

FISH AND FISHING IN FLORIDA WATERS.

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WITHOUT the use or strain of a metaphor, the State of Florida may be, not inaptly, described as amphibious. Lakes, ponds and streams abound in the interior, and frequently recurring se inlets or passes carry the tide far from the shores to blend with the flowing river waters.

With such an extent of habitat in a semi-tropical climate, fish life is naturally vigorous and the species abundant, possessing superior game-like qualities; but the charm of an angling experience on Florida waters, fluvial and lacustrine, is the luxuriant environment and the climatic salubrity, permitting, indeed inviting, the rod to be used at a season when the game fishes of the Northern States lie death-like, in their ice-bound hibernations.

The fly-fisher in Florida can roam and wade at will the winter season through, and the bait-fisher can catch fish, or loll and slumber in an open boat, amid summer surroundings, through all the frost months of the year.

With such a delightful vista before him an angler must indeed be poor, both in pocket and in enthusiasm, if he fail to yearn for specific information as to the fish and the "how, when and where" to catch them in these waters of abundance. With this fact in view, we will make a tour of the coasts of the State and of the interior, stopping here and there to give a personal experience as to details and opportunities. But first as to the fish.

The game fishes of Florida have a worldwide reputation. Anglers from distant countries, particularly from England, visit the State to battle with that lordly leaper, the silver king or tarpon, who eclipses in valor and size the great mahaseer of India's waters, which, for many years, was the champion big fish on an English rod.

The barracuda surpasses in fierceness of onslaught his fresh-water congener of similar shape and reputation—the pike. He is found almost everywhere along the coasts and is taken on a trolling line.

The Spanish mackerel, beautiful in coloration and form, can be caught in large numbers at the mouth of the passes, either with natural bait or a large artificial fly. The pompano, the choicest and highest-priced of all salt-water fishes, is found feeding in many localities on the small crustacea of the shallows or in the pockets made along the beaches by an incoming tide; and at such places takes freely a small bait of clam, or, when coming into the mouths of the inlets or passes, a small artificial fly will be found effective. The spotted sea trout may be taken at similar places and on the same lures.

The lady fish, a cousin of the tarpon, but of lesser size, full of small bones, but game to the core, is found everywhere, along the west coast particularly; and the bone-fish, with the high record of being the greatest game fish of its size in American waters, reaches its superlative vigor in Biscayne Bay, on the southeast coast.

The channel bass or red drum, with its characteristic spot on the peduncle, or fleshy part of the tail, is found nearly everywhere; and casting a mullet bait into the surf for these fish, running from five to forty pounds, is doubtless the most exciting as well as exhausting of all angling methods. Wading out waist-deep into a tumbling surf, which at times overleaps the angler's head, with a forty-pounder on the hook, fighting both breakers and fish is hard work, and an hour's experience suffices and exhausts the most muscular rodster. Senator Matt Quay is an enthusiastic red-drum angler, and visits Brigantine Beach, on the New Jersey coast, where, singular as it may be, these fish reach a weight of sixty pounds on their migrations north in the month of August. Forty pounds seems to be nearly the maximum weight of the red drum of the Gulf waters.

The sheepshead and the spotted sea trout may be said to be ubiquitous. Fiddler crab is a choice lure for them, but the sheepshead of Florida do not give the attractive fight of their Northern ilk. They bear down, jiggling fiercely, and seldom make long and strong surges; nor do they nibble gingerly at the bait like the fish of the North, but take it fiercely with a rush.

The mangrove snappers, gray and red spotted, are active when hooked. A three-pounder on a ten-ounce rod will fight wildly until death comes. They are often caught at the mouth of the passes, particularly in the channel ways of the outlets of the many lakes or ponds that lie adjacent to the beaches. The fiddler crab is a good bait for them, although in the narrow and shallow outlets of the ponds they will take a gaudy and large fly with avidity.

Some of the species of groupers grow to a large size and they are vigorous and wary fighters. They, as well as the snappers, are apt to seek the protection, when hooked, of the mangrove roots or shelving rocks of cochina, and a strong rod and tackle must do its best work in restraining them.

The city of Jacksonville, from which the railroad system of the State diverges, presents the first objective point to the angler of the North. Here he will find but little sport for his rod. The St. John's River, immediately adjacent to the city, yields only a catfish that grows to a very large size. It is a brother of the great Mississippi catfish, and we have known of one of them being caught on a trolling fly sunken about a foot below the surface of the St. John's River. It was game and weighed eight pounds.

Taking a steamboat that plies daily between Jacksonville and the mouth of the St. John's, we reach the town of Mayport, distant about twenty-five miles. The sheepshead fishing at this point is very fine, and the fish are of an average weight much greater than those caught farther south. One of fourteen pounds is of authenticated record, while the average of the larger sheepshead of the Gulf coast does not exceed five pounds. If the angling tourist happens to be at Mayport in the early days of December, he will be apt to get a fresh shad, planked in the Gloucester style, the fish being cooked with its fins flop-

ping, as it were. Such was our delight a few years ago, and the repast was acutely enjoyed, as this fish was unknown to our Northern table except in the early spring months. In the month of April and all through the summer, large scores are made at Mayport of the species of fish that are caught during the winter farther south, not excepting the tarpon, which averages very large in weight and is quite abundant.

