

ISOMETIMES CATCH MYSELF daydreaming about those years when I was a mere guppy. I have fond memories of piling into the family fishing boat — an old wooden scow — to head offshore for dolphin. That not-so-impressive vessel sported twin 30 hp Evinrudes; its steering featured the old cable-pulley system. But I didn't care. I thought it was the best boat in the world when we motored out from the old Kings Bay boat ramp in South Miami.

Though I was excited to finally be old enough to join my family for an offshore trip, I couldn't understand why we didn't fish the waters underneath us as we crossed Biscayne Bay. As a result, I must have uttered the "are we there yet?" phrase countless times to my patient father. He finally said, "We're going where the big

fish live." Not knowing any differently, I accepted his response as gospel; I watched the mangrove shoreline disappear as we headed east.

BIG BONES

"Sorry, Scott!" Capt. Dave Sutton interrupted my daydream, laughing. "I know you didn't want another bonefish, but I couldn't help myself."

His light-spin outfit doubled over; braided line streaked through the water at blistering speed. All I could do was look over at fellow angler Capt. Rich Smith, watch him shrug his shoulders, and snicker that this could be the biggest fish of the day.

But Sutton didn't need to apologize. Though we were targeting *other* species such as snook, redfish, tarpon and permit on the Biscayne Bay flats this

mid-February day aboard Sutton's Maverick HPX, we didn't have to pass up another silver speedster. After all, the Biscayne bone has a storied reputation as being both big and elusive. On this short trip, we poled our way to three bonefish (8-, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ - and 11 $\frac{1}{2}$ -pounders), all caught on shrimp.

Sutton had chosen to fish the bay's west side where the tide flows south from the shallow dark-bottom areas that absorb sun and warm the water — to the delight of the highly sought-after ghost of the flat.

Other Biscayne Bay captains agree, saying water temperature and depth help them locate winter bonefish. "I've caught bones with water temps in the low '60s," says Capt. Jorge Valverde. "Some people think the water temperature must be at least 68 to find fish. For

me, some of my biggest fish have come in the cooler water."

BAY BY THE CITY

The fact that bonefish and other inshore species still thrive in Biscayne Bay comes as a surprise to many anglers who've heard that the bay's proximity to Miami has severely damaged its productivity. The elongated lagoon, which lies along a 40-mile stretch from Miami to the northernmost portion of the Florida Keys, suffers from human activities such as dredging and bulkheading at its north end and regular pulses of freshwater drainage from the Everglades to the south.

Despite the inevitable effects of Florida's development, state and federal officials monitor the bay and take steps to protect it through the Biscayne National Park and the Biscayne Bay Aquatic

Preserve, among other agencies. Anglers still find thriving fisheries for bonefish, snook, permit, tarpon, snapper and even redfish and trout.

Prime months for bonefish include March through May, though the fish may be successfully targeted most of the year. Winter months prove best for snook, while permit and tarpon show up more prominently from April through August.

Anglers mostly fish the central and southern portions of the bay, which harbor less development and more sea-grass beds and mangroves. Bay depths range from about 3 feet on the flooded flats to 40 feet in dredged channels to the north.

PERMIT ON THE FLATS

Bonefish aren't the only prized ghosts on these flats. Permit carry a similar reputation for being spooky, and most captains

view bagging a permit on a Biscayne flat as a greater feat than taking one from a Gulf wreck.

First, an angler usually must target one fish, not a school. Then, he must present an offering — either a silver-dollar-size crab or a hand-picked (large) shrimp — without startling that big-eyed quarry.

Flats permit can top 40 pounds. Bigger fish may swim in water so shallow that their backs break the surface. Smith says they're "sunning themselves."

"They're much spookier on the flat," Valverde says. Plus, once the water cools, permit numbers drop.

"They like it hot, like bath water," Sutton adds.

Yet, while summer temperatures attract more permit, many fish stick around in fall and spring. Some even appear in winter, as our trip proved.

Despite its proximity to Miami, Biscayne Bay still harbors plentiful and sizeable bonefish, snook, tarpon, permit and redfish.

Bountiful Biscayne

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Bay

