

# To Catch a Tarpon

by Rob Steffan

The serenity of the March morning was shattered by the scream of the clicker on my Penn Senator 113H reel as my 8-ft tarpon rod arced towards the water. As I reached the rod and strained to remove it from the rod holder the 120 lb silver king erupted from the water going aerial in defiance 20 yards from the boat. The rod now in my hands, I struggled against the strength of the fish as the drag on the reel continued to scream. Then, in an instant the fish again bolted skyward as I stabbed my rod towards it; bowing to the king. The fight was on. The powerful fish dove deep and ran directly away from the boat as the rod bent and line continued to race from the reel.

As I gained my composure I was able to exert some control over the rod and pull against the fish to turn it towards the boat. The entire time, my wife scrambled to reel in our other three lines in an attempt to clear the way for the ensuing fight. Just when it appeared I was gaining the upper hand, the fish again turned away from the boat and used its powerful tail to overcome the 17 lbs of drag I had set on my reel. The fight continued; me gaining a little ground and the powerful fish ripping out the line I had just recovered. As I finally got it near the boat, it again erupted from the water, once, twice, three times, shaking its massive head with its bucket sized mouth open as it tried to dislodge the 14/0 Mustad circle hook that was buried deep into the corner of its jaw. In a final act of defiance it again dove deep and straight under the boat as I jammed the 8-ft tarpon rod into the water so the line wouldn't drag on the bottom boat or get caught on the engine if the fish again changed directions.

After several more tests of my resolve the fish was tiring and I was able to coax her alongside of the boat. I slid my orange cloth glove over my right hand and was able to grab the tarpon by her lower jaw. I used a long handled plier to coax out the circle hook and held the fish briefly as my wife snapped a few photos. I then revived the fish gently by moving her back and forth to get water moving through her gills as she again gained her strength.

As I released her she slowly turned away from the boat and then as if to bid us adieu she defiantly swatted a wave of water at us with her giant tail. As my adrenalin eased and fatigue caught up with me, I realized I had caught and released my first tarpon. My wife gave me a high five to celebrate the occasion.

My ability to catch that first tarpon on my own, and several others since, was based in large part on the information I had gathered by attending meetings of the Cape Coral Tarpon Hunters Club (CCTHC; [www.capecoraltarponhunters.com](http://www.capecoraltarponhunters.com))

Like many other transplants from the north, I arrived in Southwest Florida with limited big fish experience, and no experience catching tarpon. I could have struggled for a few years trying to learn everything on my own, hired a local guide, or read any number of tarpon fishing books and articles to learn some basic tarpon fishing techniques. Each of these is an effective approach, but I chose to try the CCTHC, and I am glad I did. The CCTHC has been in existence since 1971 and is made up of more than 200 members with varying levels of experience. Its stated goal is the safe and ethical catch and release of tarpon. The club promotes the use of appropriate tackle and circle hooks to minimize damage to the tarpon and ensure that the species continues to thrive in our area. Heavy 8-foot rods, strong reels like the above-mentioned Penn Senator, heavy line (50 lb test), and strong circle hooks are all prescribed in the club's Tarpon Fishing Manual that is provided to new members of the club. The club does, however, offer annual prizes for fish caught on 12 lb test line or with a fly rod, but these techniques are recommended only for experienced tarpon anglers. The club has monthly meetings during which local experts provide great detail on methods and techniques that have proven successful for taking tarpon in local waters. Likewise, colorful discussions with club members provide great information on effective tarpon fishing methods. Notably, each fish that is caught by club members is posted on an up-to-date member-accessible web site that details when and where each fish was caught and what bait was used. This is a valuable resource, indeed.

On the water, club members communicate freely with other members about where fish are being seen and caught and what bait or approach is most effective on that given day. The club even has a voluntary mentorship program that pairs new or inexperienced members with club members who have more tarpon fishing experience. An annual award is even given to the captain who hosts the most successful guest anglers on his/her boat during the season as a way to promote member collaboration. The goal of the club is to share the excitement of catching tarpon with all club members.

Several members of the CCTHC have gained considerable reputations in the area for their tarpon fishing prowess. Jerry Geyer, a retired NYC fire fighter, this year released his 900th tarpon as part of the club's "Captain Bob Locker Master Tarpon Hunter Program" which designates season dates (March 1-September 30) and club boundaries, and also requires that each tarpon catch be witnessed. Another retired NYC fire fighter, John Mester, released his 600th tarpon this year, while club member Ken Holzauer released tarpon number 400. Highly-respected local tarpon



fishing guide, Capt. David Holzauer (Tel. 239-940-1541), also is a club member and he annually presents a captivating and informative tarpon fishing seminar at one of the monthly club meetings.

The Cape Coral Tarpon Hunting Club meets the third Thursday of each month (February through September) at the Cape Coral Yacht Club (5819 Driftwood Parkway, Cape Coral, FL 33904). The doors open for the meetings at 7:00 pm. The February meeting (February 15, 2018) is open to the public and features a clinic-type format to introduce prospective members to the club and basic tarpon fishing techniques. Subsequent meetings feature more in-depth clinics and guest speakers from the local tarpon fishing community. The club also hosts an annual picnic, an awards

banquet, and other events to promote club member interaction and community service.

I highly recommend that new members of the Southwest Florida fishing community consider joining the CCTHC or other local fishing clubs including the Fort Myers Beach Tarpon Hunters Club and Cape Coral's Real Anglers Fishing Club. Club membership provides a venue for meeting like-minded people in the area and for rapidly improving your fishing success in our local waters. The skills I learned at the CCTHC meetings gave me the confidence and know-how to land my first tarpon and many more. For that I will always be grateful.

*-Rob Steffan*

