

The Lure of Southwest Florida

A dream destination for fly-fishers

I glanced across the bayou and there it was: a small patch of nervous water. A second later I saw the redfish, nose in the sandy bottom rooting for crustaceans, the top triangle of its black-spotted tail waving above the surface. I made the cast, about twenty yards, and my “Norm’s Crystal Schminnow” landed in front of the fish’s nose. I stripped the line once, the fish turned, and took the fly. I set the hook and the shallow water exploded as the fish shot away like a rocket and my reel started to scream. It was a beautiful sunrise on one of Sanibel Island’s fish-filled mangrove bayous.

Sanibel and the surrounding waters in Southwest Florida have all the things saltwater fly-fishers dream about. On the gulf shoreline, along miles of clean-washed sand, anglers can sometimes wade in glass-clear water. In the inshore waters, shallow-draft boats provide access to a maze of bayous, tidal creeks, mangrove thickets, and a miles-wide expanse of rich grass flats. All around swim dozens of predatory game fish that eagerly attack streamers and top-water flies.

As an internationally famous tourist destination, Southwest Florida and its barrier islands receive prominent mention in Florida travel guidebooks. But the world-class fly-fishing opportunities available often are barely mentioned.

Cape Coral resident Bill Pegram, a retired guide and Fenwick Fly Fishing School instructor who has fished the area for decades, calls it one of the best. Pegram, who guided from the Rockies to Maine and Mexico, says the reason is “the variety of species, which very few other saltwater fly-fishing venues in the world have....It’s the element of surprise that makes it so exciting when you are fishing down here.”

By Norm Zeigler



PHOTO BY TRAVIS ZEIGLER

Norm Zeigler shows off a summer snook he hooked before releasing it to fight another day.

The reason for the region’s superior angling opportunities lies in its fortuitous location in the middle of multiple marine ecosystems. The Gulf of Mexico, Pine Island Sound, San Carlos Bay, Estero Bay, Charlotte Harbor, and the Caloosahatchee River estuary provide a rich mix of waters, which in turn promotes ideal conditions for the underwater web of life.

The list of fly-fishing quarry around Southwest Florida reads like a *Who’s Who* of subtropical and temperate-water game fish. Most common are snook, redfish, spotted sea trout, tarpon, jack crevalle, Spanish mackerel, pompano, bluefish, sheepshead, mangrove snapper, and ladyfish. Less common are a host of other species that appear in smaller numbers or only periodically, including tripletail, permit, barracuda, and cobia. Except during storms and the worst winter cold spells,

there is good fly-fishing for one or more of these species at any time of year.

Barring the toughest weather conditions, hiring a fly-fishing guide is a virtual guarantee of success. But it is also possible to fish—and to catch—on your own. Having a boat increases the options, but there are also many places to wade or fish from shore.

In the warm months, from May to September, anglers have good chances to experience one of the most exciting kinds of fly-fishing: sight fishing for snook from the beaches. On blue-sky summer mornings with a light breeze and crystal-clear water, it is every bit as thrilling as flats-fishing for bonefish.

The snook glide through the shallow water like ghosts, singly, in pairs, sometimes a half dozen or more. They move with the tide and current, close along the



If it's worth a trip it's on



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beach, hungry, and aggressive.

Sight fishing for snook along the beaches calls for special techniques. They cruise so close to shore sometimes that it is best to stay ten or fifteen feet back from the water's edge. Anglers should watch which way the fish are moving, get ahead of them, cast the fly three or four feet in front of them, and strip it away. Casting over the snook or stripping the fly toward them will spook them almost every time.

Unlike sea trout, snook are not light shy and, depending on the wind and the tide, they will hit all day long. Sight fishing along the gulf shoreline is possible to varying degrees on most of the barrier islands, including Boca Grande, Upper Captiva, Captiva, Sanibel, and Estero Island. Bonita Beach and Naples also offer opportunities.