Pablo Beach, distant from Jacksonville about seventeen miles by rail, is noted for exceptional fishing and as a favorite summer resort of the residents of Jacksonville. During the hot months the shores and groves at this point are dotted with tents, one of which was occupied for a number of years by General Spinner, the Treasurer of the United States during the internecine war. He was an ardent hook-and-line bait-fisher, and his curious and world-renowned signature to the notes issued by the Government was said to have followed the squirming lines of a gyrating eel during the progress of capture by the General. At Pablo Beach the channel bass caught in the surf range from twenty to twenty-five pounds; and sheepshead, groupers, gaff-topsail catfish, whiting (barb), are taken abundantly with rod and reel at an old wreck half a mile up the coast.

St. Augustine, with its beauty of climate and palatial hotels, was, forty years ago, when I first visited it, an excellent point from which to "go a-fishing." At that time a steamboat of primitive build and management conveyed the tourist from Jacksonville to Toco, where only a rough pine-board hostelry existed; and thence ran a wheezy old stage over about twelve miles of a porous sand road to St. Augustine, along a route through a dense pine wood, where deer were seen in herds and free from timidity. The hotels at St. Augustine were at that time very economical, the highest charges being \$1.50 per day. The orange trees shaded the windows of the guests, and juicy fruit could be plucked at will without leaving the room. All this has, however, vastly changed, and the saddest part of it is that the quality of the fishing has kept company. At the early period named sharkfishing was followed for a living by the Minorcan fishermen, and paid handsomely these mulatto-

colored descendants of the Minorca Islanders, who were the first settlers at St. Augustine. The best fishing is now in the surf of Anastasia Island for channel bass, although the sheepshead and other fish are taken in and near the outlet of the Matanzas River.

The fishing near New Smyrna (reached by rail from Jacksonville) and at Mosquito Inlet is very fine. At Pacetti's (Ponce Park), a few miles from New Smyrna, and on the Halifax River, channel bass (called redfish locally), sheepshead, mangrove snappers and the groupers are caught in quantities through the winter months; and when the spring opens the river swarms with cavalli, sea trout, lady or bony fish (called skip-jacks locally), and other varieties.

From New Smyrna by rail the distance to Miami, on Biscayne Bay, the terminus of the road, is two hundred and forty-two miles, and there is no section of the route that fails to attract the angling tourist. All the usual salt-water fish are found in the inlets and bays; and when Rockledge, Jupiter, St. Lucie or Palm Beach is reached, a stay at either point will be fruitful in returns. The salt-water fishing at the inlets of Indian River—Fort Capron and Jupiter—affords excellent sport for variety and quantity. Cavalli, pompano, bluefish, sea trout, lady fish, sergeant fish, mangrove snappers and channel bass are caught; the pompano; in proportion to its size, fighting harder than any of them. Artificial baits, such as the squid or spoon, phantom minnow or fly, casting or trolling, are used, and are successful with all species, not excepting the mangrove snapper. At Jupiter Inlet the pompano abounded a few years ago, and doubtless do so now. They appear in large shoals, jumping out of the water when disturbed by a passing boat, or from other causes. They are fished for with a light rod and fine water gear, and when hooked they fight hard and die game. Large cavalli (a close cousin to the pompano, but not a good table fish) are taken up to eighteen pounds in weight. As in all other fishing sections, the fish bite best on an incoming tide. The foregoing conditions exist in all the waters south to Key West, where the angler should stop a few days and visit the fishing boats and their docks. There is no place in the world where one can study live

fishes so satisfactorily as at Key West. Professor Evermann, the ichthyologist of the United States Fish Commission, states: "Fishing boats are lying at the fish wharves at all times, and in their wells may be seen specimens of numerous species, many of them of brilliant coloration; and, by the aid of a water glass, one may spend hours observing and studying a multitude of fishes and other interesting forms as they disport themselves in the clear waters beneath the boat."

On the Gulf coast, from Key West to Tampa, the transportation is by water, and the angler who wishes to explore and enjoy the fishing should charter a boat at Key West. A thirty-foot sharpie will answer all purposes, as it is roomy and draws very little water. In this craft he can visit every inlet, bay and island as far as Pensacola, seeking protection from impending storms by keeping close inshore, where harbors meet him every few miles.

The first objective point, after leaving Key West, will be the Ten Thousand Islands, where every fish known as a habitant of the Gulf coast of Florida can be caught. The next stopping place will probably be at Marco. Here he will find good accommodation on shore, with tropical scenery that embraces all the luxuriance of foliage and forest growth typical of this land of flowers. If he wishes tarpon, they will be found in the river that skirts the northern side of the town; and from a beach lined with a cocoanut grove a mile in length he can cast a mullet-line to the channel bass, or, from under the shadow of the mangrove trees, still-fish for the alert and game snappers and groupers.

