

FISHING IN THE RAIN

Summer rains change the aquatic dynamics of Charlotte Harbor fishing. After two years of drought conditions in Charlotte County we have been deluged with rainstorms this season. The end result has been phenomenal fishing! The rainstorms flush tannic acid from the mangroves that line the Peace and Myakka rivers and their tributaries. Our waters went from very clear to dark as Texas tea in a matter of a few weeks and the freshwater influx from these storms has a profound effect on how fish behave. These storms affect the salinity, water clarity, water color, tide heights, current and many other factors less obvious.

Our gamefish feel way more comfortable in shallow water under the cover of dark water. We fished on 3 different days for only 4-5 hours each trip. We fished multiple locations on the outside of the bars running parallel to the east and west side. The day before each trip it rained several inches which created elevated high tides and heavier currents. Take advantage of an outgoing tide with the run-off that creates an extra strong water flow. The extra water flow stimulates the baitfish and bottom dwellers attracting redfish, snook, trout, tarpon, shark and a variety of other fish. On these trips we used small white bait which can be encountered over every grassbed in Charlotte Harbor. Massive schools of trout have moved in with the summer rain pattern and they position themselves to take advantage of the strong tidal flow which flushes baitfish in their direction. In each of these trips we caught more than our share of our trout in 3-6 feet of water free-lining in the open. They were mostly small trout with some legal ones mixed in. In prior weeks speckled trout were nearly impossible to find but the summer rains have brought them in.

The dark water also seems to entice tarpon and sharks to mill around in shallower water. In waters less than 5 feet we have been hammering the blacktips up to 5 feet, with many tarpon generally under 100 pounds. The method is simple; fish with cut bait on the bottom and hang on. This is patience fishing and some spots will wear you out with catfish. However, a singing drag with a hard pulling jumping fish (many of the blacktips jump in shallow water as well) is cer-

tainly worth waiting for. Tarpon have no where to go but up – and having 10 jumps from one fish is not out of the question! The shark variety is terrific this year and it's possible to sight fish shark on the last stages of an outgoing tide. Again, these sharks appear to enjoy the extra water flow attracting them into the shallows. On a calm day simply scan the shallows for wakes. Often the dorsal fin will be seen breaking the surface in only a foot of water. These sharks are aggressive and will eat just about anything thrown in front of them.

As is typical for southwest Florida an afternoon thunderstorm often produces heavy downpours and high winds. This often does 2 things: it drives all of the boats off the water and makes the fish bite. The influx of rain water has a tendency to cool off the surface water which in turn increases their appetite. A calm spell that often follows after the rain gives testimony to the effect of the rain. Fish in nearly every direction can be seen moving and boiling on the surface. Approach them slowly and they will attack a surface plug right after a downpour. For redfish purists, the dark water gives you stealth. The fish cannot see you nearly as well and are less spooky. Positioning your boat around a mangrove island or oyster bar can be done with easy casts to your target. The redfish will be reckless and will follow their noses to a tasty pinfish, whitebait or shrimp. It seems that the summer rains have brought the big reds into the Harbor with 10 to 16 pound fish being very common now. Hooking them is one thing, getting them out from the mangroves is another!

The common thread between all species previously mentioned is the fishing method. Simple bottom fishing is hard to beat. Cut bait, live bait, crabs, shrimp, pinfish or sardines- fish them on the bottom with little or no weight. Use a heavy leader because the water is dark and the chance of hooking a monster is better than ever. Look for more fish to be in shallower water and easier to get close to. The real magic is in believing the fish are there because you can no longer see them. Confidence in where you are fishing will be your biggest ally. Use the rain gauge to tell you when to go fishing. The high tides, dark water and mix of fresh and saltwater are an attraction for the fish in Charlotte Harbor.