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SILVER RUSH

ALL BOW TO THE KING OF SWFL FISH

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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EVEN THOUGH the summer solstice occurs June 20, spring is already melting into the rainy season. Sean McGarry called it on Kevin Vertesch's boat when we went tarpon fishing off Sanibel Island on a hot, blustery Tuesday afternoon.

"It's summertime," he said. Other signs

of seasonal change include the nesting of loggerhead turtles, the threat of hurricanes and the yearly migration of tarpon that come here for the "(warm water) temperature, food and sex — not too different than people," said Aaron Adams, whose doctorate in environmental biology may have trained him to compare the two predatory species. Mr. Adams is a senior scientist at

SEE TARPON, A8 ▶

▲ Top sequence: Angler Rory Fink is assisted by mate Marty Scott as a tarpon is caught and released.

NBC2 says farewell to Len Jennings, welcomes Peter Busch

BY ATHENA PONUSHIS
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Sitting under studio lights, Peter Busch looks down, looks up and smiles. Photographers tell him to think of high school. He thinks of college, looks down, looks up and smiles. Some shots he shows a little teeth, some shots no teeth, all the while demonstrating that he has done this before, this looking down, looking up, then smiling. Soon he will change his tie from



JENNINGS

cardinal red to apple green, look down, look up, and smile. And he will nail it — that trustworthy yet charming news anchor smile, on that honest yet keen news anchor face — the new face of NBC-2.

Beyond his look, the station was attracted to Mr. Busch for his conversational writ-



BUSCH

ing and his storytelling style, a style earning him three consecutive Emmy Awards for compilations of his reporting. So while the studio lights suit him and the career man in him sits obliging, understanding the perfect head

SEE NBC2, A13 ▶

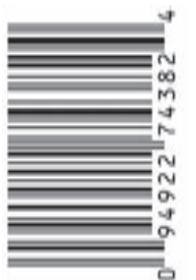
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PHOTOS BY VANDY MAJOR / FLORIDA WEEKLY ILLUSTRATION

TARPON

From page 1

Mote Marine Laboratory, and director of the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust, which is studying the fishes' migratory habits in partnership with the University of Miami.

April through June is the height of tarpon season in Southwest Florida. It's drawn sportsmen both famous and obscure ever since the first recorded catch of the fish in Tarpon Bay in March 1885, a habitat that is now part of J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

People love fishing for the so-called silver king so much that Florida residents alone (those with a saltwater fishing license) have a \$110 million per year economic impact, from roughly Boca Grande to Fort Myers Beach, Mr. Adams said, citing a recent study. He noted that number does not include tourists.

"You've got restaurants that are impacted, hotels, retail, marinas, boat shops — a whole variety of residual economic impact from tarpon season," said Lew Hastings, executive director of the Boca Grande Chamber of Commerce and the 2012 World's Richest Tarpon Tournament, held last week.

Getting a tarpon on the line is like roping a bucking bronco, and an introduction to big game hunting. It's not exactly "jaws" — no harpooning necessary — but it isn't really just fishing either. They leap fully out of the water frequently, trying to shake the hook, and they are successful more often than not. Their lunatic acrobatics include "the moonwalk," and bending into the shape of a crescent moon. They have a type of primitive lung that allows them to "roll" on top of the water, gulping supplemental air before making a run for it. They have what a football coach might call "heart." Mr. Vertesch inquired about my own heart, asking me half jokingly if I had any type of heart condition as we motored out past the thick tangles of red mangroves lining a canal.

At 50 or 60 pounds, catching one is "fun," said Mr. Vertesch, who was sipping a Coors Silver Bullet as we sought the silver king. He added a caveat: At 150 pounds, "It'll hurt you." Apparently, getting one in the boat is not *fun* — they can do serious damage, breaking equipment and bones. He and Mr. McGarry live on Sanibel and are expert fishermen, fishing buddies who each claim the other is the better angler. They try to take an afternoon off when they can to "hunt" tarpon this time of year (rather than the snook, redfish or other species they also pursue). Mr. Vertesch keeps his iPhone aboard in case a work-related call comes in. He is an owner in a contracting business, Dan Hahn Custom Builders, and moved to the area some years ago from Indiana. Mr. McGarry is a former fishing guide and boat captain for Captiva Cruises. He grew up in Cape Coral and has been fishing so long he can't remember when he caught his first tarpon, but he thinks it was at about age 13.

