

Rain, rain . . . go away!

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With summer in full swing, the Keys are enjoying some of the best fishing of the year. Unfortunately, summer also means volatile and sometimes dangerous weather conditions. Most anglers will have to postpone or cancel many fishing trips due to unsafe boating conditions. Not to worry, that just means more plentiful and less pressured fish when the skies clear.

Offshore is as hot as the weather. Blackfin tuna from “football” size to porkers are still swarming over the humps. If you can get your net over some live pilchards, a few handfuls of “freebies” and then a hook in the last one can make for some extremely fun tuna fishing. Feathers trolled way back behind the boat on light leaders will catch some fish also if live bait isn’t an option.

Yellowtail snapper are eating the paint off the bottom of the boats on the edge of the reef. There is definitely an art to consistently catching yellowtail in the Keys. A trip with a pro can cut years off of figuring it out for yourself. But for you do-it-yourselfers out there, start by looking for moving water that isn’t too clear. Then anchor and chum. The more you chum, the more they come. After they come, you can use whatever you have left in you bait box to feed them. Small hooks on light line drifted into the chum line like a piece of chum should fool them. Yellowtail need to be twelve inches overall to keep and now there are new rules on how to measure them. (See graphic for more information.)

Dolphin fishing is still good. Spotty catches of big fish mixed in with some grumbling talk of only little fish. Birds and debris seem to be the key to finding the big dogs.

Backcountry fishing is very good in July. Snook are everywhere. When water temperatures climb in the shallows, snook have a tendency get low. Try jigging or live baiting the deep potholes and edges around flats deep in Everglades National Park. Redfish and trout hang out in the same areas, so you’ll never know what might come up out of that muddy water. Again, going with a professional guide can teach volumes in a short time.

Bonefishing is very good. Ocean side shorelines and backcountry flats are holding consistent numbers of fish. Strangely, almost all of the fish are huge. Typically summertime bonefish are a mixture of all sizes. Shrimp are universally accepted by all bonefish, but have a backup crab ready for several reasons. Permit love crabs, and have a way of popping up while looking for bonefish. In addition, tarpon cruising bonefish flats during high tide are more likely to take a live crab in front of their nose than a dead shrimp. Not that tarpon won’t eat shrimp, they love them. A jumbo shrimp (oxymoron) makes an excellent “pitch” bait for tarpon, but you usually want to hook them under the “horn” of the shrimp so they swim naturally. Most bonefishermen rig their shrimp through the tail and the shrimp dies shortly after that which is O.K., they don’t mind (the bonefish that is, the shrimp really hate it).

Tarpon are still around but declining in numbers. Bait fishing with crabs and pinfish in the evenings and early mornings in the channels that local bridges span has been productive. Fly guys are still doing their thing to the ocean side migratory fish and in the basins and deep flats way out in Everglades National Park.

On a serious note, keep an eye out for deteriorating weather while fishing this time of year. Storms can be a serious threat to both your day on the water and your life. Lightning is the number one weather killer in Florida—killing more than all other weather deaths combined. The National Weather Service claims the ‘30-30 Rule’ offers the best lightning safety guidance for the general public. When you see lightning, count the time until you hear thunder. If that is 30 seconds or less, the storm is close enough to be dangerous - seek shelter. If the lightning can’t be seen, just hearing thunder means the thunderstorm is close enough to be dangerous. Don’t leave shelter until 30 minutes or more after the last lightning flash or thunder. There will be more on this subject next week, until then keep a close eye on the prize and the sky.