

# **Jeff Currier** *global fly fishing*

## **Snowbound Angler Dreams of Warmer Climes**

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The snow level outside the office window continues to rise, and the agony of not having any unfrozen water to cast into increases proportionately. Winter reading about warm and navigable places isn't a complete cure.

Nor are toasty December-through-May getaways exactly nearby. The three closest lower-altitude tailwater trout streams are the Wind River in Thermopolis, the Bighorn at Ft. Smith, Mont., and the North Platte below Grey Reef outside of Casper. The San Juan in the Four Corners area of New Mexico and the Colorado at Lees Ferry in Arizona require the better part of two driving days. None are guaranteed blizzard-free until May, at least.

Two reasonable days of driving can land your outfit in portions of Utah, Arizona, Nevada and California, where Colorado River reservoirs, their tailwaters and numerous other unfrozen bass lakes boast largemouth, rainbow trout and striped bass. Due to severe aquatic-nuisance species infestations in several of these waters, particularly Lake Powell and Lake Mead, specialized boat cleaning is required before and after a visit.

With slightly more effort, a determined driver and a cartop or trailer boat also can be examining the many mid-Texas bass lakes or prowling around the Gulf Coast

beginning in Rockport, Aransas Pass and Padre Island area.

Dreams of winter/spring break visits to tropical locations a la magazine and Internet site fantasies haunt us all. This newspaper recently offered Florida Keys getaway ads, and television is loaded with trips to Florida and the Bahamas. Flying to the Bahamas, Belize, Baja, the Florida Keys, the Yucatan, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Guatemala, Panama and other Jimmy Buffet-approved locales is possible with some super-saver pricing currently. Look for tropical destinations offering two-for-one and reduced couples' rates through direct resort booking (e.g.. Turneffe Flats and Belize River Lodge) as well as discounted trips from popular sporting agents such as Frontiers, Yellow Dog and Fly Water Travel.

On the other side of the equator breathtaking trout, dorado and big game fishing is in season currently, should your resources allow Argentina, Chile, New Zealand and Australia.

### **Hype & expectations**

An objective in describing these opportunities is to report that, too often, enthusiastic travelers stumble on so much hype that the trip cannot live up to expectation. For instance, when I've accompanied longtime friends and clients on some exciting tropical excursions, it has been with the understanding that we would have fun and discover new challenges. It is important to realize that, contrary to videos, magazine stories and trip promises, not everybody catches bonefish, permit, tarpon, snook and redfish on their first saltwater outing, especially if they are determined to use a fly rod.

Situations may conspire to hamper even the best opportunities. These include difficult weather conditions, especially wind and rain, which eliminate visibility, a key to sight fishing. For the unaccustomed angler, stiff saltwater breezes demand

additional follow-through casting skills that aren't self-explanatory, especially with weightier rod/reel combinations. Spotting subtle shapes of bonefish, permit and other shallow-water cruisers takes practice even for veteran trout chasers. Quickly delivering the longer, pinpoint-accurate casts is often the bigger challenge.

A number of tropical guide friends have related repeated problems with eager guests who struggled to get all of the spotting and casting procedures in order. Many of these were accomplished, even guide-level, fishermen who were either too stubborn to listen or overwhelmed by the array of new requirements.

Local artist, author and fishing travel promoter **Jeff Currier** and I have shared boats on tropical outings. Many of us consider Jeff to be the most well-traveled angler that we know. Despite all this experience, he exhibits a practical approach that includes eager pursuit of a variety of available species, which may not always include the most glamorous. When flats fishing is slow, Jeff happily targets cruising lemon sharks and barracuda with his fly-rod poppers. Nothing that swims creates a shallow-water nuclear explosion on a fly like either of these toothy critters. After the initial fireworks, prepare to be yanked around for a while by real pulling machines.

Another favorite Currier popper-tunity is forcing members of the snapper family to abandon their comfortable coral reef and mangrove housing to smash surface noisemakers. My job is to get the ball rolling by plug or spin casting a topwater chugger in the area. Then everything from schoolmaster, mutton, mangrove and cubera snapper joins the party. A picture in Jack Dennis Outdoor Shop of Jeff hoisting a handsome 12-pound mangrove snapper from Belize during one of these "other species" outings is one of the finest fly-rod catches ever.

## **The lure of the sea trout**

Too many, I fear, are caught in the fishing pizzazz that dictates one must be proficient in catching the most challenging species to the exclusion of having fun on the water. A particularly skilled guide friend shuns the mention of saltwater sea trout, also called spotted weakfish. Yet this handsome and most popular Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas sport and table species brings delight to thousands of rod-and-reel anglers annually. Sea trout eagerly nab many forms of live, dead and artificial baits. When conditions are right, they will simply annihilate a surface lure.

On shallow-water grass flats, a five-pound-plus spotted sea trout is spookier than any permit or bonefish. Casting Clouser minnow streamers, soft plastic shrimp, grubs and surface lures at sea trout is great sport in my book, but not something emphasized in Fly Fisherman magazine or on saltwater fly-fishing guide websites.

There comes a time in every hunter's or angler's day when patience fails and he just wants to shoot or cast at something. Loss of focus can be costly for the trophy seeker. We average sorts are after enjoyment. Here's an example: After a morning of peering into clear, shallow water in hopes of spotting and casting to a tarpon or permit, an approaching stingray is noticed, and its mudding has attracted several eager associates. Speedy jack crevalle shadow large sharks and stingrays, snatching baitfish and crabs escaping from the big guys' bottom-feeding turbulence. Although permit, redfish, bonefish and cobia also trail sharks and rays, jacks are in the majority.

It rarely takes me any time to decide to make a cast, because jacks are fine practice. For a troutie like myself, fighting any saltwater fish on fly, spin or plug tackle is good experience. Nothing that swims pulls any harder for its size than Mr. Jack, who happily forces expensive saltwater reel drags to earn their keep.

Jacks come in a variety of subspecies and sizes, from eager youngsters that inhabit seawalls to backcountry outlaws from 10 to 20 pounds, and bruising offshore almaco and amberjack that paralyze your back muscles during prolonged deepwater tug-of-wars.

My childhood revolved around local South Florida seawalls and bridge pilings, casting for jacks, ladyfish, snapper, blue runner (another jack family member) and grouper with an occasional snook, trout and Spanish mackerel thrown in, so my loyalty remains with these unheralded natives. Catching them on fly or conventional tackle is still fun. It is saddening that many modern anglers ignore the education provided by a practical fishery in order to pursue, often unsuccessfully, more glamorous prey.

Would I exchange all this snow for aching forearms courtesy of a big Mr. Jack?

In a computer keystroke!

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Paul Bruun writes weekly on his adventures and misadventures in the great outdoors.