines, which will save me some money, but unfortunately I have to stop in Washington DC for a 4 hour layover for my flight to Tampa. These are the compromises when you do these sort of trips on a budget. Anyhow, I finally arrived in Tampa and after a stop at the rental car company, I was on my way to Tony's house in Springhill, where I will be his guest for this trip. They are Italian and his wife is a great cook. Another way to save money, mooch off of others. Not really, as dinner out was on me at the restaurant of their choice, but it still was a good deal.

The guide Lowell is a young guy 30 years old that is reasonably priced, and that Tony has known and fished with for a while. He fishes out of a 17 foot flats boat that is rigged with a poling platform, electric GPS trolling motor and front casting platform. It is quite



fast being powered with a 90 horse Yammy with tiller steering and no center console. Instead he has 2 seats with a back fastened to the top of a large cooler. It worked out quite nicely. The rods provided were a 10 weight TCIRX, over lined with a 12 line , and a 12 weight with a 12 line. Tony also supplemented the lineup with his 12 weight rod. The charter is for 4 days, Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday. Tony and I will split the daily charter fee, again making this an affordable trip. The charter rate is also quite reasonable to begin with. We will be fishing a area that is roughly 9-10 miles north of the ramp in Bayport, Fla., that we will launch from. this area is known as the Nature Coast and is where the Chassahowitzka River flows out of the back country into the Gulf of Mexico. The Tarpon on their northward migration follow this coastline toward the Pan Handle of Florida past the famous Homassa area. Generally we will be fishing in 2 to 5 feet of water while trying to spot rolling schools of Tarpon, or individual fish on the surface. Of course the guide will be able to see fish under the surface, and will guide us to cast in the proper direction to cast, in an effort to try and present a fly in the fishes window, which the guide says is the size of a shoe box in front of them.



On our first day we arrived at the ramp at 6 A.M. for the trip north. Lowell said we would fish a deep hole in the back country, where he had hooked into fish earlier, so he sped thru the mangrove channels. The ride was like being on an amusement park ride as we traveled in very skinny water at a high rate of

speed barely missing the mangrove trees. Thank god this guy knew where he was going as we zoomed through this beautiful natural wonder. As we approached the hole he wanted to fish, wouldn't you know it, someone was already there. The guide was pissed. We made a few casts here but soon left for the shallow coastline. As we approached the area we will be fishing, the wind was blowing from the NW at about 10 to 12 knots and the surface of the water was a bit choppy, making it very difficult to see any fish rolling on the surface. Especially for a newbie like me. We did manage to see quite a few fish ,but combined with the murky water and the speed with which the fish were traveling the fishing was difficult. The temperature

was in the 90s and it was very hot, but luckily we had a nice breeze, which made it bearable. Tony and I would take 30 minute spells up on the casting platform during which time we both made casts to fish that would either follow the fly and not take it or would stab at it and veer off. It was very frustrating for us as well as the guide. In addition I had a bad case of Buck Fever as I saw these huge fish coming towards me, with the guide calling out instructions, and not being able to make a decent cast thereby blowing the chance. Let me tell you, your heart starts to race when you see these big fish rolling on the surface, as I blew several opportunities with horrible casts. I was so rattled that I could not tell 9 o'clock from 3 o'clock based on the boats bow being 12 o'clock. The guide was supportive, but my fishing partner Tony busted my balls to no end. After 9 hours on the water and 5 bottles of water I welcomed the ride back to the boat ramp as the apparent wind cooled me down.

Saturday morning we arrived at the ramp at 7 A.M. as Lowell our guide requested. His thinking was that we would allow the sun to rise a bit longer so he would be able to see the fish more readily. The weekend boat ramp traffic made for a further delay as all the weekend warriors were out in force, but we managed to head out on our 40 minute ride to where we had seen plenty of fish yesterday. Once again as the tide began to ebb the fish showed up on their journey north. But the same scenario, with the wind, and this morning clouds, and the fast moving fish, again made for tough fishing. Don't get me wrong, the guide worked his ass off to position us in front of fish, but either we saw them too late to get a cast off or they refused our offerings. Another long, hot day resulted in discouragement on the long ride back. But as we all know this is what fishing is all about, especially Tarpon fishing. Besides we were not in the



Keys where the water is crystal clear and you can see the fish coming 100 yards away. We will keep at this till we get results.



