

The Montauk Experience

By JOEL LUCKS

Timing is your best technique for catching trophy stripers during Montauk's fall run

D“BLITZ!” THE YELL FROM the captain cut through the early morning fog and sent shivers of excitement up my spine. I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. It wasn't long after leaving the harbor before the captain spotted birds dive-bombing the surface and picking off baitfish. The adrenaline started pumping and simultaneously we all grabbed for our light tackle. The water boiled fast and furiously with action. Voracious bluefish were jumping out of the water doing somersaults, darting with torpedo speed back and forth through the school, chomping away at anything that crossed their paths. We drifted the periphery of the pod. One or two anglers stayed with the surface action, casting poppers, divers and tins as hard and as far as they could; others, including me, switched to diamond jigs to target bigger fish below. We drilled up and down as fast as we could. While the muscles in our arms burned and quivered from the strain and excitement, there was no let up. We followed the blitz as it moved along

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I'M HERE FOR MY MEETING WITH THE MAN IN THE BLUE SUIT.

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Whether fishing from the bank or from a guide boat, finding a striper blitz is an experience you won't soon forget. Photos: Gary Tramontina and Joel Lucks



Shagwong Beach all the way out to the lighthouse before breaking up and dispersing nearly an hour later. We were exhausted. But with grins on our faces and a few fish for the cooler, we acknowledged what we had just experienced. This kind of fall action is what Montauk is all about. In the months leading up to this time, anglers lose sleep waiting for the first signs of the run.

Every year thousands of vacationers from around the country flock to Montauk Point on Long Island, the easternmost tip of New York state. Affectionately referred to as The End, its world-class beaches, unpretentious charm and quaint nautical ambience greet thousands of visitors between Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends. The clean, aqua blue waters of the fall, the crystalline beaches and the plentiful marine life are quintessential Long Island. Below the surface, though, there's something else happening: It's called the "fall run." With the undulating ocean currents and tides that pass the Point every day, the water is constantly replenished with nutrients and plankton and is a fertile backdrop for attracting big pods of baitfish. Those pods of baitfish in turn attract a wide range of saltwater species of predator fish, including the star of the fall run, the striped bass.

THE OPPORTUNITIES OF MONTAUK POINT

At Montauk Point, known as the "Sportfishing Capital of the Northeast," the fall run is a special time of year that draws fishermen from all around the country for a chance to catch a big cow striper and the bragging rights

Although other species of fish will be caught around Montauk, it's the bully stripers you are after.

Photos: Gary Tramontina and Joel Lucks

that follow. As Montauk's winter blackfish season and offshore wreck trips for cod, pollock and ling transition into Montauk's spring fishing for fluke, bluefish and "schoolie" striped bass, it is the autumnal transition from summer into the striped bass fall run that fishermen most anticipate. Early in the season you'll find live baits produce better, while trolling and jigging techniques later in the run unlock the door of opportunity for bigger fish.

As an angling bonus, because of the proximity of Montauk to the Gulf Stream, if conditions cooperate, the early fall run of striped bass can overlap with the potential for some warmwater offshore canyon fishing trips, too. And who wouldn't want to add a nice yellowfin, bluefin, marlin or swordfish to those bragging rights? Nailing down the "run" to a specific time, though, is contingent on several factors including water temperature, the presence of baitfish off and around Montauk Point, and weather patterns. Even hurricanes and tropical storms as far south as Florida can affect the bite up north.

Further enticement for fishermen is the traditional herring run that usually occurs right around the Thanksgiving holiday. Herring can really turn the bite on in those last weeks of the fall striper run. Unfortunately, in 2007 the herring didn't show up until after the bass season closed, and it was a short-lived run. It

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ON THE WATER, MEMORIES AREN'T MADE,
THEY'RE CAUGHT.

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was good for those who like pickled herring, but not good for bait fishermen looking to cash in on the last of the striper season. Timing, therefore, is the best technique for success, but the least controllable. One thing is certain: By Labor Day weekend, reels have been serviced, fishing lines have been replaced, hooks have been sharpened, and surf casters and charter-boat and party-boat fishermen have flooded Montauk to get in on the fire-hot action of the fall run.

The Offshore Option

The fall run is not limited to striped bass or bluefish. The timing of the fall run of stripers also coincides with great bottom fishing for blackfish, sea bass and, on the offshore wrecks, codfish, pollock and ling. These species are bottom dwellers. Heavy lead will be required to hold the bottom — drops between 180 and 200 feet are not uncommon. Baits such as green crabs and Asian crabs will produce great catches of blackfish and sea bass; softer baits, such as clam muscle, will produce better results with cod and pollock.

STRIPERS BY LAND OR SEA

Long Island is the largest true island in the continental United States. It's more than 100 miles in length, varies in width from 12 miles to 23 miles, and is surrounded by the East River, the Long Island Sound and the Atlantic Ocean. It's no wonder that Montauk and the extending east ends produce such an incredible fall run of striped bass. You will find you've got a definite shot at snaring a state record. The New York state marine coastal record for a striped bass, set in 1981, is 76 pounds; the largest bluefish is 25 pounds; the largest tautog (blackfish) is 19 pounds, 12 ounces — and those are just Montauk's inshore species. Switch over to offshore species and you'll see state records for huge yellowfin, bluefin, dolphins and many more species. Granted, these are state records and in some cases have stood the test of time; but recreational catches of striped bass, for example, are very common in the 40- to 50-pound range, and they are chasing big baits. And as the fall tides sweep in and out past Montauk Point, stripers are fattening up for their long migration south. Reports will circulate pretty quickly when the fall run starts.

