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Outdoor Outlook: Big Eye Bubbler means big trouble for dorado

By Mike Marsh
Star-News Correspondent

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At the Cape Fear Wildlife Expo, a retired U.S. Navy commander sat behind a table, tying a fishing fly. In gold embroidered letters, George "Chappie" Chapman's Navy blue cap served as an advertising banner for his sea tours.

While his cap alone was guaranteed to attract attention, the fly he was tying garnered even more comments because of its outsized eyes.

"It's a Big Eye Bubbler," Chapman said. "I tied flies and fly fished while I was in the Navy. I'm 89 now. After retiring in 1969, I started tying with the Federation of Fly Fishers Southwest Council in California. They had a fly fishing show and I was a demonstration tier."

The first fly Chapman tied was a sponge spider. He didn't have a nickel to buy one. Instead, he used his sister's sponge rubber ball.

"It was a red ball and worked fine," he said. "But my mother gave me a licking for using my sister's ball."

Chapman had sea duty on the aircraft carrier Wasp. He was filmmaker, among other duties including tail gunner. He made training and documentary films, rigging cameras for taking photographs out of a plane's bomb bay doors. Service films inspired the Big Eye Bubbler. Chapman tied one for the ship's sonar technician. It worked so well, it eventually became a world-famous fly.

"I was getting commercial footage from divers everywhere," he said. "One baitfish



Photo | Mike Marsh

George 'Chappie' Chapman, a retired Navy commander, ties a Big Eye Bubbler at the Cape Fear Wildlife Expo.

filmed had a big spot on its tail, like a red drum. It attracts the predator to strike the tail instead of the head, letting the fish to escape. I started making big eyes on flies and like to think I had an influence in that regard.

"When Left Kreh wrote his fist book and put some of my flies in it, he wrote me a letter and said I used the biggest eyes of anyone. I've tied with Lefty at many fly shows."

Chapman started fly-fishing for bass and bluegill. Now, his favorite fish are dorado (dolphin) and bonito. He designed his fly for catching dolphin in the Sea of Cortez.

"The fly was a radical design at the time," he said. "Dorado just ate it up. My biggest dorado weighed 23 pounds. You fish the fly like a popper and dorado can't stand it."

For dolphin, Chapman ties the fly on a 3/0 short shank hook. The short hook keeps the hook point close to the eye, where the predator strikes.

"For dorado, I cast it on a 9-weight rod," he said. "For freshwater fishing, I use a smaller hook for the smaller fly and use a lighter rod."

The first Big Eye fly was a streamer. The eyes were painted on the fly's wings. But the current version, the Big Eye Bubbler, has a foam strip that wraps around a foam cylinder to make the eyes. The foam also helps flotation.

Chapman now lives near Supply, N.C. He said he is forming a fly-fishing and fly tying club in southeastern Brunswick County. Interested fishermen can call email chappieusa@earthlink.net.

"I've done many different types of fishing," he said. "But saltwater fly-fishing is my favorite. I get to feel the bite and see the surface strike. To see a dorado jump 15 or 20 feet with my fly in its mouth is one of the most exciting things in the world."
