

The opportunities for saltwater fly-fishing in the waters surrounding Long Beach Island



While many people think of fly-fishing as something done on a serene stream with trout as the intended quarry, there are many opportunities for saltwater fly-fishing in the waters surrounding Long Beach Island. These opportunities range from fishing for snapper blues and white perch in the lagoons that adorn the west side of the bay to fishing for tuna and sharks in offshore canyon waters.

Fly rods are rated for the line weight they are intended to cast, as unlike when using spinning or conventional gear, you are casting the weight of the line (rather than the lure or sinker) when fly-fishing. For saltwater, most anglers utilize rods ranging from 5 weights to 15 weights. Unlike fly-fishing in freshwater, most of the time you need a fly line that will sink (at least for part of its length) and the flies themselves may be slightly weighted with metal eyes or heads. When throwing heavier flies or in windy conditions, heavier rods are needed, even if a more powerful rod isn't required for fighting the fish that you seek, as you must be able to overcome the wind as well as the aerodynamic drag of larger flies. In addition, instead of one simple casting motion, a fly line is played out gradually through a series of false casts, you continue casting forward and backward without allowing your fly and line to hit the water until you achieve the distance you desire. A good fly caster can cast about 90 feet, an accomplished caster about 120 feet.

There is a wide variety of choices in fly reels, and for the most part, for bay and inshore fly fishing a simple direct drive reel with a full range disc drag that is the appropriate size for your line weight will suffice. Ideally, you would like the reel to hold 200 yards of 20-pound test Micron backing in addition to your fly line. When using 9-weight and above rods, many anglers favor 30-pound Micron. When fishing for tuna, marlin, and sharks, large reels capable of holding 400 to 600 yards of 50-pound micron or Spectra backing are required, and these reels often feature an anti-reverse feature that will prevent the spool from turning backwards when the fish is taking drag, preventing "knuckle-busting."

Because this will be referenced later in this article, it is important to quickly review the different types of fly lines that are most often used in local saltwaters. The first is the weight forward floating line, which is the easiest to cast, but limits presentations to the surface of the water or just a foot or two down if using a weighted fly. More commonly used are lines that sink, at least for part of their length. The term "intermediate" when used to describe fly lines most traditionally indicates a line that floats for the majority of its length but has a slow sinking tip section. However, the term intermediate may also be used to describe a line that has a very slow sink rate for its entire length. Intermediate lines are usually weight forward in taper. There are shooting head lines that have a floating or intermediate running line section (about 2/3 of the total line length) with a sinking tip section that is labeled with a grain weight that indicates how fast they sink rather than a line weight. Many of these lines are now fused, while in the old days it was

more common to loop to loop connect a sinking shooting head to a floating line or braided monofilament. Shooting head lines do not feature any taper in their head section. Also available are weight forward full sinking lines, those that rapidly sink throughout their whole length, these lines are labeled based on their line weight. Also gaining in popularity are multi-tip lines, which are sold with either a floating or intermediate running line and usually four tips which connect loop-to-loop. These tips are usually a floating, a slow intermediate, a fast intermediate, and a full sinking. These lines allow the angler to relatively easily adjust to changing conditions or new locations.

A wide variety of flies are used in local waters, ranging from very small (size 6 or even smaller) shrimp patterns to 12-inch long streamers on 6/0 hooks for offshore use. While the range of available flies is too broad a subject to cover here, it is important to note the differences in leaders required for various flies. When fishing weighted flies such as a Clouser minnow, it is not imperative to fish a long tapered leader, a simple 5 foot leader of 15 or 20 pound test will suffice and aid in achieving a good sink rate. When fishing unweighted flies, it is imperative to have some taper to your leader to assist in turning it over during the cast. Most anglers now favor the manufactured tapered leaders made of regular monofilament or fluorocarbon. In terms of wire leaders for flies, there are various systems of retwistable haywired steel leaders, but the new super flexible metal leaders in which knots can be tied, such as Malin®'s Boa leader are fast gaining popularity due to their ease of use and thin diameters. In all cases, these wire bite tippets connect to a standard mono leader via a knot or small swivel.

First we will address fishing for a variety of species from a boat, covering surf and jetty angling later, as the added variable of waves makes surf fly rodding a bit unique.