They let me tag along with them for the special journalist's rate of nothing, as long as you spell the names of their businesses correctly. Hiring a guide who might give you expert advice and take you out tarpon fishing can cost from \$500 to more than \$1,000 for a full day. Some have had luck catching tarpon from shore.

Mr. McGarry used a net near the Sanibel Causeway to catch the live threadfin herring about the size of a hand or smaller, which we used for bait. To do so, he threw open a net that bloomed over the water, again and again, but with little luck. The day got hot and still. An airplane banked toward Fort Myers. Mr. Vertesch took a phone call. My thoughts drifted to an evening last week when I watched a driving rain from



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Kevin Vertesch tangles with a tarpon near Knapps Point, southwest of the Sanibel Lighthouse.

my screened-in porch and decided that was the beginning of summer. A brown pelican splashed down by our boat and stared at me with its beady eyes. This waiting and mental drifting, too, is part of the fishing experience.

Finally, Mr. McGarry had two good hauls of threadfins near mile marker 6. We keyed up the engine and raced out around the side of Sanibel past the lighthouse to a spot near Knapp's Point. Then more waiting. We watched for tarpon to jump or "roll," when they break the surface to gulp oxygen. I saw something leap out of the water: a big ray. I thought I saw a silvery glint but it might have been a whitecap. Sometimes the glint is silver mixed with gold.

"You don't have to have great eyes to see it. You just have to kind of have trained eyes," Mr. Vertesch said.

Expertly, they taught me how to hold the rod and when to reel when one did hit my line. It's not subtle when tarpon take the bait; the line bends and the drag whirs. At that point, there's not a lot you can do except let the line run out. When they appear to slow down, you reel hard to keep the pressure on. When they go airborne, you lean forward and point the rod at them to give the line some slack so when it comes down it won't snap the line or throw the hook. This maneuver is called "bowing to the king." All three of us ended up having a chance to fight one that evening near Knapps Point.

Four other boats looking for the same action were spread out in a semi-circle that stretched to the horizon.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

My right arm and left wrist were sore for a few days after the one I got to the boat on Tuesday, which we judged to be in the 70-pound range. I had a small scrape on my knee from stumbling around the boat while the fish fought for its life, and a red mark on my groin where I'd steadied the rod. My writing hand felt shaky and it was hard to take notes. I had to lie back on the deck because that fish had kicked my ass, which was exhilarating. It was the first time I'd been tarpon fishing, with muscles I don't often use, but even so, the experience seemed to suggest I need more exercise.

"It'll humble you," said Mr. Vertesch.

Later in the evening, Mr. McGarry and Mr. Vertesch had a "double": both of them hooked up to a tarpon at the same time. We also caught a couple of smaller blacktip sharks, considered a "nuisance," and as easy to reel in as floating seaweed in comparison to a tarpon. After dark we raced back around the edge of Sanibel where the pulsing lighthouse said "home," as it has for more than a century, flying over the mercury-colored water under a bruised sky. Mr. Vertesch had a shirt wrapped around his face as if in a desert sandstorm and Mr. McGarry turned his hat backwards like an '80s rap-

per. I felt lucky, and was lucky, catching one my first time out. Mr. Vertesch said his neighbor has been trying to catch one for years without success. The late eccentric inventor Thomas Edison reportedly also tried for years to catch one near Fort Myers and died before that happened. But there are plenty of opportunities to try all over the region this time of year.

Harold Christy, manager of The Bait Box, said one of his guides had been having luck near Ching Island (on the bay side of Sanibel), and that tarpon often congregate in the passes — Boca Grande Pass is famous for tarpon fishing, for example. But you can find them up and down the Southwest Florida coast.

Even for experienced fishermen, like the competitors at the The World's Richest Tarpon Tournament in Boca, taming a tarpon takes endurance.

"You get an awful lot of respect for the fish," Mr. Vertesch said. "And the last thing you want to do is hurt one. They're a precious resource."