For surf rats who visit Long Island, there is no shortage of public shoreline from which to cast your lines. While the beaches — from Atlantic Beach in western Nassau County to, quite literally, right under the lighthouse in Montauk — can be shoulder to shoulder with surf casters, Montauk Point is where the real sharpies go. At times, fishermen can carpet the beaches out there. Other times, during the week and especially at night, you may see only a handful of fishermen casting lines. But those night stalkers are the ones who catch fish. With long sticks that can range between 10 and 12 feet long, they're casting big slurping poppers, divers that wiggle and twist 4 to 6 feet below the surface, and tins that flash through the surf like sardines or herrings. If you're using live baits, don't be shy about using big baits; bigger baits attract bigger fish. After the sun goes down, the winds calm and the water gets flat (and you've timed the tide just right), you can smell the fish rising to the surface to feed.

Fishermen who prefer to leave their waders behind can choose from more than 50 for-hire charter boats in Montauk. While timing is the best technique, many captains will have a trick or two of their own to tempt even the laziest of stripers to take bait. Early in the fall,

running live baits such as eels, porgies or clam bellies can produce very good results. Chunk baits such as bunker will also produce big fish. The most common live bait that produces the most consistent results is the eel. Eels, however, can be expensive, and stripers can be finicky eaters. So, when live baits don't work, you'll have better luck bouncing diamond jigs off the bottom or using wire line and jiggling green parachutes on a troll. Fall surface blitzes, like the one I experienced, are very common. Captains will glass the immediate horizon looking for the telltale signs of birds hitting the surface, where the water boils from chopper bluefish chasing bait. But it's not the bluefish he's after; it's the striped bass that lie beneath. While stripers can be aggressive fish, they usually don't compete with bluefish on the surface. They can be very content to just inhale bits and pieces as they drift by them. When there's a blitz on the surface, diamond jigs might be your best choice. Sometimes the bluefish are so thick, though, even jigs can't get to the bottom. During those times, pull out the light tackle or fly rod and just have fun with the bluefish. Out in Montauk, it's not about filling your freezer with fish; it's about making memories — and one visit to Montauk will give you plenty. ISW

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Connecting with Deep Dots

By DAVID A. BROWN

Here's how to find and catch redfish you can't see

SIGHT FISHING IS probably the most common strategy for redfish pursuits; just look for fish, their shapes or shadows, their wakes or "nervous water," and cast accordingly. However, when weather, tides and/or habitat eliminate the visual element, anglers who understand the tactics of deep water recon can keep the lines tight even when they can't see their quarry.

For clarity, we're talking about tournament-size "slot" fish — those fitting into a state's minimum and maximum size limits. Mature redfish of 20 pounds or better roam near shore reefs and gather near coastal passes each fall for spawning. For simplicity, we'll stick to reds that make in-shore and coastal waters their home. *(continued)*



When there isn't a tail to be found, heading to deeper water can yield healthy reds.
Photo: David Sams

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Connecting with DeepDots

Deep water redfishing — generally, deeper than 10 feet — relies more on deductive reasoning than direct observation. What's the water doing? What does local structure offer redfish? Where's the food? Saltwater neophytes can eventually figure it out, but anyone with fundamental bass skills will more quickly decipher the riddle.

In the coastal marshes of northeast Florida, Terry Lacoss, former bass tournament angler turned saltwater guide, often employs his freshwater background to find structures that attract redfish. When high tides conceal inshore spots, or when the skinny water bite is tough, he'll use his electronics to locate submerged oyster reefs that never see the sun. Lacoss has marked many such spots on his GPS, and anglers willing to flip on the sonar and go hunting will find their share of similar honey holes.

On Florida's west coast, Capt. Ray Van Horn, another bass alumnus now guiding along the coast, said: "Bass and redfish have many similarities, so guys who have a bass background have an advantage in terms of perspective."

For example: Van Horn and his tournament partner C.A. Richardson of St. Petersburg, Fla., once marked a bunch of redfish suspending in bait schools in the middle of a saltwater lake off Galveston, Texas. Running a couple of deep diving crankbaits through the hot zone yielded several hook-ups and exemplified a different layer of redfishing often overlooked by those who only work the shorelines.

"When you understand the deep game, there are literally no limitations, and that's an invaluable perspective that most shallow water fishermen don't have," Van Horn said.



Diving crankbaits found in freshwater tackleboxes work well on suspended reds.
Photo: David A. Brown

WHEN & WHERE

Now, you may not be able to visually locate redfish on their deep water spots, but these spots are hardly hidden. Usually, they're plain view structures or areas anglers simply overlook.

In southeastern Louisiana, Capt. Anthony Randazzo of Paradise Plus Guide Service finds redfish in the deeper channels of Mississippi Delta tributaries, along with bays dredged by the drilling industry. Even more consistent are the jetties of Tiger Pass, South Pass and Southwest Pass. Extending the farthest seaward and sporting a distinctive red lighthouse, the latter is a 24/7/365 sure bet for redfish action in all but hurricane conditions. Just a few miles from any of the Delta passes, near-shore drilling rigs in 30-plus feet attract hordes of redfish that feed around the heavy steel legs.

Throughout their home waters of Tampa Bay, as well as similar areas from the Florida Panhandle to Biloxi, Miss., Van Horn and Richardson find redfish near bridges, rubble piles and particularly around jetties. Offering shelter and

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SEEING SPOTS

The latter half of the redfish's Latin name — *Sciaenops ocellatus* — refers to the species' dominant marking, the dark spot on its tail. A clever design resembling an eye, the spot is intended to confuse predators into targeting the wrong end of the fish.

A single spot on each side is the norm, but variations are countless. Some have multiple spots evenly balanced from port to starboard, while others bear unmatched flanks. Spots can also range past a redfish's tail, occasionally stretching up to its gills.

Freckled redfish pop up from time to time. A redfish caught in Louisiana and held at the Aquarium of the Americas had so many spots that it looked more like a speckled trout than a redfish.

Theories of how redfish spots are determined range from salinity levels to geographic location. A common misbelief attributes the absence of spots solely to hatchery-raised fish. However, scientists say it's just nature's random selection.

Although rare, some adult redfish with no spots are caught. All reds begin life this way, but those destined to bear spots will develop the look of their lifetime by their fourth or fifth month.



