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FLORIDA ON A FLY by Chris Parker

Growing up on Florida's Atlantic coast, I spent an untold number of days fishing in saltwater. As with many things in life, I did not truly appreciate what Florida fishing had to offer until I left it.

For many reasons Florida has always been a popular vacation site, but for the traveling fly fisherman, it can be a paradise. Too often, the variety of Florida's fishing possibilities is overlooked. But with a little creativity, the fly fisherman can add fishing adventure to a family vacation.

From stalking a cruising permit on the flats to battling powerful tuna, it can all be done in this one state. The right knowledge of rods, reels, flies and locations can make all the difference.

A favorite saltwater species of mine is the bonefish, often known as "the ghost of the flats." Bonefish are challenging, easily spooked and very fast. Holding the appearance of a small silver torpedo, they usually range in from 4 to 9 pounds. Though Florida's bonefish are often on the heavy side, they can be tougher to catch than in other locations. The bonefish feed on the warmwater flats, so the primary fishing occurs from around Biscayne Bay south to Key West. A 9 foot fly rod for a 7 or 8 weight line is best suited for the conditions on a bonefish flat. In choosing a reel, look for a smooth drag and a capacity for around 200 yards of 20 pound backing plus a weight forward saltwater fly line. Unlike trout fishing, an angler does not need dozens of flies to be successful. A few patterns in a couple of sizes will usually be sufficient. Popular patterns are the crazy charlies, bonefish special, snapping shrimp and mother of epoxy in sizes 4 to 8.

Almost the entire coast of Florida contains catchable tarpon at some point of the year, but there are two areas which provide the best fishing. The Keys and the central to southern Gulf Coast hold the best tarpon populations. The Keys area is the better of the two for landing a tarpon on a fly. Here the fish travel in higher concentrations and are more predictable to pursue. The deeper flats of the southwest Gulf coast give an angler a better chance of hooking up with a large tarpon, in excess of 100 pounds. Throughout the state, expect your average fish to be around 30 to 60 pounds.

Equipment choice becomes a primary consideration when it comes to tarpon fishing. My first choice for a rod would be a Sage 11 or 12 weight RPL-X, with matching saltwater taper fly line. Reels with a strong, smooth drag with a low start up and capacity for a large saltwater fly line with a lot of 30 pound backing are needed. An Abel 4 is one of the best choices for this type of fishing. In choosing a leader, consult a knowledgeable tarpon fishing source, due to the complexity of different strength materials. Hook sizes should be from 1/0 to 4/0 in patterns such as a Cockroach, Homosassa Special, Stu Apte Tarpon Fly and Deceivers.

There is one fish of the flats which eludes most anglers, the permit. The Florida flats contain a healthy population of good size fish. A large silver trash can lid is what I thought of in seeing my first permit. Fish sizes usually range from 6 to 15 pounds. The fly fisherman should keep in mind that of the people who attempt to catch a permit, few are successful. The permit is elusive, picky beyond reason and very quick. Choose a 9 or 10 weight rod to better your chances. Flies which have proven most effective are McCrab's, Chez Crabs, Nix Feather Crabs and Mother of Epoxy.

Often when fishing for bonefish, tarpon and permit you will encounter a barracuda and small sharks. With the correct tackle one can take advantage of this angling opportunity. Barracuda are lightning fast while sharks have great strength on their side and both fish possess extremely sharp teeth. For this reason a leader with 30 pound shock tippet should be used. Rod sizes from 8 to 10 weight are best, depending on the size of the fish. A wide variety of flies can be used including poppers, deceivers and braided cuda flies.

Going into the mangrove swamps and back country canals from the lower central coast down through the Keys offers good fishing for snook. Casting deceivers, bendbacks and poppers to the thick mangrove banks and stripping in for a retrieve can produce takes from a snook which can resemble bass. Use an 8 to 10 weight for the larger popper flies.

Almost the entire Florida coast can be productive for redfish and sea trout. From grassy flats to intercostal channels, these species can be found. Consult a local knowledgeable source for which areas are best at a given time. Tackle for the redfish and sea trout is similar to that for snook.

Offshore or blue water fly fishing in Florida is not as popular as it could be. Fishing around wrecks, schools of baitfish and weed lines should be the most productive. The possibilities for fish are almost unlimited. Expect to find hard fighting yellow fin tuna, jack crevalle, kingfish and a rare billfish. The closer to the Gulf stream the bigger the opportunity. Depending on fish and fly size, 8 to 11 weight rods are necessary, often using your basic deceivers, bendbacks, poppers and glass minnows. Be sure to use at least 250 yards of 30 pound backing.

The inexperienced saltwater angler will find a local guide invaluable in the beginning. For more specific questions concerning rods, tackle and location be sure to give our staff a call.