

AFTER DARK

Capt. Rich Smith suggests that tar-getting snook at night in Biscayne Bay can be quite productive — as it is at many Florida locations. Those anglers who do work the night shift generally walk the banks flipping live shrimp or shrimp-tipped jig heads. Others try the old-fashioned way: trolling marina jetties with a shallow-diving lure such as a Bomber.

winter. Stake out on a flat next to the deeper water that runs north and south, and watch for dark shapes.

Daisy-chaining fish may show at the surface. If not, drop a bait deeper. A finger mullet with a split shot placed above the leader should reach the strike zone. Keep a crab and a shrimp rigged as backup offerings. Target these tarpon with 12- to 15-pound tackle, and pin your liveys on

SCOTT SALYERS



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Above: Redfish stocks dwindled as development increased along the bay, but some bulls still roam the flats. Left: As tarpon migrate south in winter, ambush them on the ocean side of Elliott Key.

circle hooks for the best chance of a successful outcome.

When tarpon migrate along the bay's west side, Valverde believes they may become resident fish for a while. "These fish run smaller, in the 20- to 30-pound class. However, they're much more cooperative and eat similarly to those that feed in the cut."

If the tarpon respond and your circle hook hits home, the fun begins. Most fish streak off for deeper water. Captains on the pole find themselves in a dilemma. Depending on the tackle used, some

SPECIES AVAILABILITY

SPECIES	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
BONEFISH	G	G	E	E	E	G	G	F	G	G	G	G
PERMIT	F	F	G	E	E	E	E	E	G	G	F	F
REDFISH	F	F	F	G	G	E	E	E	G	G	F	F
SNAPPER	F	F	G	G	G	G	G	G	G	F	F	F
SNOOK	E	E	G	F	F	F	F	F	G	E	E	E
TARPON	F	F	F	E	E	E	E	G	G	F	F	F
TROUT	F	F									F	F

E EXCELLENT **G** GOOD **F** FAIR POOR OR NOT AVAILABLE

captains wisely choose to power up and follow the fish.

If a tarpon eats on the flat, watch out for active or abandoned crab pots and debris that could endanger your desired outcome.

REDFISH — THEY'RE BAAACK, SORT OF ...

Capt. Jimmy Hixon has earned a reputation within the last decade for finding redfish in south Biscayne Bay — a laudable feat considering the sharp decline of bay reds during the last 40 years of commercial and residential development.

"Most redfish are aggressive and will eat artificial lures, but not these fish. This is strictly a bait — live or dead — fishery. Crab, shrimp, even cut mullet or finger mullet are my baits of choice," he says.

Since his first encounter with a Biscayne red in 2000, Hixon has amassed many releases; most fish average about 33 inches. His largest red to date measured 45 inches and weighed 38 pounds, though he has heard of a 53-inch fish recently caught.

Most Biscayne fishermen believe these large redfish resulted from a 10-year stocking program that began in 1989 and was phased out in December 1999. The state released 1.6 million redfish in three size classes — 1 to 1 ½, 3 to 6, and 6 to 9 inches.

A scientist who participated in the program agrees. "Ultimately, we were able to establish that a small-scale fishery was created in Biscayne Bay with phase III [the largest size] hatchery fish," says Carole Neidig, staff scientist at Mote Marine Laboratory in Sarasota, Florida.

Neidig analyzed tag returns from anglers and found that 95 percent of more than 300 redfish caught by hook and line came from the hatchery. She also tracked acoustically tagged redfish in the bay, which helped her find larger schools. "We placed transmitters in reds of three sizes, and they led us to fish that people said they had no idea existed," Neidig says. "We definitely found schools of wild fish.

SHRIMP TAILS

Capt. Jorge Valverde prefers to rig shrimp on circle hooks (Mustad 39951BLN 2/0 or 3/0) for his light-tackle trips. But because some clients like to set the hook, he may also opt to use J hooks (Mustad 10841NPBLN 1/0).

Valverde bites off the shrimp's tail, then curls the bait in his hand as he threads the hook in and through the body, then out the top of the shell midway up the back. "Not only does this method hold the shrimp on the hook, the bait remains fairly weedless as well."



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Rig shrimp through the tail to create a fairly weedless presentation for bonefish, permit, tarpon, snook and other species.

FULL CIRCLE

I was fortunate to have my father take me fishing offshore when I was a youngster. We both continued to fish offshore as we matured. Over time, I spent more days on the shallower waters of Biscayne Bay. My father didn't quite understand the fascination I developed for sight-fishing bones and permit. I think, in part, he was just old-school — we didn't eat those species.

However, I was lucky enough to put him on a trophy 36.4-pound permit before he passed on. He was as proud of that fish as any he had caught. You can bet I won't wait long before I show my baby son, Zachary, that you don't have to head offshore to get the big ones!



You may recognize the name of this author — Scott Salyers — from our masthead, but not under "editorial." Salyers works as associate publisher for Sport Fishing from his home office in Miami. A native Floridian and Gator graduate, he has enjoyed fishing the waters of Biscayne Bay, south Florida and the Bahamas for more than 35 years and enjoys bringing new anglers into the sport.

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