



## Passage of the Silver Kings

*In pursuit of food, tarpons follow their appetites to the Pamlico Sound each summer.*

**A**N angler's passion for the fish he most likes to pursue is born of a wide range of emotions and reasoning often far too abstract to fully understand. While some fish are hefty examples of brute strength, others are elusive and require a seemingly endless supply of patience. Some are both.

These are the creatures that conjure visions of grandeur, a true sport fish whose greatest purpose is to inspire and challenge the fortitude of even the most seasoned anglers. Every summer for a period all too brief, North Carolinians are graced with the opportunity to target just that, the living embodiment of sport fishing itself, the tarpon.

While a relatively small sect of anglers are well aware of the presence of *Megalops atlanticus* (Atlantic tarpon) in the Pamlico Sound, many North Carolina natives are unaware that the same fish that caused Islamorada, Fla., to be designated as the sport fishing capital of the world will venture as far north as Chesapeake Bay, Va., during its summer migration.

written by **DUSTY WILSON** >> << photographed by **TOSH BROWN**







Maybe it's best that way. Tarpon addicts are a serious lot, forever changed by a relatively brief encounter with a prehistoric powerhouse. Their quarry is not for the faint of heart. Bleary-eyed anglers scan the water's surface for hours on end; drenched in sweat and salt spray they wait, languishing for a glimmer of hope. A glint of silver scales, a crab or menhaden slurped from the surface or a free-jumping tarpon. At the scantest of offerings they race to position their vessel in front of that fish, calculate wind speed and direction, toss out their baits and again wait. What happens next is nothing short of a divine miracle to a tarpon addict.

"You can't describe the sound that line makes when it cuts through the water," said Capt. Mitchell Blake in regard to speed of the take. "It's like nothing you've ever heard before." Blake, who heads Fish IBX Charters out of Chocowinity, admits that tarpon fishing is as much an obsession as a business venture. "When you put that much energy on the end of the line and that fish goes aerial, it's unbelievable."

The acrobatic flips and jumps that tarpons are known for only make the fish more difficult to land and further solidify its reign as the silver king. A fish upward of 100 pounds hurling itself from the water again and again with the ease of a playful minnow is a memory no one so fortunate to observe is soon to forget.

Due to Blake's tarpon addiction, he always has an eye peeled for any signs that would point to the arrival of the summering fish, as in this case he recounted of one July past. "I was guiding a mixed bag trip for red drum, flounder and speckled trout when I saw a school of tarpon rolling on the Pamlico Sound," he said. "In order to keep an eye on them, I started to focus my charters in this area. The next thing I noticed, this school is pushing up the Pamlico River and into the Pungo River."

Without a tarpon on the books for that season, Blake set his sights on breaking the ice. He who captures the first tarpon of the season carries bragging rights, a feather in his hat if you will among the faction of tarpon anglers. With a history in Fish and Wildlife Management, Blake planned on this occasion to get his entire family involved in an up-close and personal science lesson.

His wife, their two small children and a couple of close friends were in for a real treat, because this outing would be extraordinary.

After days of watching these fish and studying their behaviors, Blake was finally given the opportunity to put his crew on the fish of a lifetime. "We

had the kids in the boat, and I knew they were thinking we were going to just go goof off and have fun, but I'd done my homework on this school and I knew where they would go when they came into the Pungo," said Blake.

Catching skates and rays is commonplace when fishing cut croaker and spot for tarpon, and everyone was finding plenty to stay occupied while Blake kept an unblinking gaze on the waters around him. "Any minute" he thought, "Any minute." As the sun sank lower into the sky, a portrait of color was cast onto the Pamlico background and Blake knew it was now or never.

Within minutes, an eruption of tarpon pierced the river's placid surface while simultaneously cutting a swath through it with braided fishing line. "Tarpon!" he shouted. The children, startled as the fish pulled the line tight and slammed the rod in its holder, were brought to attention and stood wide-eyed staring at the spectacle in front of them. Each leap froze time as the mighty fish defied gravity and shook violently before inevitably crashing back into the water.



Growing weary of its failed attempts to throw the hook, the tarpon preceded to empty Blake's spinning reel of its contents in a blistering run that would not be subdued. "I'm coming off anchor," declared Blake, as he took to the helm and positioned his angler on the bow in a calculated attempt to acquire lost line and gain leverage on the fish.

