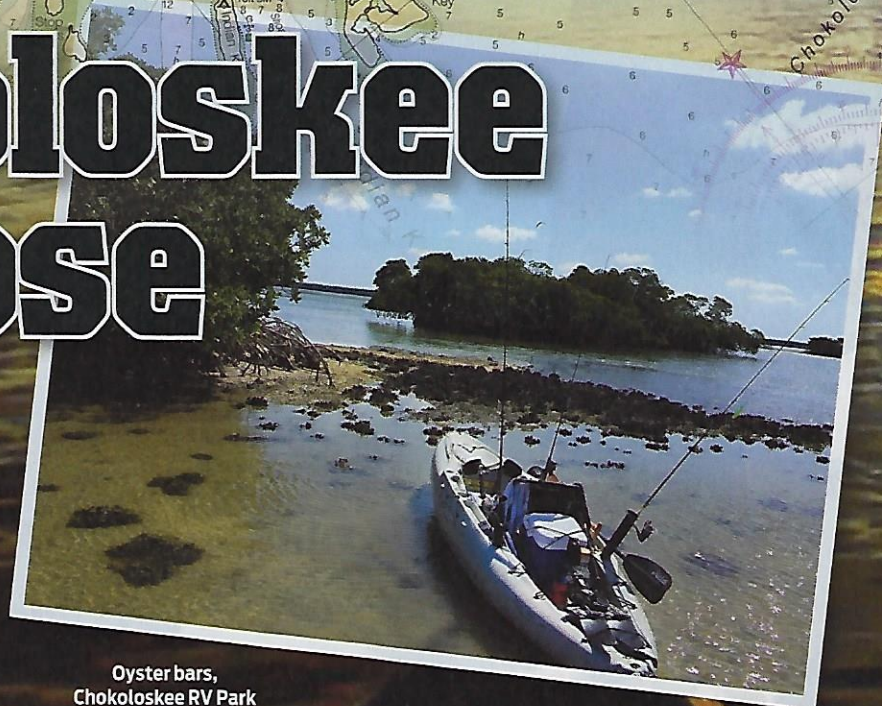
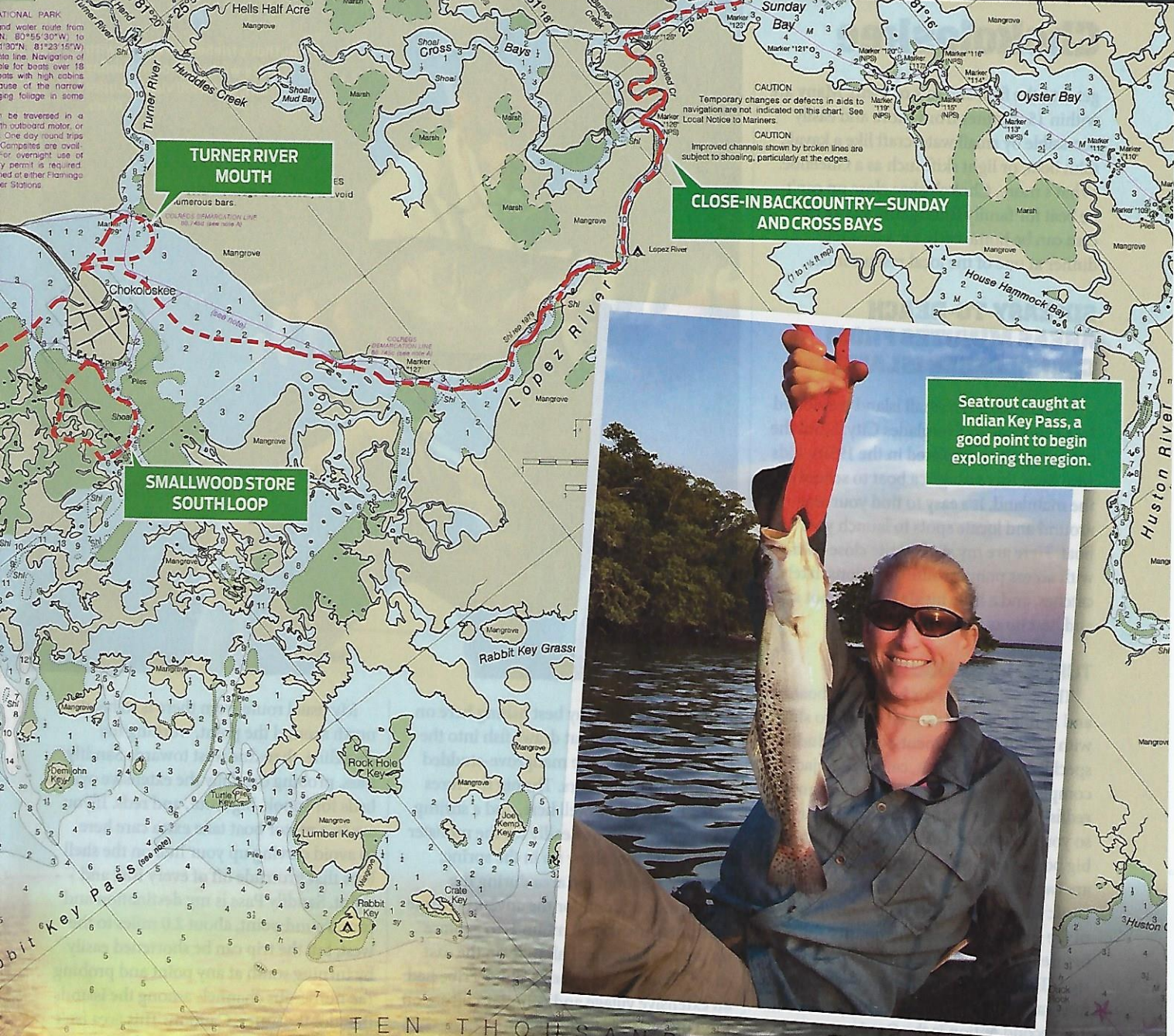


