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Sargent: Davis masters river pompano with his fly rod

Bill Sargent, Special to FLORIDA TODAY Published 9:17 a.m. ET May 24, 2018 | Updated 9:17 a.m. ET May 24, 2018

*(Photo: Gary Davis/For FLORIDA TODAY)*

Once again Jerry Davis of Suntree is catching prized pompano in the Indian River on his fly rod.

In the last three weeks he has averaged four to five per trip along a 4 1/2-mile section of the river's western shore between Palm Bay's Turkey Creek and the south end of Rocky Point near Malabar in South Brevard.

"There's six to eight key spots where I can usually find pompano holding," said Davis, who uses his boat to reach the locations where he then goes overboard and wades.

Davis makes it a point to be on the water by first light and by 9:30 a.m. he's on his way home.

"It's generally an early-morning bite and I may have to try two or three spots before I find them," explained the 70-year-old Davis, a retired school superintendent from his native California.

*Bill Sargent (Photo: FLORIDA TODAY FILE)*

Most of the spots feature drop-offs from about three feet of water to five or six feet, thus creating a trough, but he has found that the pompano also like submerged structures like broken parts of old docks. They're also attracted to drop-offs around the river's spoil islands along the edge of the Intracoastal Waterway channel.

"It's a case of blind casting until you find them," he said. "I'll be standing in two to three feet of water and throwing my fly into the deeper water."

Pompano, prized as table fare, are bottom feeders that seldom show themselves on the surface, except when disturbed like from a passing boat. But when the water is clear, as has been the case south of Melbourne, there are occasions when reflections of moving

fish can be spotted.

While some pompano reside in the estuarine system, most are ocean residents that move through inlets like Sebastian into the Indian River Lagoon for reasons that only can be speculated.

"Usually we do best in the river between January and April but I think all the dirt and sea weed we had along the surf recently, and now the rain and runoff we've been having, has pushed a lot of pompano into the river," Davis said.

Pompano demand clean conditions, and for that reason generally is recognized as an ocean species, especially along the surf where it feeds heavily on sand fleas, small crabs and other crustaceans.

"I've been fishing for them about 12 years now so I've learned to look for the clean water they like, the kind of bottom they want, and most importantly how to get them on fly," said Davis, who retired to Suntree 15 years ago after spending years fly fishing for freshwater trout in the High Sierra.

Gary Giles, a guide and fly fishing specialist from Palm Bay, is a close friend of Davis who got him interested in saltwater fly fishing, particularly in the Indian River, and they have made countless trips together.

Giles always has been willing to share his fishing expertise with others and Davis is showing the same helpful attitude.

"Gary became my mentor and he taught me basically everything I've come to know about river fishing," Davis said. "I wouldn't be having all this fun if it hadn't been for Gary Giles."

The methods for finding and catching river pompano on fly gear is one of Giles' strongpoints. He also fly fishes for tarpon and snook in the river and in backwater creeks and canals, and a week ago had a banner day fly fishing for largemouth bass at the Stick Marsh.

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Bright colors of orange and yellow, and sometimes red, are nearly always incorporated into lures for pompano. The colors imitate the orange-colored egg sack on the underside of sand fleas, making them prime forage.

Clouser minnows generally make some of the best pompano fly fishing patterns and Giles designed what he calls the Giles Clouser, tied on a No. 2 hook with weighted eyes and an overall orange-yellow body with a pink mid section and a white body. When tied properly the barb of the hook on a Clouser rides upward when retrieved.

For his own use Davis ties a variation of the Giles' Clouser starting with a Mustad 34007 O'Shaughnessy-style hook. For weight he uses medium-size barbell lead eyes on a red head and they are followed by orange and yellow-colored Craft Fur material for the body. Several strips of Krystal Flash are included for a natural, flashy look. He presses down the barb on the hook to ensure easier releases. The finished fly is two inches long.

Davis does not sell his flies, and the Giles Clouser has been available in the past at Harry Goode's Outdoors Shop in Melbourne.

There are numerous pompano flies available, some imitating sand fleas and crabs, and no doubt they all work when presented properly. Any 1 1/2- to 2-inch Clouser minnow pattern with bright colors would work.

Davis uses a 7-weight fly rod with floating line and a nine-foot leader with a 10- to 12-pound tippet. The leader length allows the weighted fly to reach the bottom.

"After a cast I count four to five seconds and then start a series of two or three short strips and a pause, followed by the same, all the while working it slow." The strips produce a pattern of short bounces.

"If they hit the tail, stop and let it sit for a moment. Then start the bouncing again and chances are the fish will come back," Davis added.

Pompano are skittish and are spooked easily by motion and vibrations and for those reasons wade fishing is recommended. Anchor the boat a good distance from your fishing area.

"When you find a school don't do much moving or else they'll detect it and move," Davis said. "If you do everything right, you might get three or four in that one spot."

Davis has taken fish as large as 3 1/2 pounds, usually females with eggs, which he releases.

"The full-bodied pompano fights as good as any jack crevalle of the same size," he said. "Just another reason why I prefer the fly rod."

Most any clean water drop off creating a deep trough becomes a potential pompano-feeding zone. The Wabasso area yields catches to the south of Sebastian as well as those zones to the north currently producing.

Those using spinning or conventional tackle will do best by using the same slow, bouncing retrieves with lures like Nylures, Doc's Goofy Jigs, or brightly colored plastic-tailed grubs.

Bill Sargent of Melbourne has been writing about sports and outdoors for FLORIDA TODAY for over 49 years. Contact Sargent at sargentwb@gmail.com.