

Into a largemouth in the everglades land of grass and water. Photo by the author.



An overlooked largemouth-bass fishery lies within easy reach of the fly fisherman. Here are some notes on tackle and tactics for . . .

Everglades Bass

LEFTY KREH

VIC DUNAWAY IS FLORIDA'S best-known outdoor writer; he was born in Florida and has fished all over the state since he was a young man — which was a long time ago. Vic is also known for his practical jokes. I met Vic through Joe Brooks, who helped me get the job as manager of the giant Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament, the world's oldest and largest fishing contest. Soon after arriving in Florida for the tournament, I wanted to fish for those big bass I'd been hearing and reading about for years. Vic, who was outdoor editor of the *Miami Herald* at the time, offered to take me.

But instead of heading north from Miami toward the fabled bass lakes and rivers as I had expected, Vic pulled his boat due west along the Tamiami Trail — a road that cuts across southern Florida through the everglades.

"Oh no," I thought, "he's gonna pull one of his tricks on me!" But I never let on that I was going to be ready for it.

Dropping the boat into the water at one of the many ramps along the Tamiami Trail road, he headed north on a canal that was perhaps 100 feet wide and that penetrated into the vast grasslands of the everglades. Along our left side ran a low dike of earth that had been dredged from the canal we were riding in. Every 150

yards there was a break in the dike, where water could flow in or out of the canal to the grassland interior. Vic explained that during rainy periods the water seeped from the inside into the canal, and the South Florida Water Management District then controlled water flow over this portion of the state. On our right, as far as I could see, was a high dirt wall that jutted upward about 25 feet, composed mainly of the material dredged from the canal bed. Vic explained that the higher outer wall formed a wedding-band-shaped dike that contained all waters inside its walls.

At one of the breaks in the lower, inside dike Vic slowed our speed and motored carefully out of the canal and into the other world of the grassland interior. Cutting the motor and starting to pole the boat, he directed me to pick up my fly rod and to start casting.

"Where in the hell should I cast?" I asked sarcastically.

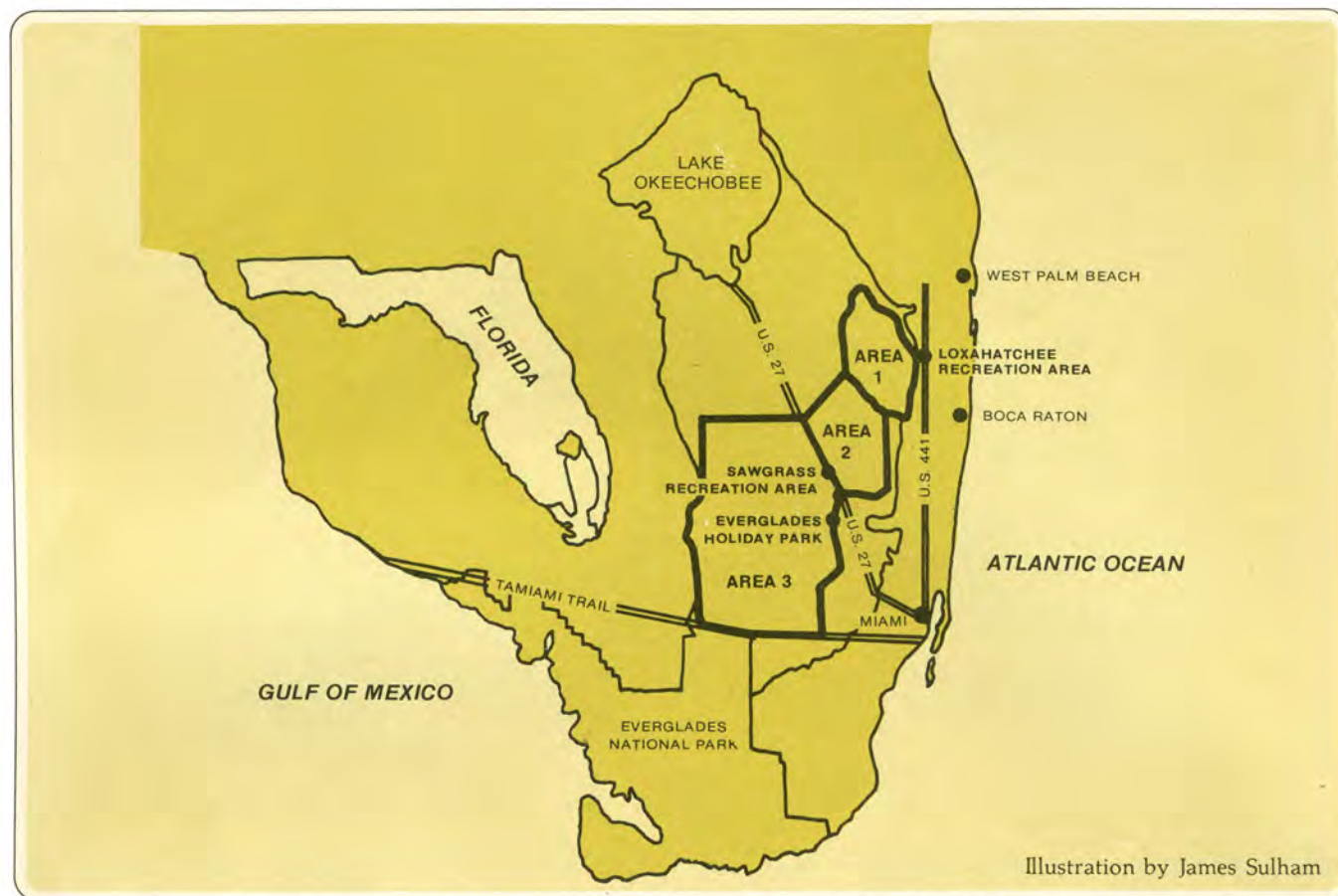
"See that three-foot hole of water in the grass to your right? Drop that popper in there."

