

**The truth about tarpon...**  
**By: Captain Ted Wilson**

Memorial Day weekend marks a transition in the Keys. Spring Break crowds are a distant memory. Snowbirds have flown North to spend the rest of the year “back home.” The people, traffic and general bustle of season is starting to wane. Memorial Day weekend is the final “shot in the arm” for local businesses that rely heavily on tourism before the doldrums of summer. It is at this point the Keys start to show their best side.

First of all, everybody relax. Merging onto the Overseas Highway in front of the Post Office no longer requires a compromise of your personal safety standards. The second thing you might want to consider is going fishing. Despite the slight dwindle of activity on the islands, the fish are all here. Ask a fishing guide how business is right now and watch his reaction. Actually, you’ll probably have a hard time finding a guide right now because all they do this time of year is sleep very little and fish a lot.

So what are they fishing for? Good question. After all, it could be anything because virtually every fish that swims down here is available to catch right now. The safest answer, however, is tarpon. The fly tarpon tournaments have started to kick off. Fly fishing for tarpon has gained popularity over the years due in large part to expanded media covering and glamorizing the sport. Locals will never lose sight of the fact that fly tarpon fishing was pioneered in the Keys.

As romantic and just plain cool as it may seem to catch a tarpon on fly, people aspiring to catch their first tarpon on fly should be warned. It is hard to catch a tarpon on a fly rod. Of course there are exceptions to every rule, but it generally requires some skill, a good guide and a little bit of luck to catch a tarpon on fly. It takes a fundamental understanding of fly casting, larger than usual fly rods at larger than usual fish under a larger than usual amount of duress. After that, you need someone to take you to where these large, migrating fish currently are hanging out and position you so you can make the aforementioned cast to present the fly to the aforementioned fish. With that all in place, all you need is the fish to eat the fly, then stick the hook, clear the loose line by your feet and bow when it jumps. All of this is at break neck speed, of course. If you’re still connected after all that, then your doing well. All that’s left is the long arduous battle that tarpon are so well known for and someone to help you subdue the fish boatside.

Most fly tournaments (and guides) require only for someone to touch the leader or for the nail knot to pass inside the rod’s tip to be considered a catch. Usually the removal of the fly from the tarpon is not even attempted. Instead, we just “pop off” the fish by breaking the tippet and leave the fly to rust out in a few days. The reason for this is to assure the tarpon is in the best shape possible to survive after release. A fly left in the mouth of a strong tarpon is much less consequential than wrestling the fish along side the boat just to get back your fly. Never lift a large tarpon into the boat, it can kill them. Reconsider the use of a lip gaff to get a handle on a tarpon due to the gaping holes it can create in the mouth of the fish when it struggles.

Most people will catch their first tarpon by using live bait. Bait fishing for tarpon holds just as much allure for some people as catching them on fly, only you don’t need to do your homework. Drifting or anchoring around local channels that connect the ocean to the bay are common tactics for catching tarpon with live bait. The beautiful thing about this type of fishing is anyone can do it. Even though “the fight” does eventually require some arm strength and some stamina, the actual fishing part is pretty easy. Just go to where they live, put out food that they eat

on a hook and wait for the fireworks to start. Sometimes it can take hours, sometimes only minutes for the first bite.

When it all comes together, catching a tarpon by any means is spectacular. Whether your fishing with flies, bait or artificial lures makes no difference. The heart and spirit of a tarpon is rivaled by no other inshore fish. Big ones, little ones, even “baby” ones are all fun. It is a fish that many have dedicated much of their lives pursuing. It is a fish that no one soon forgets.