

Winter is for the Snow Birds

Mr. Salt surveys the lands — and waters — to the south.

Lefty Kreh

WHEN THE ALL-TOO-BRIEF SUMMER AND EVEN SHORTER fall merge into just plain winter, fly fishermen in northern climes usually end up at their fly benches or staring into the fire and dreaming about past excursions and next season's triumphs.

But, there is fishing *now*, good, exciting and challenging fishing for the fly rodder. Fresh- and saltwater angling opportunities abound in Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean and Central America, where bonefish, snook, tarpon and other feather-eaters await a confrontation with the fly fisherman.

And — although all of these involve some degree of travel for the northern anglers — these spots are usually only extensions of winter travel which many of our readers will be doing anyway. As of a few years ago, *FFM* editors tell me, only 16% of the respondents in the magazine's earlier reader survey had done any saltwater fly fishing in the past year. I'm certain this percentage has grown, but I would guess that the great majority of the readers are among the "great unwashed" — untouched by the salt and the totally new experience awaiting the sweet-water fly fisher.

Beyond this, there is the "off-season" kick of locking into big bass in the middle of winter in the lakes of Florida and, unknown to many, of Mexico.

But, ironically, many anglers have already turned dreams into reality and have made blind leaps into the tropical areas. Instead of Dreamland, though, it was sometimes Bustville! The camp or lodge may have been poorly run; the manager and staff may not have been equipped for — or did not understand — the special needs of the fly fisherman; or the particular fish they were after was not around at that time of the year.

Also, accommodations might be very satisfactory for a gut-hooked angler ready for a rough-tough fishing camp which may or may not be suitable for a wife or family.

From the lone angler's viewpoint, it usually comes down to one main consideration — the guides. Most Florida and tropical fishing guides can get their boats

over fish at the right time of year; they know where they are. But, do they understand the problems of the fly rodder? Spin rigs and boat rods don't face the same problems that the fly rod does; many craft used for regular saltwater angling are not designed to allow you to drop the running line to the deck and then make a tangle-free cast.

Likewise, a guide who is perfectly competent to get you into fish with live bait or lead jigs may not understand the problems of distance, casting angle, wind speed and direction and the other factors which the fly rodder faces on the flats and reefs. Until you've fished with both, you don't appreciate the subtleties of the trained fly-fishing guide's skills; it's like hunting over a thoroughbred setter or spaniel.

Satisfactory accommodations, of course, can not always be guaranteed when reserved cold. Careful reading of the ads in the outdoor magazines, followed up with a request for brochures and specific information on the fly-fishing services (client references in your area can be requested), should give you a good picture of the situation at any specific lodge, camp or resort. Angling friends and other respected sources who have actually been to a specific spot and who can vouch that it has been a good action-producer with satisfactory accommodations will assure you the best chance to enjoy yourself the first time out.

Of course, ads can be incomplete or misleading, even though this is not the intention of the advertising campaign. However, in a magazine such as *Fly Fisherman*, in which the owner knows that he is directing his ad totally toward fly fishermen, he is usually savvy enough to know if he can deliver. The *FFM* staff indicates that they have never had any negative playback from any of its saltwater fly-fishing ads, and that, in fact, most of these lodges are known to them through personal experience or the first-hand experience of reliable saltwater fly anglers.

Even so, your second trip will usually be even better than your first. Your personal source of information



Angler Ed Given about to boat a good-size tarpon on the Rio Colorado while fishing out of the Casa Mar lodge in Costa Rica. Partner Bill Rhodes records the event for posterity. Photos by Lefty Kreh unless otherwise credited.

might have been there at a different time of year, or used a special technique or quite different equipment. So you take the wrong tackle or lures.

And, the best angling writer in the world can't tell you just what it's like for you, in that place, at that time of year.

As far as wearing apparel and the other little items which can make so much difference in your total enjoyment, their selection can only come from experience. For example, wherever I go in the winter tropics, I figure on three things — that it will be colder than I've been told, that it will be hotter than it should, and that I know damn well it will be wetter than the local chamber of commerce tells me.