"Sure!" I replied, making several false casts and letting the bug fall in the tiny hole. I was sure he was setting me up. I gave one twitch on the line, the popper quivered and there was a watery eruption as a four-pound, black-backed largemouth bass blasted toward the sky with my fly.

Instinct, not skill, helped me set the hook — I was far too surprised to act logically.

Vic was grinning broadly as he maneuvered the boat to the fish and picked it up, removing the bug and releasing the bass. I confess I felt a little guilty, because

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right up until the moment of the strike I was sure he was up to one of his tricks.

That day was the beginning of a love affair with one of my favorite bass-fishing spots. I've had poor days here when I was hard pushed to catch even three or four bass. But I have also had times when I caught so many fish that if I told anyone he'd swear I was lying.

THIS AREA OF FLORIDA is one of the largest and least-fished bass spots in the country. Between Lake Okeechobee to the north and Florida Bay to the south lie almost 2000 square miles of everglades prairie grasslands — a land of weeds and water.

Years ago, when heavy rains saturated southern Florida, Lake Okeechobee would spill over, and destructive flooding occurred on both the west and east coasts of the south end of the state. In 1957 the Corps of Engineers began a vast project of water containment and flood control in the 1345 square miles of everglades that lie north of Everglades National Park and south of Lake Okeechobee. With less than 14 feet of elevation drop over this vast plain of southern Florida, there were no hills from which to obtain fill dirt to build dikes to contain the water. So the Corps dug into the hard coral rock and piled the material on the sides to form the retaining walls.

Three huge manmade lakes were constructed, called Conservation Areas 1, 2 and 3. The deep trench that

resulted from the dredging created a canal on the inside of the perimeter of each area. These canals vary from 10 to 20 feet in depth, and they are a haven for bass, bluegills, alligators and other aquatic animals and birds.

When the interior everglades begin to dry following a sustained drought, the fish and animals gravitate to the deep, cool canals. During periods of ample rainfall, the interior grasslands furnish both excellent food and spawning sites for the bass.

These three conservation areas are so large they boggle the mind of a fisherman who is accustomed to working over a river or lake. Conservation Area 1 is often simply referred to as Loxahatchee, because the Loxahatchee Natural Wildlife Area lies mostly within Conservation Area 1, which forms much of the western and southern part of Palm Beach County. There are 221 square miles of water impounded in Area 1. Area 2 is located mostly in Broward County, taking up perhaps a third of the county's surface acres. There are 210 square miles of marshland in Area 2. The Big Daddy of them all is Conservation Area 3, and inside its manmade walls are more than 900 square miles of fishing waters. In addition to the main dike canals that encircle the three areas, there are numerous other canals penetrating the region that can be boated or canoed by the bass fisherman.

But do they get big bass on a fly rod here? You bet they do! The best one I know of was taken in 1973

by Windle Clemons, Jr., of Miami. It won him the Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament's Fly Casting Division Trophy — the largemouth weighed 11 pounds 2 ounces. But I wouldn't be surprised if some close-mouthed angler who doesn't enter tournaments has taken a larger one.

