

TARPON – NO ORDINARY FISH

By Capt. Jon Zorian

Tarpon are an extraordinary fish, which have survived since prehistoric times due to their amazing ability to adapt in a number of various environments. They are amazing to those lucky anglers who get a chance to experience the unbelievable fight and acrobatics displayed after a hookup and they are equally amazing to marine biologists regarding their life cycle and ability to exist almost anywhere.

Tarpon are also known as tarpum, sabalo real, cuffum, silverfish and silverking. They are of the Latin category called *Magelops atlanticus*, which is a member of the bony fish family known as Elopidae.

Widely spread on both sides of the Atlantic, tarpon have been seen as far north as Nova Scotia and as far south as Brazil. Across the Atlantic, tarpon are found in large numbers along the African coast from Senegal to the Congo. Some travel great distances in a migratory manner and others are referred to as “resident”, which do not travel outside of their immediate habitat.

Boca Grande is known as the tarpon capitol of the world due to the large number of tarpon that arrive annually in early to mid April and remain through most or all of July for the purpose of spawning. Warming water temperatures are the catalyst to their movement up from the Florida Keys to Boca Grande and further points north along the west coast.

Generally, tarpon will begin gathering at Boca Grande when gulf water temperatures reach the low 70s. Tarpon like warm water and temperatures up to the mid or high 80s, which occur as the season progresses through June and July.

Why Boca Grande has been the major spawning ground for Caribbean and Gulf tarpon, since long before record keeping, is not known. Most agree that Boca Grande Pass offers tarpon the opportunity to quickly nourish in preparation for spawning due to the large supply of food that flows in and out of the pass on the tides in the way of crabs, shrimp, various small baitfish, plus other small marine life.

Tarpon are also scavengers and will bottom feed on dead fish. However, longtime Boca Grande guides do not fish for them in this way as a hookup generally ensures damage to the tarpon's insides as a result of the bait being swallowed. Local guides use the longtime proven live bait method of tarpon fishing and hook their catch in the upper bony lip of the tarpon, which causes no harm to the fish and allows for a clean release.

Night feeding

Spawning actually takes place at the end of their stay. Through several months, from first arrival, tarpon are in a pre-spawning routine of grouping and adding necessary nourishment, especially for egg-laden females. Due to the tremendous daytime boating activity at Boca Grande Pass, much feeding is done at night on crabs and shrimp.

Daytime baits include crabs and shrimp, plus squirrel fish and mutton minnows. Tides, time of the day, time of the month relative to the moon and wind direction have much to do with a captain's choice of bait and method of presentation.

Spawning and Reproduction

When the time is right, a female will head offshore being escorted by a group of male tarpon. It takes more than one male to fertilize the millions of eggs released by a healthy female. Marine biologists and research studies indicate the actual spawning process takes place far offshore in blue water, about 100 miles. However, the larvae somehow make it back to the Florida west coast passes by way of tide movement and end up inshore among the shallows and mangroves of Charlotte Harbor, Pine Island Sound and surrounding waters.

The smallest tarpon larvae collected offshore at the approximate area of spawning measure one quarter inch in length. Those collected inshore coming through the passes and inlets measure from one to one and a half inches. Experts feel this movement of larvae back from far offshore to the nurseries takes about a month to two months. The smallest sized larvae collected have been found in water as deep as 500 hundred feet.

From the larvae stage to juvenile tarpon is somewhat of a mystery. Small size tarpon are not easily found, even though they do grow up in the nursery environment of the shallows and mangrove roots.

Rare

Juvenile tarpon are rare to catch. One night about 20 years ago, while snook fishing from the famous Boca Grande Phosphate Dock, the author was fortunate enough to catch a three-pound tarpon, which was a rare circumstance. The little bundle of energy bit a nice sized shrimp fished at the end of 80 pound test line tied to the end of a short joint Calcutta pole. That's the way many snook were caught off the old phosphate dock...no drag, just one-on-one with twenty pound and better monster snook who had unbelievable strength. More than once, a full grown tarpon took it all, including the pole.

Maturity and Age

The time period from birth to sexual maturity is longer than most people would suspect. An average male tarpon reaches sexual maturity between seven and 10 years of age and at approximately 40 pounds in weight. For females, the time period is ten to thirteen years with an average size at sexual maturity being 60 to 70 pounds. Males reach a maximum of about 100 pounds and females can reach a size of over 200 pounds. They can live to be 55 or 60 years old. The average tarpon caught at Boca Grande is 22 to 25 years old based on research done during a five year study that began in 1989 and was contributed to by members of the Boca Grande Fishing Guides Association.

Tarpon differ from most all other fish in that they can exist equally well in either fresh or salt water and require no adjustment time when going from one to the other. In addition, they have an air bladder that allows them to breathe from the surface when trapped in water with no oxygen. The air bladder also offers tarpon a ballast feature, much like a submarine. To lie at deeper depths for periods of time, they can expel the air from their bladder as necessary.

Boca Grande Pass and surrounding waters offer tarpon a perfect environment for spawning activities. Their annual visit is like clockwork and so dependable that most people take the fishery for granted. There is the possibility that one day these fish will gather somewhere else if boating and fishing pressure continue to increase as it has done during the past decade.

The mighty Silver King is an awesome and special fish. Hopefully, their annual visit to our area will continue far into the future.

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