

DURBAN BAY AND SLOW MOVING SUBMARINES

By Brendon Jewaskiewitz

A few weeks ago, I was still enjoying my varsity vacation and managed to do some fishing in Durban Bay with my friend, Bruce Barratt. We fished mainly off the Mangroves area into the deep channel at low tide, and at high tide we fished the flats leading right up to the mangroves (and even got snagged on them a few times!).

The first evening we fished there was pretty good. It was a spring low and we were fishing off the mouth of the channel going into the mangroves. We saw a lot of action – lots of scurrying and jumping mullet and the occasional springer. Bruce was the first to land a fish – a small kingfish (which he then returned). Shortly thereafter, I landed a nice shad (about 35cm). We spread out along the dropoff and shortly Steve (another friend of mine) landed a shad as well. We found that the best fishing method was to let the fly sink right to the bottom and then to retrieve it really slowly. Just as it was getting dark, we moved closer together and spoke while we fished. Suddenly Steve yelled that he was in, and we heard a rapid but short-lived screech from his reel. On examining his tippet, we discovered that the knot had failed and pulled loose. Since then he has had the dubious reputation of being the only person we have met who has fished his entire life without knowing how to tie an improved clinch knot. Looking back, I wish I had not mocked Steve, for his fish (presumably a springer or a large kingie) was not the only one to be lost at the mangroves.

The next two trips Bruce and I had to our “spot” were on high tides, so we fished Crazy Charlies, gurnard flies and epoxy flies to see what we could find on the flats. Again, we saw hundreds of mullet cruising around. On the one trip I managed to catch a striped grunter literally in the mangroves, and on the other trip I caught a Cape Stumpnose in the channel next to the mangrove forest. Two more for my species list!

It was on the second trip that I had my most exhilarating flyfishing experience ever. It was nearing evening and the tide was dropping, so Bruce and I began to wade out towards the deep channel. I put on my favourite saltwater fly (a yellow and white glass minnow) and had a few casts. I was not really optimistic about catching anything as the water was very quiet, and I was content to enjoy the peacefulness of the sunset over the skyline of the city.

I was casting and then slowly retrieving the fly along the bottom. On the third cast I felt a solid resistance and thought that I had got myself hooked up on a piece of junk. I was busy cursing about it when my rod tip began to dip and the fly-line began to steadily remove itself from my reel. I can still remember how eerie the feeling was. It was almost as if I had hooked a slow-cruising submarine. Well, whatever it was it pulled with such brute force that no matter how I angled it, it just kept heading out into deep water at a constant rate. My backing started to disappear into the water. In the meantime, Bruce had dashed across to lend a hand. He got my fighting butt out of my rucksack and I was just about to put it on when the fish took off again.

The whole fight consisted of long runs at a slow pace with periods in between of no movement at all. We deduced that it was probably a skate, but skate or no skate I was desperate to see the fish, as my arms were aching terribly. My stomach was sore from the pressure of my rod against it and the fish wasn't moving. The tide had gone out considerably so I waded knee deep towards the fish to get more lift on it. It was already dark and we couldn't see much. I just remember that as I got the fish to move again, my line suddenly went dead. You don't want to know what the following conversation entailed. I had got to within 5m of my fish and then lost it. My tippet had worn through at the hook due to the fish's sandpapery mouth. I can still remember how my legs shook as I gazed at the city lights across the bay. We packed up and went home shortly afterwards, and for the duration of the 45 minute journey we spoke about “the fish”.

When I got home, I saw that my stomach was bruised, and, to add injury to insult, it remained painful for about a week. Well, I've learned my lesson – now I don't move without a good shock tippet. And I keep my broken tippet in a special place just to remind me in case I get slack about shock tippets again. Later trips to the bay have yielded nothing but crabs and a few gurnard. An omen? I think so. Well, we'll see next year.

■ *Courtesy of “The Leader”, monthly newsletter of the Fly Fishers Association of Durban.*