The most common fish sought on the fly rod in local waters is weakfish in the bays. In the springtime when the spawning tiderunner weakfish that run to 10-plus pounds are swimming the local waters, anglers choose 8 or 9 weight rods. In the dead of summer when small spike weakfish abound, rods as light as 5 and 6 weights may see use, with 7 weights most common. When fishing for weakfish, most anglers choose an intermediate line that balances with their rod or use a shooting head with a floating running line, usually of 200 to 300 grains, perhaps a 350 when fishing in heavy current locations with an 8 or 9 weight rod. Commonly used flies for weakfish include Clouser minnows and Lefty's Deceivers on size 4 to 1/0 hooks, epoxy flies such as sand eel or spearing patterns, and particularly when chumming with grass shrimp, shrimp patterns and Crazy Charlies .

Many beginners at saltwater fly rodding like to fish for weakfish from an anchored boat chumming with grass shrimp, as the fly can be played out in the slick without having to cast, as the fly looks like another shrimp in the slick, so even the novice can experience the thrill of hooking up on the fly rod.

Bluefish are another commonly sought species by fly rodders, in large part due to their voracious tendencies that make them easy targets on the fly. In bay waters, the early spring blues may run up to 8 pounds, and many anglers use 8 or 9 weight rods for them. When fishing for snappers in the summer time, 5 to 7 weight rods are ideal. When fishing for the slammer blues out in the ocean, rods as heavy as 11 weights see action, allowing anglers to power large flies through the wind and more easily handle the fight put up by these large fish. Due to the willingness of blues to hit poppers, many anglers like to fish for blues with topwater flies and floating lines, as the thrill of seeing a bluefish rise up and attack your surface fly is hard to beat. More commonly used however are intermediate or shooting head lines, even full sinking lines, appropriate for the depth at which you are targeting the blues. Wire leaders are a necessity, and fly choice is not usually too critical with the blues, although it helps to match the hatch in terms of size and color of prevalent forage species. When the blues are gobbling sand eels or spearing, it is time to use epoxy flies, when they are hitting 3/4-pound bunkers, it is time to break out large streamer patterns and a heavier rod. Standard issue Clousers and deceivers are also very effective on the

bluefish. When targeting the bluefish on the fly rod, make sure to have a plentiful supply of flies on hand, as a single fish can mangle a fly and render it useless.

The glory species for local anglers using the fly rod is the striped bass. Most bass anglers choose rods of 8 to 10 weight depending upon conditions and the types of flies being used. With the exception of fishing with poppers, floating lines are rarely used for stripers. It should be noted that bass do hit poppers in the flats of the bays as well as in throughout the bay and ocean when there are large schools of mullet, spearing, or peanut bunker around. More commonly used for stripers are intermediate lines and shooting head lines of between 300 and 500 grains, with full fast sinking lines used in depths of over 30 feet in the ocean. Commonly used flies include Clouser minnows on 2/0 to 4/0 hooks, Lefty's deceivers of the same size, other large streamer patterns such as Major Bunkers and Wool Hair Mulletts, and long eel patterns. Other flies also see use in an effort to match the hatch such as shrimp patterns (particularly when chumming for stripers with grass shrimp such as in the pocket north of the North Jetty at Barnegat Inlet) and surf candies that imitate spearing and bay anchovies (rainfish).

While many people do not think of fluke as a species eligible for fly rodding, they readily accept the fly and are very easy to catch on the long rod, particularly in the bay. In late April through June, there are a lot of large fluke in the bay in areas such as Grassy Channel and Great Bay on the south end and Double and Oyster Creek Channels on the north end. From either a drifting or anchored boat, the use of intermediate or shooting head lines on 7 or 8 weight rods with short leaders and Clouser minnows on size 2 to 2/0 hooks or crab flies will get you a good number of fluke. When fishing for weakfish when grass shrimping, don't give up when the tide slacks up, throw the fly rod long in the slick and slowly retrieve your fly along the bottom. It is not uncommon to catch a half dozen flatties in half an hour as the fluke chomp on the chum slick that is behind your boat. Fluke can also be targeted in deeper water, drifting flies down deep with the assistance of lead core (lead wire inside of braided line) shooting heads attached to fast full sinking lines.

