

Fly Fishing Tampa Bay During The Winter

by MFCC member Michael Mathias

The older I get, the more winters in New England seem harder to bear and the longer they drag on, so after the winter of 2011 where it seemed I shoveled snow every third day during the entire season, I swore to never again shovel snow again for the complete duration of a winter season. This precipitated our decision to spend the majority of our winters in the Sunshine state.

If it were up to me, I would be heading south after my Steelhead fishing trip in November, but in order to keep the peace, I must acquiesce to my spouse's insistence on staying around for the Christmas and New Year holidays. So we have compromised and now generally leave for Florida a couple of days after the first of the year. We began doing this in January 2012, and have done so for the past 4 years, returning in May for the beginning of the spring Striper migration in Massachusetts. The exception to this, was 2015 when a medical situation required us to stay home and thankfully the snow gods cooperated with very little snow to be shoveled.

Our winter home is on the banks of the Little Manatee River in Ruskin, Fla. at a place called the Tampa South RV Resort. The resort is situated in an agricultural area amidst orange groves and strawberry fields, along a river which harbors Snook and Redfish in the winter months, and is a 10 minute drive to the south coast of Tampa Bay and 15 minutes to the Gulf coast. In addition to that it is very affordable.





Unlike points further south in Florida, winters in this area, are not all about perfect weather conditions. Mornings can be a bit chilly with temperatures sometimes being in the 40s, requiring one to wear a jacket or fleece to be comfortable, but by noon the chill is gone and 70 to 80 degree temperatures usually become the norm.



The Tampa Bay Inshore Fishery

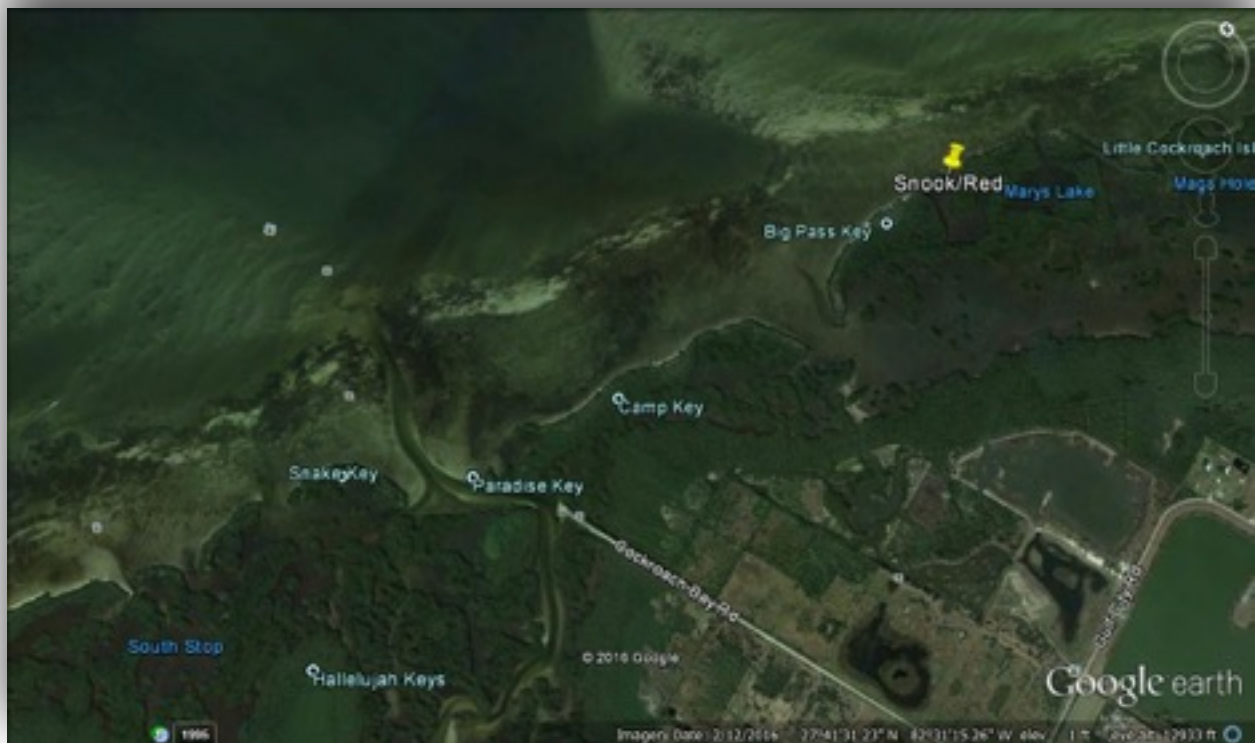
Tampa Bay provides an excellent inshore fishery for most of the year, but the winter months can be iffy, due to windy conditions and frequent cold fronts, which seem to come thru quite often. That being said the fishing can be fair to good for this time of year.

