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Fly Fishing in the Red Hills Region of South Georgia and North Florida

A Biological Perspective

BY TOM H. LOGAN

I HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO VISIT WITH many fishermen at our local lakes and find that most know a little about fly fishing. A few even tell me they own a fly rod they intend to use some day. But many of those fly rods are left at home, in part, because of the perception that fly fishing is for trout in the mountains or on an expensive trip to the Florida Keys to catch world-class tarpon or bonefish. What few realize is that we have some of the best warm water fly fishing that can be found right here in the Red Hills and Big Bend area of south Georgia and north Florida. You would be hard pressed to find another region with the variety of waters, diversity of fish species and fishing opportunities that occur during every month of the year in our area.

The waters that occur in the Red Hills around Thomsville, Georgia and extend all the way through the Big Bend area to the Gulf of Mexico host natural wetlands that generally comprise lakes, marshes, rivers and streams. Many natural lakes of sizes that range from a few acres to thousands are scattered throughout the Red Hills. Lake Talquin that was constructed on the Ochlockonee River in 1927, for hydro-electric power, is one of the two large impoundments constructed in the area. The other is Lake Seminole that formed when construction of Woodruff Lock and Dam was completed in 1952, where the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers come together to form the Apalachicola River. Those are the larger rivers of note, but somewhat unique to the area are the many smaller streams that flow from springs and seeps below the Red Hills into the Gulf of Mexico, each with their individual differences and fish species. And of course, small ponds have been constructed and stocked with fish throughout the Red Hills. The growing season is long in these biologically rich systems and they support fisheries and fly fishing opportunities that are as diverse as the systems themselves.

Locals typically use crickets and worms or “crank baits” to catch their share of fish in these warm waters,



Willow flies (*Hexagenia limbata*) emerge from Lake Talquin.
Photo by Tom Logan.

but it may surprise you to find that many of the dry and especially wet flies that have caught trout around the world for hundreds of years are remarkably effective patterns for taking southern bream, black bass and other fish. A little knowledge of the biological factors that govern the lives of these fish, their growth and reproduction, may suggest why.

The lakes and streams of the area do have similarities because they generally are of the same geographic region and rainfall. But factors that include size, depth, bottom shape, and width; whether they are shaded by local forests, are still water (lake) or flowing (stream); spring fed or laterally flow through a forested watershed; and whether they are tidally influenced, as is the case of the freshwater streams that flow into the Gulf, do affect the abundance and diversity of plant and animal life these systems support.

The bream species that live in the natural lakes predominantly include bluegill and fliers (the locals call them flyer bream) with warmouth and shellcrackers occasionally taken. They also support an abundance of largemouth bass. These species are members of the sunfish family *Centrarchidae*. Black crappie also are a favorite fish to catch, especially during winter months, and don't underestimate the challenge of landing the primitive bowfin on a small baitfish pattern and light fly rod. Species of bream typical in the area stream and river systems are the spotted and redbreast sunfish with an occasional bluegill taken from deeper waters. Redbreasts are called "river bream", and the spotted sunfish a "stumpknocker" by locals. Stumpknockers often hold near stumps and knees of the cypress trees that dominate the forest edge along these flowing streams; they are voracious little fighters on the fly, thus the name. Although largemouth black bass do occur in these streams, most interesting is the fact that locally distinct species of bass, that include Suwannee and shoal bass, occur somewhat exclusively in the respective stream systems where they apparently evolved. This is likely because many of these relatively short streams originate distinctly from unique water sources near the Florida/Georgia state lines and terminate at the Gulf with little or no natural opportunity for fish to interact among these individual systems. Any interaction that has occurred is likely due to fishermen carrying and releasing live fish from one system to another for various reasons.

Obviously, water temperatures and clarity are important to the fish that are endemic to each of these



Fish from top: warmouth, stompknocker, Miccosukee flier bream, and bluegill. Photos by Tom Logan.



Largemouth bass are abundant in all our local waters and readily take flies that imitate their natural foods. Photo by Tom Logan

systems. Temperatures do cool in area lakes from November through March during our temperate winters. The bream and bass spend more time in the depths during this period and are not as responsive to flies at or near the surface.

But winter is when take of crappie can get exciting on small baitfish patterns, such as Deceivers predominantly in white. Interestingly though, most of our small streams or rivers are heavily influenced by the springs that feed them. The spring waters come out of the ground relatively warm throughout the year, and some of these streams never cool below 65 degrees during winter. Therefore, the fish and the foods they eat remain active so that these spring fed streams and rivers are fishable throughout the winter months. I've caught stumpknockers in the Wacissa River during winter under the water surface—as though it was summer—while the air

temperature was freezing and ice formed in the guides on my rod.

The plant communities in these aquatic systems, though, are key to their fish abundance and the diversity they support. We as fishermen generally understand that plants and other structure provide habitat for fish to hide from predators and feed, and where young fish survive to eventually become breeders. So, this is where we usually fish for them. Those of us who have ever fished over a bream bed also know that sunfish, both bream and bass, require shallow sandy or gravelly bottoms for spawning in open areas of vegetation.

