

Old Yellow Eyes

▲ ED MITCHELL

EARLY ON IN my love affair with fly fishing, I had a one-track mind. I firmly believed there was only one fish on the planet worth pursuing—*Salmo trutta*.

It was brown trout or bust. That monomaniacal outlook lasted for years. Yet as seasons slipped by, my horizons slowly began to broaden. I learned that fly fishing was a far-ranging game. There were largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, rainbows, brookies, bluegills, landlocked salmon, pickerel, pike, and others to catch, each one an education in its own right. And I love them all to this day.

Eventually I wandered down to the coast, where my fly-fishing enlightenment continued. Compared to their freshwater cousins, saltwater fish proved to be bigger and bolder; a necessity born out of the vastness in which they roam.

During my first years in the salt, striped bass stocks were in sorry shape; but Long Island Sound teemed with big bluefish. Lordy, they were everywhere. And it quickly became apparent that bluefish were wired differently than any other finned critter I had ever known.

With a personality suitable for the World Wrestling Federation, and a mouth full of razor blades, blues are fixated on ferocity. They are tough hombres with a long list of nicknames. Along the Atlantic for example, you'll hear anglers call them alligators, blue dogs, choppers, 'gators, gorillas, slammers, and just "teeth."

The handle I like best, however, stems from the bluefish's eyes. Surrounding the black iris, the orb glows with a sinister golden hue, providing the moniker "Old Yellow Eyes."

As William Shakespeare penned, "the eyes are the window to your soul," and with bluefish that's true. Yellow eyes are what one expects on a rattlesnake.

I remember a spot near the mouth of the Connecticut River where I witnessed firsthand the savagery of bluefish. Here one could wade out within 50 feet of marauding blues. Ranging from 9 to 14 pounds, they roared past me leaving a trail of blood, scales, and oily slicks. Like a scene straight out of Dante's *Inferno*, they eat, puke, and then keep on eating. And that includes eating young ones of their own kind.

No hootenannies here. I've seen them bite the tail off a baitfish, then, while the prey struggled on the surface, blood bubbling from its abbreviated caudal peduncle, the perpetrator daintily returned, and picked it up like a canapé at a garden party. Chilling.

Believe me, if bluefish grew legs and walked down Main Street, we would all be in trouble. You'd watch them circle your favorite burger joint, afraid to exit the truck.

Continued on page 63

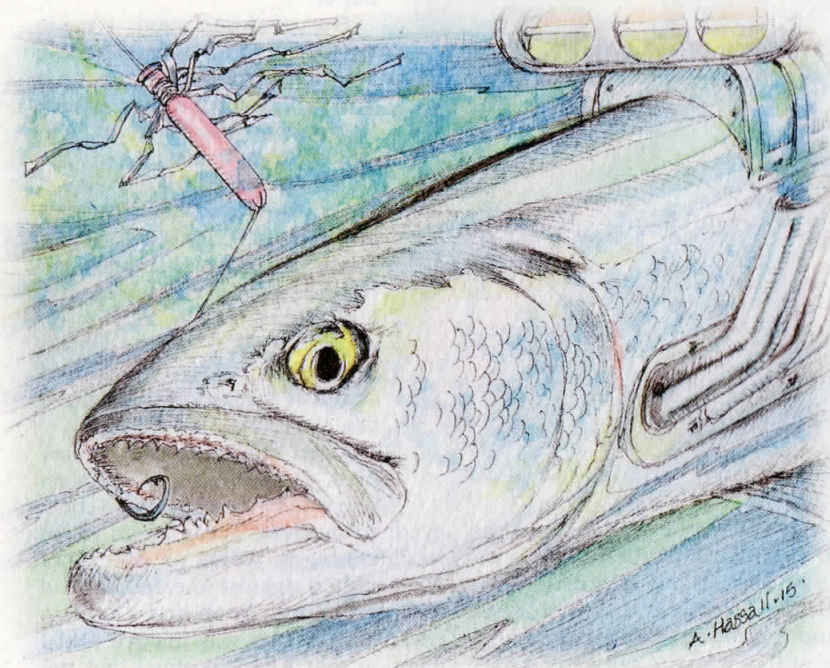


Illustration Al Hassall

Continued from page 64

Given their greedy gobbling, blues can be exceedingly easy to catch. In fact any and all flies can work. With the help of others, I proved this to my own satisfaction many years ago.

One summer, in a location which will remain nameless, the choppers were showing up like clockwork. During any incoming tide, we hooked up on every third or fourth cast. The bite went on for several days, prompting us to see who could tie a fly so ugly that a blue wouldn't eat it. This resulted in some sci-fi creations and the use of unorthodox tying materials.

Upon noticing a potato chip bag with a silver interior, for instance, I cut the bag into strips and lashed them to a hook. Yes those potato chip flies charmed the pants off the blues, and had me prefacing each cast with "Bet you can't eat just one!"

While all those experimental flies worked, there was one that revealed, at least for yours truly, the true extent of 'gator gluttony. While walking the water's edge, I spied a pink plastic tube about the size of your ring finger, designed to insert feminine hygiene products. The coastal cognoscenti call these things "beach whistles," although this is in no way a recommendation you toot on one.

