

Find Your Place in the Glades

The ultimate trip for anglers who like to get off of the beaten path.

By Brenton Roberts





Tarpon caught on fly in one of the “way back” creeks. Boats arrived at campsite on Pavilion Key, below, will be anchored stern and bow with appropriate rode for overnight tide swings.



Unzipping the tent, I was greeted by the brisk, dry air from the first cold front of the year, that had swept in during our slumber. First light was waning quickly, as the gleaming orange rays of sun trickled over the adjacent mangrove forests. A cup of instant coffee satisfied my caffeine craving as I went to check on the boat moored along the beach. Still there; that’s good news.

I took a moment to myself, sat down on the sand and soaked it all in. Here I was, in the midst of one of the last untouched places in the country. Catching fish was the main intent of this trip, but even if our luck fell short of good, how could I complain? People would give up a lot to be here.

On a trip like this, fish are just a bonus. The wildlife you see, the experiences you make and the fun you have are hard to beat when camping in the Everglades.

Everglades National Park is 1.5 million acres of protected land spreading across Miami-Dade, Monroe and Collier counties, established in 1947. There’s only a handful of areas of this caliber left in the nation, and we are lucky enough to have it right here in our beautiful state.

Fishing, bird watching, canoeing, exploring—there’s a lot you can do in the Everglades, but my favorite thing to do is take advantage of the backcountry camping that the park has to offer.

Everglades National Park offers 45 backcountry campsites, consisting of chickees, beach sites and ground

sites throughout the park. These stretch from Little Rabbit Key in Florida Bay, all the way to Tiger Key, northwest of Everglades City.

The park took a hit last summer, as Hurricane Irma blazed her trail across the region in September, affecting these camp areas. Denese Canedo, Public Information Officer for ENP, filled me in on the status of the sites and what the park is doing to get them back up and running for the public to enjoy.

“We anticipate that the majority of the sites will be reopened by the end of January,” said Canedo. She explained that almost all of the porta potties throughout the camp sites were destroyed or just gone. “There are a few inland sites that may not reopen for good, due to accessibility issues, but we will evaluate new

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Cool, clear winter days are ideal for sight-fishing snook. Also good for minimizing (but never fully eliminating) blood loss to skeeters while exploring mangrove creeks.



locations for those if it creates gaps in the backcountry sites.”

Canedo also expressed that the maintenance to the sites will be very minimal in the upcoming months, while they are focused on other things. This said, there has never been a better time to practice the seven “Leave No Trace” principles found on the National Park’s website.

Historically, a backcountry permit has been required when camping. From November to April, these have been acquired through the Gulf Coast Visitor Center or Flamingo Visitor Center, costing \$15 as well as \$2 per person per day camping fee. During the summer season the permits are free but are still required. They are available at any time at each visitor center.

The only permits issued over the phone are for visitors coming in from the south, camping on North Nest Key, Little Rabbit Key, Shark Point Chickee and Cape Sable.

The park is working on getting back to these guidelines. “We expect the Gulf Coast Visitors Center to be reissuing backcountry camping permits by late January as well,” said Canedo. The most up-to-date rules

regarding permits can be found on www.nps.gov, so be sure to check that before making the trip. The park recommends that you secure your permit a day in advance on busy weekends, and if unable to, plan to be “flexible and have alternative sites in mind.”

THE DIVERSITY

“There’s all sorts of fish in the Everglades,” says Dave Teper in the film *High in the Lowlands*, which is based around fishing in the Everglades. “If it’s spring time we might catch tarpon. If it’s fall we might catch redfish, but year-round, we never know what we’re going to catch. We just take the opportunities as they come.” There’s not much better of a way to describe this stretch of Florida. One moment you may be fishing a rivermouth as the tarpon are funneling out on a falling tide, the next you may be deep in a mangrove pocket, casting at snook belly crawling in six inches of water.

“You can go all day and not hear another boat. I like that remoteness.”

—Charlie Phillips

“There’s more water than you can fish in your whole lifetime,” said Capt. Charlie Phillips, President of the Florida Guides Association and Owner of Hope Fishing Adventures (www.hopefishing.com) out of Everglades City. Charlie enjoys camping deep in the heart of the Glades’ at his favorite site, Willy Willy, where he can catch bass and snook simultaneously at some of his spots. “I fish a 100-mile by 20-mile stretch of area, just the way the Lord made it, no bridges or buildings. You can go all day and not even hear another boat. I like that remoteness.”

NAVIGATION HINTS

Navigating the Everglades is like handling a poisonous snake: If you don’t handle it with care and show respect, you will get bit. Winding creeks, blind corners,

football-field-sized oyster bars, sunken trees—all of these make running this maze that much harder. Since Irma came through, things have gotten worse. The park has a contractor working on replacing down channel markers, but this will take time. Denese Canedo urged that boaters use exercising extreme caution when navigating the area. A good GPS with a Florida Marine Tracks chip or other up to date satellite imagery can save you and your lower unit. As a backup, the Navionics cell phone app

is a great backup that works without cell service.

THE CHECKLIST

So, you’re ready to charge into the unknown, jump off the grid for a few days, and enjoy some great fishing and camping with your buddies. What do you need? I always make a checklist before leaving the house, because you never want to be in the middle of nowhere with no toilet paper... On a serious note, though, preparation

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and a well thought out float plan in case of emergencies can be life-saving.

Charlie Phillips, who runs charters out of Everglades City, is very familiar with camping throughout the park and gave his advice on what to bring. A satellite communicator was number one on his list of essentials. He put it simply: "911 does not work with no cellphone signal. With a satellite phone, I can call in an emergency situation, or I can call my wife if I spin a hub and let her know I'm going to be home a few hours late.

"A tent cot is something I always bring. It gets you up and out of the mud, and the netting keeps the bugs off of you. I sleep like a champ out there," chuckled Phillips.

"I fish artificials 99 percent of the time, but I do get a couple dozen live shrimp, put them on newspaper and then on ice in my cooler when camping as well." This technique keeps the shrimp alive and doesn't require a livewell. "Some of my biggest snook have come on live shrimp when the fish seemed like they didn't want a thing, and if you don't use 'em, you can eat 'em!"

One thing I bring with me every time in the Glades is my Thermacell. Miles and miles of swamp and stagnant pools means



Juvenile snook, the product of spawns following the 2010 cold kill, are again found in great numbers in this sector of Florida.

one thing, breeding mosquitoes. Cooler temperatures in the winter give you a bit of a break with the bugs, but spring and summer they can be relentless. Be sure to turn on the Thermacell, outside of your tent, five minutes before you need to be out and about, and don't forget ample refill cartridges.

Everglades Park has the "Wilderness Trip Planner" on the website with seasonal information, a map of the camp sites and more, all valuable tools for those looking to partake in the adventure. See www.nps.gov/ever/. **FS**



THE NEW PATHFINDERS.





Over a dozen beach campsites, including this one, were reopened by the Park Service in the fall. Check for updates on chickee sites; many on the interior Wilderness Waterway were damaged by Hurricane Irma.



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