The best all-around fly-fishing gear for Southwest Florida (excluding tarpon) is a seven- to nine-weight rod with a floating line. The most effective flies I have found are my Norm's Crystal Schminnows (white marabou tail, pearl-colored crystal chenille body, and monofilament eyes), chartreuse and white deceivers, and chartreuse and white Clousers. Tarpon flies are in a category all their own, with black, purple, and brownish-gray among the most popular colors.

Besides the beaches, the region's other major fly-fishing environments are mangrove estuaries and grass flats. Pine Island Sound and Charlotte Harbor have many square miles of flats. Behind the barrier islands lie countless bays, inlets, and brackish backwaters. On Sanibel, the J.N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuge offers one of the richest possibilities. There is sometimes good fishing from shore, but a shallow-draft boat is required to get to the best places. One of the most productive is Tarpon Bay, where kayaks and small boats are available for rent.

An effective tactic in the mangroves is casting flies to the tangled maze of vegetation along the shorelines. Large sea trout, redfish, and snook often lurk between the roots and under overhanging branches. This method is most effective during high tides, when the water rises far into the mangrove thickets.

On the grass flats, the most common tactic is poling a flats boat over the flats and trying to spot the fish. This is especially effective for "tailing" redfish, which root around in the soft bottom to expose



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PHOTO BY NORM ZEIGLER

Dennis Cannizzaro of Ft. Myers fights a fish at sunset along the Sanibel shore.

their food sources. Blind casting to pot-holes—deep, sandy-bottom spots—can also produce many hookups.

Longtime Sanibel snowbird Dick White, who summers in Minnesota and is vice president of the Sanibel Fly Fishers club, has been hooked on the area's fly-fishing for more than fifteen years. "The combination of the weather and the fly-fishing make it one of the most pleasurable places to fish in the U.S.," he says. "And it's a year-round fishery. You can't say that about most places north of Georgia."

Surveys show that the elusive snook are the region's most sought-after game fish. But when queried about his favorite fly-rod quarry, former guide Pegram does not hesitate. "The ladyfish and the jacks are my babies," he says. Both are plentiful in number as well as terrific fighters, and ladyfish rival small tarpon in their aerial antics. He likes to use a five-weight rod unless the jacks are too big.

The toughest and most adventurous kind of fly-fishing in the region is pursuing tarpon. Though the Keys get much more press for their tarpon action, the first tarpon ever caught on rod and reel were landed in Pine Island Sound. But going after the silver kings is not simple or easy. For those unfamiliar with the area waters, a guide is almost a must for tarpon fishing. Without one, chances of success are mediocre to slim.

There is no guarantee, and good fishing opportunities of course depend on the

weather, but there are few places with greater chances for catching a wide variety of fish on a fly rod than the waters of Southwest Florida. 🦅

Writer and journalist Norm Zeigler is an avid fly-fisher who lives and works on Sanibel. His Crystal Schminnows are available at The Bait Box on Sanibel.

CASTING ABOUT FOR DETAILS?

Information on fly-fishing in Southwest Florida is available from a number of sources, including the chambers of commerce in Sanibel-Captiva and Ft. Myers Beach, as well as the Lee Island Coast Visitor and Convention Bureau.

There are several good fly-fishing shops in the region where it is possible to book guides as well as obtain equipment and information: Lehr's Economy Tackle, 1366 North Tamiami Trail, North Ft. Myers, 239/995-2280; Lee Island Outfitters, 17699 Summerlin Road, Ft. Myers, 239/437-5488, e-mail mike@leeislandoutfitters.com; and The Bait Box, 1041 Periwinkle Way, Sanibel Island, 239/472-1618. On Sanibel, visitors can book ahead with Captain Mike and Joyce Rehr, 1155 Buttonwood Lane, Sanibel, FL 33957, 239/395-9442, e-mail joymay@aol.com. The going rates for guides vary from around \$350 to \$450 per day, or \$200 to \$250 for a half-day.