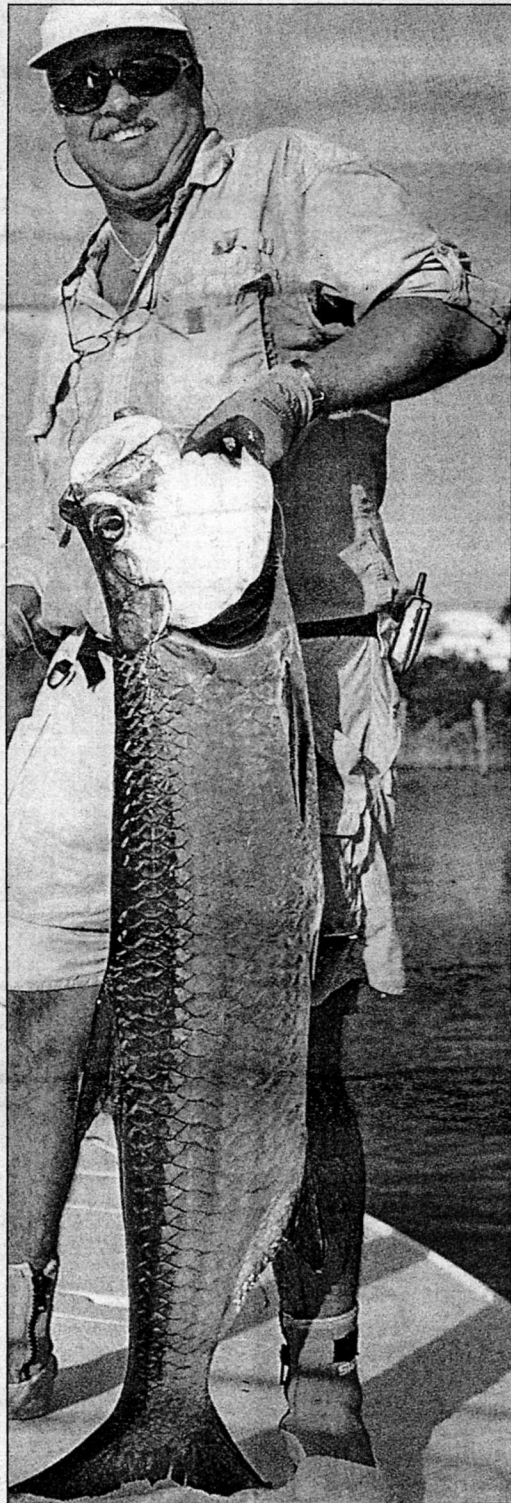


Rains catalyze fishing for inland Space Coast tarpon

Flowing water and small, dark flies: the ticket to backwater tarpon



Gary Giles used a light spinning outfit to nail this 60-pounder at the mouth of Turkey Creek. Two weeks ago he took a 65-pounder and an 80-pounder on fly tackle both on the same morning in the same spot. FF Weekly photo by Terry Lamielle

By Bill Sargent
Space Coast

Finally, the summer rains are kicking in and no one could be happier than fly fisherman Gary Giles.

Giles, a 54-year-old charter captain and fly fishing specialist from Palm Bay, tunes in to tarpon — large and small — that take up residence in backwater creeks and canals during the summer months when afternoon rains are regular events.

It's a brand of fishing overlooked by most, but one that Giles and a handful of other flyrodders finds extremely entertaining.

"People — especially fly fishermen — are missing out if they don't go after these tarpon that move up into those backwaters," Giles said. "The fish are there and they're not hard to find."

Two summers ago, Florida Tech in Melbourne sponsored a Tarpon Fishing for Science tournament in an effort to collect tarpon samples for DNA testing. During the three-month contest more than 200 tarpon were caught, sampled and released by the 50 anglers who entered. Giles landed 136 tarpon, most of them on fly, and won the tournament.