In addition to the striped bass, false albacore (little tunny) and Atlantic Bonito are favorites of fly rodders. These fish are often found in inshore waters in late summer through early fall, and they go for small flies such as glass minnows and surf candies on size 2 to 1/0 hooks, and small Clousers and deceivers on size 2 hooks. You should retrieve your flies very rapidly in order to entice these tunas, and the use of the minimum diameter fluorocarbon leader will increase your chances of success. While it is possible to catch these small tunas on floating lines, the use of intermediate lines or shooting head lines with floating running lines with grain weights from 250 to 500 will usually prove more successful. Due to the fact that these fish make blisteringly fast and long runs, it is recommended that you use a 10 to 12 weight rod when fishing for them in order to be able to maximize the pressure on the fish when fighting them in order to ensure successful release of these fish, as they have no table qualities.

On the offshore front, a variety of tuna and billfish species are sought on the fly rod, usually using a rod of 12 to 15 weight. When trolling for tunas or billfish, the objective is to tease the fish into the trolling spread with lures, ballyhoo, or strip baits rigged without hooks, retrieving the teasers near the boat with the fish following, and then yanking the teaser from the water and dropping a large (often as large as 12 inches) streamer fly on the fish in a "bait and switch" tactic. Most "bluewater" lines are sinking lines, the objective of which is not so much to achieve depth, but to keep the fly in the water at the fast trolling speeds of the boat. The heavy 13 to 15 weight fly rods most commonly used for marlin and tuna are not designed so much to be casting tools as fish fighting tools, offering a powerful butt section for lifting power and leverage. Castability is not a major factor with these rods, as when you drop the fly in the water it will play out due to the fact the boat is moving along at a clip of at least 6 knots. Obviously, the scale of the terminal tackle is different, as 80-pound fluorocarbon leaders are typically used for the tuna, with wire bite tippets and heavier mono sometimes favored for the billfish.

Similar heavy tackle is also used when chumming for tuna and sharks, with a variety of flies used. Chum flies are those that are designed to look like a bloody piece of bunker, mackerel, or butterfish, and are often used successfully, floating them back in the chum slick, but it is more common to use large streamer flies that are cast out into the slick and retrieved back to the boat, hoping to trigger the predatory response of the quarry. The use of a 1 to 3 foot length of heavy single strand stainless leader (194 pound test or above) using a haywire twist to attach the fly and an Albright knot connection of 130 pound test mono to a haywire twist at the other end of the leader is a common method of rigging for sharks. For tunas, 6 foot or so straight shots of 50 to 80 pound fluorocarbon are the favored leaders.

The surf presents some unique variables to the fly angler, as the breaking waves create a lot of drag on a fly line, whether you are casting from a jetty or the sand. In order to avoid the effects of the swell, full sinking lines are required on all days except the calmest. Additionally, inasmuch as there is no boat deck on which to keep your line, a stripping basket, which is a container in which you store and into which you strip your line, is a necessity. A wide variety of stripping baskets are available, made of mesh, plastic, and other similar materials to which an adjustable nylon belt is attached. Most anglers opt for 9 or 10 weight rods for the surf, usually with fast action tips that develop a lot of line speed, so that anglers may power their line and flies through the wind which is all too common on the beachfront. When going with larger streamer patterns such as Major Bunkers and the like, an 11-weight rod may be necessary. On calm days with one-foot swells, an 8-weight rod and an intermediate line may suffice. In terms of species available in the surf, the easiest species to catch in the surf is fluke. Fluke will lie in heavy numbers right in the shorebreak zone, and readily strike Clouser Minnows and the like. Stripers, bluefish, weakfish, and on occasion false albacore are available to surf anglers. A wide variety of flies will work on these fish, with Clouser minnows frequently used due to their weighted heads that aid in getting the fly down through the wave activity. The disadvantage of using sinking lines is the fact that the line must be stripped all the way back to the angler before it can be picked back up to begin your false casting cycle.

As you can see, basically any species that will hit artificial lures will hit a fly. Many argue that fly rodders have an advantage over conventional and spin fisherman, as it is not necessary to make the lure itself castable, enabling the fly angler to tie flies that match the hatch as exactly as possible without having to worry about incorporating mass into the fly itself. There are few thrills as powerful as catching a large fish on fly tackle and opportunities for this thrill abound in the waters surrounding Long Beach Island.