The preferred method of fishing is using live bait whether it be shrimp or live minnows. As most fishermen in this area seem to fish for sustenance, of course live bait will generally produce more than fishing with artificials in the long run.

The one thing I did notice is that fly fishing is not that common in this area, and since I mostly fly fish I appear to be an outsider when fishing with friends down there. This is not to say I will not succumb to the idea of fishing with bait, as on occasion when the Sheepshead bite is on I will fish shrimp on the many manmade reefs in the bay, to try and secure some delicious fillets for the freezer.

To prove I am not one of those fly fishing snobs, I did a charter fishing trip with a couple of friends in the campground. It was one of those blue bird days in Florida, sun was shining with little wind, a perfect day to be on the water.

Captain Pat Damico met us at the boat with a barrel full of sardines which he had cast netted at the Skyway Bridge earlier, and that was to be our bait for the day.



Our hope was to get into some Snook or Redfish, but we would be happy catching anything. The first stop we made was at a row of mangroves on the lower Little

Manatee River, where on the first cast into the mangroves my line went tight and after a bit, a 3 foot Gar came to the boat, not a bad start of the day.

The Captain decided to try our luck on some flats where we caught several Sea Trout and Mackerel, but Snook and Reds were still on our minds.

As the Captain eased the boat onto the flat, he maneuvered the boat with the trolling motor towards Big Pass Key, where a 100 foot opening appeared leading to a small bay inside. Quietly the boat was poled anchored to the bottom in about 4 ft of water where we were nearly surrounded by mangroves.

The idea was to cast our float with a sardine attached to the hook into the base of the mangroves, as far as possible without getting snagged and let the sardine do its thing.

When the float starts to move around, you had to prepare yourself because all hell was about to break loose as the fish comes out of the mangroves after the helpless sardine. In a huge explosion the water would erupt and the fight would start trying to keep the fish from going back to its hiding spot amongst the tangled mangrove roots.

For about an hour and a half the three of us caught our fair share of Redfish and Snook in that one location. The Redfish with their muscular bodies and that spot on their tail, were very difficult to bring to the boat while trying to keep them free of the snags.

I also found it amazing that right in the same root tunnels alongside the Reds were these beautiful Snook with their sleek bodies and that beautiful stripe along their sides, that would also dash out in pursuit of that tiny bait and to make their explosive takes on the bait and then make their powerful runs.

Most of the Redfish were in the slot limit of 18"-27" and many were below which of course had to be released. The Snook whose population is now making a comeback after the hard freeze of several years ago when many fish met their demise, have a slot limit of 28-33 inches on this coast.

On this trip I was lucky enough to take the prize for the largest Redfish taken that day, and for the largest Snook taken that day. Of course the prize was nothing, but knowing I had taken the largest fish and giving the other two guys a little ribbing was prize enough for me.

The pictures on the following page show the Redfish which taped out at 28 inches which was above the slot limit and was carefully released. The same was true for the Snook which measured 27 inches and was just below the slot limit.



