



**Clockwise from above: Oscar, non-native but familiar catch; kayaking in the mangroves; largemouth bass; versatile jigs in useful colors.**



I followed up this auspicious debut the next week by sampling another cluster of lakes near the intersection of Alligator Alley (Interstate 75) and Collier County 29 along Jones Grade Road. There is no entrance fee here, but again I was the only soul around when the park opened at 8 a.m. This time I decided to experiment with my go-to saltwater lure, the D.O.A. gold glitter curly-tail on a 1/8-ounce jig-head. Again, the bass did not disappoint. But this time to my surprise the shimmering little grub was eaten by a feisty, 3-pound peacock bass. That would be the start of another entertaining day catching a couple more peacocks, dozens of largemouth, and the usual assortment of cichlids.

Aside from alligators, egrets, herons, osprey, and my favorites, the swallow-tailed kites, I had the water to myself all day as I hopscotched from lake-to-lake. The conditions here are somewhat different than those at the park headquarters, as they were not dredged as far down into the limestone, only going to a depth of 10 to 15 feet for the most part, with deeper troughs alternating with shallower ridges that the bass enjoy patrolling for food. Shoreline fishing is easier here than at Lake Harmon thanks to trails on dikes around the ponds.

Fakahatchee Strand Preserve offers other distinct fisheries in addition to freshwater lakes. Two of my favorite saltwater tidal creeks, the East and Faka Union rivers, west of Ever-

glades City, are actually within the park's boundaries. So too are the miles of brackish water canals and ponds lining the Tamiami Trail that provide a smorgasbord of saltwater and freshwater fish. Unlike Everglades National Park and the Big Cypress Preserve where park boundaries are clearly signed, only recently at the headwaters of the East River is there any indication you are entering the preserve.

The relative obscurity of Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is due in large part to the fact that the park does comparatively little outreach to attract visitors, its primary mission being to preserve the rare environment and its fauna and flora. The park is world-famous for orchids and rare vegetation like bromeliads and tropical epiphytes—plants that grow on other plants for support, but are not parasitic, getting water and food from the air. In fact, the park received global attention following the 1988 publication of the best-selling novel, *The Orchid Thief*. Even today, the park staff must keep a sharp eye out for orchid poachers, assisted by remote video cameras hidden in key locations.

The park also is home to endangered species like the Florida panther and Everglades mink as well as a host of other critters ranging from scads of shorebirds, ospreys, and hawks to diamondback terrapins, bobcats, river otter, bear, manatees, alligators, and crocodiles.