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Braving the wakes thrown by tankers can mean hooking up with a deep water redfish.

Photo: David A. Brown

bountiful forage, such spots are the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches of fishing — always a good idea.

“These structures are redfish magnets, so you have to take a look at them, especially if there’s a lot of baitfish in the area,” Van Horn said. “Jetties create current breaks that make feeding stations. Current is a big variable (in determining) where those fish are going to be positioned.”

Van Horn notes that tide phases will usually offer sensible patterns for how the fish will stage, but this can vary with bait movement, so pay attention to where the food goes.

Richardson finds the first couple of hours of a tide cycle — in or out — most productive. Slack tides see little activity, while the velocity of peak flow keeps most fish tight to cover. However, when an incoming or outgoing tide starts rolling, reds will chew.

That being said, the tide isn’t the only water dynamic that makes the fish bite. Where ship traffic passes jetties, a good splash also can flip the feeding switch.

“Those fish are so tuned in to the boat and ship wakes that they will sit there and wait for (vessels) to go by, because the wakes wash a lot of crabs and crawfish out from those rocks. Then, they go crazy and start biting. It’s a pain trying to stand up in your boat when you’re bouncing around, but those wakes definitely stimulate feeding.”

BAITS & TACTICS

Because deep spots often comprise large structures or areas, search baits are the logical first step. On jetties, for example, Van Horn grabs his crankbait rod and turns on the trolling motor. “It’s straight-up power fishing until you find the mother lode, and then you can slow down and use targeted tactics.”

Now, redfish are redfish whether they’re deep or shallow, but the dynamics of current and wave action necessitate some different presentations. Richardson

and Van Horn often throw heavy swimbaits around bridge pilings to probe for active areas.

Another good bridge tactic will ring familiar to bass anglers: the Carolina rig. Van Horn rigs a 2- to 3-ounce Tru-Tungsten weight with a glass bead above a main line swivel with 3 feet of 40-pound fluorocarbon leader on the other side. At the terminal end, he runs a Strike King flipping tube soaked with scent attractant on a 3/0 circle hook. In the water, this rig looks like a squid or shrimp struggling in the current, and the oozing scent closes the deal.

When they need to keep a bait off the bottom to avoid snags, Van Horn and Richardson use a saltwater version of the drop shot. A 2-ounce tungsten weight anchors a yardstick of 40-pound fluoro with a 3/0 circle hook tied at the top end. Nose-hooking a tube makes it stand out straight for better action and maximum hook exposure.

Butterfly jigs — shiny, oblong weights with twin hooks dangling from a set of arms rigged to a top eye — can prove irresistible to deep reds in heavy current. Similarly, the wider and lighter blades of big jigging spoons do a good job in slower water. Scented plastics on 1- to 2-ounce jigheads or Carolina rigs can attract otherwise difficult bites during slack tide or heavy current.

Whatever baits you prefer, Van Horn offers this advice for deep water redfishing: “You’d better have a good trolling motor, and you’d better have a good anchor with lots of scope. You have to cover a lot of water to find the sweet spots, and those spots can change throughout the day. Also, you’d better have a really good understanding of your electronics because those are your eyes.”

No question, transitioning from conventional shallow water redfishing to the stage of greater depth requires homework, astute perception and diligence. Like all things fishing, performance comes through practice, but for those willing to learn a new game, redfishing will never look the same again. [SW]



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One to Remember in Savannah

By SAM EIFLING

Fly fishing for redfish and trout in the bitter cold is a daunting chore. Here's how two ESPN Outdoors Saltwater Series contestants tried to beat the elements

IT'S UNSEASONABLY COLD even for mid-November on the south Atlantic Coast, and two anglers and their guide, competing in the second and final day of the ESPN Outdoors Saltwater Series Redbone Savannah Red Trout Celebrity Classic, are swaddled in winter clothes for their morning run.

Hoods, hats, gloves, glasses, boots, balaclavas, synthetic windproof/waterproof/painproof this, that and the others ... the works for four guys in an 18-foot skiff racing north through the Intracoastal into a 20 mph head wind. It's 7:30 a.m. on a Saturday, right about the time when dreams are supposed to be tapering off into thoughts of breakfast, not when we should be outfitted for an ice climb in the Andes. *(Continued)*

Photo: Seigo Saito

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One to Remember in Savannah

Sitting on the floor of the boat with his back to the onrushing chill is Bob Vaught, visible only as a strip of pink face underneath the hood of his Weather Channel-branded jacket. He's going fly fishing — fly fishing! — and looks like he's about to deliver a live report from the business end of a Nor'easter.

Across from him is Capt. Scott Owens, piloting this mad craft. Beside him is a friend of Vaught's since time immemorial, Johnny Hurlburt, who's clutching chemical hand warmers and has hunkered and knotted his body against the wind like a balled fist. On the floor across from him is a writer — who is of little consequence on this trip — who defines success as avoiding hypothermia.

How did we get to this point? Savannah's only two highway hours from Florida; we should be holding beers against our foreheads to stay cool. However, the tournament was going to unfold regardless, and the show must go on. Sub-freezing overnight lows were no excuse to renege. And in the case of Vaught, Hurlburt and Owens, redemption was on the line. Fishing in the tournament's fly division — the most technically challenging category, more daunting than throwing live shrimp or artificial lures on baitcasters — the men had caught only a single fish the day before. The good news,

at least, was that they had found gobs of redfish, 60 to 100 per school, meandering around a cove near Hilton Head, S.C., that Owens and Vaught had analyzed before the tournament. With a ruler and a map at Vaught's house, the men determined that this particular pocket of water would be the most sheltered from the wind.

And that turns out to be a good thing. The run up there is a different story. As the crew hits the water a little after 7:30 a.m., what had been merely a cold day becomes frigid while speeding at 30 mph into a 20 mph head wind.

The ride is nasty cold but endurable until we hit a bay fraught with whitecaps. An overnight northeast wind had blown the high tide a few inches higher than usual, and now, with the wind still blowing down the pipe between two islands and the receding tide pushing back against it, the little skiff struggles.