I always take a good rainsuit, plus a pair of flexible, light rubber boots (Totes). When your feet are wet, you're miserable, even when the rainsuit shelters the rest of you. The rain pants go over the rubber boots, of

course, so your feet stay dry in the heaviest downpour (or spray and surf — remember, you'll usually be in a boat, so you can get wet in any weather).

I also carry an Eddie Bauer down jacket — red, for color photography. This is a very light down jacket that takes up little room and will keep you warm, even on cool summer days in Alaska.

And, I always carry a light pair of Sears, Roebuck and Co. work pants and shirt, which are made of a thin, super-tough material which dries in minutes if caught in the rain or used for wading.

All of this I carry in an L. L. Bean boat bag, with the lunch and other necessary items. With the above gear you can face most any kind of unexpected weather and not be too inconvenienced. (I use these trade names only to guide interested readers; I've used them and they're good. However, I'm sure that some similar items offered by other firms work equally well.)

Florida Bass

Where would you go to escape the winter chill, test your tackle and enjoy yourself? Well, you have to decide if you are going to take your wife or family. If so, some camps which delight the fisherman might horrify the spouse and of course, if you want to keep her around, these are the places you avoid.

There are a number of really fine fishing spots in Florida where the family can have a good time, either fishing or doing other things while you catch fish.

Central Florida is still the best place in this country to catch a big bass, or a lot of good-size bass. There are some fly-rodding spots here that are still fairly untouched. The Withlacoochee River is a fishing area that has received little publicity, but it has superb bass-fishing potential for the fly rodder — as does the chain of lakes around it.

The small town of Dunnellon would make a good base of operations. I lived in Florida for ten years and I think the country around Dunnellon is among the prettiest in the state. Huge oaks adorned with Spanish moss stand as shady spots for the cattle that feed in the rolling countryside. A number of rivers snake slowly through the area, and the Tsala-Apopka Chain of Lakes just to the southeast of Dunnellon will give you more fishing waters than you could ever cover with a fly in a winter season.

Action along the Withlacoochee near Dunnellon, Florida. This is where we would live if we were a bass!



Whether in Florida, a Caribbean island or off of the Central American coast, casting for bonefish and permit is one of the angler's greatest challenges.

Surprisingly, the Withlacoochee River runs from the southeast on a rough north-to-northwesterly course until it reaches the Gulf of Mexico near Yankeetown. Some of the biggest cypress trees in Florida soak their roots in the Withlacoochee. Tall water grasses screen the actual bank, and while the river must be fished from a boat, the bass-bugger will go out of his mind when he sees all the target areas he would like to drop a bug into.

My best bass from the Withlacoochee is only eight pounds, but I know that one I hooked and which got under a floating bunch of bonnets had to be a ten-pounder.

There is a motel in Dunnellon, and at Crystal River and several other places along Highway U.S. 19 there are fine accommodations. Your wife or family could fish, visit many local attractions and have dinner in several fine restaurants in the area.

One more thought — downriver from Dunnellon lies a dam near Inglis, and the lake behind the dam, Lake Rousseau, can often be one of the best fly-fishing spots on the river.

Like any Florida river, there are many places to rent boats, either with or without motors. If you have a six- to nine-horsepower motor, take it along. Sometimes a choice, out-of-the-way fish camp has only boats to rent.

The best fishing in this area is probably from sometime in December through April. Many big fish lie under the floating vegetation that forms a roof out from the bank, so you'll want to work a popping bug slowly here. And, I find that large Keel Hook flies work well, too. Panfish are huge, often going better than a pound — and they shame a trout for their power.

Everglades

There is another spot in southern Florida that you may want to fish, and you don't need anything but a car and your fly fishing gear.

The Tamiami Trail runs from Miami to Naples on the Gulf Coast (where it then connects with Tampa). It is a cement bank that completely cuts off the Everglades, with various bridges and culverts to allow the water to seep into the Everglades Park proper.

