

## **Legends of the Fall...**

**By: Captain Ted Wilson**

I love fall fishing. The weather is generally nice, the crowds are thin and the fish are fat. While it may not be the fabled “best time of year to fish” for anything in particular, it is a very good time to fish for practically every fish that frequents the flats and backcountry of the Florida Keys.

Let’s start close to town with bonefish. Fall bonefishing is glorious. For one thing, water temperatures are mild so you can fish for them all day without a huge drop off in activity during the afternoon hours. Another plus is there aren’t as many people fishing for them right now. It’s kind of nice fishing half a dozen flats over the course of a day and never having to skip over a spot you had in mind because somebody beat you there. The bonefish appreciate the break. They seem to be in mixed sizes and good numbers on both ocean and bayside flats.

Tarpon are also in town. Until the first real cold front blows in we can expect them to hang around. Until water temperatures start dipping below 75 degrees expect the tarpon to continue eating mullet and pilchards like Halloween candy. If you don’t want to travel very far just head to your nearest bridge. “Bridge fish” are spending their days in the shadows of overhead traffic and venturing out during low-light hours. Match the hatch if you can, but plugs and large shrimp will work, especially at night. Bridge fish are typically small to medium in size so leave your heavy tackle at home. Medium spinning tackle and a 50-pound leader are all you need. There are a few grown-up fish mixing it up around the bridges that might be too much fish for spinning tackle, but they are in the minority. There are also some bruiser jack crevalle cruising through the same areas that can be fun once or twice.

For the more adventurous, the deep backcountry has been producing some very good days on the water. Tarpon, snook and redfish seem to be everywhere they are supposed to be. Big channels to little creeks are holding tarpon of all sizes. They are also dining on the migratory mullet that have moved in over the past month. Make no mistake, the tarpon that are here now are here to eat. In the spring, migratory tarpon that move through the Keys have a different itinerary. Of course they have to feed, but in addition, spring tarpon have making baby tarpon as their top priority. This is why fishing for them in the spring (especially fly fishing) can be so frustrating. They let you look, but you can’t touch unless they’re in the right mood. There’s about five easy jokes to insert here, but I can’t think of any that won’t offend my wife. Snook and redfish are also making life easy on backcountry anglers. Look closer to the mangroves for these two species. Finger mullet, pilchards, Gulp baits and jighead/shrimp combos near the bottom all will catch fish.

Some of the snook and reds are very small so be gentle with these fish when releasing them. If possible, don’t even lift them from the water. Simply use a hook remover like you would with a catfish and try not to touch them at all. Did I say catfish? I meant, seatrout or ladyfish. I never catch catfish. I also have some oceanfront property in Arizona.

Sharks are still a problem back there. They seem to make a living eating hooked snook. I swear they wait until you’ve got a good one on before making their presence known. They are remarkably efficient, and rarely miss an opportunity once they have locked in on your prize. It is both exciting and sad to witness an eight-foot lemon or bull shark eat a nice snook like a stadium hotdog. Consider finding another spot to fish if sharks are hanging around. I have to admit I waffle when faced with this dilemma. On one hand, the shark is just making a living the way it

has for millions of years. Culling out the sick and wounded. On the other hand, I feel as though I have created this opportunity for the shark by handicapping an otherwise healthy fish. That makes me feel responsible. It's a tough call if the fish are biting and the sharks move in to leave, but it is the only way to prevent sharks from getting conditioned to equate fishing boats with food. A menacing and eery thought on many levels. Happy Halloween.