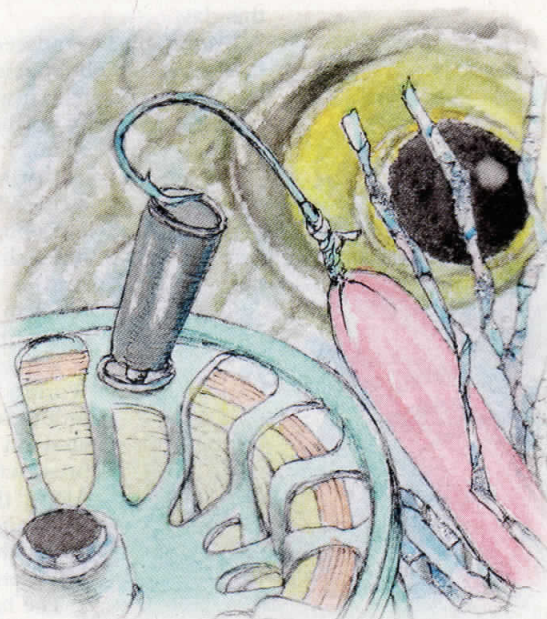
Unburdened by common sense, I picked it up for closer examination. I soon found I could pass my tippet through the domed end and out the rear. Ummm. The only thing left to do was tie on a hook.

Casting this projectile proved problematic, still much to his credit Old Yellow Eyes immediately gave chase. And within a few heaves the beach whistle landed a bluefish, which I imagine would have surprised the original owner.

Little wonder then that most fly fishers believe bluefish have absolutely no sense of caution. Not true, my friend. At times blues can be spooked. I first found this out on Block Island, in a spot called New Harbor. From a high jetty wall, I saw choppers cruising the channel. It was easy to get them to charge the fly, but they invariably lost interest and flared off. I changed flies, and later changed retrieve speeds. It had me buffaloed.

On a hunch, I made a cast, and then before the retrieve, I ducked down low in the rocks. Pay dirt. Prior to this sneak attack, those rascals had seen my ugly puss standing up on the jetty wall. So bluefish are not fearless, and like most of us, they're especially leery of people in high places.

No discussion of bluefish is complete without mention of their raw power. Yes, bluefish can run, jump, and yank your arm with the best of them. And in this vigorous process, they bust up gobs of gear, to which any tackle store owner will smilingly attest. Bluefish are good for business.



While flies and leaders are the usual victims, Old Yellow Eyes is capable of dishing out far greater devastation. I received this bad news around 2 A.M. one September night, while still new to the saltwater game.

At the time, I had just bought a new saltwater fly reel. It was a good-looking piece of gear, and came in a fancy cardboard box, along a fake suede storage pouch. Frankly, I was proud of that reel.

The fish that delivered the knock-out punch was the biggest bluefish I ever hooked. This behemoth measured over a yard in length and was as big around as a volleyball. We locked horns in a shallow rip filled with menhaden, their silvery sides flashing in the moonlight.

As I waded out, audible swirls rocked the night, announcing large carnivores at work. My blood was

pumping. Down-current lay a couple hundred yards of waist-deep water. Which I mention only because my newfound friend was about to use it as his own Bonneville Salt Flats.

The strike was just a tap. But when I sunk the steel, Old Yellow Eyes took off like Big Daddy Don Garlits. Not long after, I had enough line aloft to impress a small-town utility company. Making matters worse, my new reel was screaming a song that would have scared the britches off a banshee. I swear lights were coming on in the cottages along the shore. Yes, I was in full panic mode.

In the middle of this fiasco, I made a brainless effort to gain control by grabbing the reel handle and I promptly got my knuckles spanked. Soon afterward the drag went completely kaput.

Out of desperation, I made another grab on the reel handle and began turning with torque best reserved for a boat winch. Surprisingly that worked. Old Yellow Eyes pushed in the clutch and eased into reverse.

Following a few shorter runs and a couple right-in-your-face jumps, I landed that bad boy. Holding my light in my mouth, I used both hands to pick up my prize. As I peered down, it rolled its golden eye up and stared at me. Good thing these fish can't talk.

After releasing Old Yellow Eyes, I surveyed the damage. The reel handle was cock-eyed; so much so I was afraid to try straightening it. Worse yet, the spool now rubbed against the frame, and turning the drag knob was a useless exercise. The reel was history. Did I mention that I had to chuck out the fly and the leader?

Now who got the best of that battle is open to debate. The knock-down drag-out fight had sure been fun, but by the time I got back to the car I was lamenting the loss of my favorite reel. I was out a chunk of change. And as I headed up the highway, I kept wondering what that big, bad blue was doing at that very moment. I'll bet you Old Yellow Eyes went right back to munching on menhaden. Bluefish are bonkers. ~

Ed Mitchell is the author of the new self-published book *Along the Water's Edge* available at edmitchelloutdoors.com.