



**Critters in Our Midst: Tarpon** by Carol Ellis

Closeup shot of tarpon trolling for handouts at Robbie's.

Some may think it odd that I live in the Keys, the fishing capital of the world and I don't fish. It's not that I don't like the water. I love photographing its varying shades of blue and aqua.

I came to the Keys in the mid-1980s in a round-about way. I actually left my hometown of Ft. Lauderdale in 1979 aboard a yacht, and spent nearly five years, logging more than 47,000 miles by sea, including seven trans-Atlantics, as crew aboard the schooner "America." Upon my return home, I had tamed my adventurous spirit, and satisfied a lifetime of "been-there-done-thats" and also noticed the Ft. Lauderdale of my youth had vanished, as high-rise buildings were popping up in the once-small town.

Imagine what it would have cost to have chartered a yacht, and spent years living in exotic destinations? Yet we live in one of those

special places called the Keys, where tourism and fishing have been the backbone of the economy for decades. Here we have hot weather, warm water, and skilled fishing guides for those willing to spend a



In 1962 Kay Brodney record 137.6 lb. tarpon on a 12-pound tippet in the Florida Keys with legendary fishing guide Stu Apte.

lot of money to fulfill an item on their "bucket" list, to experience the rush of stalking and hooking a tarpon. The "Silver King" tarpon was the first major game fish sought in Florida waters.

A pioneer in the sport of fishing, Stu Apte, age 94, still lives in Tavernier with his wife Jeanine. After serving from 1955-1958 as a Navy fighter pilot during the Korean War, he became a pilot for Pan Am, most importantly because their routes included the places he wanted to fish. Stu holds many records for fish, but his largest record on fly was for tarpon, a record he achieved twice on one day (May 28, 1982) fishing in Homosassa Springs; he broke the record in the morning with a 162-3/4 lb. tarpon, only to break his own record in the afternoon with one that weighed 164 lb. on 12 lb. tippet.

When he wasn't fishing, Stu was photographing and writing, or guiding other anglers to world records. In 1962 his angler Kay Brodney landed a 137.6 lb. tarpon on a 12-pound tippet, at Coupon Bight, Big Pine Key. She was fishing alongside a half dozen

others, with baseball great Ted Williams among the boaters present. "It was fantastic to have her tie into that fish in front of all of those people," Stu recalls. Now known as Coupon Bight Aquatic Preserve, it is a 5,400-acre protected area located south of Big Pine Key in the Lower Keys.



Though fishing for the "Silver King" was generally a sport reserved for men, that didn't dissuade Shultz Heitman with her 185 lb tarpon catch circa 1900. (Credit: Archives State of Florida)

An environmentalist in a time before sustainable fishing was even invented, Isaac Walton (1593 to 1683) in "The Compleat Angler" wrote: "The Earth is a solid, settled Element; an element most universally beneficial both to man and beast: to men who have their several recreations upon it; as Horseraces, Hunting, sweet smells, pleasant walks: the Earth feeds man, and all those several beasts that both feed him, and afford him recreation."

That quote was my inspiration: Can we still in the 21st century have a battle with a powerful beast within sight of the trappings

**Tarpon...** CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis. except as noted.



This photo of hooking a tarpon was started out as a challenge and a dream, that actually came true.

of mankind? I wanted a photo of a jumping tarpon on an anglers line with a traffic-filled US-1 in the background for the America 24/7 (Day in a life of America) book project. I arranged for two guides, one as my photo "chase" boat and the second with long-time fishing guide Capt. Ron Wagner and two British anglers Pip and Ashley. My heart sunk when Capt. Ron said they'd been out all week and hadn't hooked a tarpon. Undeterred, we approached the Channel 5 area where Capt. Ron put a small crab on the hook, cast it and within moments a tarpon grabbed it, leapt high into the air and the battle had begun.

I have heard stories of anglers while fishing at Channel 5 Bridge, would hook a tarpon, it would head through the bridge to the ocean and turn around and go back again. You have to follow the fish. In heavy current it is easy for them to breathe; they have more oxygen and it gives the fish more stamina to fight harder. On this day this tarpon headed that way, in heavy current toward the bridge. The experienced Capt. Ron maneuvered the fish, line, and the boat through the concrete arches of the Channel 5 bridge and through to the ocean side.



Landing a tarpon in view of US1... closer to the boat, the tarpon leapt out of the water in front of me.



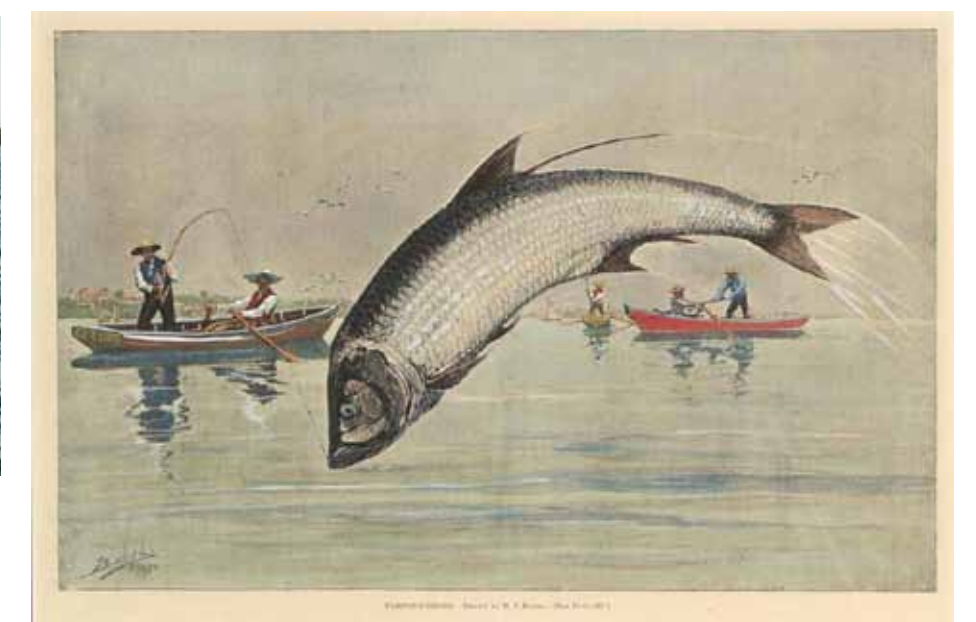
**CAROL ELLIS** has lived in South Florida her entire life and Key Largo for 37 years. Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.



Following the fish through the concrete arch of the former Florida East Coast Railway Extension.

My camera captured many different views, but always in mind was the shot I wanted... a tarpon battle with a background of US1. As the sun got lower and the fish more tired, the angler Ashley brought it closer to the boat and it

leapt out of the water in front of me. The shot made the book Florida 24/7. So I guess I DO fish after all, sustainably, with my camera and lens, I RELEASE the shutter to capture a moment.



"The requisites to success in tarpon-fishing are a favorable locality, hot weather, warm water, infinite patience, plenty of endurance, coolness, skill, a good guide, carefully selected tackle, and a knowledge of how to use it. —"Tarpon Days," Harper's Weekly, June 26, 1897