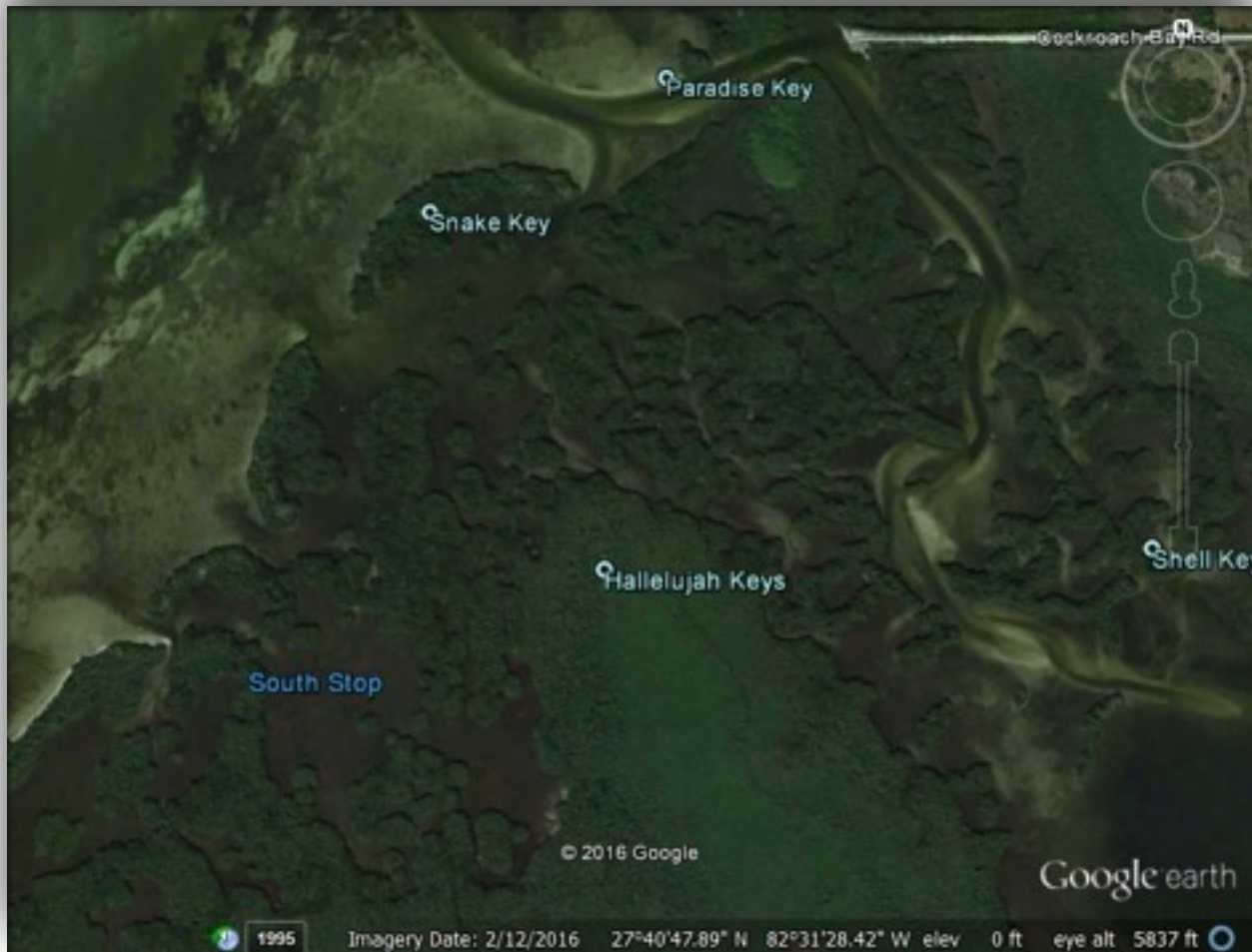
28" Redfish



27" Snook

Kayak Fishing Cockroach Bay

Cockroach Bay is located on the south coast of Tampa Bay and is where I do most of my kayak fishing.



Cockroach Bay consists of a labyrinth of mangrove islands with small waterways in between in which you can lose your way very easily if you are not paying attention to where you are going.

This area consists of shallow channels, deep channels, troughs, grass flats and numerous of wildlife.



The fishing in the mangroves can be very good, consisting of many species of fish:

