



Introduction to Saltwater Fly Fishing

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Though often heralded as the latest discovery of the "in" fly fishing crowd, saltwater fly fishing has been around for quite some time. Anglers throughout New England have cast to striped bass with a fly rod since the 1800s. In more recent times, salmon anglers used their heavier tackle and gaudy full dressed flies to entice tarpon and other marine species.

The 1950s saw the beginning of modern day saltwater fly rodding with innovative anglers like Joe Brooks and Jimmy Albright successfully catching a variety of gamefish on the flats of the Florida Keys and on Chesapeake Bay or Curritick zyzzyx Sound and publishing articles for *Outdoor Life* and *Field and Stream*. Pioneer saltwater flyrodders A. J. McClane, Homer Rhodes, Jr., Lefty Kreh, Bill Catherwood, Stu Apt, Lee Wulff, Billy Pate and many others helped perfect the techniques and design the flies and tackle for this Anew@ version of an ancient sport.

Modern fly fishers pursue nearly all marine gamefish species in all the oceans of the world, from shallow flats fish such as red drum, bonefish and tarpon to the deepwater giants, including marlin and tuna. Rods, reels and lines have been designed specifically to meet the demands of this specialized sport. Today, saltwater fly fishing is the fastest growing segment of the sportfishing industry.

The beginner can be overwhelmed and even put off by the apparent complexity of the sport, expense of the tackle and difficulty of the techniques. To be a successful saltwater fly angler, the most important rule to follow is: **keep it simple.**

The most accessible and easily mastered type of salty fly rodding takes place on inshore beaches, salt ponds, in rivers that flow into the ocean, from jetties and on wadeable flats near shore. These are the best places to begin a saltwater fly fishing education.

Saltwater Tackle - Purchasing Rod, Reel, Lines

Tackle for saltwater fly fishing can be as elaborate or simple as an angler cares to make it. The explosion of popularity enjoyed by the sport has created a range of suitable tackle that can fit almost any budget. Before purchasing equipment, determine the usual fishing conditions and the species being sought. In the first instance, knowing whether the equipment will be used on sheltered bays, flats, open ocean, tidal rips, or reefs will begin to define equipment needs. Adding in the size, habitat and habits of the fish being sought will refine that definition. These factors will determine the size, type and mass of the flies being

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used as well as the size and weight rating of the fly rod. Clearly, a rod for inshore fish like spotted seatrout and flounders can be a good deal lighter and have less backbone than one meant for sailfish, marlin, larger tuna or big tarpon.

Heavier freshwater tackle will do well for many saltwater situations, but bigger game fish may require rods with much more power, for casting, striking the fish, and playing heavyweights. Consulting experienced local anglers or tackle shops where fly fishing is featured may prove helpful.

Saltwater rods generally run in the 7-weight to 12-weight class, in lengths from about 82 to 92 or 10 feet. Some specialized situations employ shorter rods, but they are unusual in saltwater. A short fighting butt, either permanent or detachable, is helpful when playing large, powerful fish. Guides should be stainless steel with the wrappings coated with epoxy rod finish for durability. A quality locking reel seat is advisable as well.

A quality, corrosion-proof reel with a line capacity of at least 200 yards of 20 to 30 pound test backing plus the fly line is needed for fish that tend to make long, hard runs. Reels should have a palming rim and a good drag system to aid the angler. One or more extra spools equipped with other lines will be appreciated when it is necessary to change tactics to reach feeding fish. For versatility, the spare spool could be set up to handle a series of shooting heads with a floating or intermediate running line.

Quality weight forward lines in a bug or saltwater taper are the best bet for saltwater anglers. Although some very precise casting may be required, saltwater fly fishers usually are contending with wind, currents, and big water. The ability to bust out a long cast into the wind with a bulky streamer may make the difference between a great day on the water and frustration. Try the rod with several line weights to determine what works best for your conditions and casting style. Sometimes over-lining the rod by one or two line weights will produce a rod that beats the wind better and drives big flies harder. Sometimes doing so will simply overwhelm the rod and reduce casting efficiency. Many saltwater anglers are fishing a weight or two on the heavy side.

Floating lines will handle the bulk of the salt water situations where fish are near the surface or in shallow water. Some anglers prefer an intermediate line, one that is neutral density and sinks slowly, for most of their fishing. Some conditions call for getting the fly deeper, even in heavy current. Sink tip, sinking head or full sinking lines in a variety of densities can be useful under those conditions. Taking a page from the western steelheaders' books, many saltwater anglers have gone to shooting heads with a floating or intermediate running line to permit quick changes among line densities and types for the fishing conditions. This can have the angler prepared for many circumstances without needing a second mortgage on the house.

Leaders

Leaders in salty fly rodding tend to be shorter and heavier than in freshwater angling. The shorter leader helps to turn the larger flies over and the heavier tippet will be more abrasion resistant. Saltwater fish tend to be less leader shy and live in rougher terrain than their sweetwater counterparts, eliminating the necessity of fishing with fine leaders in most circumstances. Where finer leaders are required, they are easily prepared by knowledgeable anglers with a good leader tie kit. (See *Monofilament Leaders for Fly Fishing*).

A simple 6-9 foot leader can be made by tying 30 to 40 pound test leader to 20-25 pound leader and attaching 2-3 feet of 10 to 15 pound leader as a tippet. (See note above). Specialized leaders for special situations may need to be constructed, but keeping things simple helps.