Biological Perspective

Just as plants provide habitat for fish, plant communities are perhaps even more important as habitat for the natural foods fish depend upon for survival, growth

and reproduction. Freshwater fish generally eat aquatic insects, small crustaceans, macroinvertebrates and smaller fish throughout the world. This is as true for a brown trout in an Irish stream, or a golden trout in the Sierras, as for a bluegill or bass in our local warm waters. Many species of aquatic insects are specific in the plant species, woody structure or bottom type they occupy as habitat, just as are the many species of birds and mammals that occur in the different cover types where we find them. Those of us who hunt or watch birds learn where to look for certain species and where not to look, because we have some understanding of their habitat relationships. This also applies to aquatic insects; so, wetland systems that support abundant and diverse plant communities likewise will support insect populations of high numbers and species diversity as food for fish. Aquatic insects, in their respective life forms, are especially important in the diets of fish, and the mayflies and caddisflies are just as important to fish in Florida as they are to trout in Rocky Mountain streams.

The fact that mayflies and caddisflies occur and are important food items for fish in this area may be surprising to some, but true. More than 80 species of mayflies and 200 species of caddisflies have been documented to occur in Florida waters, but we seldom see them emerging as dramatically in the Southeastern United States as is typical of the western rivers and streams. This probably is because our wetland systems are vast and our growing seasons long and the ecological need to emerge in a hurried way is not necessary for insect survival in our temperate climate. More typical in our area is to see a tiny baetis occasionally rise as a single individual, a cinnamon sedge skitter across the water in fall, or notice a single caddis out of the corner of our eye on the brim of our cap. A few exceptions exist though, that include two of the larger species of mayflies that occur in the Red Hills and Big Bend area. These are the willow fly (*Hexagenia limbata*) and a large white mayfly (*Tortopsis*



From top: Western Coachman fly, Upper Aucilla redbreast on Western Coachman. Photos by Tom Logan

puella). Both do emerge in impressive numbers at specific times during the summer months. Emerging is when an immature insect rises generally from the water bottom, up through the open water column to the surface, where it then molts as an adult with wings, to fly away from the water to breed. The *Hexagenia* emerges at first light through morning hours, while the *Tortopsis* emerges at the very last light of day, usually to have bred, returned to the water to lay eggs and died by next morning. These species are burrowers in their immature forms, their body lengths alone can exceed one inch; fishing fly pattern imitations that include the White Wulff or Western Coachman, when the adults are emerging and drying their wings on the surface, can be very exciting. The *Hexagenia* typically occurs in still waters along the shorelines of Lakes Talquin and Seminole. The *Tortopsis* occurs where water is moving and clay banks are present for burrowing of immatures like along the Wacissa, Apalachicola, Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers; although, I have observed one *Tortopsis* individual on Lake Talquin, likely from a clay-banked feeder stream.



Lake Talquin *Hexagenia*

TOM LOGAN

So how does all this apply to our fly selection and the way we fish them for bream and bass? Clearly, we could do as most locals would and fish a cricket, or a minnow struggling under a cork, or even fish a Mepps spinner and catch plenty of fish. We also could fish a popping bug effectively with a fly rod. But, we think more biologically when we fish for trout; so, why wouldn't we prepare in the same way for bream and black bass? We approach the trout stream, analyze where a fish is likely holding and then tie on a fly that we anticipate will mimic the natural insect the fish is waiting to eat. Perhaps we've seen an insect on the water. Logic would suggest a similar approach could be productive for our warm water fish, and I can assure you that it is. I've worked a career as a professional wildlife biologist, and generally think of this as a biological approach to fly fishing, regardless of whether fishing cold or warm water.

I always think of water, and more importantly the plants and other structure under the surface, as fish habitat and I put my fly where I think a big bluegill probably is waiting for an easy meal. But I select the flies I fish from an understanding of predator prey relationships. All animals, whether fish, mammal or bird, must eat for survival and successful reproduction. This is fundamental to perpetuation of their species. While some are grazers and others predators, game fish around the world generally are predators, which means they eat other vertebrate and invertebrate animals to survive. This reality certainly applies to our southern bream and bass. The importance of this to fly selection is that there are two selection criteria that are very important to predator survival. Their prey must be abundant and it must be readily available in those numbers for the fish to not expend more energy foraging than it consumes. And when you apply this concept to the most abundant and available forms of aquatic insects, which are important prey of fish around the world—whether cold or warm water—it is the emerging insect life forms and adults, while on the water surface, which most fulfill these two criteria. Whether we think about it in this context or not, this is why we fish the popular dry patterns, in addition to the fact that it is exciting when a nice fish explodes on the surface fly. But, it is the historic wet patterns that are even more effective, because they more so mimic the perfect prey form that is essential to fish survival.