He chased the relentless tarpon across the mouth of the Pungo River and into a hazardous string of crab pots. To avoid disaster, he maneuvered his vessel above the fish and coerced the fish back into open water. A tug of war ensued, but shortly thereafter, they coaxed the weakened trophy within handling range.

Blake paused momentarily to allow his captive audience the opportunity to soak in the experience and see first-hand what most would only see in photographs. After grabbing his 100-pound fluorocarbon leader, which signifies a caught fish, Blake plucked the 8/0 snelled circle hook from the monster's jaw, and allowed it to rejoin the school to fight another day. "The kids still talk about it. When you take them out to the same place that we swim, water ski and catch smaller fish, and show them a 6 1/2-foot fish throwing down, it makes quite an impression," said Blake.

Tarpon are most often associated with the crystal clear flats of the Florida Keys and fly-fishing, with a guide perched atop a poling platform pointing to a fish he can see well below the water's surface.



Left, a tarpon leaps, attempting to throw an angler's lure. Top, tarpon have hard, bony mouths that make hook-ups hard to achieve. Below, not considered table fare, the vast majority of tarpon are released after landing.

Pamlico Sound anglers aren't so fortunate. Although tarpon will readily inhale a well-placed fly, North Carolina anglers are lucky to briefly identify what general direction a fish is heading, much less properly lead it and drop that fly within striking distance. The stained waters of the sound and its tributaries are relatively unforgiving in terms of visibility. It is for that reason most choose cut bait to appeal to the sense of smell and cover a broader area in the vastness of the sound.

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Above, an angler resuscitates a small tarpon before it swims off. Right, adult tarpon are nomads, constantly on the move, and can be found up pure freshwater rivers and offshore in the Gulf Stream.

But how did we become so fortunate to have tarpon in North Carolina? Why would a fish that spends most of its time in a tropical paradise transit to our backyard? The answer is not as deep and mysterious as one may think.

According to Dr. Jerald Ault, who heads the Tarpon and Bonefish Research Center at the University of Miami, the primary function of this northern migration of tarpon is to build body mass after completing the rigors of spawning offshore of the Florida Keys. Weakened and hungry, tarpon follow their stomachs to find buffet lines of blue crabs, shrimp, mullet and menhaden half way up the East Coast.

After all, a fish reaching 100 pounds and up to more than 200 pounds can't afford to sit back and nibble on hors d'oeuvres. It must be deliberate about

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its meals and go for the main course. “I liken the migration pattern to the lions and wildebeests of the great Serengeti, in the extensive pilgrimages they make to facilitate reproduction and growth,” said Dr. Ault.

Tarpon appear to be the ultimate nomad, belonging to no one state, country or even continent. Constantly on the move like some finned band of gypsies, they seem to vanish before their secrets are revealed. In fact, it is believed there exist few truly resident tarpon. Certainly the juveniles spend some time in the nursery grounds of the backcountry in the Florida Keys where they are targeted by anglers as “baby tarpon.” However, once they reach sexual maturity and roughly 100 pounds, they hit the road.

“We have the huge migrating schools here in the Keys for about six weeks while they're spawning, until about the end of May,” said Dr. Ault. “As the water warms, half of the group goes up the East Coast and the other half goes up the Gulf Coast toward the mouth of the Mississippi River.” The bulk of the resource will reach the Georgia line by the first of June, North Carolina by mid-July, and Virginia in August, differing slightly by season. They will retreat south again with the first strong cold fronts.

Dr. Ault and his research center have been utilizing Pop-up Archival Transmitting tags, or PAT tags, to track tarpon migrations. Once a tarpon is caught, a PAT tag is attached by a small dart and tethered to the back of the fish. For a period of up to nine months, the tag collects not only the fish's location, but also the water temperature, light level, salinity and the fish's depth in the water. The tag pops off at a predetermined date via a low energy charge that causes it to separate. Consequently, it floats to the surface and uplinks its data, notifying Dr. Ault with an email.

Since the inception of their tagging program in 2001, Dr. Ault and his team have tagged 350 tarpon; including several in North Carolina which were later tracked to the Indian River Lagoon in Florida, coinciding with the silver and black mullet spawn. However, these tireless travelers are turning up in unusual places. Several fish have been traced up to 150 miles into pure freshwater rivers, while others have ventured nearly 400 miles to the east of Cape Cod in the Gulf Stream.

