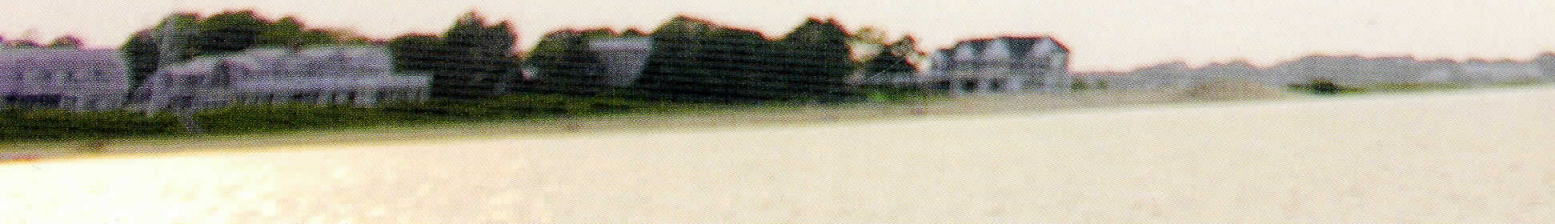


THE MASTER CASTER

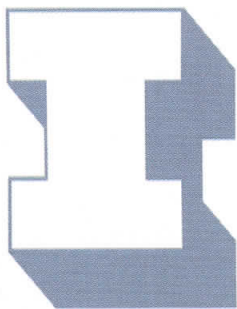
If you want to put a fly in front of a fish, Abbie Schuster, the founder of Kismet Outfitters in Edgartown, may be just the person you need to meet.

BY ED MITCHELL

PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTINE SARGOLOGOS







It was raining, coming down pretty good. Tucking back by the boat's console, I was trying to get out of the elements. Meanwhile,

Abbie Schuster

was up on the bow wielding a flyrod. Not at all fazed by the weather, with her wet hair hanging down around her face, she boomed out one cast after another. I was impressed.

Schuster is the owner of Edgartown's Kismet Outfitters, and for the past six years she has been the only female fly-fishing guide on Martha's Vineyard. For that matter, to the best of my knowledge, she is the only woman guiding saltwater fly-rodgers on the entire Northeast coast. No one in this day and age should be surprised to find a woman in a field long dominated by men, of course, but guiding has a reputation as a particularly rough and tough world. Guides can be great people, but they are a special breed unto themselves. Scratch the surface and you're apt to find a highly self-reliant alpha type – a lone wolf, an independent operator who lives and dies on his or her reputation to produce, someone wary of newcomers to the territory, male or female.

Knowing that made me wonder how Schuster had been received as the new guide on the Island. So, before we headed out on the water, I asked her about her entrance on the scene. She paused for a moment – clearly this wasn't an easy subject for her – then looked me square in the face. "At first I felt like an outsider," she said. "Some guides were just not ready to accept me. But the longer I'm out here on the water, things are slowly coming around."

It probably helps that her connection to the Island stretches well into her childhood, when her family often visited with her grandmother, who lived on the Vineyard. The Island is her stamping ground, in other words.

Even so, she got her start as a guide on the legendary trout streams of Montana. Like the protagonist in the story *A River Runs Through It*, Schuster was born into a family of fly anglers, which is to say angling is in her DNA. She earned a degree in environmental studies from the University of Montana and later attended the Sweetwater Guide School in Livingston, Montana, where she trained in all phases of guiding strategy and skills.

"Trout fishing is a lot of fun," Schuster said when asked how guiding in fresh water and salt water compared. "But I like the salt more. Out on the ocean, each day is a new adventure, a new challenge. You never know what you might see. I love it. Salt water is my passion, and I feel very lucky that I get to be on the water every day."

With words driven by excitement, she described her typical season, which sounds like any Vineyard fly-rodger's dream season. "I do around 150 trips a year, starting in May with striped bass. They will stick around throughout the fall, but the most productive time to fish for them is in June during the squid migration," she said.

Her favorite activity, however, is sight-fishing for bass on the flats. That typically happens in June and early July when the water is still cool. "By late summer/early fall, Atlantic bonito and false albacore arrive, really spicing things up. And there are other species that show up too, such as Spanish mackerel.

"It's really a long season," she concluded happily.

In normal years, in the "off" season, Schuster runs off-Island events, including a few for women only. Typically, her hosted trips run from November to May. In 2018, for instance, she spent November in Argentina and February in Cuba. "I do trips to Ireland and Maine too," she said.

The pandemic has made it hard to establish future travel plans, but she's looking forward to when she can bring groups abroad again. This winter, if all goes well, she hopes to return to Mexico, Argentina, Ireland, and the Bahamas.



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For now, though, she's still in local waters and excited to see some action.

Before heading out, Schuster warned my son and I that the current conditions were looking underwhelming. A recent storm had passed over the Island, disrupting the action. Undeterred and ever hopeful, the three of us, along with Schuster's faithful black lab, Rupert, hopped in her silver Tacoma pickup and zipped toward the harbor.

Like many guides, the inside of Schuster's truck echoed her lifestyle, with flies and shards of fishing gear adorning the interior. It made this old angler feel

right at home. Minutes later we boarded her twenty-three-foot Parker center console. As we motored out of Edgartown Harbor, Schuster pointed out the various moored boats, many of whose owners she knew. Making our way toward Chappaquiddick Point, she explained that she had pretty much spent her whole life on the water, starting with cleaning boats for others when she was young. Later, she got her captain's license and began ferrying boats, before transitioning to guiding anglers.

Out in the outer harbor, we veered northeast into Nantucket Sound, passed

Cape Pogue Elbow, rounded Cape Pogue Lighthouse, and steered south toward Tom's Shoal. It was a bit of a rough ride heading straight into the wind, but Schuster's lifetime of handling boats was apparent. When we arrived at Tom's Shoal, my son began casting off the transom.

Schuster invited me to wet a line too, but I suggested she fish instead. She shot me a puzzled look. I insisted a second time – we weren't, after all, paying customers. A huge smile spread across her face. Sliding down the starboard side, she selected a flyrod from under



Left: Schuster poses with a false albacore. Right: Novices can sign up for a weekly fly casting clinic that Schuster teaches at Lighthouse Beach in Edgartown.

the gunnel, stripped line onto the deck, and got to work.

Now, I've been fly casting for over fifty years. I can tell in an instant if someone knows what they are doing. Fly casting isn't easy to master, especially with a large saltwater rod. It requires athletic ability, eye-hand coordination, strength, and practice. There is no way to fake it. As I watched, she handled the nine-weight saltwater flyrod like an old friend. Her backcast loaded the rod nicely, then reversing directions, she flung a long forward cast out over the water.

True to her fishing forecast, the action was nothing to write home about. But that's life. Sometimes fishing is wishing, every angler knows that. Reeling up, we all agreed it was time to return to port. After a long ride back toward Edgartown, the rain began to fall as Chappaquiddick Point came into view.

Just then a few fish popped up. I gave them a few casts, but I could see Schuster was chomping at the bit. I offered her the rod and she jumped to the bow – getting soaked, getting blown around, but getting that fly out there in front of the fish and loving every minute of it.

Back at the shop, we thanked her for the ride and she gave us a wave and a parting thought. "My goal with Kismet Outfitters is to create an open and kind community of anglers who can enjoy and protect the beautiful resources we have on this wonderful Island," she called out. Amen. ♦

