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Everglades *on Your Own*

One of the country's wildest and most unique ecosystems is also home to some of the toughest saltwater game fish on the planet. Tarpon, bonefish, snook, redfish, and permit can be found in Everglades National Park, where these fish share a colorful legacy with past residents such as moonshiners, gator hunters, and Native Americans.

The Everglades is the largest national park east of the Rockies, and it comprises 1.5 million subtropical acres of South Florida. The area still offers adventure and remote escape, and it is a paradise for saltwater fly anglers. In spring, biting bugs are few, tourists are sparse, and the mild temperatures and cool nights make outdoor living comfortable. A trip to the Everglades also is easy on your budget, and I've found that the small outpost of Flamingo offers great access to fishing that ranges from grass flats to mangrove shorelines.

The two primary fisheries for anglers leaving Flamingo are Florida Bay to the south and Whitewater Bay to the north. Each area offers endless angling opportunities and is easily accessible by kayak or skiff, but the similarities end there. Florida Bay is emerald green and Whitewater Bay is tea-colored backcountry. If you like the comfort of seeing other boaters, you could not ask for a better setting than Florida Bay, but if you are a bit more adventurous, try exploring Whitewater Bay. The surrounding backcountry lakes—Mud Lake, Bear Lake, or West Lake—are closed to motorized boats. Fishing these remote waters requires some work, but if you like great fishing and little human competition, the effort is worth it.

Florida Bay

With more than 800 square miles of marine bottom, Florida Bay offers opportunities to sight-fish to rolling tarpon, tailing redfish, and feeding bonefish. From Flamingo, most paddling anglers concentrate their efforts on the waters westward to East Cape, south to First National Bank, east toward Curlew Key, and then north to Snake Bight. Although this area offers excellent fishing, I prefer to run my skiff farther into Florida Bay, which is dotted with myriad small keys.

You can launch a canoe or kayak from shore near the Flamingo walk-in campsite and head west toward East Cape

Pack in everything you'll need, and leave amenities at the gate. The memories you pack out will keep you coming back.

by Capt. Seth Vernon



for great fishing. You'll find comfort knowing that good fishing is not far away, but be sure to set out on an ebb tide, otherwise you'll have to paddle upstream. From the campground, the ebb tide falls into the Gulf of Mexico.

After setting out, you are only minutes away from some stellar redfishing on the northern and southern points of Bradley Key, which is just west of Flamingo. Beyond Bradley Key, stay close to shore and fish the deadfalls along East Cape Canal for snook. Work the current seams of the canal drain for speckled trout and tarpon.



Springtime in the Everglades offers shots at a wide variety of game fish, including baby and not-so baby tarpon. It's a good idea to keep an 11-weight rigged at all times, in case a silver king swims by.

SCOTT SOMMERLATTE

The fishing is also really good on the eastern side of Flamingo, and by March the first few tarpon begin to appear in the lakes of Florida Bay. Staking out on early-morning rising tides can provide some exceptional opportunities. This past spring, a friend of mine hooked three out of five tarpon that ranged from 60 to 90 pounds. The fish were rolling in four feet of water and no more than 40 feet from the boat. One of my favorite places to catch a sunrise, and a glimpse of rolling tarpon, is on the southern side of Palm Key, which is southeast of Flamingo. When the tide is rising, a steady current seam forms

between Frank Key and Palm Key. If you are a kayak-bound angler, this area is within reach; just pay attention to the tides and use the current to your advantage.

On falling tides, the deep cut on the northeastern corner of Palm Key offers opportunities for snook. Deer-hair sliders cast up under the mangroves can provide exciting topwater hook-ups. In the same general area, falling tides offer shots at schools of redfish tailing in the shallow grass flats on the western side of Cormorant Key.

For paddling anglers, anywhere beyond these points is



quite a haul, but in a skiff, I'll leave Palm Key and travel Tin Can Channel east toward Buoy Key then turn to the northeast, where there's good fishing to be had at Garfield Bight. In early spring, it is not uncommon to see large tailing red or black drum, small schools of speckled trout in the sand holes, or even juvenile tarpon and snook tucked against the mangrove shoreline. Stealth is the key here, and poling is the best way to get close to these fish. What makes Garfield so appealing is that at almost any point on the compass there is a decent amount of leeward shoreline.

