

Captains generally agree on using braided line, such as PowerPro, and stepping up tackle from the 6- to 10-pound gear used for bones to at least 12 for permit. Spinning gear and live bait — shrimp or crabs — create the most common scenario, though fly tackle certainly works well for talented casters. “The best part of fishing Biscayne is that you might have a deck full of rods loaded and ready for any number of different species that might appear on the flat,” Valverde says.

As Smith poled the Maverick, he spotted a school of “black-eyed peas,” as he calls smaller permit. Sutton’s cast flew true. The permit turned on his shrimp, but suddenly beelined east toward Elliott Key without taking the hook. Although we missed our shot, we certainly felt encouraged just to see them.

SIDE LINES

Snook may be one of the most difficult-to-locate species in the bay. “They’re so hard to see, you can pole right up to them, never knowing that they’re there until you blow them out,” Smith says.



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Above: Permit swarm the flats in summertime, when the water feels like a hot bath. Left: Biscayne bones frequently top 10 pounds and can be caught year-round.

When Smith fishes the flats and pot-holes for snook, he usually throws a black-and-silver Rapala Skitter Walk. He casts to areas where he doesn’t anticipate a bonefish strike but that might hold a laid-up snook. “I love to



SCOTT SALVERS



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Guides and experienced anglers look for snook hovering above sandy potholes or following mangrove shorelines.

see the explosion at the surface that snook create when they hit a topwater bait,” he says.

Look for snook to lie in a hole or over a sandy bottom near turtle grass. They may be absorbing sun or waiting for an unsuspecting baitfish to cruise overhead. Sometimes they “shower” bait as sailfish do to ballyhoo on offshore reefs. But this spectacle occurs in just a couple feet of water. Occasionally, anglers see snook cruising the banks, especially in areas where a sandy bottom creates contrast below the moving fish.

That’s where we spotted a likely linesider during our February trip. Already on the bow, Sutton cast his shrimp and missed the fish slightly aft. Loaded and ready to back him up, I took a shot. My line and shrimp found too much air, and — you guessed it — *boink!* I hit the fish right on top of its head.

Guides and anglers alike feel the pinch of civilization on Biscayne Bay in the form of busy boat traffic. Whether or not a boater intends to make waves, such popular waters demand courtesy.

“Most of the time, other boaters don’t even realize what they’re doing when they run up on you as you’re trying to work a flat,” says Capt. Dave Sutton. “However, once they buzz you, or the flat, you can forget fishing there for a couple of hours.”

The preferred method for approaching a flat is to pull back early on the throttle and shut off the boat well outside the area you plan to fish. Pole in slowly, trying not to cause disturbances.

“If you take your time poling in, you’ll see much more activity,” says Capt. Rich Smith. “I pole slower than most guides, but I feel I get more shots at seeing fish, especially if I know the flat has proven itself before.”

Stake out on an ambush point or in an area you feel will produce. However, if you’re up on the pole and another captain is working the same area, be respectful of the other boat’s drift or movement. Try to avoid intersecting paths. If it looks like the boats will come closer (Sutton says within 300 yards), pick a new direction or flat.

When moving off the flat, don’t just start the engine and spin up on plane. Take the same time and care you did on the approach. You might see another fish on the way out, and the flat will remain undisturbed in case you decide to come back later.

during the winter shrimp run.

Most captains believe the migratory tarpon are moving south toward the Keys. Biscayne Bay lies between the island chain and Government Cut.

Some fish follow the oceanside shoreline of Elliott Key south of the cut as they move south. Anglers often see these tarpon daisy-chaining in schools of five to 10 fish.

Valverde prefers to pole areas with light-colored bottom so he can spot fish on the move. “I like to see the fish off in the distance, even up to 300 yards away, so I can position my boat to intercept them for the best possible presentation,” he says. Valverde adds that it’s quite common to see permit following or even mixed in with tarpon.

Once in position, cast a shrimp or crab well ahead of the fish, and retrieve it slowly across the tarpon’s path. After hookup, quickly crank the engine and chase the fish; they can rapidly cover some distance. In addition, many obstructions, such as rocks, sea fans, sponges and (probably) a deepwater channel, lurk nearby.

Inside the bay, along the mainland shoreline, tarpon also move south during

SF INSIGHT

COPING SKILLS

Many factors allow Biscayne Bay to sustain itself against the backdrop of downtown Miami and the effects of continual development. The coastal red-mangrove forest of south Biscayne protects the shoreline from erosion and filters sediment carried with runoff water from yards and streets.

Red-mangrove roots play nursery to the juveniles of many aquatic species. Larger predators — snook, barracuda, snapper and redfish — also use the roots as cover for ambushing prey.

The bay comprises a vast shallow-water estuary with miles and miles of sea grass. Turtle grass, the most common variety, hosts bite-size shrimp and crabs, which attract game fish.

When heavy rains flush water from the Everglades or coastal areas, tides help move the tainted water to the sea. Wide, shallow channels run east — past Key Biscayne and Stiltville (an area of stilt homes built on the water) — to the north and out numerous cuts south to Angel Fish Creek.

FLATS-FISHING ETIQUETTE