Then Owens blurts, "Sit up, sit up, sit up, sit up!" As he tries to weave through the wake of a passing boat, a wave slops over the port bow. Vaught springs up a moment too late, and the water runs over and under him, starting with the middle of his back.

As we press on across the bay, its surface a meringue, water sprays everywhere, soaking pants, leaving salt deposits on glasses, drenching shoes (and that's about all

that anyone feels from their toes for a while). The bottom of the skiff, built flat to allow passage into the shallowest backwaters, smashes against the waves. On the verge of calling it quits, Owens decides to take the long way — a series of back canals that adds 20 minutes to the trip but promises smoother passage.

We zip past homes. Big homes on the water, three-story jobs, serious nests; homes with central heating, toe-snuggling carpet inside, steaming coffee mugs you can wrap both hands around on lazy Saturday mornings under a down duvet with the dogs on the divan. Homes in which someone is slapping the snooze button and rolling over to spoon his sleeping wife. In which someone changes into the cotton socks, as the wool makes his feet sweat, and someone else stands an extra five minutes in a high-pressure shower, letting the bathroom mirror fog over completely.

Outside, wind blows against wet pants, up sleeves, into every exposed sliver of skin. The chill is a malice, a blind thing that peels you. The ride is, in all, the kind of experience that teaches a man not to whine about anything, ever.

Around 9 a.m., after more than a solid hour of running, we pull into a shallow cove littered with exposed oyster beds.

Vaught pulls out his fly rod and from the casting platform on the bow sets about plopping flies in front of the redfish that Owens spots from the poling platform at the stern. Hurlburt amuses himself with a casting rod, making dozens and dozens of casts at various spots throughout the course of the day, without so much as a nibble to show for it. He's blind casting, probing. Vaught, though, is engaged in trying to fool fish with a feather, sight casting with a fly on saltwater, an elegant challenge that nonetheless pays quick dividends.

After a few minutes, Vaught lands a small redfish, silver in color, that Owens measures and kisses and releases even as Vaught readies the next cast. The day is still abusively cold but, shielded by an island with a dense line of oaks, hardly as windy.

Then, as quickly as it had revealed itself, the bite simply ceases.

Owens spots fish. He poles toward them. Vaught makes the cast. And the fish simply won't have it. This is the sort of fishing that acquaints anglers and guides with the fish they're chasing. It's a hunt,

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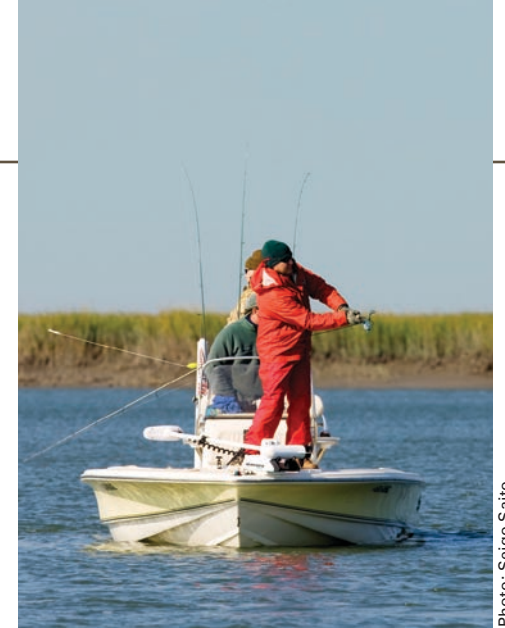


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The toughest days on the water are sometimes the most memorable. Plus, they make the great days that much better. Photo: Seigo Saito

and it's visual. When Owens notices the redfish pulling their pectoral fins close against their bodies, he knows it's going to be tough. Successful saltwater fishing requires a host of variables to align. The fish have to be present. The angler has to be able to cast well. The physical conditions need to be hospitable, and with the light wind and clear skies, Owens figures this spot should be good for five or six fish. But when the fish pull themselves in tight, ball themselves up the way Hurlburt did against the wind tunnel commute to get here, Owens knows they're not in a mood to be enticed by a fly.

Still, Vaught casts. He rigs different flies: a Razmataz, an EP shrimp, a Gold Wobbler, a Dorsey's Kwan. And yet, bubkes. We eat sandwiches. We massage hand-warmers. We wipe snot from our nostrils with sleeves and gloves. We discuss what life would be like if all our toes had to be amputated.

The sun wakes up. It turns out to be a nice enough day. But the fish do not want to come out to play.

We drift. We run. We cast at a dock. We hit more banks. We sway in the wake of a ferry. A trout nibbles at Vaught's fly, maybe. Suddenly it's 3 p.m., and lines come out of the water.

Only now does Owens get around to tallying the fish caught that day. On a clipboard he had kept dry in a garbage bag in a hull compartment, Owens marks the top line of a scoresheet. One fish. A red. On fly. At 9:29.

"That was a long day," Owens said, "to catch one fish at 9:29 and not another."

Weeks later, though, he still recalls that fish. That one fish. "Any time you work so hard for one fish, it makes it that much more special," the guide says. "It makes you appreciate that fish, that day, that moment, that second, that much more." He remembers it more vividly than any he caught even hours before on a trip when his clients boated 20.

There's something about one-fish days. With a fish in the boat at 9:30 a.m., a day never feels like it will be a one-fish day. But sometimes you run in the coldest, wettest, choppiest conditions you'd ever care to see, cast your heart upon the water for hours, and the elements reward you with a single fish.