Where sharp teeth or opercula are encountered, shock tippets or bite tippets are advised. Heavy monofilament can be tied to the tippet with an Albright knot, and the fly can be attached with a Kreh loop knot for better action. If monofilament in the 30 to 80 pound class is inadequate, woven or single strand wire can be attached with either an Albright and a haywire twist or by forming a loop and attaching the leader with a Palomar or similar knot. Keep any wire as short as possible (4' is usually enough), and as thin as possible for the job you intend it to serve. Heavier wire is more obvious, causes more challenges in the casting department, but will not kink as readily as the thinner material. Where fish like bluefish are

encountered, dark leader material is better than bright stainless steel wire because the fish will not bite you off as often trying to take the prey away from their fellow school-mates. Note that the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) rules require that the Abite or shock tippet must not exceed 12@ (including knots) and the class tippet be a minimum of 15 inches in length@ for any fish to be considered for record purposes

Knots

Knots are the weakest link in a saltwater fly fisher=s equipment. Good, strong knots tied well and snugged down fully are the best defense against lost fish due to equipment failure. (See *Knots for Anglers*). Practice increases the ease and speed of tying knots under fishing conditions. The following list includes a few knots and their applications to saltwater fly fishing.

Albright - tippet to mono bite tippet, tippet to wire bite tippet, backing to fly line

Arbor Knot - attach backing to reel arbor

Blood Knot (also **Barrel Knot**) - monofilament to monofilament where diameters are similar

Haywire Twist - wire bit tippet closure

Improved Clinch - standard knot for tying the tippet to the fly (Palomar knot is better and more compact)

Kreh Loop Knot - attaching shock tippet to fly where movement is desired

Nail Knot - leader butt to line

Perfection Loop, Surgeon=s Loop - loop knots for leaders and line tips

Three Turn or Rhodes - attaching heavy monofilament shock tippet where fly movement is not critical

Loop to Loop Connection System

This is an effective method for quickly connecting two lines of similar or dissimilar diameters. It is fast, strong and efficient, providing quick change options to the angler without the need to tie additional knots. Loops are simply interlocked by passing one loop through the other, then passing the tag end of that line or leader through its own loop. The resulting knot resembles a square knot with the two loops pulled flatly together. Some examples of uses for the system include:

1. Attaching a leader butt section to the fly line
2. Attaching a tippet section to a leader butt
3. Attaching the tag end of a fly line to backing
4. Attaching a shooting head to running line
5. Attaching a weighted leader section to a line or leader
6. Changing multi-tip line tips

Shooting Basket

Along with a well-maintained rod, reel and line, the successful salty fly rodder needs one more essential piece of equipment. A shooting basket helps to keep the fly line from becoming tangled around any available object like feet, boat cleats, net handles and weeds. It also keeps the line out of the water, reducing drag and permitting anglers to make longer, more accurate casts while wading flats, standing in surf or standing in a boat. Several commercial models are available in both soft bodied and hard bodied forms. A simple but very effective homemade shooting basket designed by saltwater fly fishers in New England is in use all over the world. It can be constructed from a plastic dishpan about 6 to 7 inches deep and a shock cord or wader belt.

Construction is simple. Start by drilling several holes in the bottom of the pan for drainage. If the pan has dimples in its bottom, those depressions make excellent sites for the holes. For use with a shock cord, drill two holes in the upper corners of a long side of the dishpan and insert the shock cord hooks into the holes. For use with a belt, make two slits wide enough for the belt on the ends of one long side, and slide the belt through the slots. This simple device will make a trip to the ocean a lot more fun and probably more productive.

Tackle Care

In no other area of fly fishing is tackle care more important than in salty or brackish water. Saltwater and sand quickly corrode and destroy even the most expensive equipment if it is not properly cared for. Fly tackle will be pushed to its limit by the powerful saltwater fish, and abused by contact with coral, rocks, shells, sand, brine, sunlight and a host of enemies conspiring to turn fly gear into junk.

Before the Trip -Prior to the trip run through a checklist and inspect the tackle.

- Check lines for strength and any damage or abrasion
- Check leaders and tippets for nicks or abrasions
- Check all knots and retie as needed
- Stretch lines and coat with line cleaner or Armorall7 auto wax and wipe with a clean cloth
- Check rod guides for nicks, scratches or hairline breaks
- Check reel seats for good order
- Inspect and oil (or use silicone lube) on all moving parts of reels
- Inspect hooks and sharpen as needed

After the Trip

- **Immediately** wash and rinse all tackle (use a soapy cloth and rinse throughly with light pressure (**caution:** heavy pressure forces salt deeper into the line and moving parts of reels and reel seats))
- Wipe down with a clean cloth and air dry
- Break down reel and rod and clean them thoroughly
- Run out lines, rinse backing, run lines through line cleaner/Armorall7 wipe down with a cloth
- Spray a moisture replacer lightly on all metal parts (NOT on the line) and wipe down
- Loosen reel drags all the way and store (see Rod and Reel Socks fact sheet)
- Wash and dry flies that were exposed to saltwater or spray before storage

Following these simple steps will make your experiences as a saltwater fly-rodder much more pleasant and successful. It will also reduce your costs in tackle replacement.

The use of this trademarked name reflects the experience and preference of the author. It does not imply endorsement by the Extension Service or censure of any product not mentioned. When trying a new product, test a small portion of the line to make sure that the product is compatible with the finish on the line. Commercial line dressings are designed for this purpose.