

June Classic . . .

By: Captain Ted Wilson

Let's review the weather so far this Spring—relentless, depressing, honking wind with an occasional driving rain thrown in for added discomfort. The wind blew so hard the last half of May that I'm pretty sure I saw a Kansas girl with a little dog soaring over Channel #5 Bridge.

Now it's June. What does Mother Nature have in store for us now, locusts? Currently, things are pretty good and thank goodness, because June is a monster fishing month. We're over due to catch a break at least one month this Spring.

Tarpon are still around in huge numbers. The palolo worms hatched a few days after the full moon and the tarpon got a little loopy. For those unfamiliar with the famed "worm hatch" here's a quick synopsis. The palolo worm is a reddish colored aquatic worm about three inches long that lays its eggs in the hardpan bottom commonly found on the oceanside of the Keys. The eggs remain dormant through the year until conditions are just right to hatch. Conditions are favorable in May or June when an extra-low tide falls late in the evening.

The significance this hatch has for fisherman stems from the tarpon's eagerness to eat the fledgling worms. As the worms emerge from the bottom and begin to wiggle around the water surface, the tarpon gorge on them. Actually, most fish will readily eat these worms when they are available. Bonefish, permit, snapper, and of course, jacks of all kinds, take full advantage of the all-you-can-eat buffet. Fisherman armed with worm imitations who know where and when to find the hatch can be treated to the most unbelievable display of tarpon in their lives.

June marks the beginning of consistent "classic" bonefishing. Classic refers to poling the flats in search of tailing fish that are happily feeding. This scenario occurs somewhere every day of the year, but the hot months seem to bring them out of the woodwork. Maybe it's due to a decrease in boating pressure relative to what they've encountered over the last few months.

I would be remiss to talk about fishing for bonefish without mentioning the safe handling of one of our most beloved species. It is best to keep your handling of bonefish boat side to a minimum. Everyone loves pictures, but consider a few things before manhandling a bonefish for a mere keepsake.

First of all, they're slippery little suckers. I'm a little ashamed to admit how many times I've seen a bonefish dropped onto the deck of my boat a nano-second before hearing the click of the camera shutter. Bang, boom, bong, fumble, fumble, fumble, O.K. we're ready for the picture again. This is not good for the fish. They lose their protective slime coating, they get even more exhausted than they already are and who knows what kind of internal damage has been done. If you must get a picture try the "release photo" approach. Have someone get the camera ready before the fish is boat side and try to avoid ever bringing the fish over the boat at all. When you catch a bonefish keep it in the water. Get down on your knees and lay your chest onto the gunwale of the boat. Now you're balanced and both of your arms are free. Grab the fish above the tail and roll it over onto it's back. This will disorient the fish for a few seconds while the hook is removed. Have the photographer lean over the same side of the boat with the camera ready to pop. Now you can turn the fish right side up and gently raise the fish from the water a few inches and smile. The whole thing need not take more than a few seconds. Done properly, the fish should not need reviving before letting it go. If the fish is ready to go, give it a little shove and say goodbye. The whole notion of "reviving" a fish is usually only necessary after you've nearly killed it taking too many pictures or too much handling. If the fish will not hold

itself upright and swim away, gently rock it back and forth until it swims away on its own accord.

June is a wonderful time to fish in the Keys. The crowds have lessened, the winds should back off and all the fish are ready to play.