

Tarpon, snook smacking their lips

Rain from Tropical Storm Barry sparks the snook and tarpon spillway and river bite

By Bill Sargent
Space Coast

When Tropical Storm Barry dumped more than seven inches of rain on the south end of Brevard County on June 1 and 2, you could almost hear the tarpon and snook smacking their lips.

Following weeks of drought they knew what was coming with all that new runoff flowing down creeks like the Eau Gallie River and Crane Creek in Melbourne, Turkey Creek in Palm Bay and the Sebastian River at the Brevard-Indian River county line.

Gambusia minnows, shiners, small bluegill and grass shrimp are among the morsels there for the taking for days after a storm's passage.

"Things definitely pick up after a storm like that and we'll see the same during the summer rains," said Gary Giles, a guide from Palm Bay who prefers to track the tarpon that range up the freshwater creeks during the summer months.

"The fish are going after the bait being pulled by the runoff and they're also looking for the cooler water that comes with the runoff."

The strong easterly wind responsible for raising water levels some 18 inches in the Indian and Banana rivers also was responsible for pushing schools of finger mullet inside the creeks.

That, in turn, captured the interest of the backwater snook and tarpon.

Melbourne Harbor, an anchorage for large boats at the mouth of Crane Creek near the old downtown section of Melbourne, had been holding tarpon at night around lights several weeks before Barry, and the activity simply compounded when the runoff added another factor.

Crane Creek is a drainage from areas west of Melbourne and it flows from the west into the Indian River.

"There are 60-pounders in there.

"They'll range between 20 and 60 pounds," said Giles who waits to fish the tarpon from a boat until about 10 or 11 p.m. around lighted docks and bulkheads near a particularly popular watering hole with area patrons.

"I go when they're drunk and gone," Giles laughed.

Giles, who calls his guide service Backcast Flyfishing because of his fly fishing specialty, hooks his share of tarpon on 2-inch black Clouser minnows tied on a No. 1 Mustad tarpon hook. He attaches medium-size barbells eyes for weight.

"It's a fly I tie myself and I've found that the black

works best because the tarpon like to key on those little (Gambusia) minnows which are black.

When it's slow on the fly, I'll switch to a 4-inch DOA CAL and I've found that the darker colors work better with those baits as well."

It must be made clear that boats are necessary in the Melbourne Harbor area because all the docks and catwalks are private.

Mike Badarack, a Satellite Beach guide who operates Controversy Sportfishing Charters, also fishes these backwater creeks, and on Crane Creek he concentrates farther upstream, west of the Florida East Coast railroad trestle which spans the creek west of the U.S. 1 Bridge.

"I've been doing better by freelining live mullet and you can fish these tarpon all night," Badarack said. "Look for dropoffs along the edges of bars and flats where the water drops to 4 or 5 feet. There are times when the tarpon are stacked in those holes."

If he has a flyrodding client, Badarack will switch tactics and baits and concentrate on small snook to 22 and 24 inches along the vegetated shorelines of the creek.

He recommends an Everglades Minnow pattern.

"It's a morning bite for these small snook. I've really done nothing with them in the evenings," Badarack said.

For snook, Giles goes to Turkey Creek, which is 3 miles to the south and another creek that flows from the west into the Indian River. It is fed by the Melbourne-Tillman Canal which drains a north section of Palm Bay.

"There are snook around some of the docks back inside the creek that you can't stop," Giles said. "I use 40-pound fluorocarbon leader and I can't hold them. Few of the snook out around the mouth of Turkey Creek are under 8 pounds."

Much of the time he uses the black 2-inch Clouser Minnow, but there are times when he'll switch to a larger 4 1/2-inch white and chartreuse polar fiber fly with a lot of Krystal Flash.

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

The Sebastian River is much larger in size, and it has two freshwater forks coming from the backcountry. There are dozens of private docks to pick from.

Sebastian River holds masses of mullet, including the large 8- to 10-inch mullet used by the handful of regu-

lars that go for the heavy-weight brood snook that stage around the mouth of the river in the spring.

A few of those bigger snook are still possible. A boat is necessary and the best bite usually occurs at first light. Some of that action is continuing because of the recent mild temperatures.

The Eau Gallie River often is overlooked as a quality spot for snook and small tarpon. A boat is recommended here as well because the only shoreline access is at Ballard Park, a multi-use park at the mouth of the river.

An excellent ramp is available at the park which is a stone's throw from where you'll begin to fish.

Read more of Bill Sargent's work at www.floridatoday.com.

RIGHT: Guide Mike Badarack shows one of the larger tarpon coming from the Melbourne area along the Indian River. This fish hit a freelined mullet. FF Weekly Photo



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