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MARCH 2025



How a fishing trip to Flamingo rekindled family memories and provided a few nice catches, too.

RECONNECTING IN THE EVERGLADES

BY BLAIR WICKSTROM

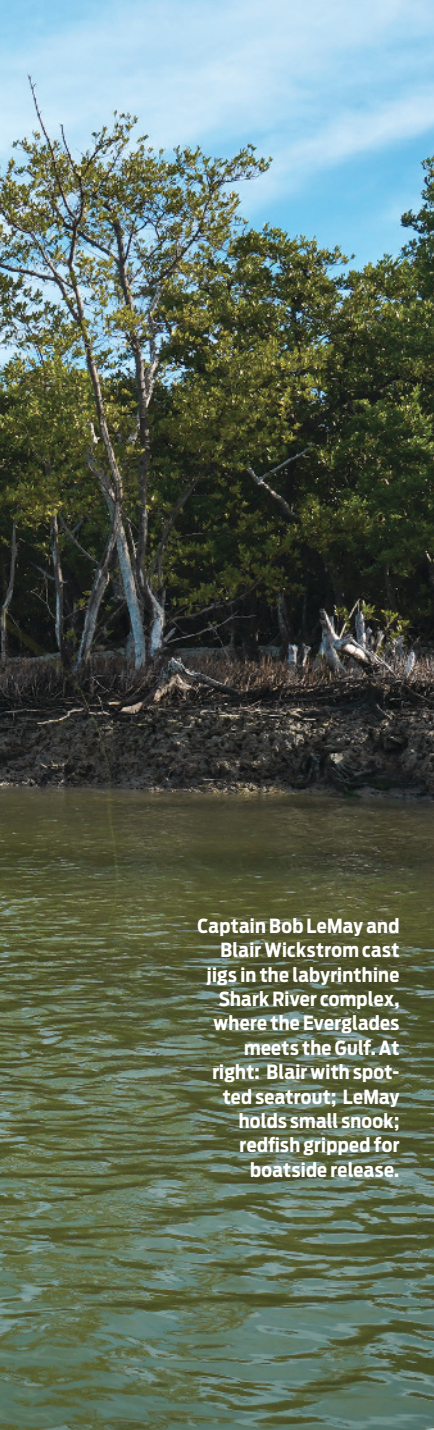
Not long after my father passed away in 2018, I found an unopened letter he'd written 20 years earlier. At the time of writing, Karl was facing major, high-risk heart surgery. In the letter were instructions that if he didn't make it out of surgery, he wanted his ashes scattered in Whitewater Bay, deep in the Florida Everglades.

Because I'd fished with my dad out of Flamingo many times while growing up, I knew it was a special place for him and wasn't surprised to read his request. Especially

given that he'd spent nearly every day following that surgery fighting for Everglades restoration.

His feeling then, as I'm sure it would be today, is that we need to figure out a way to get more freshwater south, through the Everglades, the "River of Grass" as it has been called, and ultimately to Florida Bay.

Reading his letter brought back happy memories for me. The timing was such that it was now too late to fulfill that long-ago request, but I made a commitment to honoring his memory by at least visiting those favorite fishing grounds.



Captain Bob LeMay and Blair Wickstrom cast jigs in the labyrinthine Shark River complex, where the Everglades meets the Gulf. At right: Blair with spotted seatrout; LeMay holds small snook; redfish gripped for boatside release.



I recently asked my brother Drew, art director for *Florida Sportsman*, if he'd like to take a trip to Flamingo, the century-old outpost on the edge of the Everglades and Florida Bay, and revisit some of our dad's favorite fishing grounds. Of course he jumped at the opportunity.

TIME AND TIDE

Flamingo is much like many areas in the state where time of year, weather conditions and tide dictate where you should fish and what you'll likely catch. There isn't a single time of year when all fisheries are firing at once.

What makes Flamingo unlike many other areas in the state is the sheer variety of habitat from freshwater wetlands and brackish marshes to coastal flats and a wide open bay you can fish in a day.

In planning a trip, I turned to Capt. Bob LeMay, of

Pembroke Pines. LeMay has been fishing out of Flamingo nearly as long as we've been writing about it.

"Everything I learned initially about fishing the Everglades, now going on 40 years, I learned in *Florida Sportsman*," Bob told us.

He'd be perfect for this trip.

It was early January. The water temperature in the marina was 65 degrees and the air was a balmy 53. We were more than two hours into a falling tide and there was a light east-northeast wind.

When I told Bob that I'd love to fish out front along the coast and work our way up to Shark River, he agreed, but not without some reluctance, saying the coast fishes the best in waters warmer than we had that day. "The best conditions to fish the coastal shorelines between East Cape and Middle Cape is mostly the last two hours of the

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incoming and the first two hours of the falling tide, when the bait is in and water is warmer,” the captain explained.

