

Deadly Sins on the Flats

A SPECIAL REPORT by Captain John Kumiski ©2010

When it works properly, flats fishing is one of the most rewarding forms of fly fishing. When it doesn't, few things are more frustrating. Read on to learn about a compendium of sins to use when you wish to scare off every fish on any flat you find yourself working, and of course the antidote for such foolish behavior, too. Let's start with what I call the stalking sins

Clothing

If you can see them, you should assume they can see you, too. Flats fish can see bright clothing, especially brightly colored shirts or hats, more easily than more subdued shades. My friend Barry Kent was disgusted with himself one day while we were fishing together, saying his white hat had spooked several fish. White, bright red, and bright yellow are definitely colors to avoid when chasing skinny water fish. Wear subdued earth tones to avoid becoming a neon DANGER sign to your quarry.

For the ultimate in flats camouflage, Aqua Designs (888) 603-4303 makes a line of technical clothing printed with computer enhanced images taken from underwater photographs looking through the water's surface. If you make it harder for the fish to sense your presence you ought to get more good shots at fish.

Noise

Fish in shallow water respond negatively to noise, even the human voice. The following two examples illustrate this. One recent morning three of us were stalking a school of about 200 redbfish from my boat when my angler moved the Fly Lane Tamer, trying to get it into a better position for casting. The Tamer's base bumped the lip that goes around the edge of my casting deck. The school, almost in casting range at that point, immediately stampeded and never slowed down as long as they remained in sight, pushing a receding wake for at least a quarter of a mile. A golden opportunity was lost because of one small bump.

On another picture perfect morning (the kind fishermen dream about) I was wading with a friend. We were surrounded by tailing redbfish, literally hundreds of them, in water less than knee deep. My friend decided he needed to tell me something, even though he was 100 yards away. After he shouted over to me, every tail in the vicinity immediately disappeared.

If you want more shots at fish while on the flats conduct yourself as though you are stalking wary wild animals that are intent on surviving, because that's exactly what you are doing.

Hesitation

An old proverb says that, "He who hesitates is lost." Flats fishing proves this adage true over and over again. If you hesitate once the fish is in casting range, the fish either moves too close and sees you or else it moves too far away and you can't reach it. It's better to do anything, screw up, and learn from your mistake than stand there wondering what to do and let the opportunity disappear.

When fishermen call me to inquire about my guiding services one thing they often ask is, "How far will I need to cast?" I tell them in most flats fishing speed and accuracy of delivery will be more important than distance. Fifty feet, on target and right now, will usually do the trick.

Now for the all-too-common casting sins. These happen all the time, even to accomplished anglers.

The Slow Delivery

The fisherman makes five or six false casts to deliver a fly 35 feet. The fish sees all the motion and flees. Once again, assume that if you can see the fish, the fish can also see you. One of the things that attracts a fisherman's eye to the fish is its movement. It works both ways, since the fish are keyed to look for movement, too. A waving rod, a fly line passing overhead, a fisherman's arms flailing wildly, all these things are guaranteed to spook skinny water fish.

Body English

I often have casters aboard my boat who are struggling, trying for a little more distance. They rock the boat when using body English for that extra little push. When the boat rocks, waves move out from it to the fish. The fish are very sensitive to changes in pressure and feel these waves, which immediately make them suspicious.

I tell my anglers NOT to rock the boat when casting, or hookups will be rare occurrences.

Presentation Flaws

If you make a cast that is too short the fish will never see your fly. If you make a cast that's too long several results can happen, none of which lead to a hookup.

In extreme cases, the fish sees your fly line. This won't bother fish that don't see many fishermen, but pressured fish won't wait around for an explanation.

A cast made slightly too long causes the fly to approach the fish. Again, in lightly fished waters this may work. In heavily fished waters you'll get a good view of the fish's tail waving goodbye. Fish don't expect to see a minnow, shrimp, crab, or whatever attacking them. They don't like it when it happens.