Chokoloskee Up Close

Start your adventuring
with these six quick
trips for light skiffs or
paddle boats.



Oyster bars,
Chokoloskee RV Park
Loop.



By Chris Duerksen

Chokoloskee Island and nearby Everglades City are gateways to some of Florida's wildest, most remote waters. They are also portals where past and present meet. Deep in the heart of the Everglades National Park and the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, peace and quiet and fishing reign supreme. Many of the descendants of the original settlers from the late 1800s are still around—like Kenny Brown, local historian par excellence who manages the Chokoloskee marina, and the Smallwood family that has run the Smallwood Store, a National Historic Register property, for over a century.

The fishing is rightly fabled. Presidents like Theodore Roosevelt and famous writers like Hemingway have plied

the waters in search of monster tarpon and snook for over a century. Angling remains outstanding today. Chokoloskee is one of few areas of southern Florida that escaped the deadly red tides in 2017 and 2018, the dinoflagellate blooms which killed tons and tons of fish on both coasts. Getting a slam here—a trout, red, snook—is common, and a shot at a tarpon to complete a grand slam are excellent. And that's not to mention the scads of ladyfish, jack crevalle, sharks, and gaff topsail catfish that will keep everyone on the boat busy and smiling.

There are dozens of good local guides that can whisk you to far-away hotspots like Lostmans and Rogers bays, but the good news is you don't have to run miles to find the honey holes and you don't need a big bay boat or fancy flats rig to

Chokoloskee

get into the fish, and lots of them. Many are within 15 minutes from shore and easily accessible by small watercraft like a kayak, john boat, or light skiff such as a Gheenoe. What's more, Chokoloskee close up can't be beat for family fishing fun, where the clan can be home early for a leisurely dinner at one of the local restaurants.

