

REDFISH HEAT



Typically when one thinks of stalking the shallows in search of monster reds, the winter season is probably furthest from his or her mind. However, the hidden gem of Es-

tero Bay in Southwest Florida can provide savvy sight fishermen with a wealth of willing targets.

Estero Bay is located just south of Fort Myers Beach and just north of Naples.

It covers roughly 15 square miles and is fed by four freshwater rivers: Hendry Creek, Estero River, Spring Creek and the Imperial River. With its vast, lush, sea grass beds, Estero has something for

everyone.

In warmer months, baitfish line the passes and beaches where hungry snook and tarpon gather to feast. As the first cold fronts of winter push through the area, things change drastically. Schools of redfish tend to dive deep into the backcountry creeks in search of warmer water and crustaceans. It's here that hardworking anglers will be rewarded for putting in the effort. On the Gulf coast redfish rarely exceed 34 inches, as they leave to become part of the breeding stock. Wintertime redfishing in Estero Bay will give you shots at the biggest fish.

Wintertime tides along the Gulf coast, coupled with predominantly northeasterly winds, will all but drain the shallow back bays on the eastern side of Estero Bay. A sight angler's dream tide is when extreme negative tides expose dark mud bottoms to a warming sun.

An interesting weather phenomenon in Florida is that it is very rarely cloudy and cold. As cold fronts dip through the area they are followed by high pressure and bright, bluebird skies. A dark mud bottom absorbs the heat and transfers it to the incoming tide much like a giant radiator. As the incoming tide warms up the redfish begin to feed in earnest and you'll notice some tailing and waking as they appear to be in a relaxed feeding mood. They tend to be much spookier on falling tides which see them lounging way off the shoreline.

Temperatures in the back bays can be as much as 10 degrees warmer than water in the main bay. One such bay that exemplifies this is Hellpeckney Bay, located in the northeast corner of Estero Bay. Fed by a virtual maze of freshwater creeks, Hellpeckney Bay is only accessed by shallow-running, technical poling skills.

The bottom of Hellpeckney Bay is a mixture of hard sand and oysters. A small layer of silty compost typical of freshwater creeks coats the hard sand. Wading is an option, but you better have some warm waders. The good news: banker's hours afford the chance to sleep in late. The early bird here will definitely not get the worm. Pick a low tide around



8 a.m. and plan on being on the water by about 9 a.m.

Although it can be done with a trolling motor, the stealth of poling is unsurpassed in being able to get within casting range. Rarely will your boat be in more than 60 inches of water. The dark, tannin-stained waters of the back bays take some getting used to when trying to spot the fish. Redfish will appear a deep burgundy and are usually crawling in water just deep enough to cover their backs. Keeping a safe distance will allow you the best opportunity to place a cast in front of an unspooked, hungry redfish.

Tackle for winter sight fishing in Estero Bay is characterized by two words: brown and down. There is no better sight fishing lure than small 1/8-ounce or 1/4-ounce brown bucktail jigs, especially those designed for bonefish. Sweetened with a small piece of shrimp,

these jigs will rarely be refused. Scented soft plastics in the same dark natural tones pegged on 1/8-ounce jig heads will also be effective.

As crazy as it sounds, long Hail Mary casts with topwater plugs will work if water clarity is less than ideal. Don't give up on the shallow water. A stop-and-go, walk-the-dog retrieve will elicit the occasional thunderous strikes. If these strikes come up short, a prototypical 1/4-ounce gold spoon will get the nod.

Redfish aren't the only fish to be found in the warmer back bays of Estero Bay. Expect to see the occasional bruiser snook in the upper slot range. Count on a one in 10 success ratio, as they are in survival mode and not much interested in chasing down lures. However, don't miss the opportunity to fire a jig into a deeper creek mouth or any 3-foot hole you may find around points, as a big winter snook may surely surprise you. 