

The Boca Grande Pass

by Gerard Barnardt

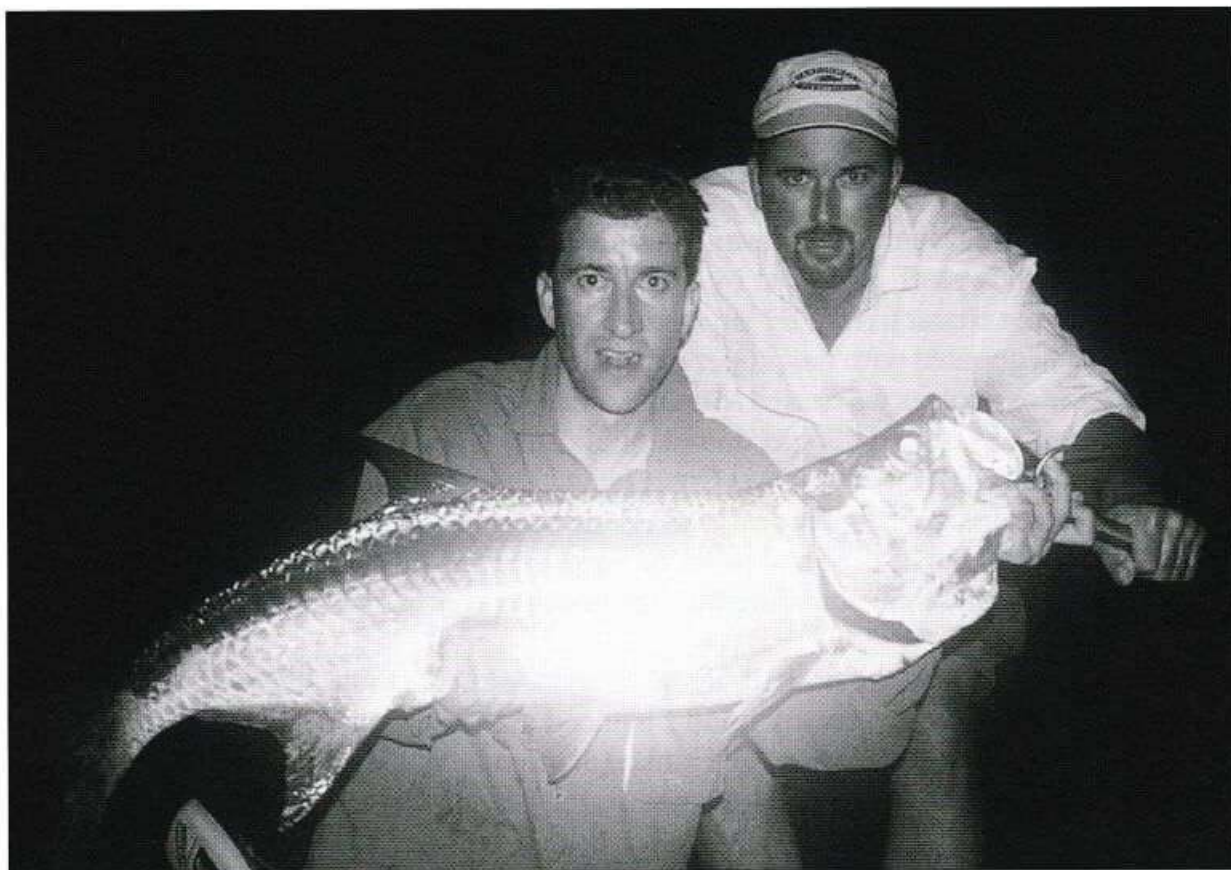
It was 5:30 pm as we made our way through Gasparilla Pass in Ted's (our guide friend) 20ft Pro Guide skiff, powered by 200 HP of Yamaha's best. Although the Gulf of Mexico is not characterised by large beach waves, those that are formed can easily tip a skiff if not negotiated with the proper experience. Ted took it easy over the inter-coastal waterway, but as soon as we passed Murdock Point on Cayo Costa island to the left, he got all 200 horses fired up and his speedometer indicated speeds as high as 63 miles per hour. We were travelling parallel to Cayo Costa Island about sixty metres from the shore in a southerly direction, and I could see that Ivan, my fishing companion, was not enjoying the experience. Although he is a good sailor he is not enamoured of boats travelling at speeds in excess of 60 mph while pounding through beach waves at the same time.

To the east we could see the flash of lightning and the black clouds that were approaching us. With dreams of tarpon on my mind I glanced at the incoming storm and then at our guide. Without a word between us Ted looked at me and smiled, giving me a thumbs up at the same time, - it was clear that he was not troubled by the potentially inclement weather.

We reached Boca Grande Pass after a few minutes and steered safely past the old fort pilings. About a hundred metres ahead of us we saw tarpon engaging in their distinctive 'daisy chaining' ritual. A female tarpon of about 160 lbs was in the middle of the chain with about a dozen males of around 80+ lbs locking her in. The males would continually surface and when they did, one could hear them breathing. They have rudimentary lungs and the sounds they make are similar to what you hear when porpoises surface. While all this was going on we reached for our 12wt's. They were rigged with a proven tarpon pattern - the cockroach, on 80 lbs fluorocarbon shock tippets and looped to 20 lb class tippets with bimini twists on both ends.

