

# TARPON TRIPLE PLAY



by Peter Miller

## EVENING YOUR ODDS

Nothing rings in spring like the annual migration of tarpon throughout Florida. Anglers across the state are gearing up for the first big push of silver kings in their

local waters. There are as many ways to target and catch tarpon in Florida as there are tarpon themselves. Essentially fishing for tarpon takes place in three locations: passes and inlets,

beaches and lastly, the backwater.

### PASSES AND INLETS

Probably the most accessible and readily available fishery for tar-

pon in the state of Florida is around passes and inlets. Both the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts are dotted with passes allowing fishermen in boats and even shore-bound anglers to gain access to tarpon. Bear in mind that every single inlet and pass has its own nuances and quirks that demand adherence in order to be successful. For example, passes in the Keys tend to favor anchoring versus drifting or trolling, whereas the renowned Boca Grande Pass demands that anglers drift with incoming and falling tides to find success in hooking up with tarpon. Having local knowledge of a particular inland pass is imperative to increasing your odds.

Utilizing the right bait rigs, tackle and tide, my personal favorite is to drift live crabs though south Florida passes on falling tides. I prefer 60- to 80-pound fluorocarbon leader, finished with a circle hook appropriately sized to the bait I'm using. The diversity of baits and tackle across inlets and passes of Florida will differ greatly from the east coast to west coast, north to south. Anglers fishing passes in Everglades National Park tend to favor live, large baits like mullet, ladyfish or large pilchards. Suffice it to say the gathering of information about your local pass will give you the best opportunity for successes.

### BEACHES

When you think about migrating tarpon, schools of leaping and rolling fish traveling up and down Florida's coastline is probably a common image that comes to mind. In spring, tarpon begin their annual migration from far offshore and begin to invade Florida beaches and begin showing up near beaches as early as February and can last all summer long up into the Panhandle.

The key to the migration seems to be water temperature, preferably 75 degrees and above. Fishing for tarpon migrating up the beaches favors a run-and-gun approach. Anglers begin by searching known migration routes for telltale signs of rolling or free-jumping tarpon. Regardless of where you find

them, beach tarpon prefer a stealthy approach, which favors trolling motors as opposed to noisy outboard motors.

Beach tarpon anglers tend to employ lighter tackle and longer rods. I've noticed that when I catch tarpon off beaches, they tend to be longer and leaner and much more acrobatic. Baits for migrating tarpon include small crabs, pilchards, thread herring and menhaden. Of all the places to find tarpon, beach tarpon can be the most finicky. A variety of live baits and the willingness to change tactics is a must for success.

### THE BACKWATER

And then there's the backwater. Backwater tarpon fishing is probably the most rewarding way to catch them, especially when sight fishing. The pinnacle of all tarpon fishing is sight casting to fish laid out in back-country bays. Nothing gets your knees shaking and heart rate pounding like the sight of a 100 plus-pound tarpon

lying motionless 30 feet away. While not the most challenging type of fishing, it is certainly the most rewarding. Fly fisherman in the Everglades spend countless hours silently poling small skiffs in hopes of getting a dozen shots a day. This is certainly not a numbers game, but if you're looking to tangle with tarpon using artificial lures or fly, this is your best shot.

Backwater tarpon tend to stick around through the summer months all throughout the state, through the Everglades to Tampa Bay to Mosquito Lagoon and Pensacola Bay. If you're new to tarpon fishing, the best advice I could give is to hire a guide and be honest with them about wanting to learn how to catch a tarpon.

Wherever you choose to target tarpon, Florida is indeed the place to experience the tarpon triple play. Here, there is a wealth of diverse opportunities for anglers of all skill levels to connect with the silver king. **G**

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