"I'm not bragging. I just know where the tarpon will be, and I know how to present the fly," Giles said.

Since that time Giles has become the head of Florida Tech's tarpon tagging program.

In the short time since the rains began, triggered by the passage of Tropical Storm Alberto, Giles has tagged two tarpon of 65 and 80 pounds. He landed both fish on fly while fishing alone from his flats skiff. Another angler who was fishing nearby helped Giles tag the larger of the two tarpon.

An interesting part of Giles' approach lies in the fact that he does some of his summer fishing from shore. Using public road accesses to canals and creeks, he fishes from banks in places where boats can't be launched.

Since he lives in the southern part of Brevard

County, Giles concentrates on the Melbourne-Tillman Canal and Turkey Creek, two major drainages in Palm Bay, and Crane Creek and the Eau Gallie River in the Melbourne area.

He also fishes the two forks of the Sebastian River at the Brevard-Indian River county line.

Most of the tarpon in these backwaters are under 25 pounds, and a good number are juveniles. The deeper waters like Sebastian River and the mouth of Turkey Creek will hold much larger fish. In fact, Giles was casting near the mouth of Turkey Creek, close to the U.S. 1 Bridge, earlier this month when he took the 65- and 80-pounders.

But it's the numbers of the smaller fish that keeps Giles coming back.

"You might land 20 or 30 in a couple hours in an afternoon, and even if they're only 6 or 8 or 10 pounds, they're still a ton of fun on a 6-weight," Giles smiled. "I've caught them as small as 8 inches, but you also get your share of fish over 10 pounds."

As the rainy season progresses, so do the tarpon, he said.

"They move farther up the creeks and canals because they want that cooler water from the runoff," he explained.

Not to mention the hordes of shiners, shad, small bluegills and Gambusia minnows pulled along by the flow.

That's why outflows from culverts and other drainages become primary fishing zones especially following periods of heavy rainfall.

The extra oxygen and bait-rich water really energize the tarpon.

"Sometimes you'll have 10 jump-offs before you land one," Giles laughed. "But just seeing them jump is enough for me. I've had small tarpon jump six feet in the air."

As fly patterns go, Giles is emphatic when he says black is the only color to use.

"These tarpon are keying on those minnows and small bream being washed down by the runoff, and everything looks black to

them in the tannic water," he reckoned.

Size of the fly also is important.

"These fish will not take a fly that's longer than a business card," he said.

"Three inches is max."

Giles, a rep for the TL Johnson Fly Rod Co. and Old Florida fly reels, ties his own flies and his favorite patterns are floating finger mullet imitations made of black deer hair, black feathers and a little Crystal Flash; shallow-sinking Deceivers in all black; black Muddler Minnows; and a fly used by guide and television show host Rick Murphy called the Purple Death.

The Purple Death is a 3-inch bunny hair stripping fly which incorporates black bunny hair, Crystal Flash and purple marabou on the front.

"It pulsates and you barely strip it," Giles said.

In all cases, he ties the patterns on 1/0 Mustad stainless steel model tarpon hooks C68S.

He throws a 6-weight flyrod for the small tarpon. His leader consists of 12 inches of 40-pound test Mason mono, tied to 3 1/2 feet of 30-pound and 3 1/2 feet of 25-pound test fluorocarbon.

Floating line works fine in the shallow canals and creeks, but in deeper areas like Sebastian River he goes to an intermediate sinking line.

"I found early on that the secret to strikes is the perfect placement of the cast to a particular fish," Giles explained.

"When you see a tarpon roll or see its wake, you make your cast and you must get the fly two or three feet in front of his face. He will not turn for it."

"Usually there's flow, so you throw up current and let the fly drag across in front of the fish."

"That's when he'll nail it."

Bill Sargent is the Outdoors Editor for Florida Today, a Gannett newspaper published in Melbourne. He covers the Space Coast for Florida Fishing Weekly. You can read more of his work at www.floridatoday.com.