



One of the most intriguing figures in the early days of fly-fishing in salt water was a 6-foot-5-inch giant who wandered the wilds of the Florida Everglades — often at night and alone. Introverted by nature, he lived a life deeply immersed in the natural world. He loved the creatures of the Glades and knew where they lived, how they conducted their lives and even their Latin names. He could catch the fattest snook with a fly rod or the biggest rattlesnake with his hands. The backcountry was his home.

Using a houseboat as a base camp, he spent countless hours in the Ten Thousand Islands, navigating the endless maze of mangroves and shell mounds. Had you encountered him back there, it's unlikely you could have engaged him in lengthy conversation. He was to the point and self-contained. Still, even in the briefest exchange, you might have sensed he was someone special. If so, your instincts would have been dead on. He was one of those rare people totally in touch with the planet — a man who devoted himself to the sun, moon and rain.

**HOMER S. RHODE JR. WAS BORN ON DEC. 10, 1906,** in Reading, Pennsylvania, where his father was a physician. As a young boy, Rhode had many interests. During his school days, he was a member of the gun club and the camera club, and he would be a firearms enthusiast and photographer for the rest of his life. He was also a versatile athlete. Rhode played on the football team and his school's championship baseball team. Later in life, he would even try out as a pitcher for the New York Yankees. Also as an adult, he was a purveyor of the sweet

science, and good enough to win a Golden Gloves tournament. Yet his favorite sport was the one he practiced with his father and brothers — fly-fishing, and in the Rhode household, that was a family affair.

Just after 1925, the family moved south to Coral Gables, Florida. Now outside his window were Biscayne Bay and the Everglades. Yet somehow Rhode correctly recognized these waters for what they offered — a brave new world of fly-fishing — and he immediately began tying saltwater flies. While there is no record of what his earliest flies looked like, they must have been effective. By 1930 he had landed a bonefish and a permit on a fly, making him one of the first fly-anglers in the world to take either species.

Rhode married in 1940. He and his wife, Verta, got a place in Coral Gables and soon had a son, Homer III, and a daughter, Veva. At this point, Rhode had lived in Florida for over a decade, time enough to accumulate an intimate understanding of fly-fishing in salt water. In those same years, he had also acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of southern Florida's wildlife. Whether something

The author first fished Florida waters in 1935 and recalls this Everglades naturalist [Rhode] in those days as a tall, straight and very thin fly caster; a loner with thoughtful, perceptive eyes shaded by an inevitable broad-brimmed hat. Homer Rhode roamed the Florida backcountry canals and boated and waded the shallow waters of Florida Bay, often for months without letup." — George X. Sand in *Salt-Water Fly Fishing*

Step back in time and meet one of the Everglades' first fly-anglers.

# Homer Rhode Jr.



BY ED MITCHELL



“One night Homer and I left his houseboat in a tin boat to do some fishing. Guided only by stars and the ink-black silhouette of the shoreline, Homer steered his boat through the labyrinth of the Ten Thousand Islands. Eventually we arrived at a spot loaded with snook. The following morning, back at the houseboat, I suggested a return trip. Homer paused and in a quiet voice said we couldn’t. He did not know how to get there in the light of day.” — Lefty Kreh

lived in Biscayne Bay or the Everglades, he wanted to learn about it. And his fascination with the natural world was reflected in his home. In the yard, he kept raccoons, possums and armadillos; in the garage, there were terrariums loaded with live snakes; and in the house, snake-skins covered the walls.

**AS THE 1940s EBBED, RHODE’S** involvement in fly-fishing increased. He taught a fly-fishing course at the University of Miami and became a member of the famous Miami Beach Rod and Reel Club. The fledgling Wapsi Fly company began marketing some of his patterns. But most importantly, from his vise emerged two flies that would greatly influence saltwater fly design: the Homer Rhode Jr. Tarpon Streamer and the Homer Rhode Jr. Tarpon Bucktail.

Both flies appeared in Joseph D. Bates Jr.’s 1950 book, *Streamer Fly Fishing in Fresh and Salt Water*.

The Homer Rhode Jr. Tarpon Streamer is a simple fly constructed with splayed hackle wings tied off the bend of the hook and a palmered hackle around the hook shank. In the book, Rhode described his design rationale in this way: “You will note that all my neck-hackle and saddle-hackle flies are tied with very heavy collars. The divided [splayed] wing flies have their wings tied as far back as possible, and the collar is started at this point. This helps to keep the wing from wrapping around the shank and keeps the fly from turning and spinning.”

“My flies are longer and larger than usual. The heavy collar is due to the fact that I fish very slowly,

usually in very shallow water. The divided wings open and close like a pair of scissors, making the fly seem to breathe. The heavy collar vibrates when fished slowly, seeming to give the fly added life.”

Even a casual look proves this fly the father of a huge number of conventional tarpon flies, ones still in wide use today. It is also the source of Chico Fernandez’s Seaducer.

The Homer Rhode Jr. Tarpon Bucktail is also uncomplicated. Made mostly of bucktail, it has a short tail off the bend of the hook and, tied in at the hook eye, a wing that slants back over the thread body. Joe Brooks acknowledged that he took this basic fly design,

fashioned it in several colors and popularized it as his well-known Blonde series.

Curious and ready to experiment, Rhode continued to push the boundaries of our sport. Beyond chucking feathers at bonefish, permit, tarpon, spotted seatrout and snook, Rhode cast to mullet and snappers with trout-size fly gear. For snapper, he used scaled-down flies made of white or yellow polar-bear hair and then attached one or two spinner blades up front. Working around mangroves and even over shallow reefs and wrecks, he refined his technique until he could take snapper successfully. His approach with mullet took a more radical adventure into what one might call ultra-light saltwater fly-fishing. Realizing that mullet were



Homer S. Rhode Jr. (top right) with the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission’s inaugural graduating class.