SIX EASY-TO-REACH AREAS MINUTES FROM CHOKOLOSKEE ISLAND

Chokoloskee is a small island connected by a causeway to Everglades City. Until the causeway was completed in the 1950s, kids who lived there caught a boat to school on the mainland. It's easy to find your way around and locate spots to launch your boat. Here are my six favorite close-in trips, with access points, route directions, likely catches, and a little inside dope on hot spots and best lures and bait.

TURNER RIVER MOUTH

This is a great trip for beginning boaters and families with kids—very close to shore with a willing assortment of fish including speckled trout, ladyfish, catfish, and jacks complementing some sizable snook and redfish. It's also a manatee slow-motor zone so you don't have to worry as much about big boats blasting through the area. There are two access points. The first is a free rustic kayak launch site on the north side of the causeway about one-quarter mile before the Chokoloskee Island welcome sign. The break in the mangroves has a nice firm sand bottom for launching your boat. The second option is the Outdoor Resorts marina right at the entry to the island that has a ramp where you can launch a motor boat for \$20. Kenny Brown, the amiable proprietor at the marina, rents kayaks and canoes as well as small power boats while throwing in colorful local history lore for free. (Caveat: Don't try to launch your kayak from the beach across the road from the marina. A few feet out it turns into a mucky, muddy flats that will suck you in to your knees.)

Once you are in the water with a kayak or canoe, head straight east across the shallow flats one-half mile to the islands that dot the mouth of the Turner River. Because the bay here is very shallow, motor boats are advised to make a loop around the flats following the well-signed route to the southeast that loops back to the



Author's friend Bob Wayne with a nice winter snook in Sunday Bay, accessed via the Lopez River.

mouth. I have had my best fishing here on a high, falling tide that draws fish into the channels between the mangrove-studded islands and oyster bars. The big five lures noted below all do well here, and a shrimp on a jig head can be deadly for the monster black drum that show up in the spring. Manatee frequent the area during the winter months, and for the adventuresome there are Indian shell mounds to explore up the river another half mile on the east shore. The now-vanished Calusa Tribe had an extensive village and complex culture on the Turner River in the 1600s.

CHOKOLOSKEE ISLAND RV/PARK LOOP

The launch point for this trip is the ramp at the venerable Chokoloskee Island RV Park on the north side of the island. The fee is \$10 for kayaks and \$20 for motor boats. I like this trip because you can be fishing in the crescent-shaped oyster bar just offshore directly to the southwest within five minutes of casting off. The inside edge of that bar is usually the best for reds using a popping cork and shrimp. Just north of the oyster bar is deeper water and a mangrove-studded island where snook, trout, and ladyfish lurk. A white curlytail paired with a 1/8-ounce red jighead or a white-lipped floater/diver minnow plug are the ticket.

My usual route from there is to head north around the point, working the shoreline, then due west towards Sandfly Pass, probing carefully the extensive oyster beds for snook, big trout, and reds. If you are in a motor boat take extra care here to avoid carving up your hull on the shell bars that protrude off of every islet and point. Sandfly Pass is my destination and turnaround point, about 2.0 miles to the west, but the trip can be shortened easily by turning south at any point and probing the numerous channels among the islands that dot the water. Caution: This area isn't known as the Ten Thousand Islands for nothing. It's very easy to get turned around and confused in the maze so I always carry a Top Spot waterproof map and my cell phone with access to Google Maps. I often see dolphins hunting mullet on this trip.

SMALLWOOD STORE SOUTH LOOP

This trip begins at the historic Smallwood Store on Chokoloskee Island where for \$10 you can launch your kayak from a sandy, postage-stamped sized beach. (Be sure to check-in the day before to make arrangements to pay and park if you are shoving off before 9 a.m. when the store opens.) You will head directly south about one-half mile on the well-marked Chokoloskee Pass route to a line of oyster bars just to the east marked by a few small



Redfish action has been solid in this corner of Florida for the last few years; perhaps fish escaping red tides? Below: Lunch break on Barron River. Below right: Indian Key Pass crab.



mangrove trees. There are some good holes on the west side of the bars that are favorites of trout, jacks, and ladyfish that, on an outgoing tide, like to dine on a white Gulp! swimming mullet. When the tide is up and flowing in over the oyster bars, get out your popping cork and a live or DOA shrimp for some fun with muscular reds, snook, and big trout. Just be careful of those pesky oyster bars, especially if you are in a motor boat.