As we idled out of the marina, I zipped up my jacket.

WET FEET

As soon as we reached the end of Flamingo’s channel markers, Bob pointed his skiff west and we began running

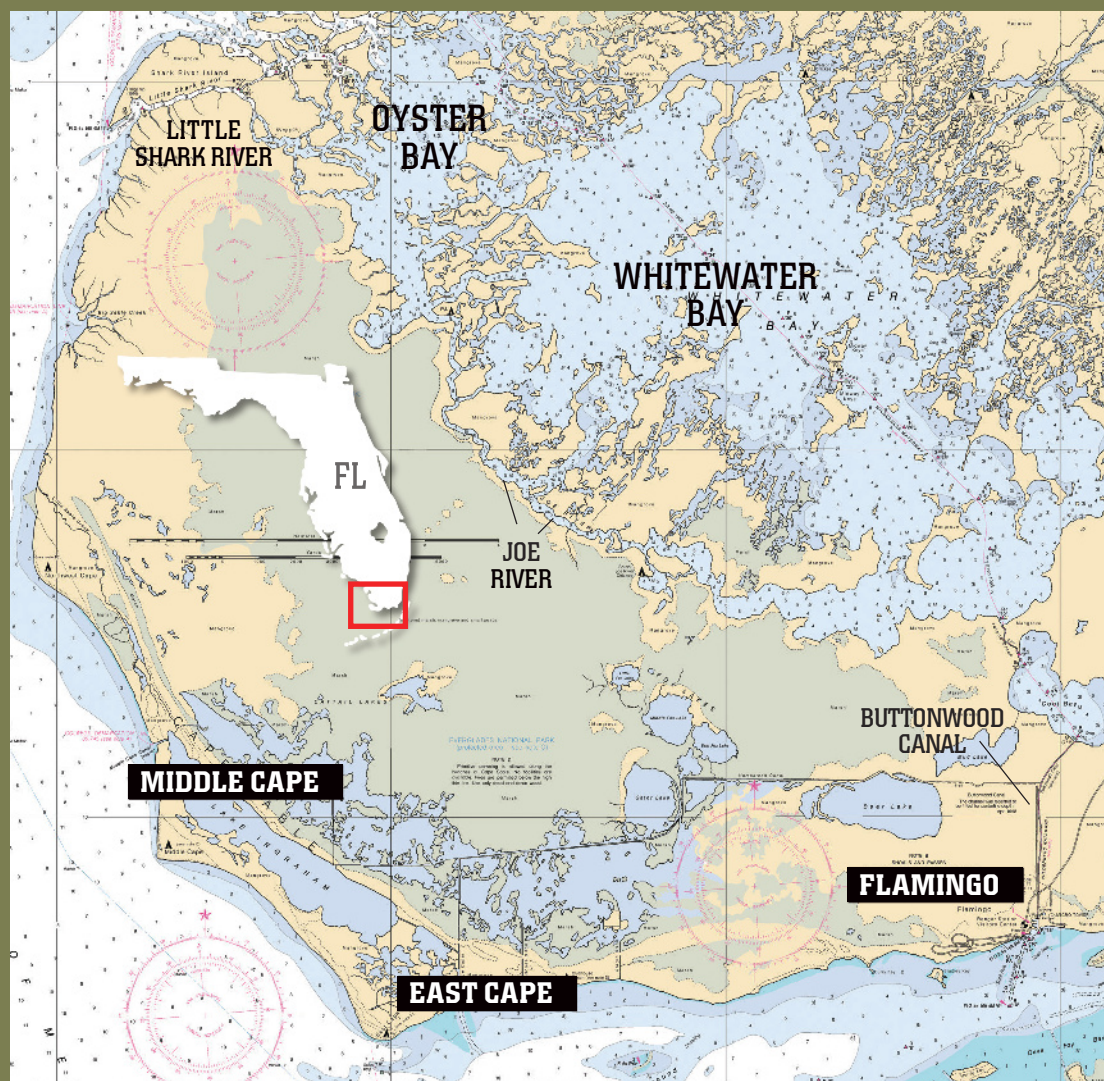
along the coast in about four feet of water. Bob said to begin looking for showers of bait or the presence of birds.

“Birds are everything. Look for herons and egrets on the beach; if their feet are wet, they’re fishing.”

At about 8:30 a.m. we worked our way into East Cape Canal, staying clear of a sandbar that sticks way out on the west side of the entrance. We fished just inside the mouth of



Captain Bob LeMay at the helm, with Florida Marine Tracks data on GPS. Below: NOAA chart detail.



the canal and made several casts using spinning tackle and 1/8-ounce jigs with 3-inch soft-plastic tails. We didn't have any luck, but Bob said that along with snook, redfish and trout (all the species you'd likely find along the coast during the spring, summer, and fall) that both the East Cape and Middle Cape canals also hold good numbers of rolling tarpon each day on the falling tide.