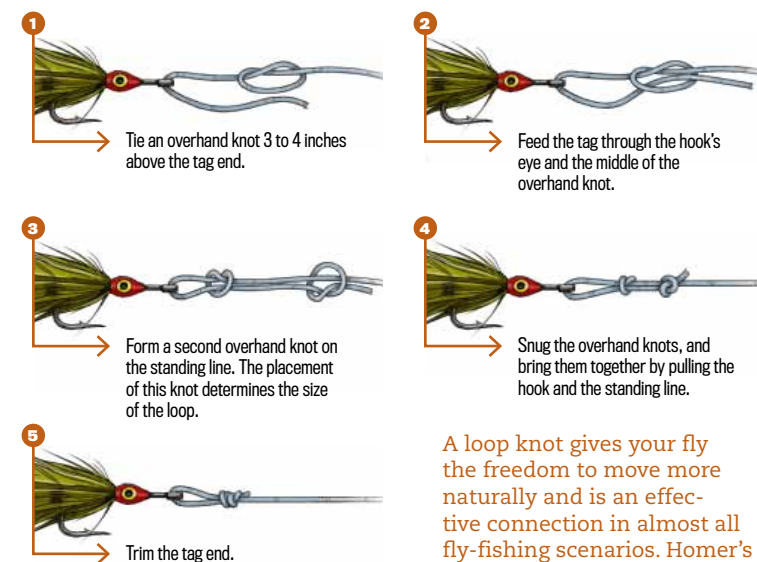
algae eaters, Rhode understood his flies would have to be tiny. So he tied them on hooks down to size 16 in white, light green, yellow and black and then attached them to leaders tapered down to 4X. His largest mullet was 5¾ pounds; it burned 150 yards into the backing while leaping like a demon. It makes you wonder how many species we are overlooking even today.

**ALTHOUGH HE WAS ALREADY ACTIVE ON** many fronts, a brand-new challenge caught his eye. The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission was organizing its first band of conservation officers. Wasting no time, he enrolled. And when the first graduating officers lined up for a class photograph, Homer Rhode Jr. was among them.

Enforcement of game laws in the Everglades was desperately needed. Yet wandering in the backcountry without any real hope of backup was clearly dangerous business. Back then, southern Florida was as lawless and untamed as any place on earth. There, where the temperate zone meets the tropics, lived gators, crocs, snakes, sharks and clouds of mosquitoes thick enough to choke a horse. Worst yet, hiding in the buttonwood hammocks were varmints of the two-legged kind. The Glades was infested with criminals. At any moment, you could come face to face with poachers, smugglers, moonshiners or even murderers — none of whom wanted a lawman around. So it’s no real surprise that while on duty, Rhode found himself in a gun battle. A crack shot since a kid, he came out all right, yet in the process was forced to kill a man.

After that unfortunate incident, Rhode hung up his badge and spent the next three years fly-fishing commercially for snook; it was legal at the time. Working the waters around Everglades City, Marco and the Tamiami Trail, Rhode fished day and night, filling up a big wooden ice chest built into his car. Daily he made two trips to the Miami market, selling his catch at 6 cents a pound. That might not sound like much, but on a good day he’d bring in half a ton. His accomplishing that with a fly rod speaks volumes about Rhode’s skill, but his intimate knowledge of the natural world played a role too. While driving the Trail at night, he would keep an eye peeled for leopard frogs plastered to the pavement. Rhode realized that wherever the frogs showed up in numbers, the snook would be waiting in the water alongside the road. Stopping the car, he would jump out with his fly rod, all the while being careful; rattlesnakes and cottonmouths were fond of the frogs too.

## TIE HOMER’S LOOP KNOT



A loop knot gives your fly the freedom to move more naturally and is an effective connection in almost all fly-fishing scenarios. Homer’s variety is still popular today.

## EVENTUALLY HE TOOK A JOB WITH

Miami-Dade County. In an accident, he was exposed to a powerful rodenticide. It damaged his nervous system, weakening his arms and legs and forcing him to retire with a disability. On the upside, that allowed him more time on his houseboat, near Chokoloskee. Roughly 30 feet long, it was a rustic affair, with the only creature comfort being piles of books. Still, Rhode loved this simple retreat, not only for the solace it offered but also for the freedom to spend unlimited hours exploring his favorite waters.

Homer Rhode Jr. passed away on July 7, 1976. The loop knot that bears his name is widely known, yet the true extent of his contributions to our sport have remained largely hidden. To a degree, we can attribute that to Rhode’s humble personality. Reluctant to be in the limelight, he deliberately kept himself out of it. Regardless, this much is clear: Rhode was a pivotal player in the dawning days of our sport. And he richly deserves to be ranked as a pioneer and remembered as a man of many skills. He was a fly-rodder, naturalist, game warden, guide, amateur herpetologist, commercial fisherman — the list goes on and on. And because of this, it’s clear that behind his quiet exterior, there lived an exceptional mind. As the old proverb goes, “Still waters run deep.”

“Outdoorsmen usually wore long sleeves, white gloves, and mosquito or head nets, which made it tough to smoke ... or you made your own mosquito dupe. I used coal tar as a base; it was thick and sticky, and the mosquitoes couldn’t bite through it, but it took an awfully lot of soap and water to wash it off.” — Homer Rhode, quoted in the 1978 *Florida Sportsman* article “The Pioneer Captains”

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