The thunder was getting dangerously close, followed by eye-blinding lightning. As I looked up to the east where Charlotte Harbor lay, I could clearly see the rain forming in what looked like a white blanket of mist on the water. The tarpon were still engaged in their spawning ritual and a few yards to the south we could see a school breaking the surface as they slashed at small baitfish. Five minutes after our arrival the question of staying or seeking shelter came up in our minds. I looked at the weather and then at Ted again and could see he was getting worried (if only a bit). Ivan was so fascinated by the activity off the bow that he gave scant regard to the weather. A few more minutes passed and as the waves started growing in the pass, so did my worries that we might not live to tell of it. Finally Ted decided we should get out of the pass and wait out the storm at a nearby marina. Without wasting time on stowing the rods, Ted opened up the horses and we turned north-east around the old dock pilings.

We headed straight north after clearing the dock pilings and by this time we could feel the force of the rain and wind coming from our right. Each wave needed to be negotiated with finesse as it hit the skiff at full blast, leaving us wet with spray in the process. Miller's Marina lay on the eastern side of Gasparilla Island about 10 minutes from Boca Grande



CPS chairman, Gerard Barnardt and his guide, Ted, celebrate the capture of a tarpon on the coast of Florida.



Gasparilla Island off the coast of Florida where thousands of tarpon gather from May to July each year.

Pass. We saw a couple of bigger boats heading for the same marina and even they had trouble keeping afloat.

As we turned into Miller's Marina and cleared the mangrove section on the left we could see the black of the storm which was about to hit the island with full force. We found an empty space on the dock in front of the tackle shop and tied down the skiff. Just as we entered the shop the sky opened and the rain came down like bullets. We waited out the storm, while listening to the CB calls coming in from boats near Charlotte Harbor.

Two hours later the sky started to clear from the east and the wind died down to a breeze. We got into our raingear and decided to head back to the pass to see if the tarpon were still rolling. The water was calm and clear, and it was difficult to believe that this sea had been almost unnavigable a mere two hours earlier.

As we came around the dock pilings we immediately saw tarpon rolling. Our initial thoughts were that they were feeding on baitfish, but that theory was soon dropped when we saw the swimming crabs moving with the tide. These crabs are about the size of a drink coaster and the tarpon were gobbling them down as fast as they came in with the tide.

We fished well into the evening, mostly by drifting crab patterns over the tarpon that were holding in the current close to the docks. They were clearly visible under the big dock lights and hooking them made for some great action on 12wt's. These fish were cunning as hell, as once hooked they would beat a speedy retreat into the numerous pilings. We had our work cut out to keep tarpon upwards of 40 lbs out of the pilings. Some of these brutes were over 100 lbs in weight and fighting them on 20 lb tippets was an exciting but hopeless experience. We quickly switched to 30 lb tippets after a few breakoff's, and our ability to bring the fish to hand improved.

The tarpon stopped feeding after an hour or two and we switched to 8wt's to try for some snook. We fished around the numerous dock lights because the water beneath them was teeming with snook, feeding on shrimps. They weren't big, but they were great fun on light tackle and once they got their heads down in the current, they provided a great battle.

Once the tide turned the fish stopped feeding and we headed north towards Gasparilla Pass and the short ride home to little Gasparilla Island from there. The night air was hot and humid and we felt tired and sleepy. The mosquitoes and 'no-see-ums' awaited our arrival at the dock and no sooner had we pulled in then they took their seating for dinner. I paid them little heed and, as sleep came, my thoughts were filled with silver kings jumping in the Boca Grande pass and a few 'crazy' fly fishermen trying to hook them on crab imitations in bad weather.

Notes : Boca Grande is known as the tarpon capitol of the world - and for good reason. The beaches around Gasparilla Island attract a lot of spawning tarpon from May-July each year with an estimated 14,000 tarpon holding in Boca Grande Pass alone. Not only are good guides essential to hooking up with a tarpon on fly, but you will also need one that is knowledgeable on fly fishing, as without the right flies at the right time, failure is inevitable. In addition, you will need the proper hooks - on this note forget about using the Mustad 34007, with which local saltwater fly fishers are familiar. Hooks such as the



A snook, caught at night using a shrimp pattern.



A typical Florida flats skiff. The guide, when looking for fish, poles it from the raised platform over the outboard motor.

Owner 'Cutting Edge' and Trey Combs 'Big Game' are essential. Hook sizes from 2/0 to 3/0 are best. The Owner hooks may be obtained with longer shanks which are a help when tying crab imitations. The sun is another factor to contend with and adequate clothing is a must. The Tarpon Wear (www.tarponwear.com) range of UV protected clothing not only provides good protection from the harmful rays of the sun, but is also well ventilated and quick drying. For more information on Boca Grande regarding guides, places to stay and other technical information, contact the author on e-mail gerard@smallstreams.com or telephone 083-450-5934.