After fishing the oyster bars, I usually turn straight west and fish the islands and points thoroughly for reds and snook before circling back through the islands to the Smallwood Store. A white diving plug fished close to the islands on a high tide can be deadly for good-sized snook. Try to get back in time to tour the store and museum that has preserved many of the original goods and fixtures. It's genuine old Florida. If you are out in the late afternoon, don't miss the hundreds of wading birds that put on an incredible show as they flock to the islands south of the launch to roost at night.

BARRON RIVER

Named after Barron Collier, the turn-of-the-century advertising mogul who developed Everglades City and Collier County, the Barron River sidles along the north edge of Everglades City on its way to the Gulf. Upstream, this tidal river offers a

potpourri of fishing venues ranging from narrow feeder creeks where big snook hide to expansive lakes with mangrove-edged shoreline flats where redfish hunt. The key to fishing here is to get out early before air boat music fills the air. For kayaks, there is an informal launch on the east side of Route 29 at the north end of the Everglades City entry bridge. There is plenty of room for parking, but be careful when launching your boat—the river is deep and current fast when the tides blast through under the bridge. For motor boats, the best put-in is the ramp downstream at the Everglades Rod and Gun Club, where the charge is \$20.

The most productive route is to head upstream from the bridge launch following

the river as it turns south. Most power boat traffic takes the loop north and east around the first big island, so I keep to the right and south probing the creek mouths and points for redfish and trout. There is lots of water to explore here, and the trip can be as short or as long as you like. Upstream the river drains several big lakes where I have lured reds, snook, and high-jumping baby tarpon. The river has a strong current so I like to ride the tide in during the morning and float back home in the afternoon.

ENP HEADQUARTERS/INDIAN KEY PASS LOOP

This trip that originates at the free kayak ramp at the Gulf Coast headquarters of Everglades National Park is a great combination of fishing expedition and ecotour. For motor boats, the closest access is from the ramp at the Everglades Rod and Gun Club. From the kayak ramp, head north to Bear Island, following the channel markers. Take care crossing the Indian Key Pass channel, where not all motor boaters follow the minimum-wake regulation. Bear Island sits at the mouth of the Barron River and will give you shots at snook and trout. I then follow the pass markers to the first big island to the west that never fails to produce trout and ladyfish. The next good-sized island along the pass route is a fun stop for the family to explore an old fishing camp wrecked by Hurricane Irma and wade the long sandbar. But don't be fooled—there are some big snook and reds not to mention trout and ladyfish that feed around the numerous oyster bars.

If the tides are out, stop to check out the oyster beds—they are the keystone species here in the Everglades. In other areas of Florida, sea grass flourish and provide shelter and sustenance for many critters, but not so much here. Rather