Just north of the Tamiami Trail is a new road called Alligator Alley, which runs from east to west across lower Florida.

These two roads, both running directly through the Everglades, furnish free access to the bass that live in these sawgrass areas. The largemouths move into the canals along the roads, then back into the grass.

These arteries, built on flat coral, are constructed by digging down and piling the dug soil into a packed mass on which the cement highway is built. This means that both roads have a deep trench of four to 11 feet along their entire length.

During the winter, and especially in February and March, both of these canals fill up with spawning bass and bluegills. You can frequently see the bluegill and bass, or at least see the disturbance they make as they move among the reeds and along the shallows.

For bluegills, a popping bug moved almost imperceptibly, or rubber spiders or chenille wet flies with rubber-band legs, can usually help you catch more than 100 of these tasty panfish larger than your hand in a single afternoon.

Some terrific bass have come from here, too, both on popping bugs and streamers. Windle Clemons, Jr. of nearby Hialeah, walked along the Tamiami Trail canal tossing a tarpon streamer two years ago. He got a heavy strike and finally landed an 11-pound, 2-ounce largemouth that became a new record in the Metropolitan Miami Fishing Tournament.



Florida Keys and the Back Country

So much has been written or is readily available on the fishing in the Florida Keys and the "Back Country" area west of them that I won't cover them in this article — except to mention that they were my "home waters" for a decade and have given me some of my biggest fishing thrills. From Biscayne Bay through Marathon and Islamorada down to Key West itself, there are men to match the mountains of fish available to the fly rodder. Even there you have to be selective, of course, because many of the guides still don't specialize in handling long-rodders, but the odds are definitely in favor of the fly fisherman making good connections in the Keys.

Bonefish, tarpon, snook, redfish, permit, sea trout — these are only a few of the prime targets for fly fishermen in southern Florida. Other areas of both south Florida coasts abound in good fishing, but the shallow flats offer the best opportunity for top-water angling. Drops in temperature, of course, affect the shallow water of the flats more quickly than the outlying deeps, so a December or January cold-snap, when the smudge-pots smoke up the air around the orange groves, can occasionally chase many of the schools of bonefish and some of the others off the flats — but there are always some topwater species around during these brief periods. Remember — if it's your first time down there, you won't know what you're missing!

The temperature-drops themselves are not too frequent or long-lasting, but mid-winter in southern Florida does carry its share of "cold" fronts and line squalls, frequently producing considerable winds. The fly rodder quickly learns to live with the winds as far as they affect casting, but these brisk winds also create definite visibility problems. Usually you are casting to specific fish, and to reach 'em you have to see 'em. Constant ripples on the water cut off your views below the surface, rendering your Polaroids useless. I mention these comparatively mild weather problems merely to orient the virgin salter, not to scare him away from the flats in December or January if that's the only time he can make it. As far

Even though we all know it's done with fast shutter-speeds, this photo captures the romance of the flats for any Florida fly rodder.

Lefty Kreh and friend. From Florida to Central America, the bonefish is still the fly rodder's most popular prey.





View from 50-foot mother ship of Keller's Caribbean Sports Lodge in Belize (formerly British Honduras), showing skiffs in tow to be used for fishing outlying flats.



Guides make the difference in bonefishing, even to experts such as Stanley Babson, shown here with Harbor Island's (Eleuthera) Bonefish Joe Cleare. This is a friendly, comparatively unknown island, and the guiding is shared by Joe and his friendly rival, Bonefish Stanley. At right is a lane in picturesque Dunmore Town, Harbor Island, with a view of the harbor.



Lodges we are personally familiar with are the Coral Sands, the Pink Sands and the Remora Bay Club (see addresses at end of story). Latest edition of Babson's book, Bonefishing, is advertised in this issue. FFM photo.

The site of the Casa Mar camp on a lagoon in Costa Rica.



Winter Angling . . .

as I'm concerned, fishing the Florida flats is a relative matter — like which part of Heaven you choose to live in! Good, better or best!