Above: Bob LeMay's hand-made spinning rods, with which he fishes jigs—which he also makes. Left: Crocodile at saltwater ramp, Flamingo. Below: One of many fishy cuts on Gulf Coast.



Bob also stated that these spots typically produce better with live bait. With a quick stop along the edges of any grassflat between Flamingo and East Cape, hanging a chum bag over the side and using a bait-catching rig tipped with tiny pieces of shrimp or squid will fill a livewell with pinfish. Bob said that he normally fishes live or dead bait on the bottom of the canals with a simple knocker rig.

Interesting fact about these canals: Dug in the early 1900s, the cape canals are artifacts of misguided efforts to drain interior marshes to make way for agriculture. This region, remote and pristine as it seems today, was in the crosshairs of the dredge-and-drain development schemes that ran unchecked across South Florida at the turn of the 20th century. By the mid 1930s, efforts were in motion to preserve a vast natural wilderness and keep it in the public trust. Everglades National Park was formally dedicated by

President Harry Truman in 1947. Clay Henderson's excellent 2022 work, *Forces of Nature*, recounts the heroics led by architect Ernest Coe and newspaper writer Marjory Stoneman Douglas, among others.

National Park status was really just the beginning of Everglades restoration. In the late 1990s, my father, Karl Wickstrom, became laser-focused on resolving the ecological consequences of drainage schemes similar to those forgotten cape canals but many orders of magnitude larger. Indeed the St. Lucie Canal, more than 100 miles north and east of Flamingo, to this day diverts fresh water from Karl's beloved Whitewater Bay.



Karl Wickstrom, founder of *Florida Sportsman*, with Everglades redfish. Photo taken in early-mid 1990s. Wickstrom, who passed away in 2018, wrote numerous columns articulating the interrelated fates of these two fisheries. He urged restoring to the Everglades natural sheetflow from the Kissimmee-Okeechobee watershed, and warned against the consequences of seaward diversions. More work remains.

FISH ON!

Seeing tent campers off both East Cape and Middle Cape, I was glad we went this way. It was beautiful and it brought back a memory of a time my brother Eric and I played a trick on Dad, who was still asleep in his tent just off the shoreline of Middle Cape.

"Fish on!" we screamed, as line peeled off the reel, *Zzziiing!* "Fish

on!" we continued to scream, as my father fumbled to get the zipper open on his tent. Dad struggled to get his bearings and after stumbling to stand on the beach, he realized (not too happily I might add) that there was no fish, but one son holding a rod and another running down the beach pulling drag with a casting plug in his hand.

Bob, Drew and I made our way into Middle Cape Canal around 9:30 a.m., the mouth of muddy Lake Ingraham. We continued to watch for bird and bait activity as we made our way down the canal. While fishing the southern shoreline

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Good-sized redfish for Whitewater Bay “backcountry,” caught (left) and displayed (above) by Blair Wickstrom. Below: Drew Wickstrom with juvenile Goliath grouper.



we immediately began catching small jacks and ladyfish, which Bob had us keep three or four of the latter to be used later as bait.

“Everything eats a ladyfish,” Bob said.

At about 10:15, about 25 miles from Flamingo, we caught our first small snook in one of the small creeks of Big Sable Creek.

GOLIATH GRAB

About a half hour later, much to Bob’s pleasure, we entered Little Shark River, leaving the open Gulf for tannin-stained rivers and streams. We exchanged 100-foot-tall black mangroves on the coast for push-pole-height red mangroves in the backcountry.

Bob idled up to the point of a mangrove island on the very north end of Oyster Bay and had Drew lower the trolling motor. He then hooked a live 10-inch ladyfish to a ½-ounce jig head and dropped it 8 feet deep into a hole. Our target species was juvenile goliath grouper.

Almost immediately I hooked up. I lowered the bait and took the slack out of the line. Bob’s counsel to put the rod butt into my belt as soon as I raised the rod was spot on. My 20-pound spinner was nearly pulled from my hands as soon as the line came tight.

A few seconds later, I had a healthy goliath grouper next to the boat. Drew caught one a few minutes later. I could see that Bob was now clearly in his happy place.

Bob said that the small grouper (averaging 10 to 40

pounds) are there in the rivers year-round but quit biting when the water gets too cold.

“The rivers, actually all tributaries of the Little Shark River, hold speckled trout in the winter and spring, and mangrove snapper in the summer,” Bob said. “At the first sign of spring, the rivers become home to giant tarpon which we fish all the way until early May, which is when they leave to spawn down in the Keys.”

As we continued to cast to shorelines, Bob talked about the fishing that heats up in the summer, saying that the mouth of every river and nearby shoreline is ripe for snook, redfish, speckled trout and smaller tarpon. He then added that in the fall, beginning in September and going strong until almost Halloween, the big tarpon come back for the mullet run and just about any river mouth is where you’ll find them.

