

The Best Fly Fishing in the Florida Keys



Bonefish

Photograph by Joseph Smith

Florida is a state that, for many, conjures images of sunny beaches, oranges, and an overgrown mouse who owns a large theme park. For fishermen, though, it often means the Keys. The Florida Keys are a 125-mile chain of islands that begin just south of Miami. A scenic 110-mile overseas highway with 42 different bridges makes for a trip just worthy of the drive.

The Conch Republic, as it is often referred to, is a separate piece of Florida that is unique in its own history and culture. Known for key lime pie, fruit-inspired drinks, and beautiful sunsets (complete with a green flash on lucky days), the Keys are also a fisherman's paradise. It was in Key West that Ernest Hemingway had a home and fell in love with deep sea fishing, and it still remains a [top fly fishing destination](#). If you get the opportunity, I strongly suggest you go.

As rules and regulations change, and hurricanes come and go, please consult the fishing regulations for up-to-date information before you go. Here is some information to help.



Snook

Photography by Joseph Smith

Geography

The Keys are broken down into roughly three parts. Knowing where you will be staying affects where you will be fishing.

Upper Keys

Upper Keys—The more famous Keys are Key Largo and Islamorada. Islamorada’s claim to fame is the fishing capital of the world, and it lives up to it. [Here are the top sites.](#)

- [The Everglades National Park](#) – This is not just a backcountry fishing **abode**. This is fishing in a jungle. Here, you will be off the beaten path, and instead of cell phones and traffic, you will only experience nature. You will want to have a good map or perhaps even hire a guide. The beauty of fishing here is that, around every corner, a new opportunity and a different fish lurks. **Here** anglers have a reasonable shot at completing a Backcountry Grand Slam, which is **the act of catching three** of the **four** fish **caught** on the same day: **Red Fish**, **Snook**, **Sea Trout**, and **Tarpon**.
- [Florida Bay](#) – Right outside the back door, this is a shallow bay with flats and sea grass beds. Although it is connected to the Gulf of Mexico, the geology and sea grass prevents extensive mixing of the waters. Here, anglers can target a wide range of fish.
- [Blue Water](#) – On the ocean side, this area is known for sailfish, swordfish, mahi mahi, and other pelagic species. This is a prime fishing location, and depending on what you plan to target, you can find it.
- [Islamorada](#) – Unfortunately, most of the wadable flats in this area are private property or restricted to hotel guests. There is a section that is wadable around mile marker 76 (right past Robbie’s where you can hand feed a large tarpon for a small fee). Look for the flat on the ocean side of the island. There is a ½ mile-sized stretch of small vegetation of sea oats, which is fishable for the DIY angler.

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Middle Keys

- —Marathon is the main town for these **K**keys. Often overlooked as people focus on Islamorada, this area **h**as plenty of opportunity as well.
 - **F**lorida Bay – Here, the bay **h**as far more salt flats with potential for anglers to achieve a Grand Slam, which is a **t**arpon, **b**one **f**ish, and **p**ermit **in this location**, within an area the size of a football field. The passes in the middle **K**keys are known to hold large numbers of tarpon, especially during the spring migration. The light-colored bottom **at this spot** here allows anglers to see these 100+ lbs. fish coming well in advance and gives their nerves plenty of time to mess the cast up.
 - **S**even **7** Mile Bridge – This bridge is one of the longest bridges built. Here, a large amount of water between the Atlantic and Florida Bay passes through this area, creating currents that make fishing this area well worth it.
 - **L**ong **K**ey **S**tate **P**ark – This state park is on the bay side of the island and offers several unique opportunities. The flats are wadable and are popular with **d**o-**i**t-**y**ourself anglers. Kayaks can also be rented from this park to increase the area fishermen can cover. Payment of a small fee will grant you access to the campground area where most of the wading is accessible.
 - **M**issouri and **O**hio **K**ey - Located just south of **S**even **7** Mile Bridge, on the ocean side, there is a small picnic area that has a wadable flat as well. This can be productive on an incoming tide.



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Lower Keys

- ◆ — The lower Kkeys are primarily Key West, which has a vibrant feel with plenty of bars and restaurants for after fishing activities, and Big Pine Key, which is more of a nature preserve, complete with chance to see the Keys Deer – a subspecies of Whitetail deer. These Keys are also not short of more perks.

- ⊖ ● Bahia Honda State Park - This state park is a gem and probably the more popular place for do-it-y-yourselfers. Hurricane Irma changed this park, but anglers can still wade the flats here to fish. A kayak you can stand in or a SUP (stand-up kayak) is often preferred as you can cover more water than wading, and you will also be higher, so spotting fish will be easier.