But not for food. By general consensus, they're inedible. They can live as long as people, sometimes into their late 70s, said Mr. Adams, and they reach sexual maturity between ages 8 and 12. The one I hooked Tuesday was probably at least that old, a teenager. The species itself is ancient.

Tournament time

The water was a gauzy green as if lit from below last Thursday in Boca Grande Pass, the first day of the spring tide. It was also the start of the World's Richest Tarpon Tournament, which began promptly at 3 p.m. and stressed "conservation" of the respected fish.

There were about 40 boats bobbing

in the pass between two small green islands, where Charlotte Harbor meets the Gulf of Mexico, Thursday and Friday afternoons last week between 3 and 7 in the evening.

Capt. Rusty Pearsall steered the press boat on Thursday, a 32-foot Boston Whaler ("the unsinkable legend") supplied by MarineMax. When one of the competing teams hooked a tarpon, Capt. Pearsall would get us close for pictures, a little too close for some of the competitors, even though all of us aboard were grateful. We irritated "the Godfather of tarpon fishing," a long-time captain who crossed our bow, yelling over at us to watch it. Capt. Pearsall hung back.

"I ain't worried about it," he said. "It's easier to get forgiveness than permission."

Also aboard was Tom Nelson of Nelson Photography, who grew up outside of Philadelphia. He's small with an oversized personality, a natural, not affected, swagger. He's 58 years old. "A lot of water under that bridge, baby!"

Robert Neff, of Fifth World Art and Twitter fanatic, was handling social media for the Boca Chamber, because he believes in the conservation message. He showed me how to use a hashtag to Tweet about the event in real time and noted that in the month leading up to the tournament, the World's Richest website received 2,960 hits from 529 cities in 10 different countries. That included 315 visits from people in Fort Myers, 53 from Punta Gorda, 35 from Naples, 32 from New York City, 18 from London, and 14 from Philadelphia.

And then there were "The Shark Brothers," Sean and Brooks Paxton of Think Out Loud Productions, who were filming the event for the Boca Chamber.

"If there's one thing sharks don't eat, it's clowns. Do you know why?" Sean Paxton asked. "Because they taste funny." At that point, both of the brothers pulled out red clown noses and attached them to their faces.

Catch and release

The tournament was strictly "catch and release," what organizers and participants called the "old-school" way of catching tarpon. That is, with live bait rather than locating them, snagging them, and dragging them up — more like entrapment.

Each boat, which paid a \$2,000 entry fee that went toward prize money, had an objective "observer," a local volunteer who determined that a fisherman was "holding onto and in control of the leader" for an official catch. The fish were not taken out of the water or weighed. The hooks dissolve in the fish's mouth.

"This is the best conservation way that you could fish for tarpon: naturally presenting the bait and if they choose to eat it they eat it," said tournament judge Chad Lach.

In the past, it was more common to hang the fish up for a picture or have it taxidermied. Advocates of the sportfishing industry discourage that because conserving the fish and their habitats is good for the economy. The catch-and-release method that puts the least stress on the fish calls for getting it up to the boat and then breaking off the leader while it's still in the water. Doing so increases the survivability rate to more than 90 percent, scientists say. And you can have a fiberglass replica of the one you caught based on eyeballing it or a picture, if you'd like a trophy.

"It was a good time seeing this tournament get back together and get back to this style of fishing," said 33-year-old Shane Sovan, captain of the Haywire, at the close of Thursday's action.

Successfully conserving tarpon, their habitats and their economic benefits as a sought after catch will mean learning more about this fish, said Mr. Adams of the Tarpon Trust. Most fishing data is about fish we can eat because we kill

in the know



Economic impact of local tarpon fishing, July 1, 2009, to June 30, 2010

■ There were 67,936 active licensed saltwater anglers residing in Lee, Charlotte, Collier and Sarasota counties during the year-long study.

■ Resident anglers were on the water 268,000 days targeting tarpon, averaging about 10 days each.

■ Tarpon anglers in the region spent about \$237 per day and \$2,362 annually.

■ Anglers spent \$63.5 million for fishing-related goods and services.

■ Indirectly, these local residents had a \$45 million impact, bringing their total economic impact to \$108.6 million.