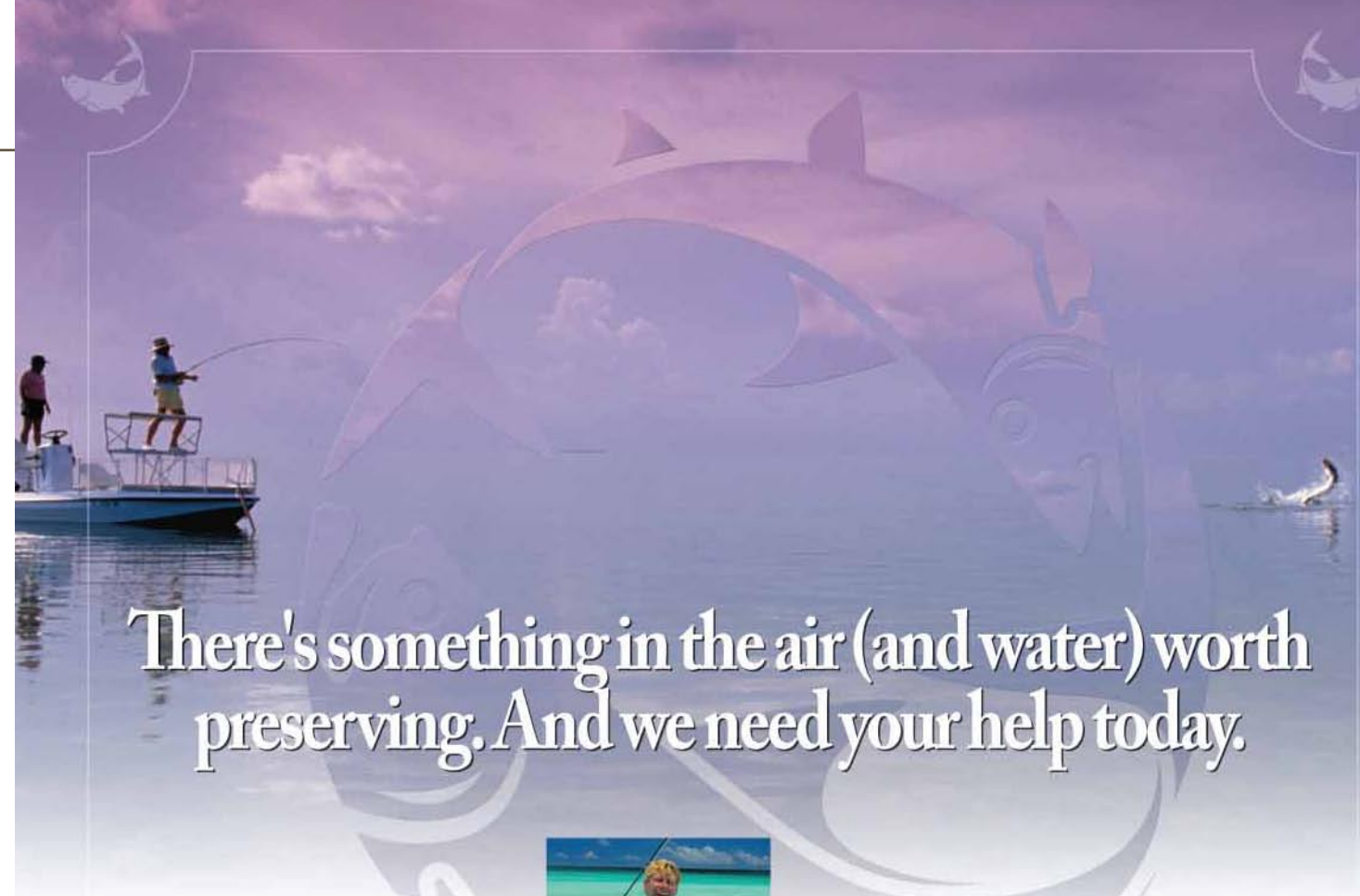
It reminds him of a fishing trip to the Marquesas the previous winter. For years, he had tried to catch a permit on fly. Permit — now that's a gamefish. Eyes like silver dollars. Doesn't miss a thing.

Three days he fished, casting well, casting badly, battling through everything. On the fourth day, wind whipped up whitecaps and forced him to the sheltered side of an island. Thirty minutes, he and his guide decided. Long run back. Thirty minutes, and they were out of there.

Fifteen minutes later, they had a permit on. Owens fought the fish for more than an hour before hauling it aboard and weighing the beast at 31 1/2 pounds.

"You ask me if I'd do it again," the guide says. "I'd spend seven days without catching a fish to get another one like that."

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L to R: Chico Fernandez, Diana Rudolph, Flip Pallot, Lefty Kreh, Rick Ruoff and Joan Wulff

Two-Lane Road to the Keys

By DAVID HUNTER JONES

In the Florida Keys, you'll find some of the best saltwater fishing in the world.