The Bahamas

The Bahamas rank among the finest spots to fish for bonefish. Unfortunately, because of their recent independence it is taking the Bahamians some time to adjust to the situation, and some unpleasanties have been reported by visiting fishermen.

The islands that perch on or beside the Great and Little Bahama Banks often teem with bonefish. There are few places in the world where you can actually see more bonefish than on the bank north of Andros Island.

In fact, Andros makes a good base of operation for any bonefisherman. A number of good hotels and some excellent guides live on this largest of all Bahamian islands.

Northwest of Andros is Bimini, famed for its blue-water fishing, but the flats on the east side hold some of the largest bonefish in the world. The current largest bonefish ever captured on sporting tackle, 16 pounds, was taken there just a few years ago — and February and March are the best months to take a super-trophy — a female laden with roe.

Actually, most of the islands in the Bahamas have some bonefishing. You can stay at the motel on Chub Cay, arrange for guides ahead of time and fish on one side of the tiny island for bonefish through all the Berry Island Chain — or walk 200 yards to the south of the motel and you could cast a surf lure into blue water. At Chub you can fish bones in the morning, have a leisurely lunch, then fish for marlin, dropping the outrigger baits the moment you clear the tiny harbor entrance.

Bonefishing is best in the winter, spring and fall in the Bahamas, with summer fishing usually only good early and late in the day. However, during the winter, cold fronts can produce winds that reduce visibility and your chances of seeing the fish.

Mexican Bass

If you have read or heard much about bass fishing, you know that Mexico is one of the new frontiers of the sport. I first fished Mexico for bass back in 1957, and it was an eye-opener.

We had planned to hunt in an area that was a four-hour drive south of Monterey, but were told that some bass fishing was available in a large lake on the ranch. The lake, perhaps 150 acres, maybe a little more, reposed in a desert-like area, with the Sierra Madre mountains not five miles away.

The hunting was fantastic — especially quail, which we saw by the hundreds — but it is the bass fishing I remember best. I really don't know how many we caught. Few were more than four pounds — but few were under two pounds, either.

Fishing there is no longer available, but there is a lake in Mexico where you can fish from a modern bass boat, powered by a 50-hp motor, and a powerful electric motor.

The boats are even equipped with depth finders.

Food is excellent, tailored to Americans, and you stay in a clean, first-rate motel nearby the lake.

I'm talking about fishing Lake Obregon, in Sonora, Mexico. Obregon is nearly 50 miles long and six miles across, with an indented shoreline and drop-offs that make a bass fisherman's pulse beat faster.

Charlie Gray, an expert bass fisherman, along with his family, runs Mex Bass, and he knows fishing and people. The tall, likeable owner caters to fishermen in such a way that they enjoy his company almost as much as the fishing.

I don't believe that you'll take lunkers, like the monster Florida species of ten pounds-plus, from Obregon, but how would you like to catch 50 bass from two to five pounds in a day? It's possible at Mex Bass.

Meals, boats, accommodations — everything is built into a package. About the only thing you pay extra is the tips you want to leave.

To get to Mex Bass you can fly through Tucson, Arizona, on a direct flight that deposits you in Obregon. You can get the necessary visa quickly at the Tucson airport. Flights are on commercial jets.

Another untouched fly fishing area is the many small lakes near Lake Obregon, where the camp can furnish small skiffs for you to work from. The waters here are shallow and perfect for floating line. On the main lake plenty of bugging is possible, but I'd take along a Hi-D fast-sinking line, too, for fish that hold among the drop-offs and ledges.

Pez Maya Bonefishing

If you don't care for bass fishing, there is another Mexican hot spot that will soothe the soul of any bonefisherman. "Pez Maya" means "Mayan fish," and it's a good name, for you will see more permit than you have ever thought possible, and bonefish in incredible numbers. I would guess that on a good day you might see 3,000 bones.

