

## **What's it gonna be?**

**By: Captain Ted Wilson**

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This month we've seen a little bit of everything. For fisherman it's been a bit of a meteorological Russian roulette. The weather started windy and rainy, layed down to gloriously calm and perfect, and then went to full-throttle frostbite. It makes me wonder what the poor fish are going through? Let's think through it.

Let's start with that "gloriously calm and perfect" part, because that's the best part. When the weather calmed down and the water slicked off, we were privileged to experience the best the fall has to offer. Bonefish tailing on the flats all day, grown up tarpon cruising the basins like it's spring time without the heat and permit spiked up everywhere in between. Conditions were perfect, and those who got out on the water were reminded of what a great fishery we have here in the Keys. The bonefish and permit are probably residents, but the full-grown tarpon are only here to feed on the fall run of mullet. The tarpon usually hang around until the first cold front and then both the mullet and tarpon kind of disappear for a while. If you missed it, look for the same conditions next year any time from the middle of October until it turns cold. It's pretty reliable.

Now for the bad part. As I sit and write, it is the coldest day of the year so far, and the steady north wind doesn't look to be letting up. Water temperatures dipped to 62 degrees and it's still falling. The tarpon are gone, the bonefish and permit are huddled in their respective schools in the deepest water they can find. Might as well give it up, right? Wrong, you just need to switch gears until it warms back up.

The beautiful thing about the Keys is the variety of fishing available to us. The yin and the yang of it is that as conditions turn sour for some types of fish, it creates perfect conditions for others. Right now is a great time to take advantage of all the fish that move into the Keys for the winter. Like snowbirds, only they don't drive slow and leave their turn signal on.

At the top of the list is the Spanish mackerel. A decent food fish (if you don't freeze them) and a terrific fighter. They migrate into the Keys when it gets cold and all you need is a couple blocks of chum, some shrimp or pilchards, a box full of white bucktail jigs and jig heads. Take your supplies and go either southeast to the patch reefs, or due west to the Gulf. Any patch reef in 10-20 feet of water should do. In addition to the mackerel, "the patches" provide probably the most variety of fish as any type of fishing we do down here. All kinds of snapper, grouper, bluefish, permit, sharks, cudas, porgy's, hogfish, pompano—you get the picture. The Gulf has most of the same species just subtract hogfish and add the occasional cobia, tripletail and Goliath grouper (a.k.a. jewfish).

The Gulf probably has more reliable mackerel fishing than the patches but is significantly farther away. Fishing typically starts around the Sprigger and Schooner Banks, go west from there as far as you want to go. If you know of some structure out there, that's a great place to start but it is not necessary. I used to travel west from Sprigger until the water started to look a little cleaner on average and I started to see bait fish skip around as I ran. From there I would drop my chum bag over the side and anchor up if the wind and current were in the same direction, drift if they were opposite. The Gulf is a wonderfully lonely place to fish. It may appear featureless but there are tons of fish out there. So the next time the water temperatures drop and all the sexy fish are nowhere to be found, don't let it stop you. Grab a chum bag and gas up because there are some visitors that think the water is just fine.