WHITewater BAY

As we rode past marker 40, we entered Whitewater Bay about 15 miles from Flamingo, 40 miles into our loop. We stopped to fish a wide area between two islands.

I was thinking of Dad. He loved to fish a topwater popper more than anything. The unlimited potential for his plug to get blown up was what he liked most about Whitewater Bay and the Everglades.

“Keep your rod tip straight up in the air, keep it coming,” Bob instructed Drew. Fish on, a trout. I grabbed my rod and we both caught several more trout as we continued to work

shorelines in Whitewater Bay.

"There's just nothing like the 'Glades backcountry in the winter," Bob said. "It's because the water in here is warmer than the coast. Plus, you can fish here on days when you can't fish anywhere else due to bad weather. During the summer, the place to be is out along the coast. In spring or fall, take your choice since both areas can be excellent."

To this point, the fishing seemed to be pretty slow. That is until about mid-afternoon in central Whitewater Bay not far from Joe River. Drew landed a nice slot-size snook. A few casts later I came tight with a snook too big to clear the water on her first attempt to throw my jig. On her second jump, with my rod doubled over, she successfully freed herself, instantly leaving the three of us a bit in shock.

"Wow, that was a big snook," Drew said. "In very shallow water."

Still in the same general area north of Joe River, Bob was using his trolling motor to anchor us a long cast from an indent in the mangroves. It was more of a small island than a thick shoreline. Drew cast a live shrimp on a jig, suspended by a popping cork, to the right side of the cove where clearly one could see water flowing through the mangroves. I cast my shrimp-tipped jig to the left side of the cove and immediately hooked up with a small redfish. Before Drew could recast in my direction, I fired another cast to the same area and before I could tap the jig twice, I was hooked up to another small red.

BROTHERLY LOVE

By this time Drew repositioned his bobber on my side of the boat, smiling as only a brother can. I cast my jig just to the right of his bobber and got slammed. No jump, no shakes, all pull. I couldn't stop the fish, but thankfully it wasn't headed for the mangroves.

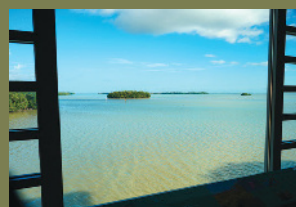
Giant red we all thought. I now feared my decision not to change out the short 12-inch leader I'd already lost a big snook on and caught two redfish with. Could this bit of laziness cost me the fish of the day?

Luck was with me, the 30-pound leader held. Bob's coaching to keep the rod tip low while pulling away from the fish helped land the big red and grant us a cover worthy, trip saving catch.

By then it was after 4 p.m. and the east wind had picked up. To avoid the wind chop, Bob chose the slightly longer 3-mile trip back through Joe River versus the more open water of Whitewater Bay.

It was as Bob steered the boat toward the opening of the Buttonwood Canal, I thought back 50-plus years, back to a trip when I was steering our family's 20-foot Sea Craft aiming at the same canal opening, imagining myself the captain when suddenly there was a loud crack and the boat lunged to its side. I'd struck a submerged tree stump splitting the outboard's lower unit.

Fortunately, we had a 9.9 hp Mercury kicker mounted on the transom and we made it back to the ramp, trolling plugs along the mangrove shorelines the final 3.5 miles of the Buttonwood canal. My first job as a guide didn't end all that bad though, from what I remember. My dad wasn't mad at me, and seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed his day in Flamingo's backcountry. **FS**



Above: Views exterior and interior of Flamingo Lodge room.
Top: Ample room for trailer parking.
Below: Flamingo Restaurant and Lodge office/check-in.



FLAMINGO LODGE AND RESTAURANT

RE-OPENED in November 2023 after suffering substantial damage from hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma in 2005, the new and improved hotel features 24 rooms constructed from 40 shipping containers. Each room has an east-facing balcony, offering both sunrise and sunset views of Florida Bay. Rooms don't have televisions, by design, but do offer high speed WIFI. There is boat trailer parking directly in front of the lodge on a first-come basis. Flamingo Restaurant, adjacent to the lodge, serves breakfast at 7 a.m. plus lunch and dinner until 9 p.m. and has a full-ser-

vice bar. As in years past, the restaurant will cook your catch.

Lodge Rates: 2-bed suite, \$399; 1-bed suite, \$309; studio, \$259; in season rates, November to May, not including taxes. Overnight lodging is typically a two-night minimum.

Camping: Summer and winter "glamping" tents; campsites; rates start at \$33 for non-electric campsite.

Boat Rentals: Houseboats, \$450 a day; 17-foot Mako Skiff, \$195, half day

Address: 1 Flamingo Lodge Hwy, Homestead, FL 33034; 855-708-2207