Tom Scrivener and Bill Wilke, two spinfishermen from Baltimore, accompanied me on a trip to Pez Maya and spent a half day on a flat south of camp. Never having fished for bonefish before, they still managed to catch more than 50 bonefish before lunch.

I won't deceive you. The bonefish are small by Florida Keys standards, most of them running from 2 to 4 pounds. But I know of a 10-3/4-pounder taken there and Bob Stearns, Mark Sosin and I saw two bonefish that would have topped that one.

What delights me is that you can take along a fly rod that handles a #6 weight-forward line. Be sure to use a light reel, but with at least 150 yards of 12-pound-test backing.

If you think you have enjoyed bonefishing, wait until you work over school after school at Pez Maya, taking maybe a dozen fish a morning on a trout outfit and a #6 line.

The flats are absolutely the best to wade that I've ever trod. The base is hard, but covered with several inches

of soft material, and wading is a joy. In the bays behind the camp, which sits on the Yucatan Channel near Cozumel, the bones move around in schools, and flies from #2 through #6 are recommended — no larger are necessary, and generally the #4 and #6 are the most effective.

Patterns mean little. I find that on some days, they will go for light-colored patterns, but other days dark colors are accepted more readily.

If you long to catch a permit on a fly, nowhere on earth or water, I believe, is there a better chance for doing it than this area. The permit are not usually large, averaging five to eight pounds — but we did catch a 22-pounder on four-pound-test spin outfit, and Bill Wilke lost one close to 30 pounds after a two-hour battle on four-pound spinning line — so the chance exists of taking a big one on the fly. (And don't think that isn't real sport on light spinning tackle!)

Accommodations are superb, about as good as any fish camp I have ever stayed at, and food is excellent.

The Turneffe Islands

If you long to fish in Central America, one of the most favored of all my trips is to go to Keller's Caribbean Sports Lodge in Belize City, Belize (formerly British Honduras), and take a houseboat to the Turneffe Islands, offshore more than 30 miles.

The base camp is five minutes from the Belize airport, and within an hour of arrival at the camp you can be on your way to the Turneffes in a 50-footer that you will live aboard. Behind the lead boat will be several 14-foot plywood skiffs, highly stable, that are your tools for working the flats.

It's about as much fun as I've had on a fishing trip. The Turneffe Islands are 38 miles long, built something like a wedding band with breaks in the circler. This allows you to cruise inside the islands, and here you can fish for tarpon, the biggest ladyfish I've ever seen, and many other species.

On the eastern edge of the islands you wade flats that are very shallow but the surf rolls right into the knee-deep water. This means you can pole in two feet of water and cast to surf snappers, permit and other reef fishes — if you can tear yourself away from the bonefish.

The grass-covered flats hold one of the largest concentrations of bonefish in the world. You frequently see a school of 200 or more bones coming toward you. I once hooked a bonefish while standing near angler Bob Stearns; he hooked one, too, then asked the guide to hand him another rod, which he made a cast with and hooked another. I grabbed a spinning rod, and did the same thing. We finally managed to land all four fish — with the aid of the guides.

Another time I stood in one spot, and with a #6 Brown Keel Fly I caught five fish without moving my feet. Again, the fish do not run big on the average, but using trout tackle it's an experience you'll never forget.

In the evening you can cast in the saltwater "creeks" and around the islands and take snapper and other good-eating fish. Coupled with freshly caught crawfish, you

can enjoy some of the finest in seafood at Turneffe.

Because you live aboard the boat, you are never more than a few minutes in the skiff from good fishing. And, when you tire of one spot, you simply move the lead boat, towing the skiffs behind.

Costa Rica Tarpon

Another great fishing hole in Central America (the next really great fishing area that fly fishermen will visit) is Casa Mar in Costa Rica. This is a camp located in the northeast corner of Central America at the mouth of the Rio Colorado.

The camp is run by an experienced fly fisherman, Bill Barnes, and his wife Linda. The food is superb, accommodations first-rate — despite the fact you are living on a jungle lagoon. Guides speak English and the boats are all American-type aluminum john boats, perfect for fly casting, wide and stable.