Moving farther eastward past Camp Key and through the pass at Dump Keys, you'll find secluded sight-fishing for snook, shark, and baby tarpon from Mosquito Point into Santini Bight and Derelict Key. I blew a shot at the largest snook I have ever seen there last spring—the fish was easily 25 pounds.

You can also stalk bonefish in Florida Bay. If you have low incoming tides and mild water temperatures around 76 and 78 degrees (and a skiff to head farther southeast), there's the possibility of finding a few hungry bonefish on the eastern side of Manatee Keys or Bottle Key Bank.

With so many options, the hardest part of fishing Florida Bay will be deciding which game fish you want to stalk. But if the wind blows you off the open water, or if you prefer solitude, head to Whitewater Bay.

Whitewater Bay

Gaining access to the true backcountry experience of Whitewater Bay is easy. From the boat ramp on the northern side of the Flamingo Marina Store, launch your skiff or kayak into Buttonwood Canal and head north. The canal empties into Coot Bay Pond, where the easternmost shoreline provides excellent topwater fly-fishing opportunities for snook. Mud Lake lies to the west, and paddlers can access its no-motor waters through the creek on the southwestern shore of Coot Bay. At Mud Lake, you can find seclusion and shelter from the wind, and can cast to juvenile tarpon and snook without the roar of boat motors.

At the opposite end of Mud Lake, on

GETTING THERE

Access to Flamingo is easy from the Miami area. Take the Florida Turnpike (Route 821) south until it merges with U.S. 1 in Florida City. Then turn right at the first traffic light onto Palm Drive (State Road 9336/SW 344th St.) and follow the signs to the park. A vehicular pass is \$10 and good for seven consecutive days.

WHERE TO STAY

The 2005 hurricane season damaged many of the facilities in Flamingo, but the RV and tent campsites and facilities are in excellent condition. Camping in Flamingo gives you the advantage of access to boat ramps into Whitewater Bay and Florida Bay. Personally speaking, a trip to Flamingo wouldn't be complete without staying in the campground or in one of the backcountry chickees, which are elevated wooden platforms built for camping in areas where no dry ground is available. If you prefer modern conveniences, you will find many budget motels in the greater Homestead-Florida City area, just 45 miles from Flamingo.

WHAT TO BRING

If you are a minimalist, you could fish Flamingo's waters with an 8-weight and an 11-weight fly rod. But the nearest fly shop is more than an hour away, so I suggest a little insurance. I carry two 8-weights for redbfish, bonefish, snook, and trout; a 10-weight for permit, jacks, and juvenile tarpon; and two 11-weights for tarpon and sharks. All of my rods are rigged with floating lines except for one 11-weight, which is rigged with an intermediate tip for days when there's a lot of floating grasses on the water's surface. Nine-foot monofilament leaders with breaking strengths of 13- to 22-pound test will cover most fishing situations. When fishing for tarpon I like 60-pound or greater bite tippets, and for snook, nothing under 40 pound. When shark fishing, I opt for wire leader for bite tippets.

My favorite flies for tarpon include Toads in chartreuse, pink, purple, or brown-and-tan, Black Death's tied Keys style, and Whistlers in orange and white for sharks. When pursuing snook, try Mayfield's Rattle Mullet for topwater action and Borski's Haystack in chartreuse and white for subsurface work. Think weed guards when targeting redbfish and try Dorsey's Kwan in tan or rust, SeaDucers in grizzly tan, and Chard's Redfish Getter. For chasing bonefish and permit, I have had good success with Borski's Bonefish Slider in tan, Chard's Foamy Crab in green or tan, and Chard's Yarn Blue Crab.

If you're camping, bring a tent, sleeping bag, sleeping pad, flashlight, food, water for drinking and cooking, rain gear, bug repellent, sunscreen, camp stove, mess kit, pocket knife, matches, and toiletries.

HELPFUL LINKS

Everglades National Park: www.nps.gov/ever/index.htm
 Homestead Chamber of Commerce: www.chamberinaction.com/
 Top Spot Maps: www.spottedtail.com/pasadena-top-spots-fishing-maps.htm

the southwestern shore, there is a portage for kayak and canoe access to Bear Lake, which can be loaded with juvenile tarpon in the spring of the year. If you are looking for a quick exit from Bear and Mud Lakes, the same portage trail runs east toward the Buttonwood Canal.

