



IS THAT

A FEATHERED

SQUID

YOU'RE USING?



Not long ago, saltwater fly-fishing was an oxymoron. Now it's all the rage—and the East End is one of its hotbeds

BY ALISON BEVILACQUA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS FOSTER

Every morning Chris Foster and Paul Dixon climb aboard Dixon's 21-foot Sea Craft, a small, low-profile boat that stands out among the massive tuna towers and outriggers of Montauk charter boats. They drive right onto the shallow flats, cut the engine and silently glide towards the fish. From the platform of the boat, Dixon sees a shadow in the water; he crouches and points.

"In order to be a successful fly-fisherman, you must get much closer to the fish. You stalk them. You can see them... and they can see you," said Foster, an internationally known photographer, Amagansett resident and avid saltwater fly-fisherman.

Just ten years ago fly-fishing in local saltwater was practically unheard of. The sport originated in freshwater, and for years remained confined to Midwestern rivers and

The guy at left is actually lucky. He's on a barbless hook, thanks to a saltwater fly-fisherman like Tim Borski (above) observing the eco-friendly practice of catch-and-release. It was on flats like the one pictured here, off Gardiner's Island, that saltwater fly-fishing was born.



LEARN HOW

When learning to fly-fish a class or instructor can help. (And ladies, despite repeated references to the contrary, fly-fishermen include women, too!)

Check out fishing outfitter Orvis for gear, gadgets and schools across the country, as well as these resources closer to Manhattan and the Hamptons:

Orvis Sandanona is one of the most well respected fishing schools in the country. This 100-year-old, beautifully preserved hunting camp is located in Millbrook, New York, about 90 miles from Manhattan. Visit orvis.com, or call (845) 677-9701 for more information. Tuition is approximately \$470.

Mark Malenovsky offers lesson that can be customized to any fisherman's skill level. Located in Sayville, NY, Mark teaches students in local waters. Visit ny-fishingguide.com, or call (631) 589-0065 for more information. Lessons cost approximately \$160.

On the North Fork, **Captain Barry Kanvy** will help students perfect their cast and guide them through bountiful Peconic Bay. Visit naturalanglers.com or call (516) 785-7171 for more information.

streams. Intrepid sportsmen would travel far from the coast to find the best fly-fishing, without ever considering the resources in their own backyard. The shift began in Florida, when sportsmen smoothly working the flats spotted bonefish in the shallows and cast to them. Until then, fishermen had no idea that you could sight-fish for stripers on local flats. Once this potential for saltwater fly-fishing was discovered, it became the fastest growing and most exciting contingent of modern sport fishing by offering anglers an opportunity to fight the largest of fish, such as tarpon or tuna, on the lightest of tackle.

And it's a good fight. The first challenge is actually finding the fish, which can be especially difficult in deeper waters. Waves and currents make a motorboat necessary, but fly-fishermen try to lay off the power as much as possible to keep from scaring off the fish and lengthening the search. They stay on the lookout for clues: diving birds, floating wood, buoys and weeds, which make great hiding places, and, on rarer occasions, game fish jumping through the air after baitfish. And when the fish move, the fly-fishermen must act quickly to keep up.

Once the target's in sight, the work's just begun. Unlike regular fishing, where the rod is used to cast the weight of the lure or bait, fly-fishing uses the weight of the line to cast the fly. Because flies are practically weightless, a fly-fisherman must cast continuously back and forth to gain momentum. He can eventually cast a fly on target from 30 feet away or more, but only after significant exertion—saltwater fly rods are bigger and heavier than freshwater rods, because they have to be powerful enough to lift large, heavy fish into the boat.

Whether fly-fishing in the flats or further offshore, landing the fish is always the biggest challenge. A fly-fisherman must follow the fish to avoid snapping the line, then vigorously pump the rod up and down to bring the fish in. The combined weight of the fish and rod already makes for a

good muscle builder, but pumping while the boat's rocking on unpredictable water makes this fitness routine more trying than any done at the gym. In Montauk, the challenge is probably greatest in autumn, when bluefish blitzes set fishermen's hearts racing and lines screaming. These voracious feeders swarm around schools of baitfish to feed. The ensuing scene is a frenzy of teeth and tails and bent rod-tips. Monster stripers, bonito and false albacore also cruise these blitzes. These varieties of small tuna are known as some of the hardest fighting fish.

The exciting mental and physical challenge has caused the sport's popularity to grow tremendously, and Dixon, who operates Dixon's To The Point Charters, now counts up to 100 boats fly-fishing in local waters. "When I first started," he remembers, "fishermen looked at me funny. I was the only one out there fly-fishing." Other reasons for the surge are environmental. Fly-fishing is dependent on the surrounding ecosystem, which fly-fishermen must understand and work with in order to be successful. This can mean casting from afar or even hiding behind trees onshore to avoid being seen by fish that can see every which way but straight back and down. It can also mean adapting the fly to mimic local bait—what used to look like flies or bugs now look like baitfish, crabs, shrimp and squid. The sport also makes little ecological impact, as it uses barbless hooks and the goal is more catch-and-release than catch-and-eat.

While fly-fishing might seem at odds with Montauk, home to competitive fishing tournaments, commercial fishing and over 25 current world fishing records, the fly-fisherman is having the time of his life. The East End has put itself on the fly-fishing map for having access to some of the most beautiful and bountiful saltwater flats. And Montauk has even managed to make a name for itself apart from Florida, or any other fly-fishing destination, thanks to its exciting autumn blitzes.

Left: local captain David Blinkin poses with a bluefin tuna he caught using a fly. Big ones can weigh in at 1000 pounds. Above: A bluefish frenzy like this one is a beautiful sight to saltwater fly fishermen.

GETTING OUT THERE

Want to try your luck in local waters? An experienced guide can help.

Captain Matthew Miller Charters
(631) 899-3600 / Cell (631) 275-6770
montaukfly-light.com

Dixon's To The Point Charters
Captain Paul Dixon
(631) 329-6186 / (516) 314-1185
flyfishingmontauk.com

Double Haul Charters
Captain Jim Levison
(631) 725-1412 / Cell (917) 714-3222
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