One recurring theme Dr. Ault has discovered through tagging is the fish's propensity to be found along what is known as the 26th degree Celsius Isotherm. An isotherm is basically a line of equal temperature, and 26 degrees Celsius is also 78.8 degrees Fahrenheit. As the ocean water warms and cools, this slug of warm water moves up and down the east coast

of the U.S. and South America. “The tarpon follow this temperature regime as a guideline for their migrations,” said Dr. Ault.

Although interest in tarpon fishing is on the rise, the species numbers are not. “The U.S. has changed for the most part to catch and release fishing,” said Dr. Ault. “But this is not true farther south.” As tarpon venture into the southern end of their range through parts of Mexico and as far south as Brazil, the custom changes to more of a subsistence culture, where the fish are kept without restriction.

“The economic value of tarpon in the U.S. is around \$6 billion a year; it's a big deal,” said Dr. Ault. However, many cultures see them as just another fish. In fact, it is a bony fish with undesirable meat that is kept in these countries for the consumption of their roe or animal feed. “Our partners to the south are critical; we have to make them understand that these fish they sell in their markets for 10 cents a pound could be worth much more as a recreational fish,” he said.



So how should North Carolina anglers pursue a constantly moving target? According to Capt. Blake, the angler himself must stay on the move. As he said one muggy July day on the Pamlico Sound, “we're going to put at least 50 miles on this boat today.”

Fortunate for the seekers, tarpon “gulp” air by way of a swim bladder that acts as a simple lung. They are the only fully marine animals capable of doing so. This is the function of the telltale roll in which a tarpon breaks the surface and reveals its location.

Although tarpon can be spotted from the console or bow of a conventional vessel, many serious anglers affix a tower to their boats, most often with remote steering and throttle. This raises an angler's vantage point up to 10 feet, and unveils disturbances on the water's surface for hundreds of yards on a

relatively calm day. Not to mention the glaring flash of a silver beauty catching the sun's reflection.

“You want to see where that fish is going,” said Blake, “then set up in front of the school and drift into them.” Fishing cut bait is regarded as far and above the most effective strategy for hooking up with tarpon. Blake interchanges between the freshest croaker, spot, mullet and menhaden until he determines what is preferred in that scenario.

“I set up with six rods out from the boat in all directions,” said Blake, who dresses all his spinning reels with 50-pound braided line and maintains a tight drag to allow the fish to hook himself during its initial run. “I almost always fish my baits with no weight, but if the fish aren't biting and I know they're close, I will suspend the bait with a balloon,” he said.

Once the scene is set for action, anglers feverishly chum the surrounding water with small pieces of baitfish and hope the tarpon pick up the scent. This is also an effective approach when stiff winds produce white caps on the sound and renders sight fishing unprofitable.

In such case, dedicated anglers are reserved to anchoring on oyster beds and hoping tarpon happen by to feed on the wildlife it sustains. Finding the most productive areas is a matter of experience and using sonar.

Years of chasing tarpon give Blake a solid starting point when they are spotted in an area. Thanks to a technological advantage, his best oyster beds are available at a finger's touch, accumulated in his GPS unit. But, knowing your sonar will help you find new beds. “You want to read a really hard bottom,” said Blake. “That means you are on solid oysters in the middle of the bed, instead of just scattered oysters on the edges. The center of the bed will also be slightly elevated. If the surrounding area is 21 feet, the middle will be around 19 feet.”

Fishing the Pamlico Sound is a daunting task, but the mouth of the Neuse River near the sleepy town of Oriental is one of the best places to start. An estuary is only as productive as its tributaries, and the Neuse is nutrient-rich, attracting the baitfish that draw tarpon. The mouth of the Pamlico River near the vicinity of the Pungo River is another hotspot.

Tarpon are unlikely to ever be thought of with the warm fondness of spunky bluegills or channel cats caught down by a timeless creek before the dawn of our modern age. Rather, their place will be revered amongst piscatorial treasure hunters, men with steadfast resolve and unwavering allegiance. For theirs is the stuff of legend, the silver king himself, the tarpon. ☞

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