Anglers in skiffs can exit Coot Bay through Tarpon Creek and enter the watery maze that is Whitewater Bay. On windy days, the leeward islands and shorelines offer shots at snook, trout, tarpon, and redfish. This area has saved several fishing trips when the wind pushed me off the open waters of Florida Bay.

Traveling across Whitewater Bay, it is not uncommon to encounter schools of rolling tarpon around both the Green-Day marker 33 and in Ponce de Leon Bay at the mouth of the Shark River. On the southeastern side of Whitewater Bay, you'll find the East River, which provides access to Hell's Bay, which is an exciting area to explore. Here I have found excellent snook and redfish habitat and often find fish cruising in water so shallow, their backs break the surface. Underwater vegetation in Hell's Bay can be thick and will foul your flies, so be sure your flies have weed guards. Other notable redfish and snook hideouts worth investigating include the South Joe River Chickee, Mud Bay, and Graveyard Creek.

Keep in mind that Whitewater Bay is a maze of mangrove creeks and rivers, making it difficult to navigate. If you plan on venturing deep into these waters, study maps to help familiarize yourself with the area, use a GPS, and file a float plan at the ranger station. There is little to no cellular-phone coverage, and I recommend you have a ship-to-shore radio for backup.

Also, be wary of alligators and crocodiles. My rule of thumb, however, for exploring these remote lakes is simple: big alligators, big fish. Predators such as crocs and gators indicate a thriving fishery—little fish are eaten by game fish and game fish are eaten by gators.

If there is one thing that is certain about Whitewater Bay, it does not relinquish its secrets easily, but once you establish a pattern, the rewards can be

Flamingo DIY Spring Everglades Trip



Borski's Bonefish Slider

Hook: Tiemco 811S size 4.
Thread: Tan Uni-Thread size B.
Tail: Tan Craft Fur barred black or brown.
Accent: Six strands of pearl Krystal Flash.
Body: Natural tan elk hair stacked and trimmed on the head.
Eyes: Yellow dumbbell eyes size small 1/32 ounce.
Weed Guard: Single strand of 15-pound test.
Note: Tie in the weed guard before spinning and trimming the elk hair for the head.



Wyatt's Tarpon Bunny

Hook: Tiemco 600SP 1/0-3/0.
Thread: Purple Uni-Thread size B.
Tail: Purple magnum Zonker (20-pound-test mono loop for anti-foul guard tied in under the tail).
Collar: Pink schlappen.
Body: Purple and pink Aunt Lydia's craft yarn.
Eyes: Extra-large plastic dumbbell eyes.
Note: There are many variations of this fly and all are excellent. I prefer the bunny tails for movement but they do foul more readily.

CAPT. SETH VERNON




Chard's Foamy Permit Crab

Hook: Gamakatsu SC 15 size 2/0.
Thread: Green Uni-Thread size B.
Tail: Olive medium Zonker.
Legs: Tan round rubber legs barred brown with red tips.
Body: Olive Furry Foam.
Eyes: Large black dumbbell eyes 1/20 ounce.
Weed Guard: Two strands of 15-pound-test mono.
Note: Furry foam comes in sheets and body of crab is trimmed to the desired shape.



Dorsey's Kwan

Hook: Tiemco 800S size 2, 4.
Thread: Tan Uni-Thread Size B.
Tail: Tan Craft Fur banded brown with a 15-pound-test anti-fouling loop tied in at the base on the underside.
Body: Orange Egg yarn sac tied in at the tail with variegated tan and dark brown Aunt Lydia's craft yarn.
Eyes: Yellow dumbbell eyes size small 1/32 ounce.
Weed Guard: Two strands of 15-pound-test mono tied in at the hook eye.
Note: A very effective crab or shrimp fly.

phenomenal. The same could be said for Florida Bay. There is simply no place on earth quite like the Everglades, and I feel fortunate every time I visit these mysterious waters. 

Capt. Seth Vernon operates Double Haul Guide Service out of Wilmington, North Carolina. He has vowed to fish Flamingo every March with his friends until he is too old to remember how to get there.