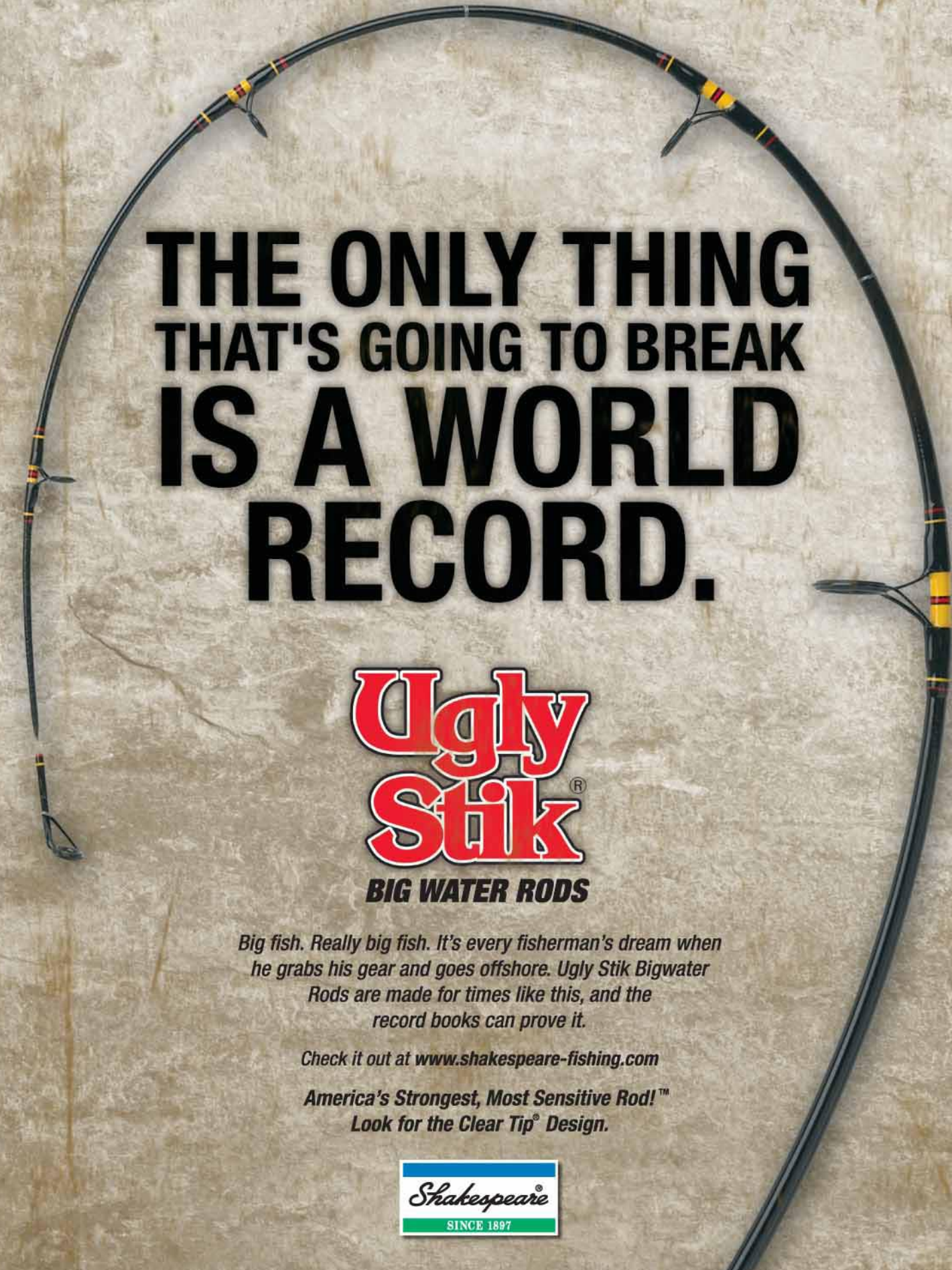
Two brothers who grew up bass fishing found that, and much more

IT'S LIKE YOU can see to the end of the earth," is how Bobby Lane describes cruising the shallows that surround the Florida Keys. "When you get out there first thing in the morning, it's like nothing you've ever experienced. Everyone needs to see this at least once in their lifetime. The 20 or 30 minutes you spend traveling to the fish will stay with you the rest of your life."

The Florida Keys are surrounded by what seem like innumerable miles of crystal-clear water that seldom exceeds 3 feet in depth. As you head out toward the Atlantic Ocean or Gulf of Mexico, the pristine waters evoke feelings of freedom found in few other places in the world.

"When you're out there before sunup, it feels like you're completely free and in tune with the fish and nature," Lane said. "There are no cell phones, e-mail or other distractions. Life slows down out there. It's all about fishing." *(Continued)*

Photo: Seigo Saito



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(Clockwise from left) Chris Lane holds his prize for winning the Pro Celebrity division. Chris with a red, one of the many species interested in his bait. Part of the enjoyment of the tournament for the Lane brothers was the opportunity to fish together again.

Photos: Seigo Saito



BASS BROTHERS GET SALTY

Bobby and his brother Chris are seasoned Bassmaster Elite Series pros. They have carved out names for themselves, on an individual basis, in the high-stakes, cast-for-cash Bassmaster Elite Series trail. To get away from the sometimes overwhelming pressure of BASS competition, and perhaps to get a little closer to each other, they traveled five hours south from their homes in central Florida to fish the ESPN Outdoors Saltwater Series Redbone Celebrity Tournament in Islamorada, Fla. This is considered an upper key, only a quarter of the way down the island chain (two hours' driving time from Miami and two hours from Key West). While it's not their typical style of fishing, it was not unfamiliar to the Florida natives. The Mercury Redbone tournament format brought back fond memories for the two.

"The best part about the whole thing — besides the scenery — was the chance to fish with my brother again," Chris said. "Granted, it wasn't for hundreds of thousands of dollars, but it was just great getting out there and fishing for fun like we used to."

"When we were growing up, we didn't have the opportunity to travel a lot and fish in different places, so it was great having Chris there to share the smiles and experiences with because he appreciates it as much as I do," Bobby said.

In the Redbone, an angler — in the Lanes' case, both of them — is paired with a local guide. The goal is a "slam," which entails catching a redfish and a bonefish in the same day. At each day's end, points are assigned for each fish caught to establish a leaderboard. Because no money is up for grabs, tension is removed from the

picture, which reflects the laid-back atmosphere of the Keys.

"It was nice fishing for fun for a change, and being in a completely different setting" Bobby said. "You know when that boat slows down you're about to have the time of your life."

Bobby and Chris fished in the Pro Celebrity division, and Chris' three redfish were enough for the win. For his efforts, Chris received a painting of a redfish and a bonefish from a local artist, which now adorns his living room.

TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

Despite the obvious differences between freshwater and saltwater fishing, the Lanes believe there are more parallels than contrasts.

The best method to find and catch a redfish or bonefish is sight fishing, something with which bass fishermen should be intimately familiar. When looking for reds or bones, however, you're looking either for fish "tailing" or a puff of sand signifying a bonefish has just sped from the area. A fish is tailing when it is rooting through the sand searching for a crab or shrimp and angles its body down, which exposes its tail to the air. It's not unlike a shark swimming with its dorsal fin exposed. While the Lanes are proficient saltwater anglers, a guide is indispensable when trying to catch fish or navigate the expanse of flats.

