

Keys Christmas

By: Captain Ted Wilson

Christmas time in the Keys is different than in other towns. With few exceptions, life generally goes on as usual without much fanfare, barring the occasional holiday party and subsequent eggnog bender. Don't get the wrong idea, holiday spirit certainly exists. We exchange gifts, put up lights and Christmas trees, go to church and eat and drink like Vikings. However, compared to a big northern city you might not get that typical feeling that Christmas is "in the air." Despite our lack of Norman Rockwell Christmas ambiance, people nonetheless flock to the Keys for a different twist on the holidays. The promise of warm weather, swaying coconut palms and sandals rather than snow shoes lures people from all over the world to enjoy our little slice of paradise. Maybe it's because there are no long lines, no road rage and certainly never any snow. Maybe it's because we frown upon the frenzied hustle and bustle of the big city. Then again, maybe it's the fishing.

Late December is a great time to fish in Keys. Just make sure you tailor your quarry to the conditions. One of the many advantages to our fishery is the variety of fishing that is available. Regardless of the current weather conditions, some type of fish is going to appreciate the change. Unfortunately, some will not.

When it's cold and windy, don't fish the flats. You might see a few fish here and there, but you will probably do better to stay away from the shallows. On occasion you might stumble upon a school of bones in deeper basins trying to stay warm but that's not the same as the flats. I know this isn't a very positive statement but sometimes you have to get real. Bonefish, along with their flats buddy the permit, are sub-tropical fish. The Keys rest on the northern edge of their natural range. Minimum temperatures are required. Wait until we get a few days of unseasonably warm weather and then they'll pop back up on the flats.

Winter weather is perfect for fishing the backcountry. Snook, redfish, tarpon, seatrout, sharks and all their friends await the weary traveler willing to make the 20+ mile trip across Florida Bay. Dress one layer warmer than you think you'll need and button up.

Snook and redfishing has been particularly good and should stay that way for some time. Remember, snook season closed December 15th and will not re-open until the 31st of January. That still shouldn't stop you from chasing them around. Large shrimp, pinfish or pilchards should do the trick. Fish them around the mangroves under floats to keep them from snagging or freeline your bait with just enough weight to keep them moving. For the patient angler, try pinning a pinfish on the bottom in runoffs or around structure.

If sharks begin to eat your catch without asking, you have two choices. Move to another spot or catch the shark. I like to keep at least one decent sized rod rigged with a trace of wire and a disposable hook (nothing stainless steel) for this very purpose. Sacrifice a gut hooked jack or ladyfish, pin it to the bottom and stick the big rod in the rod holder. It usually doesn't take long for them to take you up on your offer and a big shark usually winds up being the biggest fish caught all day. Some people "poo poo" the idea of catching sharks, I think hooking one of these sporty brawlers every once in a while is kind of a nice change of pace.

Drifting mullet muds is another winter crowd pleaser. Truth is, you never know what might come up out of those muds. I've seen bonefish, permit, pompano, sharks, bluefish, Spanish mackerel and even tarpon come out of muds. Seatrout, ladyfish and jack crevalle are the usual suspects and are typically pretty user friendly. Try jigs in rootbeer, brick red or chartreuse tipped

with shrimp. You can also just use a shrimp under a popping cork with a split shot right above the hook. Don't forget to pop, pop, pop that sucker every 15 or 20 seconds or you might as well just put on a Snoopy bobber. It's the commotion of the float being popped that attracts the fish to area of your bait.

Even though we don't have snow or chestnuts roasting over the open fire, the Keys are a glorious place to spend the holidays. The fishing is great and everyone is in good spirits. Merry Christmas everybody and have a safe and happy New Year.