

Sargent: Summer rains fire up catches in creeks and canals

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With our rainy season kicking in, tarpon, snook and an assortment of other gamesters are heading toward backwater creeks and canals smacking their lips. Which means smart anglers will be in hot pursuit.

The summer rains produce runoff flowing from creeks in the south end of Brevard, among them Crane Creek and the Eau Gallie River at Melbourne, Turkey Creek at Palm Bay and the two forks of the Sebastian River at the Brevard-Indian River county line, along with major canals like the Melbourne-Tillman Canal in Palm Bay

The runoff carries mosquito fish, freshwater shiners, small panfish, and grass shrimp, all of which scatter out as newfound forage that attract the gamesters to areas around the mouths of the creeks and into the creek backwaters. What's more, the runoff is cooler and inviting.

Canals with active culverts serving as drainage points hold tarpon, snook, freshwater bass, sometimes even catfish that live in the canals. Because the runoff is concentrated at the culverts those are the hotspots.

It's a fishing opportunity, especially for those preferring light tackle and fly gear, that will continue with the seasonal weather.

A boat is necessary to expand your range of fishing sites, and the creek fishing is popular with kayakers and other small boaters because of the wind protection provided in the narrow confines of the creeks, not to mention the increase in catches.



Capt. Gary Giles of Palm Bay is one of the best at this brand of fishing. He's an avid fly fisherman who lives on the Melbourne-Tillman Canal and one of his hotspots is in his backyard.

"I saw tarpon rolling this morning after (Tuesday evening's) heavy rain and I hooked a couple," Giles said the next morning. "That's what it takes to fire 'em up. The runoff brings all the bait."

Giles is a licensed guide but at age 70 seldom books trips. "I just enjoy helping people. If you want to catch fish, follow me," said Giles who usually fishes from shore or by wading.



Over 15 years ago Giles, who doubles as a fly tier, developed a fly pattern imitating the black-colored *Gambusia minnow*, also known as the mosquito fish, that swarm by the thousands during the runoff periods. Most of the minnows are little more than an inch in length and they're at the top of the feeding chain.

Giles calls it the Tillman Tarpon Slayer, and it is solid black except for a few strips of flashing Mylar on its sides. Tied on a stainless 1/O Mustad No. 34007 tarpon hook, it has a black deer hair body, black feathers for hackle, stick-on eyes and it's two inches long.

"I don't sell them but I can teach anyone how to tie it. It's simple," said Giles, who has a website called prepareforcatching.com.

For those using boats to fish the runoff, good ramps can be found at these locations: Ballard Park for the Eau Gallie River, the Front Street Park ramp for nearby Crane Creek in downtown Melbourne, the Goode Park ramp on North Bianca Drive for Turkey Creek in Palm Bay, and Dale Wimbrow Park on Roseland Road (CR 505) on the south fork of Sebastian River.

Local knowledge is necessary for public access along canal easements, which for the most part is bordered by private property. Bank fishing at roadway intersections often is banned with notices. But with searching sites can be found.

The broad, high-banked north fork of the Sebastian River, which was channelized years ago, can be tops for the summer tarpon. It receives freshwater runoff from the Fellsmere Canal, which has constant discharging, thereby attracting tarpon from the Indian River and Sebastian Inlet area.

In the north fork, live-baiting with freshwater shiners or mullet account for most hookups of the 30- to 50-pound tarpon, occasionally larger. An unheard-of 140-pounder was caught and released some years back by Art McPherson of Viera during a guided trip with Capt. Mike Badarack of Satellite Beach. Its measurements of 6-foot-2 and 39 inches in girth were used for the estimated weight.

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Fly fishermen using baitfish patterns usually can score with the north fork tarpon making it a popular site for parties using guides from Brevard and Indian River counties.

The 300-foot-wide C-54 Canal with 15-foot depths, a major drainage from the west, parallels the Fellsmere Canal and connects with the north fork at a spillway giving the St. Johns River Water Management District the option of releasing great volumes of water through the Sebastian River and into the Indian River following emergency rain events such as hurricanes. For this reason the north fork was channelized.

Unlike the north fork, the Sebastian River south fork meanders lazily along picturesque settings of overhanging oaks and mangrove with a slower flow rate. It's an area where you can catch snook and largemouth bass side by side. The Wimbrow Park launch site puts you directly into the south fork.

With Palm Bay's Turkey Creek collecting runoff from the Melbourne-Tillman Canal, another drainage from the west, you can find snook around shoreline docks and the railroad trestle. The U.S. 1 Bridge is popular with live-bait fishermen fishing from the bank. Generally the best spot for larger tarpon is near the mouth of the creek in the bay east of U.S. 1.

In his quest for larger tarpon, Giles wades the bay area from Castaway's Point Park and hooks 30- to 60-pounders on fly gear. Once he landed an 80-pounder.

Melbourne's Crane Creek is a drainage for the M-1 Canal starting west of Melbourne before flowing through the Crane Creek Reserve Golf Course and eventually into Melbourne Harbor and the Indian River. Tarpon to 60 pounds frequent the harbor and fly fishermen in boats get into the act at night by casting into shadows around boats and docks. Others use live mullet or freshwater shiners. It's important to note that fishing from the docks and catwalks in the harbor is prohibited.

Upstream, west of the Florida East Coast railroad trestle, the deeper water, the result of dredging, is where tarpon tend to hold around drop-offs along bars and flats and those become good live-baiting spots during evening and nighttime hours. Redfish also can be found in the deeper water and snook along the vegetated shores and docks upstream.

Currently a trestle is under construction over Crane Creek for the future Brightline high-speed train, paralleling the old trestle, and boating is restricted around the construction site.

Rigg's Outpost, a tackle shop on the Crane Creek waterfront on Melbourne Avenue, offers kayak, canoe, paddleboard and pontoon boat rentals west of the construction site.

Those needing rentals on Sebastian River will find them at About Kayaks River Rentals on Airport Drive West off Roseland Road near the Wimbrow Park ramp.

The Eau Gallie River, including the Eau Gallie Yacht Basin, is known for its snook around docks, anchored boats and the railroad trestle, which is another Brightline construction site. Hopkin's Canal, a small drainage from the west, feeds minimum runoff into the Eau Gallie River. Most of the snook are resident fish available year-around. Small tarpon, redfish and seatrout can be added to the catch list in the yacht basin. Ballard Park offers bank fishing. For boaters, a recently re-designed boat ramp puts you minutes from your fishing.

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