Snook



Trout



Redfish



Ladyfish

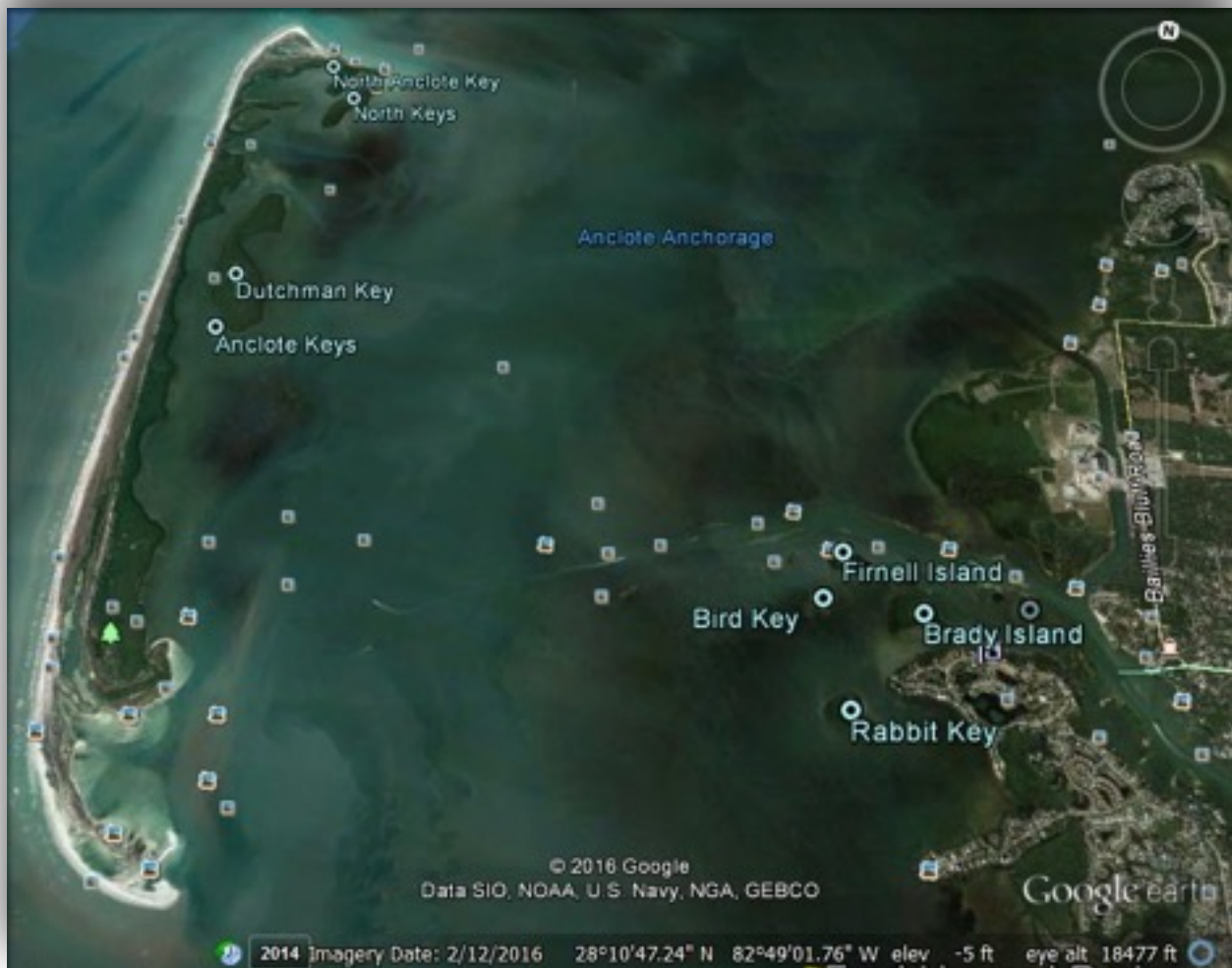


The Aneclothe River

I have a close friend who once lived in Rhode Island and like many New Englanders, have found their way to the state of Florida. He is an avid fly fisherman and currently lives in the Tarpon Springs area.

Unfortunately for him he still has to work for a living, but fortunately for me he keeps an 18 foot Action Craft flats boat on the Aneclothe River.

He is also a licensed Captain but does not ply that trade at this time. We have made a habit of fishing together every Sunday when I am in Florida, fishing the area shown in the map on the next page, as well as the St Joseph sound area.



Many species of fish exist in these coastal waters, but during the winter months the predominant fish are Sea Trout, Spanish Mackerel, Lady Fish, an occasional Jack Crevalle, and once in a while we pick up a small Bluefish.



Snook and Redfish can, now and then, be caught along the mangrove edges, but as I mentioned above water temperature is critical with these species and most are generally found in the shallow waters of the rivers and bayous further inshore.

It has been our experience to find larger sized Sea Trout by fishing around the many spoil islands located along the intra-coastal waterways, that allow boaters to navigate the inshore waters that extend up and down both coasts of Florida.

The material from dredging these channels is what created these spoil islands.



Below is what one might expect to catch around the many spoil islands.



Tampa Bay Fly Fishing Tackle

Below is a picture of many of the flies which I have tied for most of the fishing that I do in Florida.



My fly fishing tackle consists of the following, and NO I DO NOT WORK FOR TFO!

8 weight TFO TCIRX for most fishing using an Intermediate line w/ Gilmore reel.

9 weight TFO Mangrove lined with Floating line w/ Albright reel.

10 weight TFO BVK lined with full sinking line w/ L.L. Bean reel.

I personally find that it is totally unnecessary to spend hundreds and hundreds of dollars on fishing rods and reels when very reasonable and quality equipment can be found for lower prices.

If you going for large Tarpon or Billfish that's another story, but for what the average guy fishes for, mid range tackle is more than adequate.

I apologize if this has dragged on too long, but I thought it would be worthwhile to outline what it is like to spend the winter in and around the Tampa Bay area regarding fishing possibilities, for anyone who may be anticipating spending some winter months in that area of Florida.

Thanks for your attention

Tight Lines,

Michael Mathias