Few fly fishermen tie or fish the wet patterns any more, but I can assure you that I catch my share of the



bream and bass that occur in the Big Bend waters on wet patterns. These include the Irish Invicta, Fiery Brown and Green Peter, the Welch Coch-a-bon-ddu, Iron Blue Dun, Partridge, and Orange and other soft-hackle patterns; and of course the Old Gray Mare and Western Coachman. This is why a Partridge and Orange that was first tied for taking brown trout in the North Country of England perhaps 400 years ago is also an excellent pattern for taking big bluegill in our natural local lakes. The pattern is a perfect imitation of an abundant and available prey form rising up through the open water column, as are the others I mention. The White Wulff and Talquin Sedge; although not as historic, are very good surface patterns, and the Deceiver and Wacissa are streamer patterns on which I take largemouth, Suwannee and other species of black bass.

I'm often asked whether I "match the hatch"—I don't. I've also been asked if insects actually occur around Tallahassee that look like the Irish Invicta or Old Gray Mare—they don't. I fish patterns that more generally mimic insect life forms, color tones and behavior, rather than imitate exact species-specific details. I often wonder what a fish thinks when it sees some of the flies I fish, but let a big bass take a size 14 Invicta and turn like a wild horse, or watch a big bluegill push a wake from under a lily pad to take an Old Gray Mare and the excitement of the moment makes the question somewhat unimportant.

Lakes Jackson, Hall, Iamonia, Carr, Talquin and Seminole are all very good fly fishing venues, but my favorite is Lake Miccosukee, just to the east of Tallahassee. Miccosukee is a natural lake named after the Native American tribe of the Seminole Nation that once occupied the area. The lake is shallow, highly organic with floating islands and dark water; much of its surface is covered with the



A small Deceiver pattern imitates baitfish that all species feed on, especially during winter.

large leaves of water lilies and lotus the locals call “bonnets.” Lake Miccosukee, although larger than some, is typical of the many natural lakes in Florida. It is rich with aquatic life and fly fishing can be spectacular.

Fishing on Miccosukee and other similar area lakes is most productive during the early and late hours of the day, but my preference is to be on the lake before first light of morning. That’s a good time to be on the water, when the only sounds are pig frogs visiting with one another, an occasional alligator can be heard taking a big bowfin and a bluegill sucking an insect off the surface. The birds soon begin singing, and I sometimes enjoy seeing them as much as catching another fish. Although I fish all the patterns I’ve mentioned, my fly of choice is often the Western Coachman. I make my first cast to the edge of a lily at the first hint of light, and I let the fly sit on the surface for a few seconds. I twitch it a bit and if it hasn’t disappeared down the mouth of a bream, I start stripping it in short strips sub-surface for six to eight feet. The retrieve ends with a gentle lift of the fly through the water column to make my next cast. It is during this lift when the fly is often taken if not before. So, I fish the Coachman during each cast as a dry, stripe it as an insect or small fish moving laterally in the water column, and then lift it as an emerging immature insect rising to the surface. I usually apply a small amount of silicon dressing in the wing, so the fly will stay dry, and on or in the surface film, until it gets wet enough to sink 8 to 12 inches below the surface with gentle strips. This gives me a better perspective for how fish are responding the fly. They seem to take the fly on the surface some days, while sub-surface on others.

I generally fish all patterns the way I describe for the Western Coachman. However, I fish the White Wulff

only dry on the surface, and if fish appear to be taking the Western mostly on the surface, I will add floatant as needed to keep it floating. I fish the Talquin Sedge and Coch-a-bon-ddu, with just a little floatant in the wing to keep them in the film. The Old Gray Mare is fished identically to the Western, but I fish wet patterns like the Invicta and Fiery Brown by stripping them purposefully under the surface and then lifting them as an emerger. The Deceiver and Wacissa are stripped to imitate a bait fish swimming laterally under the surface. I often fish soft-hackles like the Partridge and Orange by themselves or as a dropper under a Western Coachman. I typically let a soft-hackle sink a few feet when fished as a single fly and then lift it as an emerger for the take. Each pattern is fished on our rivers and streams similar to that on lakes, except that stream currents provide movement of the fly.

I’ve fished other similar dry and wet patterns with success, but the patterns I mention above are those that seem to best satisfy the predator feeding criteria I describe. Weighted nymph patterns that sink deeper will be taken when fish are staying deep, and small poppers are always productive for bream, as are larger surface patterns for bass when they come to the surface. But, I enjoy fishing the patterns I do and perhaps most importantly, I have confidence that I’ll usually catch fish when I fish them. There also is something satisfying about catching a big, copper-headed bluegill on a pattern that was designed several hundred years ago for taking trout in another part of the world. So, add a little biological perspective to your fly fishing for bream and bass and give some of the historic patterns a try. Logic would suggest that if they’re still around after 400 years, they are probably still a good choice for catching your next fish.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – Tom H. Logan is a retired certified wildlife biologist from Tallahassee, Florida who specialized for more than 47 professional years in the research, recovery and management of threatened and endangered wildlife species. He enjoys tying classic trout patterns and fishing them for southern bream and bass in his home waters, as well as for trout in the Smoky Mountains, Sierras and other streams of the western U.S. Tom teaches fly tying classes in Tallahassee. He is the creator and manager of North Florida Fly-fishing Adventures and School dedicated to teach fly tying, casting and fishing activities that enhance the fly-fishing experience for anglers who fish with the artificial fly. His website is www.northfloridaflyfishing.com. Contact him at tomlogan@comcast.net.