If you cast too far into a school of fish, you will line the fish on the school's edge, spooking them. One spooked fish in a school usually leads to a spooked school. When casting to a school, work the edges. There are some clear floating fly lines available now that may solve this particular problem somewhat. Monic makes a completely clear line, and AirFlo makes a conventional line that has a 10 foot long clear tip. There's nothing like a good, accurate cast, though.

Another casting flaw I call the splashdown. This is a cast that's just a little too accurate. You hit the fish on the head (or other body part) with your fly. In lightly fished

areas or in deeper water this actually works sometimes, but with heavily pressured fish in the shallow stuff you have blown opportunity.

The opposite of the splashdown occurs when you lead the fish too far. Optimum lead distance varies depending on the species of fish, how fast it's swimming, the depth of the water, the current, and other factors, but if you lead the fish too far it will not see your fly. Sometimes an angler will lead a fish too far, then move the fly immediately after it hits the water. The fish never sees it, or is unwilling to chase it from such a great distance if he does see it. A too far lead can still work if you leave the fly there until the fish gets near it.

Normally (where I do most of my fishing, at least) when you throw to a cruising fish you want to anticipate exactly where the fish will go (never an easy task), put your fly directly in its path, and leave the fly there until the fish is close enough to see it when you move it and respond to it in what you consider to be a positive manner.

The only way you can minimize these casting sins is to become a more proficient caster. Never mind worrying about how far you can cast. Speed and accuracy are all important in most flats situations. Get a few lids from five gallon buckets, set them on a lawn at various distances, and practice hitting them in sequence with only one or two false casts in all kinds of wind and weather conditions. Good casters will always catch more fish than mediocre ones.

Now for a discussion of some presentation sins.

Using the Rod to Manipulate the Fly

This one is especially heartbreaking. You've stalked the fish successfully. You've made a good cast. Now the fish has seen and taken the fly, but you cannot hook him because your rod is out of position and you have slack in your line.

When you manipulate the fly, the rod tip should be on or under the surface of the water, the rod should be pointing directly at the fly, and with only one major exception (the two hand retrieve popular with striper, bluefish, and barracuda fishermen) all fly manipulation should be done with the line hand.

Setting the Hook Before You Feel the Fish

You see the fish take the fly (or even worse, you strike just before the fish takes the fly!) and in your excitement you strike. The fly invariably pops out of the fish's mouth.

Using the Rod to Set the Hook

This is another technique that breaks hearts. You've done everything right. The fish sees and takes the fly. The angler responds by lifting the rod tip. Although this sometimes works, usually the fly is pulled from the fish and it noisily flies out of the water, scaring the bejabbers out of the fish. If the hook does stick the fish, too little force is applied to cause it to penetrate any appreciable distance, and the fish shakes it a short way into the fight.

When a fish takes the fly, wait until you feel pressure, then strike by tugging sharply with the line hand (the left hand for a right handed fisherman). Unless you're fishing for tarpon usually this will be sufficient to set the hook. If the fly pops out of the fish's mouth, it's only a few inches away from the fish. The fish can (and often will) move

to the fly and take it again. Once the fish is hooked, then and only then should you raise the rod and try to clear the line to the reel.

Not Listening to the Guide's Advice

This past winter I had a good angler out with me. A school of about 60 redfish approached the skiff from the twelve o'clock position. They were moving fairly quickly and before the angler could respond they were all around us. My angler tried to present his fly to the fish who were already aware of our presence.

In the meantime another wave of fish was coming toward us. I wanted him to ignore the fish already around us and cast to the approaching fish, which were still unaware of our presence. He could not ignore the fish around the boat and change the focus of his attention. Three more waves of 50 to 60 fish each came, at least 200 fish in all. My fisherman never got a strike because he ignored my frantic instructions and persisted in casting to the already spooked fish.

It doesn't matter if your guide is a hired professional or one of your fishing buddies. In a flats boats he will usually have better visibility because he stands up on a poling tower. He should be able to see what's happening better than you can. Ignore their instruction at your own peril.

No one catches every fish, or even one out of every ten fish. Have a sense of humor about your learning process (which after all never stops), use every mistake you make to increase your knowledge, try to avoid the errors elucidated here, and you'll have more fun and more success when out fly fishing on the flats.

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