

**T**hey don't sport multicolored wraps. They don't run at high speed, and most have battle scars acquired from fishing in the crowded and often choppy waters of Boca Grande Pass. They're the eclectic assortment of boats you'll see drifting the Pass during tarpon season, the ones with anglers seated in fighting chairs astern intently clutching stout rods while waiting for tarpon to inhale the live baits dangling 30 or 50 or 70 feet below.

Guided tarpon fishing in Boca Grande Pass has a long, colorful history dating back more than a century to the days when most of the wealthy anglers stayed on nearby Useppa Island, home of the Izaak Walton Fishing Club. The club was found-

ed in 1908 by a group of affluent and enthusiastic tarpon fishermen and today, over 100 years later, the club is still active and photos of club members and their catches grace the walls of the stately Collier Inn on Useppa Island. The historic photos show that in the early days the dress code for anglers was a tad more formal than today: Gentlemen anglers wore long pants and dress jackets and the lady anglers wore ankle-length dresses and wide-brimmed sun bonnets. The nattily attired anglers made quite a contrast to the guides who toiled at the oars.

The advent of powered boats in the early 1900s changed the game for the guides who no longer needed to row, but did not much change the actual fishing. Whether the boat was powered by horsepower or by manpower the goal was the same: to

present a natural-looking bait to the hordes of hungry tarpon which were holding in the turbid waters of Boca Grande Pass.

Today, traditional-style guide boats employ fishing techniques which evolved over many decades and which are crafted to allow a fishing guide to work in partnership with his anglers. The object is to precisely control the presentation of live baits to tarpon which may be anywhere from just beneath the surface to the bottom in 70 feet of water. Making this presentation more complicated: There is usually a ripping tide, the tarpon are often holding in small areas, and sometimes the fish are tucked in closely behind sheer rock ledges as much as 20 feet tall.

"It's all about presentation," says Capt. Cappy Joiner, long

time guide and president of the Boca Grande Fishing Guides Association. "Presenting a bait to a huge tarpon in the Pass isn't that much different than presenting a bait to a finicky trout in a mountain stream."

The key to getting the presentation right, says Joiner, is to find the fish, run upstream just far enough to get set up, quickly feed out just the right amount of line and then, as the drift begins, to control the attitude and movement of the boat so as to sweep the baits in a natural way just above the holding fish. If you're familiar with the terms "red on the reel" or "green on the tip" then you know one of the secrets employed by the live bait guides to help get the presentation just right: Using lines that are pre-marked at precise depths.

Inside the  
old-school Boca  
Grande livebait  
tarpon fishery.

# The Other Side of the PASS

By Ralph Allen

*Angler and guide have their hands full during a spring bite at Boca Grande Pass. Orange tournament flag flies on hard top.*

## The Other Side of the PASS

Most of the guides sew or stitch two markers into their lines (braided line is favored by almost all the traditional guides. Some holdouts still use 50-pound Dacron, but most have switched to 100-pound super braid in recent years). Embroidery floss or heavy thread is used to place a green marker 42 feet from the swivel and a red marker at 60 feet from the swivel. These highly visible marks allow the guides to work with their clients to get the needed amount of line into the water, and to quickly adjust if necessary during a drift. Too much line out means lost fishing time while riggering tackle snagged on the jagged rocks, too little means the fish



Izaak Walton Club record tarpon in 1914, 154 pounds. Photo taken on Useppa Island.

might never see the bait.

Leaders vary from 6 to 15 feet and 100-pound fluorocarbon is a popular choice. The heavy tackle is favored because it affords at least a bit of control over a frantic, freshly hooked fish in the crowded Pass. This is not a place for light tackle, regardless of whether you're fishing natural bait or jigs; leave the 20-pound gear for the beaches and backwaters.

If you study the action in the Pass during tarpon season, you'll pick up the pattern used by the livebait guides: Deploy the lines, drift through the fish, then pick up lines and move outside the pack of



Photo by Angie Mills

## Classic Tarpon Boats of Boca Grande

### Searene

We'll never know for sure which boat on Planet Earth has caught the most tarpon during its lifetime, but any serious attempt to bestow such an award would have to consider this tidy little 26-foot cabin cruiser. Built in 1956 by Daniels Brothers Boats in Ft. Myers, the *Searene* was bought by Capt. Cappy Joiner in 1964. The boat has been in the Joiner family ever since and has charter fished Boca Grande Pass ever since. Operated first by Capt. Cappy Joiner, then for nearly 30 years by Capt. Lamar Joiner Sr., and for the past ten years by Capt. Lamar Joiner Jr., the Joiner family conservatively estimates that more than 30,000 tarpon have been landed aboard the *Searene*. That's a bunch of silver kings!