Tarpon are the rage here. Supposedly, as many writers have said, you can catch more tarpon here than anywhere — and no one has disputed that. In the winter, however, the Rio Colorado, which flows into the sea near Casa Mar, is cloudy and runs deep, so you need lead-core shooting heads or at least a Hi-D line.

If you are willing to use such tackle, you can get into more tarpon than you ever have before. The tarpon are not as large as the spring-run fish in the Keys — average size, I'd guess, would be between 65 and 75 pounds, with quite a few in the 80- to 90-pound class — but that's a helluva lot of fish for a man with a fly rod that just left his fireside and the snow back home.

In the fall, especially in late September and October, Bill Barnes, and others who are reliable, tell me that literally thousands of tarpon stack up in the clear waters outside the mouth of the Rio Colorado.

Just how many tarpon are there can be judged by a story Leon Martuch of Scientific Anglers told me — and several others have had the same experience. Leon said that tarpon filled the water around the boat. He made a cast, hooked a tarpon, which jumped and threw the fly. As the fly fell to the water another tarpon took it, jumped and threw the fly — which the third tarpon struck. This time Martuch boated him.

In addition to the tarpon fishing, fall snook fishing can be fantastic. In the jungle rivers, if you can leave the tarpon alone, you can catch quapote and spunky moharra on popping bugs. A moharra is like an overgrown sunfish — and the quapote, which can exceed six pounds, strikes popping bugs much faster than bass.

Panama Offshore Angling

If you like offshore fishing with a fly rod, and don't care what you pick an argument with, then you might want to visit Club Pacifico de Panama.

Bob Griffin, an American electrical contractor, operates a fishing camp on the Island of Coiba off Panama. The waters teem with all sorts of fish, from black marlin to Cuberra snappers, with teeth like the canines on the biggest, baddest dog you've ever seen.



The map spotlights a selected few of the many winter angling opportunities for the fly-rodder.

Using U.S.-made boats, you operate either in the blue water, or along the steep mountains that plummet into the sea to form a jagged coast line, allowing you to actually catch wahoo within a mile of the shore.

Accommodations are good, the food is fine and the fishing can be fantastic. The camp is located in the Gulf of Chiriqui, on the Pacific side of Panama, and Hannibal Banks offshore turn a depth-finder sheet almost black, there are so many fish at times.

A direct flight 200 miles southwest of Panama City allows you to land on the island.

Fishing to the south of Coiba Island has not been explored, and customers have generally been so satisfied that Griffin has not really had the time or need for such explorations.

Any of the fishing spots mentioned are bound to thrill fly fishermen who thirst for angling when snow bound by winter.

If you want, there are several fly-fishing-oriented agencies in the U.S. that can make all arrangements necessary. Here are two that cater to sportsmen:

Safari Outfitters, Inc.
8 South Michigan Ave.
Chicago, IL 60603

George Hommell
World-Wide Sportsmen
Islamorada, Florida 33036

Here are the addresses if you want to contact any of the mentioned camps. In Florida, there is no specific organization, just show up in the area and make your own arrangements. (As in all cases, you can also check recent ads of resorts in these areas.)

Pez Maya
c/o Cabanas del Caribe Club Hotel
Santa Pilar Beach
Cozumel, Quintana Roo, Mexico

Casa Mar Fishing Club
1500 East Bay Drive
Largo, Florida 33540
(813) 584-7691

Mex Bass Motel Valle Grande
Charlie Gray
CD. Obregon, Sonora, Mexico
(Tel) 3-37-96

Keller's Caribbean Sports, Ltd.
Box 459
Belize City, Belize
Central America

Club Pacifico de Panama
Bob Griffin
2747 N. W. 75th St.
Miami, Florida 33147
(305) 691-2392

Harbor Island, Eleuthera
(Coral Sands, Pink Sands,
Remora Bay Club)
Guides: Stanley Johnson
and Joe Cleare

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