

FISHING AMONG THE FLORIDA KEYS

By WILLIAM C. HARRIS

THE exodus of angling tourists to southern waters, particularly to those of Florida, does not occur until about the middle of January; the few knowing ones, however, who annually go to that section do so much earlier, or, if restricted in time or pocket, defer their visit until April and remain, as a rule, during the month of May. They have found that in the months of October and November and in those of the early spring the best results for the rod will be the rule and the climatic conditions more propitious for enjoyment. I have never found the temperature oppressive during these months even in Southern Florida, or on the coast of Texas, or anywhere along the Gulf from Key West to the Rio Grande. In fact, nearly every day a refreshing southeast trade wind sets in early in the morning and does not die out until twilight, with the resultant lessening of the temperature of the night.

In an experience covering the winters of nearly a third of a century, the heat was not oppressive except infrequently and only then when a land breeze prevailed, which seldom does at points on the coast where the best fishing is found.

From Ponce Park, one hundred and twenty-five miles south of Jacksonville, to Key West there is hardly a mile of water that is not fruitful to the rod, unskilful as its handler may be. Commencing at the first-named point, I have visited and fished twenty-nine bars and channel-ways in a cruise to Key West covering sixteen days, and at all of them, with an average of three rods on duty, no failure was made in scoring at least fifty to one hundred fish in a morning's fishing of two hours' length, and a similar score in the afternoon's fishing of the same duration.

No tarpon fishing was followed and only two tides on the entire cruise were allotted to bonefish, the warrior, so called, of the shallow bars. Most of the fish that were taken and cooked were those known as panfish, averaging about a pound in weight, although five and six pounders were frequently caught and immediately returned to the water.

So great was the variety and quantity taken that the larder was filled twice every day with fresh food, and at no consecutive meal was served the same species, except rarely, when the favorite of one of the voyagers was served after being cooked by a different method than usual.

It may be of interest to many anglers to know the names and edible quality of the fish caught, as well as the methods, tackle and lines in use for their capture. We fished twice daily, the forenoon or a dinner supply and in the afternoon for the next morning's meal. The yacht was usually anchored under the lee of a key, with the feeding-grounds of the fish within a mile or less of our anchorage. The tackle, of

which there were all kinds on board, usually taken in each of the fishing-skiffs was a tarpon rod, natural bamboo or Japanese cane, a fifteen or eighteen thread Hall line, no leader and all sizes of sinkers and hooks the latter running from No. 1 to 10 of Harrison, Sproat make; a lighter rod of similar bamboo, No. 6 Hall line and no leader. These constituted, with the addition of free-running reels of various sizes and makes, the daily outfit.

Light tackle would be ineffective in waters where the quarry might be from a half pound to a hundred or more in weight. In fact, when fishing and catching grunts of a pound as fast as the hooks could be baited and the lines cast, a huge jewfish or a sleepy sawfish, weighing several hundred pounds, would not infrequently seize the bait, or, still more likely, a big shark of similar size would either take your bait or seize a smaller fish that had previously taken it. At or near Indian Key, it was a frequent contest as to which would be the most agile, the rush of a shark at a hooked fish, or the muscles of the fisherman who hauled it in, hand over hand. On several occasions when a hundred or more were hooked, more than half of them were captured by sharks before the smaller quarry could be boated.

The fish especially esteemed for the table were pompano, Spanish mackerel, mangrove snappers, yellow-tails, porgies, Margate fish, trigger-fish, and after passing Ragged Keys, about fifteen miles south of Miami, which is three hundred and sixty-six miles below Jacksonville, we never failed to catch a daily table supply of these fish, and it was a choice menu from which to select a boiled, baked, broiled or fried appetizer.

In addition to the above species, many others were taken daily; for there are about six hundred varieties of fish in Florida, a majority of which are caught in the waters extending from Miami to Key West, about one hundred and fifty miles, and the lower half of Biscayne Bay. The section covering Indian Key and Bahia Honda Harbor is doubtless the best fishing-ground in America for salt-water fish.

Some idea may be had of the abundance of all species when it is stated that three rods in my presence boated on April 7th of last year at Bahia Honda, with single hooks, two hundred and fifty-two fish in about three hours and forty minutes. Of these there were one hundred and thirty grunts, all of which, with many of the other species, were returned to the water, the fishermen only retaining for food a pompano, a porkfish, a Spanish mackerel and two mangrove snappers. This grand score in so limited a time could only be made with the assistance of two boatmen, one in each skiff who baited the hooks, unhooked the fish and then immediately returned them to the water.