—Source: *The Economic Impact of Recreational Tarpon Fishing in the Caloosahatchee River and Charlotte Harbor Region of Florida*

them and examine the bodies, but tarpon isn't commercially viable, so there's little historical data. Scientists don't have a complete picture of their population, their migratory habits and how we as humans affect their population — for example, how the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill impacted them. Some scientists believe ground zero for the spill is a place tarpon go to spawn. By working with fishing guides and the state, Mr. Adams said, they can monitor catch rates and learn more about tarpons' travels. This will help protect them. "So if there is deep-sea mining or offshore sewage or anything that involves that habitat, you know where not to put that because that location might be important to spawning tarpon," Mr. Adams said.

About the hunted

Mr. Adams leads the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust in an effort to track tarpons' migratory habits. The pattern isn't entirely clear yet, but they have documented the fish going from southern Florida to the Chesapeake Bay, or to the northern gulf and from there to waters off Mexico.

"We do know they are capable of those longer migrations but it's not clear what portion of the population does that," Mr. Adams said. Some travel far and wide, while "others never left the Keys, they just hang out there."

Although they appear in abundance in May and June, scientists have not been able to determine how many exist in the region. Mr. Adams said they could be found throughout the Charlotte Harbor estuary and coastal areas in the fall, and even in the winter, if the weather isn't too cold. The most prominent theory suggests the fish are here to feed in our warm, rich waters, before going offshore to spawn.

"I think they're here this time of year because they're aggregating for spawning season," he said. "They do the same thing over at Vera Cruz, Mexico." The males and females gather in groups and spurt sperm and eggs into the open water where fertilization occurs. What hatches out of the eggs floats in the open ocean for about a month until the little tarpon make their way to shore and hide in the mangroves or in canals or somewhere else. The modified bladder where they store air as they roll and gulp on the surface gives them an option other fish may not have: they can live in oxygen-poor waters. They also take in oxygen through their gills.

Like most fish they don't appear to have any connection to their offspring and are cannibals. They eat basically anything that can't eat them. Live crabs and threadfin herring are a few popular types of bait used to catch them.

Does the hook hurt?

The stress on "conservation" from fisherman is sincere, but it collides with human compulsion — we can't do without the thrill of the catch. After all, if you really want to conserve the fish,

why not just leave them alone? What if you put an apple on a hook and tied rope to it and threw it in a pasture full of horses, hooked one by the mouth and dragged it over to you and let it go? That would not be considered a "conservation" effort. On the other hand, Ernest Hemingway, writing for Esquire Magazine in a piece called "On the Blue Water," April 1936, is confident that big game fish don't feel much of anything when you hook them. Instead, he writes, they struggle when they feel themselves being tugged in. "If the fish

is hooked in the bony part of the mouth I am sure the hook hurts him no more than the harness hurts the angler... he makes his fight not against the pain of the hook but against being captured... you can convince him and bring him to the boat by the same system you break a wild horse..."

Mr. Hemingway compares game fish twice to a "wild horse" in the article and once to a "bucking horse," although it's not clear whether he's referring just to marlin, or to big-game fishing in general. It's certainly true of tarpon. And he's

depicted in a number of photographs standing proudly next to tarpon in the 100-pound range that he caught with a fishing buddy.

"You are fashioned to the fish as much as he is fastened to you and you tame him and break him the way a wild horse is broken," he writes. "The rod bends and you feel it double and the huge weight of the friction of the line running through that depth of the water while you pump and reel, pump and reel, pump and reel."

It can go on like that until you or the fish has had enough. ■



ERNEST HEMINGWAY COLLECTION / JFK PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY

Ernest Hemingway, Bra Saunders and Waldo Peirce with fish aboard a boat near Key West in 1928. Hemingway's caption on the back reads, "Papa caught both the big and the little tarpon. The big man with the beard is Waldo Peirce (sic). The small tarpon jumped 10 times out of water — shaking his head with his mouth open to get the hook out."



FLORIDA PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION
Tarpon, the game fish of Florida from this old postcard.



FLORIDA PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTION
Several freshly caught tarpon on display at the Tarpon Hunters Club.

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