The third day at the Bayport ramp was quite uneventful, as we beat most of the weekend boaters at our 6 A.M. departure. The water seemed to be a little

clearer and with the sun nice and bright, the plan was to pole a particular flat where the fish hold up to rest before continuing their migration. We would be looking for fish either sleeping or resting on the bottom, or leisurely swimming around in a more peaceful environment. By this time my Buck Fever had abated and my casting had improved to the point where I was hardly being ridden by my fishing partner. Of course that is nearly impossible for Tony, as he will always find something to bust your cookies about. But I digress. It was at this time that I could finally figure out what I was supposed to be seeing in trying to locate these fish under the surface. Having standard polarized glasses as I do does not do the trick. I was able to see fish that were close by, but the fish that were more than 50 feet away I could not see. Tony and the guide could see them with their Costa Sunglasses made for this type of fishing, but I knew that I was at a distinct disadvantage as to casting exactly where the fish were. Unless they were on the surface, I had to depend on the guides directions. A lesson well learned with regard to eyewear for this type of fishing. Anyhow after Tony and I had several close encounters hooking up truly sight fishing we had both failed. I was resting while my friend was up on the casting platform when the guide called out to Tony, "fish

at 10 o'clock 70 ft." as he poled closer, Tony started casting the Chartruse Toad fly right in the window. The fish turned, grabbed the fly and took off. A quick strip strike made the 6 ft. Tarpon jump completely out of the water exposing it's muscular 16"-18" deep body as it crashed back into the water with a big splash. As quickly as it began



it was over as the line went slack and the water filled the void where the fish once was. As the fly less leader came in, the fish must have crashed down on the leader and broke the Bimini Twist at the bite tippet. Sad but happy at the opportunity of a jumped fish Tony retied the leader with no Bimini Twist as I climbed up on the platform. It would turn out that this would be the only take for the day, but again some fish showed some interest in their slumbering state. Tomorrow will be our last chance to catch one of these prehistoric fish.

On the last day we had hopeful expectations with perfect conditions, flat mirror like seas and very little wind. As we powered the final 9 miles to Chassahowitzka Bay and Lowell started to pole the 2-4 foot water, fish were rolling everywhere. We had perfect conditions, and if we could not do it today we probably would not do it. As the guide continued to poled the skiff in the flat ass calm it was my second shift on the bow in ready to make a cast. My nerves had finally settled down as Lowell tracked down a few fish coming toward the boat seeing them on the surface, he told me to start casting and I was lucky enough to place the fly in the take zone. As the guide said "strip, strip strip", one fish turned and grabbed the



fly. The Puglusi style baitfish pattern, black over purple with red eyes did its job as I stuck him hard and off he went, peeling backing from the Redington Bohemouth fly reel. I fought the fish for about 1 hour or so with the 12 weight rod bent to the maximum with all the power coming from the rods butt. This fish was

determined to beat the hell out of me as it towed the flats boat around, with the drag set as hard as I dared, but still running out as required. Unfortunately or fortunately depending on how you look at it the fish never jumped. After gaining and losing the flyline a couple of times as well as backing, I was determined to land this behemouth on the one and only chance I would have on this trip. About half way thru I needed a drink of water and when Tony handed me the bottle, I was shaking so much I could barely get it up to my mouth. As I continued the fight, the fish came right under the boat and I had to get on the rail of the boat and stick half

of the rod into the water, bending under the boat. As the line went under the boat it nearly missed the trolling motor as the fish took off forward again. I finally got one quick head shake above the water as the battle continued.

Slowly the fish began to tire as he got closer and closer to the boat as I applied maximum pressure. When the fish approached the boat, the leader slipped into the tip top for an official catch. As we all jockeyed for position to land this giant, the guide reach down to grab the fish, but it made one last lunge for freedom and the fly line instantly broke above the leader. Apparently the constant abrasion weakened the fly line to the point of failure. So there are no pictures except for the headshake. I was of course in disbelief, but as they say, shit happens. In the end I was absolutely amazed at how strong these fish really are. The guide estimated the fish at over 6 ft and about 125 lbs, it beat the hell out of me reeling it in, and will probably be the fish of my lifetime on the flyrod. Most people put hours and hours in trying to catch a Tarpon, and I was lucky enough to catch on my first time out.

While I was recovering from my catch, my buddy placed a fly in front of another one of these oncoming fish, and had his Chartreuse Toad devoured once again.



This fish, unlike mine immediately jumped completely out of the water and when it landed was still on as it peeled off backing from the Billy Pate reel. After another extended fight and a few more jumps the fish remained hooked. The battle further continued until the Silver King was 50 ft from

the boat. In a last attempt to be free to continue its journey north, it made one last jump and broke the 80 lb bite tippet. Tony's first words were "that was freaking incredible". On closer look, it looked like the tippet was abraded thru. Once again the guide estimated his fish to be between 5 and 6 ft. long and about 100 lbs. We continued to try and catch more fish to try and break the boat record of 3 fish landed, but it was not to be. We were quiet on the way back to the ramp, reflecting on what a fantastic day we had.

It is amazing how powerful these prehistoric monsters are, and I can now understand why Tarpon fishing can become so addictive. Do I have the bug? Maybe, will I be back....? Maybe. So overall I would say we had a successful trip.

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