

Pick your battle . . .

By: Captain Ted Wilson

“Season is here.” It’s a common phrase that one might hear any place that caters to tourism. The Keys are no exception. The notion of “season” certainly carries undertones of sunburned, freckled-face children wearing sandals and socks. Unlike every other place that our friends to the North tend to visit, “season” in the Keys also means fishing, and the fishing season is definitely here.

Tarpon are on the move. Large schools of the oversized herring can be seen moving through area channels, deep in the backcountry and along ocean side migration routes. Fly fishermen have been a little stymied by the fish so far this year, but things are picking up. Bait fishermen have also been a bit frustrated but are still grinding out enough bites to make the trip worthwhile.

Tarpon can be caught any time of the day but are primarily nocturnal feeders, doing most of their feeding in low light or no light. Some prefer to fish at night for tarpon. It is a very productive time to fish and keeps tender skin out of the scorching sun. Fishing at night does however, pose a few problems. First of all you can’t see at night. Even with spotlights you are limited to the scope of the beam of light. Tangled lines can go unnoticed, trap floats can catch lines and ruin drift fishing, and there are always safety concerns when maneuvering around a boat in the dark. Personally, I like to witness the actual bite and subsequent mass hysteria that takes place immediately following the initial hookup of a tarpon. It’s a feast for the eyes. Early mornings and evenings offer anglers the “best of both worlds” in terms of tarpon fishing. Sunrise and sunset are glorious times to be on the water in the Keys. The tarpon are active and you still get to see everything unfold as the tarpon eats your offering then dances across the water. Snook season closes May 1st. While the harvesting of these awesome game fish will be suspended until September, the fishing for them continues to be very good. Seasonal tides are very low this time of year, reducing available habitat for snook and many other backcountry predators. Shrimp and jigs bounced on the bottom in channels and around mangroves is a time honored tactic to catch the cagey snook. At least a 30-pound leader is necessary to avoid cutoffs from the snooks Ginsu-like gill plates.

Bonefishing is back. Not that it ever completely left, but Spring bonefishing the past few years has left something to be desired. Lately, bonefish have been making decent showings on both bay and ocean side flats. Fish of all sizes are foraging for shrimp and crabs, waiting to make a happy angler’s day. Actually, I made that last part up. They’re probably trying their best to avoid fishermen at all costs. It’s not really known why bonefish numbers have been on the decline the last few years. Researchers are trying to figure out why, but money is tight for species not considered as food-fish. Bonefish & Tarpon Unlimited (BTU) is an organization that was developed to address these very questions. Their mission is to support projects and research to help understand, nurture and enhance healthy bonefish and tarpon populations. Sounds good to me. The founding members list reads like a who’s who of South Florida fishermen. If you would like to join or simply make a donation to help research efforts go to www.tarbone.org or call (305) 367-3416.

The most asked questions during a guided fishing trip by anglers to their captain is “how deep is the water here?” I’m not sure what the fascination is with water depth. Most of the time it’s less than five feet and you can just look over the side for your answer. The second most asked

question is when is the best time to fish in the Keys. The answer to that question is, right now. Pick your battle, all the best fighters are in town.