So varied is the coloration of the groupers that no indisputable recognition of species could be obtained from a specific description of the color, however minute it might be of each fish, for I have found extreme variations in the same species. It is possible, however, that the following notes may aid in the differentiation of them:

The rock-hind grouper is of olive gray color, mottled with dark clouds, with a number of irregular whitish blotches all over its body. The Nassau grouper is of pale olive gray with four irregular transverse bars of dark brown on its sides; the red grouper is one of the most beautiful of the family, resembling somewhat in coloration the Nassau fish, but the warm browns on its sides, according to some authorities, are rich in tone with a more mellow diffusion of tints.

Many anglers prefer a boiled or baked grouper to any other table fish, except, perhaps, the pompano, of which it is asserted that when eaten frequently the flesh palls upon the palate.

The most universal and popular bait in South Florida waters is the crawfish, not the tiny one of the fresh-water streams, but the huge crustacean of the Keys; the shell is removed and the flesh sliced in sizes suitable for bait; unfortunately they can seldom, if ever, be found in sufficient numbers for the purpose north of Miami on Biscayne Bay. When prawns (large shrimp) can be had, they prove to be very seductive to all species of fish. Mullet, the meat of the Conch; cut pieces of any kind of fish; clams; fiddler crabs, especially for sheep's head; hermit or soldier crab for bonefish; live minnows for sea trout and many other fish, particularly for barracuda and tarpon, are all in general use, the live minnow, I think, not to the extent that it should be. Artificial lures are not held in high esteem.

The grunts, the Margate fishes, the sail-ors' choice and porkfish are all of one family, technically known as the "Roncos or Grunts," of which there are about fifty-five species in American waters. Several of them are found in the Pacific Ocean in shallow water, but the pigfish, quite numerous at times in Hampton Roads, Virginia, and occasionally caught by line fishermen along the New York and New Jersey coasts, and less frequently as far north as Massachusetts, is the only northern representative of the grunt family, the other species living in warm seas. The most distinguishing mark on the common grunts is a series of narrow, irregular lines on the head, and sometimes on other parts of the body, of different colors—hence the name of yellow grunt, white grunt, black grunt, etc. They are not a choice table fish and they were not cooked on the yacht, as the earthy flavor of their flesh made them as distasteful as that of the black bass often is when taken from a river after a freshet which

washes the soft soil from the bottom and banks.

The snapper family, scientifically known as "Pagrus or Snappers," is a numerous one in the waters of Florida. They are all fierce fighters and when hooked in shallow water near the banks, are very difficult to restrain from entangling the line in the roots of the mangrove trees. The gray or mangrove snapper is the strongest and most game of any southern fish of its size, which may reach eighteen, but the average is two pounds.

The pompano family includes not less than two hundred different species, nearly all of which are good edible fish, not excluding the dry and bony cavalle which the Conchs of Key West consider one of the best for the table.

There are in all more than four hundred species of the sea bass family, some of which, notwithstanding their technical name and classification, have been born and thrive in fresh waters, one or more showing no inclination to visit the salt estuaries or the sea. The white bass or fresh-water striped bass, as it is sometimes called, and the yellow bass are the most striking exemplars of these land-locked or non-migratory fresh-water fish even when a free run is before them to salt water. Included in this numerous family is the striped bass and the sea bass, with both of which the fishermen of the northern Atlantic coast are familiar, but when we remember that with these comparatively small but interesting game fishes of the north is associated the big jewfish of the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, growing up to five hundred pounds, and that at any moment either a pigmy or a leviathan may seize the bait of a Key fisherman, he cannot be justly ostracized by the craft for the use of heavy tackle in catching ordinary panfish.

The only fishes of the sea bass family listed on the schedule of scores above given are the jewfishes and the groupers, both of which are frequently caught, the latter particularly. There are several species of them, which are known to the Key fishermen as the rock-land, Nassau grouper, red grouper, black grouper and the "gag" and "scamp groupers. About a dozen species in all are found along the Florida coast, but those named are most frequently taken by hook-and-line fishermen, and some of them, known to the layman as simply "groupers," reach a weight of fifty pounds. The jewfish, as stated, which is also classified as a grouper, reaches a weight of more than a quarter of a ton, but to the ordinary fisherman it is a jewfish or Warsaw and he knows it by no other name. The groupers as a class may be recognized by the apparent absence of scales, which are often embedded in the flesh; large mouth; gill cover with two strong spines, and their large front teeth.