



A Look at Florida Wildlife

Mike Laptew, AKA The Diving Fisherman offers a fish-eye (and sometimes gator-eye) view of Florida fishing in July.

I guess one of the things I most enjoy about Florida is its diversity. When I drive around I'm tempted to say that all of Florida has become a giant strip mall, but that's not entirely true, despite the fact that many areas seem to be carbon copies of the neighborhood down the street -- homogenized, pasteurized, sanitized and just another cloned example of urban and suburban sprawl.



There are still plenty of places that are teeming with wildlife.

Gators have certainly made a comeback and this little "grunt" is one of thousands of young alligators looking for their own little piece of the wilderness.

Mangrove trees provide a nursery area vital to wildlife that lives above and below water.



Biologists now estimate that there are over one million alligators in Florida.



In July, 2006 I went on a photo shoot in Florida with a number of very talented anglers. I started my trip by flying into West Palm Beach and then driving up to Jensen Beach where Captain Jim White and I teamed up with Mark Nichols, the owner of D.O.A. lures.

Captain Nichols at the helm of his flats boat heading down the Indian River

Our base of operation on the first leg of our trip was at Captain Rufus Wakeman's terrific River Palms Cottages and Fish Camp. Located on the western bank of the Indian River it is a 7.2 acre tropical paradise filled with lush plants and incredible edibles like mangos, bananas, lychees, guava, passion fruit and many other exotic fruit trees.



Check out the accommodations at <http://www.planetwebdesigns.com/RiverPalm/index.htm> it was the perfect location for R&R and to launch our fishing adventures from.

We met up with Mark and over the course of two days we got quite a tour of the Indian River where we fished his array of amazing soft plastic offerings.



Whether we worked the little shrimp off a flats boat or from shore, we found there were always game fish willing to eat.



As you jerk the rod, the DOA "clacker float" creates noise that draws the attention of hungry fish and then the slow sink rate of the shrimp drives fish to strike.



Even tiny trout and lookdown fish fall for these effective soft plastic offerings.



Mark Nichols with a snook he fooled into eating one of his Terroreyz lures. Later that day I watched him fight a 6 foot tarpon that nailed one of his tiny Soft-shell crabs.

On this fishing trip I learned that elephants do indeed eat peanuts and if you don't have a selection of DOA offerings in your tackle box, you're missing out on using some of most effective soft plastic baits ever made. Make sure you include the phosphorescent glow variety of shrimp, they seem to manufacture fish!

Visit <http://www.doalures.com> and see why the company tag line is "The Unfair Advantage."

On the second leg of my shoot I teamed up with my wife Donna to visit Captain George LaBonte in Jupiter. The snook fishing in July is typically out of this world in Jupiter (no pun intended).



Within sight of the famous red lighthouse you'll find huge schools of spawning snook making their way to the beach.



There was lots of boat traffic due to the opening of the lobster mini-season.



The mouth of the inlet is where the big schools of snook hole up.



The south breakwater at Jupiter Inlet is a popular shore fishing spot.



This boat blowing diesel fumes is in the midst of salvaging buried treasure.

In 1990 I videotaped the bottom off the south jetty where the boat above is still recovering treasure. Little did I know that while I was filming someone's lost drivers license sitting on the bottom there was actually millions of dollars worth of gold, silver and jewelry directly below it. That's an example of the extraordinary luck I have – always close, but no cigar.



Captain LaBonte with one of the dozen or so "nuisance" false albacore or Little Tunny that most anglers would love to connect with; George, pictured with the rod in his hand is very proficient with the cast net and most days start out with a live well blackened with every imaginable type of live bait.

For the best possible help in connecting with trophy fish consider chartering George...check out his website <http://www.edgesportfishing.com> and if you're into sailfish you have to pick up a copy of his new book "Sportsman's Best: Sailfish," it's a must read for anyone interest in catching these sensational game fish.

Check out this review:

http://www.tcpalm.com/tcp/fishing_and_boating/article/0,2820,TCP_24440_4861591,00.html

As always George put me in front of a mess of snook, jacks, rays, sharks and lobster.



In addition to the colorful reef fish, I was able to scrounge up a couple of lobsters for the camera...no small feat two days into the lobster mini-season.



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Where you find lobsters you often find the nurse sharks that love to dine on them.



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Big rays also scrounge the bottom looking for crabs and lobsters.



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Jack Crevalle often mix in with the schools of snook when there is bait in the area.



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The area holding the most bait was right next to the docks in the marina.



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Snook spend a lot of their time near the bottom; however they are always on the lookout for baitfish that might appear above.



July means spawning snook that are receptive to live bait as well as plugs; these ambush predators spend a lot of their time surveying the top of the water column.

Often found in large schools these are powerful fish that know how to wrap you in the pilings.



The beach north of Jupiter Inlet is a well known turtle nesting area and is duly posted as such.



Finding a turtle getting ready to lay eggs was yet another highlight to our trip. Please refrain from tossing balloons into the air, they often land on the water and are mistakenly eaten by turtles thinking they're jellyfish.



A visit to Florida can be a very rewarding experience, especially if you're looking for unique wildlife you won't find north of the Mason-Dixon Line. The lessons learned fishing Florida will help you connect with more fish back home...I know I added a few tricks that have already helped me catch more stripers.