

Bye Bye Summer . . .

By: Captain Ted Wilson

The fall is upon us. I thought I might actually get out and mow the lawn but then it rained . . . for a week straight. My lawn (more accurately a combination of pea rock and weeds) is happy. It is enjoying a temporary reprieve from the reaper and all the water it can drink, but what about the fishermen? When the weather has been stable enough for fishermen to get out, the fish have welcomed the company.

What I like to call “catch fish” fishing has been very good. Catch fish fishing (or action fishing) is the kind of trip you can take anyone on and they are going to catch fish. Sounds elementary, but it’s not. Some of the species we have in our little neck of the woods are very hard to catch. Bonefish, permit and tarpon come to mind. Also, there are some very bad fishermen in this world. The key is to lower your sights a bit and concentrate on having fun.

A fabulous place to catch some fish is in the backcountry of Florida Bay. Right now, the fall run of mullet are moving back into the bay in giant schools and causing quite a stir. Of course, mullet are vegetarians, spending most of their time eating decaying grass off the bottom. By themselves they are of little value to a sport fishermen except as bait. A mullet school as a whole is an entity and creates great opportunities for fishermen. As the mullet graze along the bottom they kick up shrimp, crabs and juvenile finfish that hide in the grass. The mullet of course have no interest in them. However, as they “goose” all these critters from their hiding spots it acts as the base of a food chain that many other fish find irresistible. Sea trout are at the top of this list along with ladyfish, jacks, snapper and sharks. When these predators find these schools they may travel with them for months. To find the mullet just look for their “muds.” As the mullet feed they also kick up sediment. The sediment will stay suspended in the water column for a period of time before settling back down to the bottom. The sum of thousands of mullet kicking up the sediment creates a muddy looking area compared to the surrounding water. Muds can be as small as a two-car garage or bigger than Marathon. The key is to find the leading edge of a mud and drift through it with shrimp, jigs or a combination of both. The leading edge is where the mullet are actively feeding and can usually be identified because there is a hard line where the color changes from clear to muddy. If you can’t figure out where the mud starts just go upwind of the darkest portion you can identify and start your drift there. There are some fish that dine on the mullet as well. Sharks, of course, will eat most anything but tarpon will also cruise the edges of these schools of mullet. Jacks and seatrout that are big enough to take down the corn-cob sized mullet will definitely take a shot at them as well.

The near shore patch reefs are another place to “catch fish” Recently they have been loaded with snapper of all kinds. There are also some grouper, but most will not make the tape, but are nonetheless fun to catch and release. Hogfish are on the move as well. The hogfish is an interesting fish. Most people call them hog snapper, but they are in fact in the wrasse family and not a snapper at all. This distinction is what makes them so good on the table but also makes them more difficult to catch on a hook and line. Most people are aware that hogfish are vulnerable to spear fishermen but I can’t tell you how many people believe that hogfish can’t be caught on a hook. Spear fishing is a great way to put these flavorful fish on the table, but it makes catch and release a little difficult. Hogfish are not great predators. They are more like reef dabblers. To catch them consistently you have to make life easy on them. Dead shrimp on the bottom work as well as any bait out there. Put your baits around the perimeter of a coral head or

patch reef and wait it out. The downside to this method is that there are many undesirable fish in the same areas that will happily scarf down a defenseless shrimp. These pesky unidentified fish are called pickers. They are called pickers because they “pick” at your offering (usually in schools) until your hook is bare. They can do this with amazing efficiency sometimes without your even sensing the heist. Grunts are the mayor of Pickertown but are constantly challenged by undersized snapper of every make and color. Sometimes you have to dig through some manure before you get to the pony.