Leaving Marco, his next point will be Punta Rassa, where he will find scores of companion anglers on the wharf, or stepping into the boats of their guides for a visit to the adjacent fishing grounds for small (?) fish, or the swift waters of the Pass for the tarpon, or perhaps taking the steamboat for Fort Myers, where still-fishing for tarpon continues to be a favorite sport with a few anglers, who do not incline to trolling for this great game fish.

Punta Gorda, the terminus of the railroad from Jacksonville, is about forty miles north of Punta Rassa, and is a great gathering point for sportsmen tourists. All the Gulf fishes abound in

adjacent waters, and every facility for catching them is within reach.

The city of Tampa, with the two arms of the great bay embracing it on the east and west, is thought by many sportsmen to be the best central point on the Gulf coast from which to shoot and fish. Certainly the deep water of the bay yields all the native fishes, and the arms afford excellent fly-fishing for sea trout and other varieties. This was a favorite resting-place of W. C. Prime, the author of "I Go A-Fishing," and he was the pioneer of fly-fishermen in this section.

Sarasota Bay, about seventy-two miles south of Tampa, is an ideal spot for the fly-fisherman. Billy Bowlegs and Philippi Creeks, easily reached by sailboat, can be waded and fly-fished with comfort and success. Rovalli (snook, locally), channel bass, skipjacks or lady fish, sea trout, cavalli, are taken on the lower stream, and black bass in the upper reaches.

Pages could be covered by descriptions of the grand fishing waters of the Gulf coast, but space allotted to the subject forbids. Suffice it to state that at Homosassa, Tarpon Springs, Isola Bella, near Cedar Keys, and at all the intermediate points between that town and Pensacola, the usual species of Gulf fishes can be taken in quantities to suit the most fastidious or exacting rodster.

There are but few places in the interior of the State where hotels have been opened that fail to yield excellent fishing for the large-mouthed black bass and the smaller fresh water fishes, such as the sunfishes, including the warmouth, strawberry bass, which are generally known by the local name of "brim." There is no better point for black bass than Kissimme. Lake Tohopekaliga is the favorite water, and from it a bass weighing 23³/₄ pounds is reported as having been caught. The supply of fish in this lake is simply wonderful, and they will take a fly readily if it is allowed to sink a few inches below the surface.

The fishing in the upper St. John's River is very fine for black bass. Lake Monroe, which is practically the head of navigation, yields bountifully to the rod. Near Winter Park are lakes Osceola, Maitland, Mizell and Virginia, which are reported as "being full" of black bass, garfish and alligators. In

Volusia County, particularly near Ormond, excellent fresh-water fishing may be had. The Tomoka River, three miles distant, and the Halifax, near by; not only give good fishing for black bass and other fresh-water fishes, but salt-water species, the cavalli, sheepshead, channel bass and other varieties, are caught in numbers. The numerous lakes around Winter Haven give excellent fishing, particularly Silver Lake. Lake Ariana, near Auburndale, is one of a large group of lakes, and is the deepest and clearest. A little stream feeds the lake from a smaller one, and, owing to the extreme purity of the water, the black bass in this lake are exceptionally game, that is, for large-mouths. There is a water surface near Eagle Lake station, which covers seven square miles, and in it abound black bass, perch, gar, etc. The fishing is very fine. In the western part of the State there are many excellent waters, particularly at Marianna and Cantonment.

The angling tourist will find in Jacksonville a full supply of coarse tackle for ordinary bait-fishing in the waters of the State; but if he intends to fly-fish or essay the acrobatic tarpon, or to surf-fish for the channel bass, it would be well for him to outfit at home, and we suggest articles as follows:

Two split bamboo fly-rods of best make, respectively weighing 10 and 7 oz.; a minnow casting rod, length 6¹/₂ feet, weight 5 oz.; a natural cane bamboo rod, 8 feet 6 inches, weight about 12 oz.; a tarpon rod, length 6 feet; a click fly-reel, holding fifty yards; a compensating quadruple multiplying reel for minnow casting; a steel pivot striped-bass reel or Silver King, holding not less than 200 yards of 18-thread Cuttyhunk line. For flies use an assortment tied on Nos. 6 to 3.0, leaders either 3 or 6 feet long, hooks ranging from Nos. 1.0 to 5.0 tied on long snells of twisted gut. If you take longer hooks—7.0 to 9.0—use those with eyes. A lot of manganese pliable wire will be useful for short leaders and snells when fishing for Spanish mackerel; it will not crack or corrode in contact with salt water. For further details consult a reliable fishing-tackle dealer, who is ordinarily the angler's best friend and adviser. He knows or should know just what is needed, and it is to his interest to be honest.