

Creeks kicking in

BY BILL SARGENT
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MELBOURNE — Traffic was heavy over the U.S. 1 Bridge as Mike Badarack and I idled west on Crane Creek.

Downtown Melbourne's evening rush hour was still flowing and there were a few envious glances toward the two of us easing along in the flats skiff.

It was a little after 6 p.m., a good time to be on the water this time of the year, with summer just around the corner and the rains starting to kick into activity in the creeks.

Between now and the end of August, backwaters like Crane Creek and the Eau Gallie River in Melbourne, Turkey Creek at Palm Bay and Sebastian River at the Brevard-Indian River county line will be potential hot spots for small tarpon and snook.

The fish aren't always there, and there will be days when the mornings will be more productive than the evenings. But overall, summer creek fishing is a welcomed change of pace along the Space Coast.

A key will be rainfall. With the rain comes the runoff through the creeks and the runoff brings an assortment of natural baits like *Gambusia* minnows, shiners and small bluegill.

The creek action got a sudden boost a week ago after Tropical Storm Barry dumped more than 7 inches of rain on the South end of Brevard County. That was followed by another couple of inches last Wednesday evening.

"Yesterday, the tarpon were stacked in here," Badarack said Thursday evening as we continued to motor west under the railroad trestle toward an area where Crane Creek opens to its widest point.

"They'll lay up in holes along the edges of bars waiting for the bait and they'll definitely hit a live mullet."

We had about a dozen 6- to 7-inch mullet in the live well that Badarack had cast netted along the Melbourne Causeway after we launched at Front Street Park.

Gary Giles, a guide and fly fisherman from Palm Bay, makes the creek tarpon one of his specialties. In addition, he finds a surprisingly number of juvenile tarpon in the larger canals, among them the Melbourne-Tillman Canal that serves as drainage for north sections of Palm Bay.

"They're going up the creeks and canals not just for the bait, but also for the cooler water temperature," Giles explained.

"The smaller fish are zeroing in on small, black minnows that

Summer tarpon, snook guides

■ **Capt. Mike Badarack:** Controversy Sportfishing Charters, 863-0561.

■ **Capt. Gary Giles:** Backcast Flyfishing, 258-0041.

■ **Capt. Terry Lamielle:** Easy Days Guide Service, 537-5346.

are pulled along by the runoff," he added, referring to the *Gambusia* minnows or mosquito fish, which swarm by the thousands in freshwater.

It's the reason Giles uses an all-black fly.

"Black is the only color," Giles stressed. "It's a fly I tie myself and it's really nothing more than a 2-inch Clouser minnow on a No. 1 Mustad tarpon hook. I put a little weight on them so they'll sink with medium-size barbells foreyes."

Crane Creek, and particularly Melbourne Harbor, an anchorage for large boats east of the U.S. 1 Bridge, is a favorite nighttime tarpon spot with Giles.

"There are 60-pounders in there. They'll range between 20 and 60 pounds," Giles said. "I won't fish until 10 or 11 when it's quiet and the restaurants have closed, and I'll ease my boat around the edges of the security lights."

All docks in the Melbourne Harbor are private, so the only access is by boat. The closest ramp is at Front Street Park just off New Haven Ave. near Harry Goode's Outdoor Shop and Hatt's Diving Center.

For larger snook on flyrod gear, Giles, who calls his guide service Backcast Flyfishing, heads 3 miles south to Turkey Creek.

"There are fish around some of the docks that you can't stop," Giles said.

He switches flies for the snook, usually using a 4½-inch white and chartreuse polar fiber pattern with a lot of Krystal Flash that he ties.

"I'll put 10 pieces of Krystal Flash on one fly and let it extend 2 inches beyond the body of the fly. It gives the fly the live look. I'll also catch tarpon on that fly," Giles said.

The best launch ramp for Turkey Creek is at Alex Goode Park at the north end of North Bianca Drive in Port Malabar.

Palm Bay's Terry Lamielle centers his guide service on the Sebastian River where he tracks bigger snook. The tarpon he catches start out as 5- to

25-pounders early in the summer before the 40- to 50-pounders move in later in the season.

Lamielle uses heavy wooden top-water baits by High Roller Fishing Lures out of Gainesville for the snook and he switches to the gold-sided Yo-Zuri Crystal Minnow or the Yo-Zuri 3-D Minnow, a suspended bait, for tarpon.

"At first light, for the first 45 minutes, I fish my clients around docks because that's the best time for snook," explained Lamielle, owner of Easy Days Guide Service. "Then I'll move up the North Fork and start looking for rolling tarpon."

"For the snook, we'll walk the dog with the High Roller, or if there's a chop, use the Rip Roller before going to the Yo-Zuri baits for the tarpon."

When it's time to go deeper for Tarpon, he switches to a plastic swim bait by High Roller called the Fingerling.

"I'm an artificial freak, so live bait is a last resort," Lamielle said.

Thursday was one of those evenings when the tarpon, for whatever reason, failed to make a Crane Creek appearance. Badarack and I never saw a tarpon roll.

We turned our attention to the small snook that hang along the thick vegetation that lines the creek.

"I've found it's mostly a morning bite for the snook in here," said Badarack a Satellite Beach resident who operates Controversy Sportfishing Charters.

We gave the snook about an hour and the fishing was steady along the south bank, where they were snuggled inside small pockets and around a couple broken down docks. You had to place your cast close to the bank for a strike.

But all the snook were juveniles under 20 inches.

Badarack used a small 2-inch fly called the Everglades Minnow. It has a subdued natural look with an olive-colored back and large red eyes. He buys the pattern at Bass Pro Shops in Orlando.

Too often, the Eau Gallie River is overlooked for snook and tarpon. Some of the better cover is east of the U.S. 1 Bridge in the form of docks and boathouses.

There's a fine doublewide ramp at Ballard Park at the mouth of the river. The fact that you can begin fishing minutes after launching makes the Eau Gallie River inviting for those short early-morning and late-evening summertime sessions. ■

Contact Sargent at 242-3697 or bsargent@floridatoday.com