"Part of the reason it was so much fun was because we had a guide who knew what he was doing," Chris said. "He knew what to look for and more importantly where to place the bait, which is critical in the ultra-clear water down there." (Continued)

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Two-Lane Road to the Keys

"This isn't the kind of place where you can just move anywhere. In lots of places the water isn't even a foot deep," Bobby said. "Plus, a guide knows where to go. There's way too much water out there to try it on your own the first time."

Getting a slam isn't a matter of chance; you need to know where the fish are and how to best approach them.

"You need to look at how they feed," Bobby said. "It's like the difference between a deer and a cow. The redfish will sit and graze in one spot like a cow, and the bonefish is always on alert and moving, which is how deer are."

Like in bass tournaments, artificial baits rule the roost. The Lanes caught every one of their fish, regardless of species, on Berkley Gulp shrimp threaded on a jighead. The scent the Gulp baits give off creates something similar to a chum line. All that is required is a cast in the vicinity of a fish, and the scent takes over.

"My boat was like a Gulp graveyard," guide Mark Gilman said. "That's all we used all day."

The rods and reels used could easily be found in a bass boat. Spinning reels are the preferred choice for most saltwater fishing because they are easier to maintain and simpler to use. However, casting accuracy and distance are just as important, if not more so.

"We needed 8-pound-test line for the tournament, so we used braid that has the diameter of 3-pound-test

line," Bobby said. "You could cast those jigs a country mile with that thin line."

Light line is not only a tournament regulation, it is necessary to keep from spooking line-shy fish, similar to finesse bass fishing. The casting distance also keeps fish unaware of an angler's presence. For all its positives, the biggest drawback of light line carries over from the freshwater arena: more break-offs. This is truer in saltwater, as the fish are tougher. Bobby says when you compare a bass and redfish of equal size, the redfish wins hands down when it comes to brute strength.

"You can't just horse it in like a bass on 50-pound braid. You need to use more of the rod and tire the fish out before you can put the screws to him," he said. "Those reds are hard-pulling fish."

When looking at the flats skiffs moored in a Keys marina, one thing becomes apparent: These boats are made with shallow water in mind. With 30- to 50-hp motors, small gas tanks and a poling platform, these boats are as unique as the Keys themselves. Most weigh 500 pounds or less, and are maneuverable in 5 or 6 inches of water, a far cry from a half-ton bass boat.

Trolling motors are replaced by a 20-foot-long push pole made of fiberglass, graphite or a composite of the two. The pole is operated by the guide standing on the

(Continued)

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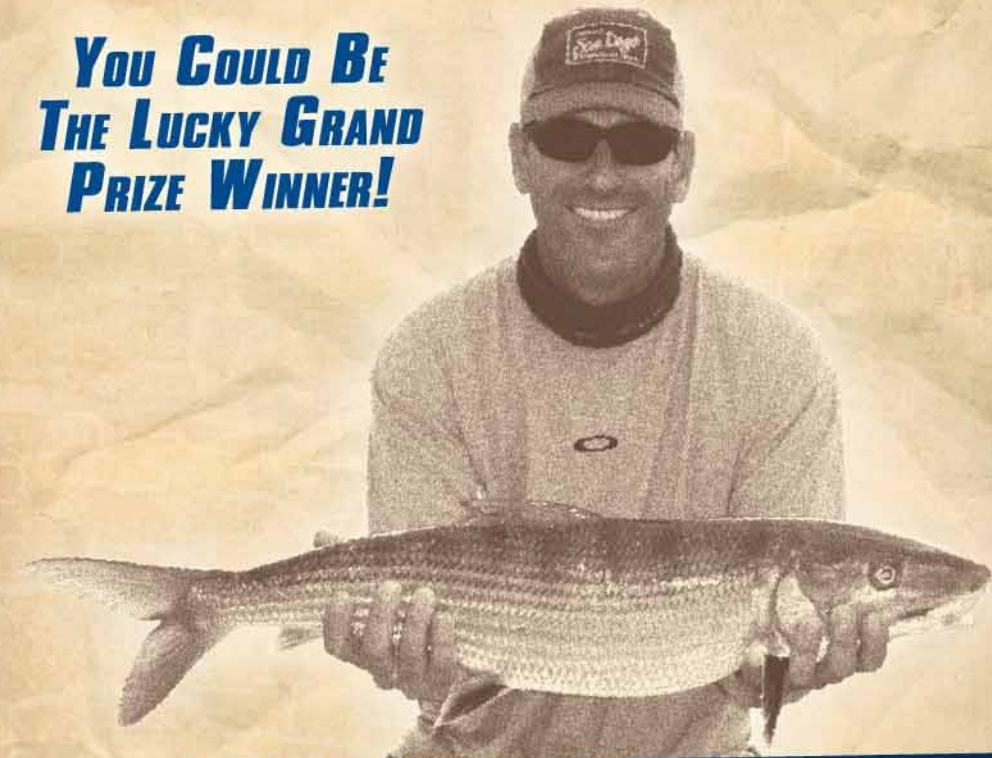
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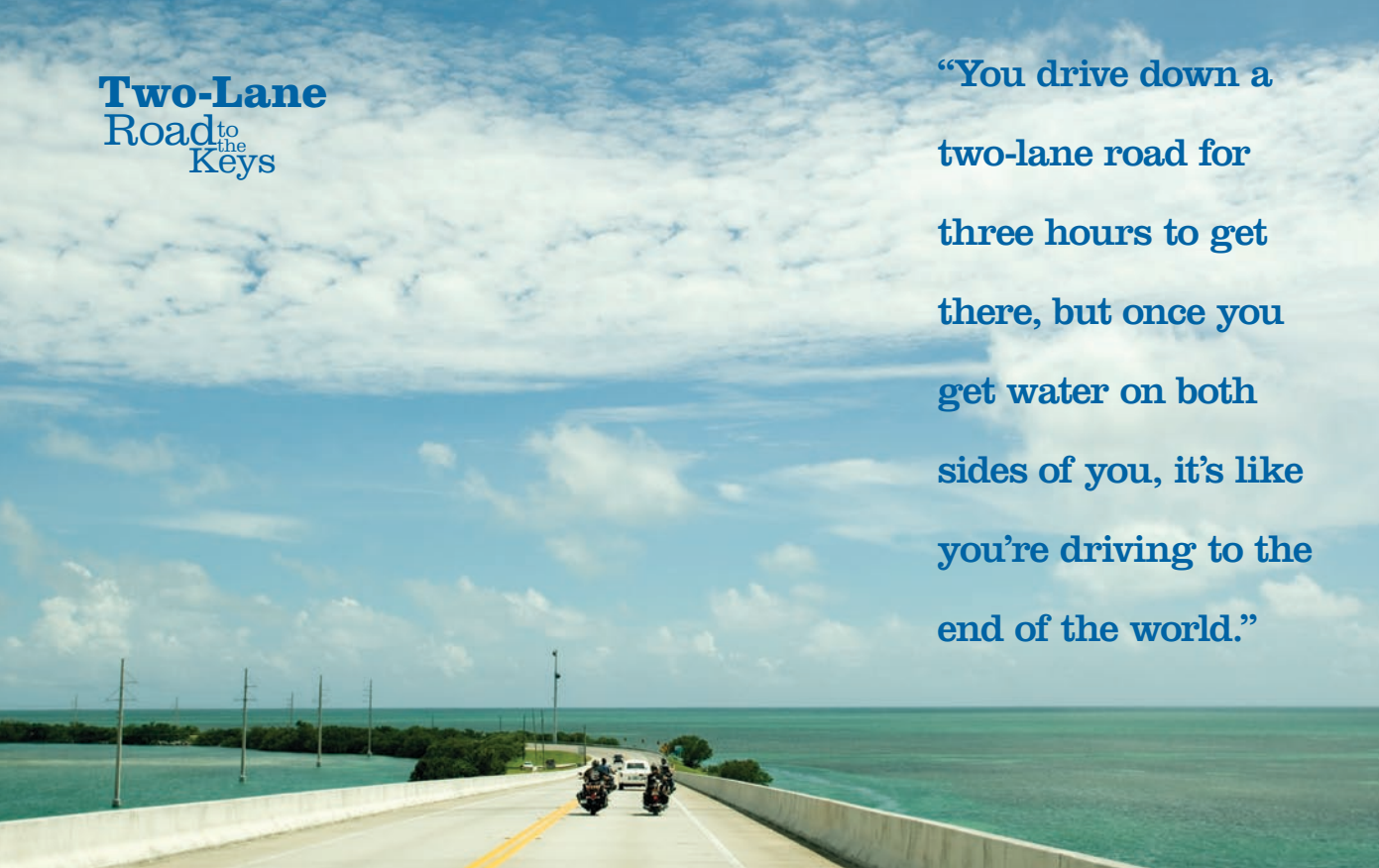