- ⊖ ● Boca Chica Canal Bridge – This bridge connects Boca Chica Key to Key West and produces many different species around its structure.

- ⊖ ● Key West – This area is primarily known for its flats fishing. Done primarily with a boat, wadable sections do exist at Smathers Beach and other locations.

- ⊖ ● Marquesas Keys – These uninhabited islands lie 30 miles further west from Key West. Boca Grande channel separates these islands from the rest of the Kkeys and traveling there can be hampered by strong currents. This area is known for large permit. In addition to permit, tarpon, bone fish, barracuda, and sharks can all be easily targeted here. Due to the distance, guided trips here are recommended.



Permit

Photography by Joseph Smith

Seasons

All species can be caught during the year, but there are some better times for certain species. Here are some general guidelines.

- January and February – Snook and bonefish

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- March – Snook and **bP**onefish; Tarpon start to arrive near Islamorada and Biscayne Bay
- April and May – Snook and **tF**arpon; Bonefish around Islamorada and Marathon
- June – Snook, **bP**onefish, and **tF**arpon appear around Islamorada to Marathon



Tarpon Photography by Joseph Smith

- July – Bonefish, smaller **tF**arpon, and **pP**ermit start to arrive from Islamorada to Key West
- August - Bonefish, smaller **tF**arpon, and **pP**ermit appear from Pine Key to Key West
- September - Bonefish, smaller **tF**arpon, and **pP**-Permit appear from Islamorada to Key West
- October – Snook, **tF**arpon, and **#**acks appear at Islamorada
- Year-Round – Redfish
- Winter – Spotted **sS**ea **tF**roun

Commented [1]: Hi, Joseph. Can we state where each type of fish begins to appear? Islamorada? Pine Key? etc. You mentioned some places for some of the months, but I'm wondering if we can provide all details for consistency.

Also: Just a note for the future, Curated lowercases fish names.

Gear

The fishing in the Kkeys can be demanding, and anglers should be prepared. Fishing in the Kkeys often requires gear that trout anglers typically would not think about. Make sure you talk to a fishing expert if needed at Curated.com to ensure you have what you need.

- Sunwear-Gear – Fishing in the Kkeys exposes the angler to sun. Make sure to use sunscreen, hats, UV apparel, and sunglasses (polarized lenses help spot fish easier as well).
- Rainwear-Gear – Quick rain showers can often blow through the keys. Ensure you stay dry with packable rain gear.
- Footwear – If you plan to wade the flats, get a good pair of flats wading shoes, as an inadvertent step could see you on the wrong end of a stingray buried in the sand.
- Rods – Rod size will vary based on the species chased. An 8wt fly rod is the standard size for most fishing applications. A 9wt may be desired for juvenile tarpon and permit. A 10 or 11-wt is certainly a solid choice when chasing large, migrating tarpon, and pelagic fish require even larger-sized rods. You will want a fast-action rod to help make quick casts into the wind and to help turn over large, bulky flies.
- Reels – Here, you will want a reel that can withstand the corrosive environment of saltwater fishing. A strong, smooth, sealed, or cork-based drag is ideal.
- Stand-up kayaks and stand-up paddle boards: The name of the game on the Keys is seeing the fish, and this often necessitates being on a skiff, a very small stand-up kayak or something similar like a SUP. These will help DIY anglers not only increase the amount of water fished but see fish that wading fishermen might miss.

Final Thoughts

Fishing in the Keys can be a fishing experience of a lifetime. There are many different species of fish, and anglers of all skill levels can have success. The universal name of the game, though, is proper planning, seeing the fish, and this often necessitates being on a skiff.

~~Stand-up kayaks and stand-up paddle boards will help DIY anglers not only increase the amount of water fished but seeing fish that wading fishermen might miss.~~ If you are doing this trip on your own, make sure you pay attention to the weather, especially if you are an inexperienced boater. You may come out of the mangroves after a day of fishing to find yourself in higher seas than you are comfortable with. The tide charts are also helpful as shallow water is very common in Florida Bay, and if you have a borrowed or rented boat, running aground is not a good idea.

Also, just due to the nature of the fishing, using a Florida Keys fishing guide can make all the difference in the world. There are many qualified guides in the Kkeys and with enough planning, one that matches your interests can be obtained.

If you have more questions on the Keys, which specific site might be best for you, and what gear to bring, feel free to reach out to me or our other Fly Fishing Experts at Curated. I hope you found this article helpful and that you can make it to the Kkeys one day. Tight Lines!