



PIANKATANK FLIES

By
Court Van Clief

Back cast, load, haul ... let fly! Six-weight line rushes through the guides straightening into an adequate cast. The Clouser Minnow, just issued me by Captain Chris Newsome, rides the sink tip line towards the fuel dock. Strip, strip, strip. Wham! Strip strike! A six-weight fly rod bows deeply into the slashing attack of a solid fish. I choose to fight the fish off the reel letting the surge of his first strong run rip several yards of line through my fingers. The fish goes deep. I let him go, not wanting to

break the light monofilament leader. He comes to the surface, slashing vigorously. In an overly-aggressive attempt towards turning him to the boat, I cross the fine line of pressure to the fish. The leader snaps. The rod whips straight as a twenty-two inch rockfish runs free, only moments prior to his planned release.

That's all I ask. The chance to glimpse the fish I am connected to. A novice fly caster, I am pleased with the effort. A successful cast, the emphatic jolt

of the strike during a series of strips. The fight and the release - albeit slightly premature.

After close inspection of the leader, Captain Newsome discovers the cause of the line separation to be a wind knot, and describes the inappropriate mechanics of my cast that caused it. Chris is a good instructor and breaks down the nomenclature of a fly cast with patience and detail, in a manner rarely enjoyed by clients of most fishing guides.



Virginia's Piankatank River is a truly pristine place. From Dragon Run to Hill's Bay the scenic river meanders through wooded and pastoral countryside, on a journey that never brushes with a sign of industry, except maybe a small commercial fishing wharf. Her waters lap on Middlesex County's shores to the north and wash Mathews County's beaches to the south. As she enters the broad expanse of the Chesapeake Bay, anglers on her south shore cast lines from Cherry Point on Gwynn's Island, enticing speckled trout from clear water grass beds. On her northern shore, at the confluence with the Chesapeake, people call their home Deltaville.

Captain Chris Newsome grew up around Virginia's Middle Peninsula. He uses his lifelong knowledge of local waters well. His passion for the lovely

Captain Newsome on the Pianakatank.



The Piankatank Flies

land and waters on which he earned his stripes and his unabashed enthusiasm for his old stomping grounds are contagious. The marine science degree he earned is yet another advantage added to his native instincts, and natural-born ability to follow the habits of the fish he seeks. Chris's degree could have led him to distant loca-

tions. His decision to put it to good use in interpreting the intricacies of all aspects of angling is a major advantage to us, his clients.

As we glide from Captain Chris's peaceful home waters on Chapel Creek and enter the broad expanse of the

Piankatank, the stately brick mansion of Hess Plantation forms a stately background. Chris and I begin casting our flies. Chris's casts are elegant, effective and serve as a lesson to me. I am sure he notices my regular glances his way, glean- ing what I can from his smooth rhythm. At first my casts are not pretty, but my fly is reaching the water far enough out to allow a few strips. As we work our way through the afternoon, I feel the satisfac- tion that comes with improvement.

We contend with a steady 15-knot southwest breeze, not a factor for Chris. I am intimidated by the prospect of casting flies through an imposing wind, but Chris's apparent nonchalance is encourag- ing.

Virginia's Piankatank River pro- vides the ideal habitat for saltwater fly angling. Numerous piers and docks can hold fish. Shell bars, oyster reefs, and grass beds provide excellent structure for rockfish, speckled trout, flounder, red and silver drum. Occasionally schools of bluefish and Spanish mackerel come marauding through the pristine waters. When they leave, bellies bulging, there will be a few less baitfish in the area.

Accompanied by a squadron of laughing gulls, Chris unfolds his agenda for the afternoon's expedition. We toss flies over oyster reefs, around piers, along ledges, sand bars and creek mouths. Chris never punches in a GPS number. He runs from one likely spot to the next with the confidence of a man who has been there before. This is the backyard of his childhood, and he fishes it with ease. Most spots give us a fish or two.

Our mission is catch and release. Quite a few rockfish and silver drum oblige. To effect an easy release, Chris fishes barbless hooks. The fish remain hooked up as long as you practice the old

angling adage, *keep the pressure on him*. The releasing maneuver is, of course, the payoff when fishing without barbs.

I once heard a Chesapeake fly fishing guide say, "If we could just teach croaker to tear off on long runs, bonefish wouldn't have anything on them. They're a seriously tough fish on fly." Bringing a handful of the red drum's smaller cousin over the gunwales of Chris's guide boat that afternoon, I am inclined to agree. Silvers may not fight in sizzling, extended runs like bonefish. They give you a dogged down-deep fight, though, that very few fish, matched ounce-for-ounce, can rival. They are a handful on a six weight.

While the persistent southwest wind nullifies Chris's plan of fishing the famous grass beds of the "Hole in the Wall" at Gwynn's Island, we enjoy a pleasant and productive afternoon working flies over several miles of the Piankatank. Ducks wing their way along overhead, ospreys call from scraggly nests atop day marks; boats cruise by in the channel off in the distance. We fish alone, away from crowds armed with cut and live bait, run-

ning to gang up on well-known fishing holes of the open Bay. The afternoon slips over the waves with a pleasant satisfac- tion.

Chris shares tales of outings where he and his anglers connected on multitudes of rockfish and silver drum, an occasional speckled trout, mackerel or flounder thrown in the mix. He believes that a properly presented fly will consis- tently outfish a conventional outfit under the right conditions. The eagerness of today's strikes has not gone unnoticed. I wouldn't go so far as to suggest my spin- ning outfits and trolling tackle will appear in the next yard sale, but I am looking forward to whiling away plenty of hours working the long rod this summer. I can't imagine a better way to enjoy a Chesapeake Bay sunrise, or a summer afternoon. There are definitely future trips with Captain Chris Newsome on Virginia's enchanting Piankatank River and around the peaceful Middle Peninsula in the offing. I like the odds, and the beauty of the setting is immeasurable.

Next time you plan a trip to *The*

Captain Newsome's catch at the Piankatank River



Rivah, give a Chris a call. Your experience with him will add a delightful element to your time there. He can put you on the fish from his sturdy guideboat, a kayak or while wading the shallows. In addition, for a memorable family outing, he can guide you on a rodless tour of some of nature's finest creations. Give him a call at Queen's Creek Outfitters, Mathews, Virginia, 804 725 3889, or 804 642 1925. Email him at eco-fly@ccsinc.com or visit his website; www.bayflyfishing.com.

When you go, pass my regards along to Captain Chris, and catch 'em up.

Court Van Clief is a staff writer. He resides in Albemarle County and has a second home in Mathews, Virginia.



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