The best catch of largemouth bass I ever helped make was in Conservation Area 3 with Bill Youngstrom of Miami. Fishing the canals at night, we caught seven bass from 7½ to 11½ pounds in a few hours, although not on fly tackle. I lost one bass that night that we felt would go 13 pounds. That should give you an idea of what is here.

THERE ARE SEVERAL methods to fly-fish these areas. You can rent boats at several places or launch your own. Canoes also work well to get you back into some of the more isolated pockets of nearly dry grasslands that are too difficult to get to with an outboard motor. You really can't get lost in the conservation areas; the canals will always lead you back to civilization, and the high, outer-dike wall is visible for miles.

My favorite way to fly-rod this area is to move to one of the cuts in the inner dike. These cuts allow water to seep slowly into the canal from the grasslands, and bait and bass traffic through them as well. Sometimes you can get fast action by quietly approaching one of these cuts in a boat. You can cast, catch a fish or two and then move on to the next cut to repeat the operation. At other times I move the boat just inside the cuts to explore the open pockets of water with a weedless popper or streamer as Vic first showed me. Then I come out, move to the next cut and start all over.

I prefer popping bugs that are constructed on a Keel Hook or that have a loop guard of 20- to 25-pound-test monofilament around the hook. With either of these I can work weeds fairly effectively without hanging up too much. I also use a number of streamer flies, but I consider fishing them on nothing but Keel Hooks. There's just too much grass to fool with conventional hooks.

Since I fish a lot of pockets of water that are less than the size of a living room — some no larger than a wash tub — I work my flies slowly, giving the bass ample time to look the fly over or to get to it from the weeds. At times, bugs should be allowed to sit and barely quiver. If I'm using streamers I don't like to drop them directly into the smaller pockets. Instead, I'll cast to the matted vegetation two or three feet beyond the hole and crawl the fly back across the dry weeds. Usually, if there's a bass in the pocket, the strike comes the moment the fly drops into the open water.

You must learn to control yourself in this kind of fishing. Sometimes you'll be working a fly along the edge of an open spot, and you'll see a distinct trembling along the roof of vegetation. You'll know from the ripples of the weeds that a bass is moving in quickly to take your fly. If I get a good look at all of this, I'm

generally able to tear the hook out of the anxious bass's mouth about 50 percent of the time!

You can also work along the sharply inclined banks of the dredged canals. These banks are loaded with all sorts of vegetation, from cattails to hyacinths. Baitfish seek shelter here and the bass often cruise the walls looking for food. I like to use a Hi-D line that sinks my fly deep and quick in this situation. I prefer to work Keel Hook streamers (from three to five inches long) that resemble a worm when retrieved. I find that black and dark brown are the most effective colors.

Working popping bugs slowly at night is also an effective method of fishing these conservation areas. I have taken several bass better than six pounds using bugs on dark nights. I have never done well on moonlit nights.

In the spring, after the dry season of winter, these areas and the entire everglades usually become very dry. The fish, including the bait, retreat into the deep waters in the canals. Florida has a daily bag limit of 10 bass, but the bass pack the canals so heavily in severe droughts that biologists may allow you to take an unlimited number of them, fearing a die-off from overcrowding.

One hot spot that you should always look for is where seeping water drops from a higher elevation — even a few inches — into a lower body of water. Such seepages apparently add oxygen to the water, and they invariably attract bait — which in turn lure bass. These are normally small fish, but they are a lot of fun. On one occasion, Keith Gardner, editor of *Fishing World* magazine, and well-known south Florida angler, Al Pflueger, Jr., and I once cast small flies at such a runoff during a drought. For more than an hour we caught 7- to 10-inch bass on almost every cast. We finally moved away — it was too easy.

About the Areas

GUIDES, TACKLE AND BOATS can be obtained at Loxahatchee Recreation Area, Sawgrass Recreation Park, and Everglades Holiday Park. Boats can be rented and some tackle purchases can be made at Mac's Fish Camp and Johnny's Fish Camp.

Loxahatchee Recreation Area, which serves Conservation Area 1, can be reached by proceeding north on State Road 441, then turning west on a hard-top road at the south edge of the Hillsboro Canal. A prominent sign shows the way. Sawgrass Recreation Park, serving Area 2, is just two miles south of Andytown on U.S. 27, a road that stretches in a straight line from Miami to Lake Okeechobee. Everglades Holiday Park is just nine miles south of Sawgrass Recreation Area on U.S. 27 and is the main base for exploring Area 3.

Further information on the three conservation areas is available by contacting: Angellee Nobel, Public Information Office, South Florida Water Management District, 3301 Gun Club Road, P.O. Box V, West Palm Beach, Florida 33402 (telephone: (305) 686-8800). LEFTY KREH

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