### Phil Jack

Owned by Toby Weiner of Boca Grande, this boat is the only vessel profiled here that is not currently available for charter, though she enjoyed an extensive charter career earlier in her life. She was built in 1959 by Bill Crawford of Punta Gorda for Capt. Ted Blysaka specifically as a Boca Grande Pass tarpon charter boat. A deep keel, huge rudder and stocky dimensions of 25 1/2 feet long by 10-foot beam make her a stable, steady, controllable platform for drifting the Pass. Current owner Weiner has restored the original plank-on-frame construction and had the boat c-flex coated from the gunwales down, which explains the beautiful exterior appearance of the vessel. By the way, the name *Phil Jack* comes

from the names of the two sons of the original owner Capt. Blysaka: Phil and Jack.

### Faithful II

A 22-year-old Capt. Dickie Coleman had this 34-footer built in 1964 at Knight Brothers Marina on Gasparilla Island for service as a tarpon charter boat and a commercial grouper boat. White cedar planked on cypress frames and fastened by monel nails, she was built to last a long time and has never missed a tarpon fishing season in Boca Grande Pass since her construction. For many seasons Capt. Coleman would outfit the boat with bandit rigs and electric reels and take her grouper fishing as much as 130 miles offshore for part of the year, then convert the vessel into a tarpon guide boat for the spring Boca Grande Pass fishery. *Faithful II* no longer grouper fishes, but she is still an active Pass charter boat and is now operated by the original owner's son, Capt. Matt Coleman. How many hours have been logged on her? No one knows, but Capt. Dickie says she's been repowered nine or ten times in her career!

### Savannah

The 28-foot length by 11 1/2-foot beam, low freeboard, big keel, single inboard engine and large



rudder on this craft are a great combination for a Boca Grande Pass tarpon boat. Built in 1974 by Wilbur Storter in Naples (their boatyard was located at the present site of the Tin City complex) for Capt. Freddie Futch as a tarpon boat, *Savannah* is now operated by his nephew Capt. Steve Futch. In a bit of boat-building irony, the white cedar planking over cypress frames which comprise the hull of this boat sit atop a keel fashioned from heart pine which was salvaged from the old phosphate bins which used to sit at the south end of Gasparilla Island. Says Capt. Steve: "That old pine is so hard that you can strike matches on it. You just can't find lumber like that today." Originally named Lil' Priss, the boat was renamed *Savannah* after Capt. Steve's first grandchild, and keeping it "all in the family" Capt. Steve hopes to pass the *Savannah* on to his son when he retires from guiding.

### Chico

Capt. Bill "Dumplin" Wheeler's boat *Chico* can probably claim at least two honors among the Boca Grande tarpon fleet: Built in 1944 she is probably the oldest vessel regularly fishing the pass, and is probably the only vessel there that's named after a monkey. *Chico* was commissioned by Sam Whidden and was built of fir over cypress frames by Lee Hickock at his famous boat works in Palma Sota, Florida (Bradenton area). The boat was named for Chico the monkey, a Gasparilla Island celebrity who lived at Whidden's Marina on the Boca Grande Bayou. The distinctive round stern on this 38-footer comes from the fact that she was originally constructed as a king mackerel net boat. Constructed toward



the end of WWII, the vessel was at one time commandeered by the Coast Guard for beach patrol between Sanibel and Venice during the war. Capt. Wheeler reports that the vessel boasts such a pleasant ride while drifting that his clients compare the boat to sitting in a comfortable old rocking chair.



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## The Other Side of the PASS

boats to motor upstream for a repeat. Sometimes the fish are scattered over hundreds of yards through the Pass and the drifts can last for 10 minutes or more, but sometimes the fish are huddled in small areas and the drifts might last for only a minute or two. At any given time there is a choreographed dance of boats fishing downstream and motoring upstream and if everyone follows the pattern then a large number of anglers can share the fish.

