

Summer schools...

By: Captain Ted Wilson

The flats and backcountry of the Florida Keys are a lonely place in the late summer. Unless, of course, you are a shrimp, crab or baitfish. If reincarnation exists, I hope to never come back as one of these poor critters. To have to endure a life on the edge as forage for hungry denizens of the shallows would be a short life of constantly looking over your shoulder. Assuming of course that you have shoulders. While the fishermen are taking time out to get kids back to school, repair tired boats or just relax for a while, the fish are taking advantage of the lack of pressure. For those few who are getting out on the water, they are reaping the benefits of calm seas, no competition and happy fish.

On the top of the list of happy fish is the bonefish. It seems over the last five to 10 years bonefish have been waiting until later and later in the year to show up with any consistency. Sure, you might see some flashes of brilliance from time to time. Bonefish, after all, are a year-round fishery in the Keys. On any given day, when the planets align you can experience excellent bonefishing. But it seems that springtime bonefishing is getting more and more sporadic. The reasons for decline in bonefish sightings is still a little vague. It could be due to a change in water quality, an increase in sustained pressure, decreasing available forage or none of the above. The only thing for sure is that bonefishing is very good right now. Look for early morning tailers up on top of flats wherever you can find clear moving water. After the morning feed, look for mudders and travelers in slightly deeper water adjacent to productive flats or along oceanside shorelines. Shrimp are always a good bet if you can find them. If shrimp are not available a silver-dollar-sized crab will work. You can also use a small white or tan jig tipped with shrimp over hard bottom for typically smaller fish.

Tarpon and permit are still good bets in the backcountry right now. Both species will be cruising the deeper edges of flats this time year in search of prey. Permit may be found tailing in the shallows adjacent to the same areas but tarpon will most likely not venture too far past the edge. When you find permit tailing, approach them with the utmost stealth. It is here that they are most spooky. Long casts with a small crab are the ticket. For the tarpon, you have more options. Large shrimp work well. If shrimp aren't around try artificials. White Millie's bucktails, D.O.A. CAL jerkbaits (I like key lime color), Yo-zuri crystal minnows and even the old Mirrolure in chartruese works well. Try and reduce the number of hooks on the hard lures to just one super sharp trailer. It may be hard to believe, but it is actually easier to stick one good hook sized (3/0) into the mouth of a tarpon than nine small ones. In addition, one hook tends to get fouled in the ever-floating grass much less than the treble hooks that normally come stock on Mirrolures and Yo-zuri baits.

Late summer is my favorite time to fish in the Keys. My favorite fishy citizens are abundant, active and happy. There's nobody on the water and the winds are typically at a minimum. So quit lounging around waiting for football season to start and get out there. You'll have the best the flats have to offer all to yourself.