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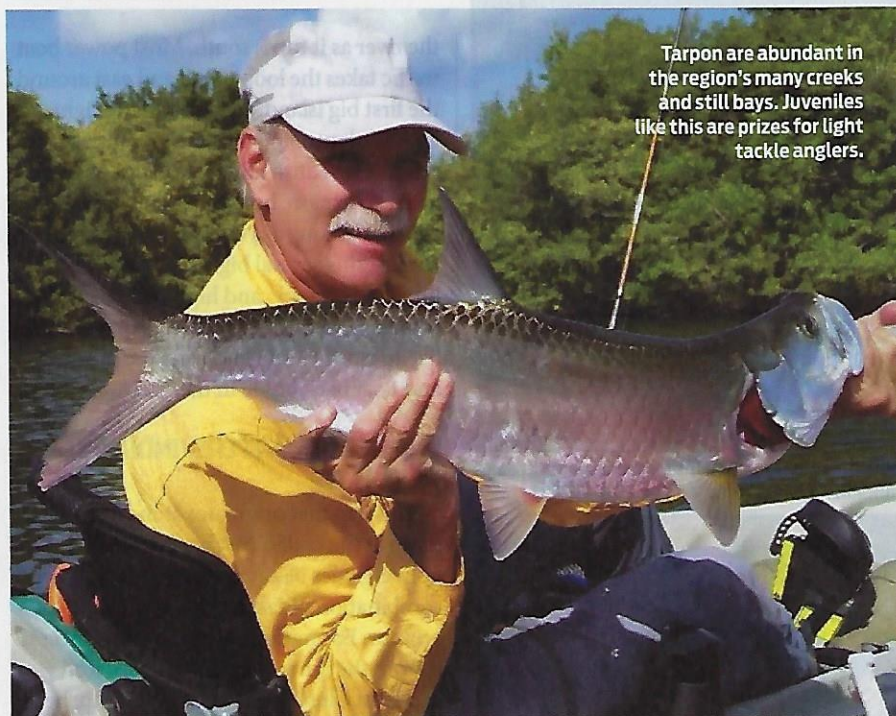


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Tarpon are abundant in the region's many creeks and still bays. Juveniles like this are prizes for light tackle anglers.

young oyster larvae drift in the current until they find a hard substrate—maybe a sandbar—then start building shells they will call home for the rest of their lives. As they grow they filter phytoplankton out of the water for food, helping to clarify the water and remove pollutants in the bargain. The shells themselves provide shelter for crabs, shrimp, and small fish. All this food makes the oyster bars magnets for bigger gamefish.

The ecotour continues just to the north among the mangrove islands that serve as nesting areas for pelicans, egrets, and other birds. The five creek mouths along the shoreline to the west all produce good fishing, especially on an incoming tide. The waters here are very shallow, especially at low tide, so take care, especially in a motor boat. For the ambitious angler, Lane Cove to the north provides a good loop trip with excellent shots at big trout and reds as well

as a good chance to see Roseate Spoonbills up close.

CLOSE-IN BACKCOUNTRY—SUNDAY AND CROSS BAYS

Most of the motor boats that blast off from Kenny Brown's Outdoor Resorts Marina on Chokoloskee into the Everglades Waterway and backcountry whiz by the good fishing in nearby Sunday and Cross Bays. They can be reached with a short 15-minute ride up the Lopez River. Work the islands, creek mouths, and east shoreline of Sunday Bay for a grab bag of trout, ladyfish, jacks, baby tarpon, and reds with an occasional lunker snook lurking under the mangroves. As you enter Sunday Bay, keep an eye out for pod of frisky dolphin. Another option is the north shoreline of Cross Bay that has good structure and also will give you a shot at multiple species including grouper. High tide is best to access shallow Cross Bay, hugging the east shoreline near the Crooked Creek Chickee to avoid the sandbars that criss-cross the bay.

FISHING/GEAR TIPS

The best mindset for fishing gear around Chokoloskee is to keep it simple. I usually carry a couple of 6 ½-foot medium-weight spinning rods paired with a 2500 or 3000 series reel. I recommend 30-pound

For More on the Area

Two of the best route guide books are *Day Paddling Florida's 10,000 Islands* and *Big Cypress Swamp* and *A Paddler's Guide To Everglades National Park*, available at local stores and the Everglades National Park headquarters in Everglades City.

The best source of kayak/canoe trip information, fishing tips, and outfitting around Everglades City is Capt. Charles Wright of Everglades Area Tours. Located on Chokoloskee Island, he is open daily and can be reached at 239-695-3633 or at info.EvergladesAreaTours@gmail.com. For tackle, Everglades Bait and Tackle in Everglades City opens faithfully every day at 6 a.m. The marinas and Everglades City hardware store and gas station carry a limited supply of tackle.