Most of the livebait fishing in Boca Grande Pass is done with squirrelfish, sand perch, mutton minnows (a type of mojarra), small crabs, or jumbo live shrimp and any of these baits command a premium price during high tarpon season. At two or three dollars a crab your bait bill can skyrocket in a hurry, which is why you'll see boats in the Pass dipping their own baits. On outgoing tides there are often thousands of small "pass crabs" on the surface and a long-handled dip net can pay for itself in minutes.

### Boca Grande Regulations

Special regulations for Boca Grande Pass during April, May and June were implemented by the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 2004, said Lee Schlesinger, "to help reduce conflicts between anglers in [the] Pass when it's most congested during the spring tarpon run, and to decrease the amount of non-degradable material (i.e., lead weights) that litter the sea bottom in the pass."

While fishing Boca Grande Pass during April, May and June:

- ◆ A maximum of three fishing lines may be deployed from a vessel at any one time while fishing for all species.
- ◆ No person shall use, fish with, or place in the water any breakaway gear, defined as "any bob, float, weight, lure, or spoon that is affixed to a fishing line or hook with wire, line, rubber bands, plastic ties or other fasteners designed to break off when a fish is caught." (However: Anglers fishing with "pass jigs" may affix the jig to the hook by using wire ties whose breaking strength is equal to or greater than the fishing line, i.e. 75-pound-test tie, 50-pound braided line.)

What's that about a pass jig? It's nothing more than a 4- or 6-ounce molded lead head with a spindle on the back for holding a soft-plastic shad tail. At the top is a loop to which a large circle hook may be fastened by a strong wire tie, or "zip tie," heavier than your fishing line. Tackle shops in Lee and Charlotte counties carry these rigs in season.

Or would you prefer to fish live bait as described in the main article? Your choice. Either way, it's advisable to follow the generally established fishing patterns in the Pass:

- ◆ Do not anchor in the Pass (bad form and terribly dangerous)
- ◆ Do not turn off your engine (for safety and strategic reasons, you'll want to always have power at the helm)
- ◆ Don't chase rolling fish—they aren't feeding up there on the surface anyway!
- ◆ When finished with your drift, go around—not through—the other boats.



Cotee Liv'Eye Tarpon Jig.

—Jeff Weakley, Editor

By the middle of last century the locus of Boca Grande Pass tarpon fishing had shifted from Useppa Island to the Gasparilla Inn, a luxury resort which opened in 1912 on Gasparilla Island. The Gasparilla Inn attracted an affluent clientele who enjoyed the then-genteel sport of tarpon fishing. It was not uncommon for a wealthy client to enjoy an extended stay at the Gasparilla Inn and to hire their favorite guide for weeks or sometimes months at a time and to return year after year to do the same thing. The relationship between guide and client could become quite close and there were even cases where a client would buy their favorite guide a nice boat so they'd have a quality craft from which to enjoy their fishing every season. Corporate leaders would often reward their employees or prized



Pass crab swims out with the tide. Traditional guide boats sometimes utilize these for bait, dip-netting them on the spot. Other baits used include squirrelfish, sand perch, mojarra and shrimp.

of some of the guide boats several decades ago and snapped the same photo to today, you might capture exactly the same boats. But things do change. Due to the vagaries of a changing economic climate the days of multi-boat multi-day corporate outings have dwindled and the number of wealthy clients who book their favorite guides for weeks at a time has also decreased. Tarpon guides, some of whom are third or fourth generation skippers, have had to scram-

ble to stay in business. In addition, the number of boats crowding into the Pass has skyrocketed in recent decades, and some of the fishing techniques now being employed are perceived by some veterans as incompatible with the old-school techniques which have taken so many fish for so many years. No one knows how this will play out for the live-bait guides but I suspect that they'll find a way to stick around for another century or two. **FS**



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clients by inviting them to participate in company fishing outings on Gasparilla Island and it would not be unusual for such an event to book 10 or 15 guide boats for several days or a week at a time. The Gasparilla Inn probably generated half of all the tarpon charter trips in Boca Grande Pass for many years.

Some things stay the same while some things change. More than 100 years after the Boca Grande Pass tarpon fishery was first established, there are still tens of thousands of tarpon moving in and out April through June, and there are still thousands of anglers who journey here each season to battle the silver kings. If you took a photo

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