

September 6, 2009

## Bill Sargent: Angler lands record tarpon

*BY BILL SARGENT  
FOR FLORIDA TODAY*

Sebastian River just got a boost as one of the East Coast's prime tarpon hotspots.

News will spread fast about the catch of a huge 140-pounder that nearly proved too much for the angler and his guide, fighting for an hour and 15 minutes, almost spooling the reel twice, and at one point skyrocketing high into the air like a smoker kingfish.

It's one of the largest tarpon ever reported in Sebastian River, also known as the St. Sebastian River.

"There was nothing I could do but hold on," said Art McPherson, the angler from Viera and a broker for a Satellite Beach financial planning firm. "For me, it's a once-in-a-lifetime catch. I'm getting a replica mount to put out by my swimming pool."

To eliminate injury to the prize fish, it wasn't pulled aboard. It was measured and photographed in the water beside the boat and released. It was 6-feet, 2-inches long and 39 inches in girth. A formula using the measurements determined the weight.

The guide, 36-year-old Mike Badarack of Satellite Beach, was amazed that a tarpon of such size had moved into Sebastian River, a backwater tributary that pulls runoff from rural Indian River and Brevard counties that is best known for smaller tarpon in the 30- to 40-pound range. Tarpon heavier than 80 to 100 pounds in this part of Florida seldom venture outside of ocean areas and mouths of inlets.

"We'd been seeing some decent size fish, maybe a few to 50 pounds, which usually is about the limit for Sebastian River," Badarack said. "But when this fish ripped off and made its first jump, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It burned off 150 yards of line in nothing flat, came up shaking its head then leaped higher than I've ever seen a tarpon jump."

The tarpon made more than a half dozen jumps and launched a second sizzling run later in the fight.

Terry Parsons of Sebastian, a guide with more than 40 years of tarpon fishing experience, fishes Sebastian River regularly.

"I've seen thousands of tarpon up Sebastian River and I've never seen one even come close to that," Parsons said. "My biggest from the river was 45 pounds."

Martha Matulich of Satellite Beach, a regular client of river guide Charlie Fornabio of Wabasso, released a 75-pounder in 2000.

McPherson's tarpon struck an 8-inch live mullet being freelined with no weight or bobber in the main branch of the river west of the railroad trestle near the convergence of the north and south forks. He caught the fish about 9 a.m. on Aug. 27.

"I always anchor up in a spot and let the tarpon come to me. If you approach them even with a trolling

motor they'll spook," explained Badarack. "There were 15 to 20 smaller tarpon rolling in the area and that's the size I figured we'd get. We'd fished them for about two hours before the big one hit."

McPherson used on-board tackle belonging to Badarack consisting of 40-pound test mono line on a Penn 650 spinning reel and a 7-foot St. Croix rod. For tarpon, Badarack uses 4-O Gamakatsu circle hooks, which unlike J-style hooks, slide to the corner of a fish's jaw thereby reducing the chance of injury to the fish. He hooks the mullet through the lips.

"At first I thought we were doomed but Art did everything right, bowing to the fish when it jumped and keeping pressure on it. We didn't have a fighting belt, so it was shear arm strength. Like I said, we weren't expecting anything like a 140-pounder," Badarack added.

Judging from the tarpon's brilliant silver and green coloration, Badarack believes it was a newcomer to the tannin-stained river that empties into the Indian River opposite Sebastian Inlet.

"We've had cold water along the beaches and I think that pushed this fish into the Indian River and then it simply moved into the Sebastian River, which is loaded with mullet," Badarack said. "This definitely was an ocean fish."

Fellow river guide Terry Lamielle of Palm Bay agreed.

"In the last couple of weeks I've noticed big loggerhead sea turtles showing up in the river, I think for the same reason, the cold water," Lamielle said.

Another factor that may explain larger fish moving through Sebastian Inlet is the new 9-foot deep dogleg channel linking the inlet with the Indian River. Two years ago the Sebastian Inlet District Commission completed a dredging project which corrected serious shoaling in the navigation channel which, for years, was a nightmarish 3-foot deep during low tides.

In addition, a two-year \$23 million de-mucking project of the Sebastian River bottom by the St. Johns River Water Management District deepened channel areas to their original depths, 12 to 14 feet in some areas of the main branch.

"Big tarpon stay close to deep water," Badarack said. "But these new deep-water channels might be changing things for us. We might be seeing bigger fish coming into our backwaters as a result."

**Contact Sargent at [sargentwb@gmail.com](mailto:sargentwb@gmail.com).**

---