Photo: Seigo Saito

“You drive down a two-lane road for three hours to get there, but once you get water on both sides of you, it’s like you’re driving to the end of the world.”

boat’s poling platform above the motor, giving him leverage and a better vantage point. Looking at the guide, skiff and angler on the water reminds one of a gondolier rowing tourists through the waterways of Venice. Poling is the only way to navigate the flats if you want a chance at a phantom bonefish or spooky red.

The starkest difference is perhaps the most exciting thing about fishing around the flats, or anywhere in saltwater.

“Well, the biggest difference is probably the fact that you never really know what you’re going to catch,” Chris said. “We caught catfish, jacks, snook and even a shark, and we were only targeting bones and reds!”

NO SHIRT, NO SHOES, NO PROBLEM

To truly experience the Florida Keys, you need to get out on the water. Otherwise, it’s just another series of towns on a remote road. Once you leave Florida City, the southernmost town on mainland Florida, the road becomes Interstate 1, the only way in and out of the Keys by land.

“You drive down a two-lane road for three hours to get there, but once you get water on both sides of you, it’s like you’re driving to the end of the world,” Bobby said. “You can smell the saltwater and see all the billboards of people with big fish. You can’t help but get excited. And once you get out there, you see why all those signs are true.”

A lifelong bass fisherman, Bobby believes other freshwater anglers will be dazzled by what they find swimming in the flats.

“The fishing is different from any other type you’ve ever experienced in freshwater. Standing on the front of a little boat with a guide whispering in your ear while poling around in 6 inches of water is incredible.

“The fish are beautiful, too. In the Elite Series I see tons of largemouth and smallmouth, but when you land a big coppery redbfish it really kind of puts you in a different place.”

Bonefish are known as the bruisers of the flats despite their unassuming appearance. Bobby can attest to their strength:

“I had 200 yards of 8-pound-test braid on my reel, so getting spooled wasn’t even in my mind,” he said. “Mark (the guide) told me they’d run when you hooked one, but I had no idea what I was up against. When I laid into that fish, my reel was empty in under 10 seconds. I didn’t even know what to do.”

If fishing is the reason to come, the atmosphere is a reason to come back.

“You can’t beat it,” Chris said. “It’s a unique place with the sharks, tarpon and every kind of fish there. There are iguanas walking around all over the place, too. It’s pretty wild.”

“My grandfather took me and Chris fishing five days a week when we were little, but he also taught us about conservation, and when you’re down there you can really appreciate what he was talking about,” Bobby said. “There’s so much life in and around the Keys, it kind of gets in your skin. It’s a different kind of place and lifestyle altogether.”

While not a health hazard, those who visit may contract “Keys disease,” as Bobby did. Sufferers find themselves unable to resist the lure of the islands and their inhabitants, especially the finned ones.

“That one brief trip left a spot in my heart for bonefish and for the Keys. I’ve only been down there once and I’ve called the guide I know several times to set up my next trip. I’d go right now if I could.”

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