Both Chokoloskee and Everglades City have hotel rooms available, but they tend to fill up early on weekends. Outdoor Resorts of America on Chokoloskee Island and Chokoloskee Island Park and Marina are good choices if you are in an RV or trailer. Everglades City has a small grocery store and one gas station/convenience store. Good eats after a long day on the water: Island Café, Camellia Street Grill, and City Seafood, all in Everglades City. Havana Café on Chokoloskee Island is the choice for breakfast or lunch.

Camping: Chokoloskee Island Park & Marina, RV and tent sites, rental units; 239-695-2414; www.chokoloskee.com. Also Trail Lakes Campground, Ochopee, tent camping, chickee huts, cabins; 800-504-6554; evergladescamping.net



Above: Historic Smallwood store at sunset. Below: Chokoloskee Outdoor Resorts marina ramp.



braided line paired with a two-foot length of 30-pound fluorocarbon leader. Sometimes I carry what I call my shark/tarpon rod, a heavy 7-footer that can handle any beast I may stumble on. For fly anglers, an 8-weight rod is best, with a floating fly line.

The waters closest to Chokoloskee are loaded with oyster bars. Wading is out. A sturdy, shallow draft boat is the ticket. My 13-foot Hobie Outback pedal kayak lets me get in close to the productive skinny water without scraping bottom (at least most of the time). With the kayak I'll navigate some of the tight mangrove-edged channels where snook hang out. Standard 16-foot canoes are okay with two people on board, but they can be a challenge in the wind or narrower passages. A small john boat or motorized canoe like my 17-foot Gheenoe that can run in a foot of water are also good options. There are several places on Chokoloskee and in Everglades City to rent a kayak or canoe.

Once you start your trip, the number one thing to look for is moving water—that's where most of the fish hang out. Tides around Chokoloskee rarely vary more than three feet, but it's important to check out high and low tide times before hitting the water. Some areas, like around oyster beds, are barren or inaccessible at low tide. Prominent points, creek mouths, and channels that constrict and speed the water flow are good bets. Usually the fish will be sitting just outside the heaviest flow picking off food as it swirls by.

A rising tide is usually the ticket around oyster beds or shoreline flats, giving the fish access to morsels like little crabs they can't get to at low tide. Tip: Carry a mushroom anchor to help keep your boat in position to cast to the holes just off the current and avoid your having to continually paddle back into position. I've learned from hard experience that fluke anchors hang up too easily on mangrove roots and hidden oyster beds. A Power Pole or Talon anchor on a motor boat is a big plus.

When the tide nears its peak or begins to fall, I like to skip lures under the mangrove branches, into nooks between trees, and around deadfalls—all good hiding places for a variety of fish, specially snook and baby tarpon.

I catch 90 percent of my fish on five lures. My first choice and a great search pattern is a 4-inch white curlytail on a 1/8-ounce jig head. A Gulp! swimming mullet is hard to beat, with a locally made lure called a Mr. Whiffle being equally as good. Oldtimers in the area swear by gold lures for snook, and I have to agree so my second essential lure is a gold paddletail. Third, diving plugs also definitely have their place, and my favorites are those that imitate a swimming mullet like the lipped Yo-Zuri 3DS Minnow or Rapala X-Rap, both in smaller sizes and white or gold. Number four in my arsenal is a noisy surface lure like a Zara Spook.

Finally, for pitching a lure underneath overhanging mangroves or into brushy deadfalls, nothing beats a green or white Bass Assassin or similar fluke rigged weedless Texas style.

If oyster beds are on your route, be sure to take a popping cork and live shrimp. It's a deadly rig for big trout, hungry reds, and



Clockwise from left: Diving plugs; topwater; jerkbait on weedless hook; curly tail jig trailer (white); gold paddle tail lures.

marauding snook. A bronze-and-white DOA Shrimp is a reasonable facsimile if you don't want to tote a bait bucket.

Best flies will vary by season, but an unweighted streamer like a Clouser Minnow or one that resembles a mullet is a good all-around choice for luring snook out of the mangroves. For the latest skinny on hot flies, check in with the gents at the well-appointed Mangrove Outfitters fly shop in Naples. FS

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