

Opportunity Knocks

Captain Bill Russell

If you are an angler in southwest Florida you have to love the month of April. If you want to learn to fish southwest Florida you will also not find a better time. Cold windy days give way to sunny warm skies and the transition to spring is in full swing. It's the month many anglers look forward to getting back on the water, especially after a long, cold winter. It's the beginning of our best time of year to fish.

Going back to my childhood I have always marveled at how everything comes to life around Pine Island this month. The waters will come alive with so many species of fish you lose track and the birds, dolphin, manatees and other sea life are active and everywhere. Even if you are not fishing or the fish just aren't biting you still get a great nature show. However, more often than not the fish are biting and it is one of the best times of year to spend as much time as possible on the water. The cold days have moved on, it's not too hot, the March winds have subsided and it's too early for our daily summer thunderstorms. All those factors make it easy to spend a good deal of time fishing.

I like fishing the month so much I scheduled our wedding around it. Over sixteen years ago I talked my soon to be wife into getting married in March so the calendar would be open to fishing the following month without interruptions. I

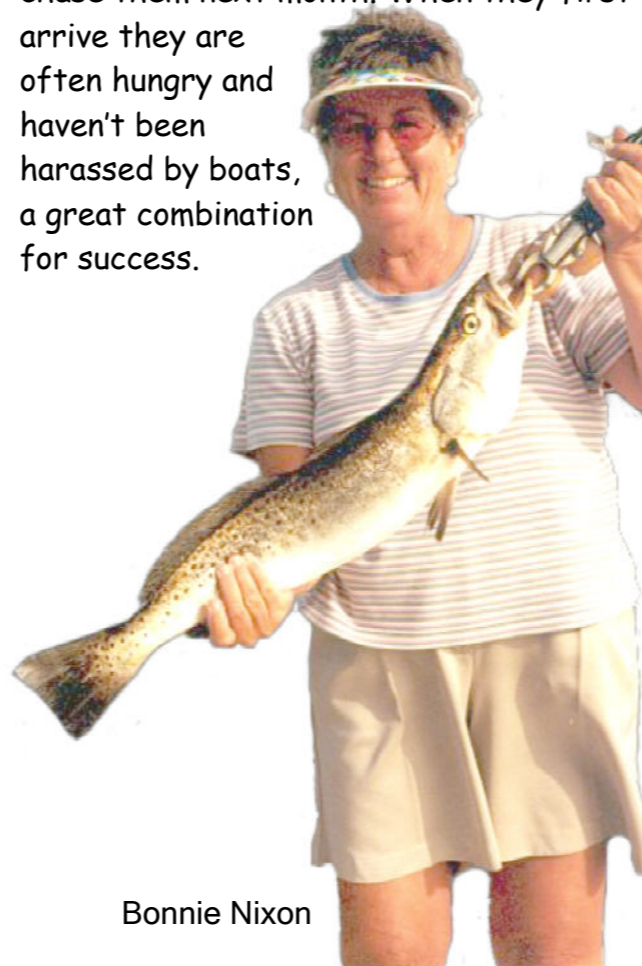
don't think she fully realized my plan at the time. Seems now every year we attempt to go somewhere or do something on our big day the weather is miserable, cold, windy or both. And every time my lovely wife, Laurie ask me "Why did we get married in March when the weather is awful?" then she quickly answers her question while giving me the look "That's right because you wanted to go fishing next month".

I enjoy fishing this month for the same reason so many other do, it's not just the weather, its how many fishing opportunities are available. If you look at a chart of all the different fish species that swim through our waters you could probably challenge yourself with a shot at catching them all. Our resident inshore gamefish like trout, snook and redfish are coming off a long winter and when they transition to the flats they will be eating machines. This is also the month you can expect to hook into the largest trout of the year with consistency. Mackerel both king and Spanish will make their presence off the beaches and in Pine Island Sound and Charlotte Harbor.

Bait fish of all shape and size will infest our waters and predator fish large and small will be hot on their tails. Pilchards is the favorite of most anglers, fishing with a live well full of these baits often referred to as "fish candy" is a definite

advantage. Pinfish, thread herring and sardines are also common baits.

Also as the month progresses you can expect bigger fish to arrive by the day. Tarpon will arrive in numbers, first in the Gulf off of Ft. Myers Beach and Sanibel, then moving into the Passes and Charlotte Harbor and Pine Island Sound. Also the Caloosahatchee River is a good place to hook into a tarpon, especially around the bridges after dark. There are good opportunities to get in some great tarpon fishing ahead of the crowds that chase them next month. When they first arrive they are often hungry and haven't been harassed by boats, a great combination for success.



Bonnie Nixon

If you have an interest in shark fishing you can expect to find them roaming the inshore channels, around the Passes and in the Gulf. Look for any type of feeding or schooling fish including mackerel, ladyfish and tarpon and you can bet there will be sharks nearby. The question is how big? Sharks are a blast to catch if you don't over tackle them, by this I mean use tackle appropriate in size to the fish you are targeting.

You do not need a Penn 9/0 loaded with 130 lb Dacron if you are targeting three to five foot sharks in six feet of water. For most of our inshore fishing a medium rod with thirty to forty pound line is plenty.

If you think you are fighting a shark or sight one cruising below the surface look at it close it might just be a cobia. At least once a week this month we will be anchored up over a deep grass flat fishing for trout and mackerel and someone will start pointing in the water and hollering SHARK! Only to look a little closer and identify the brown shark shaped fish as a cobia.

They can be small up to really big and show up at any time. My experience with cobia is they are either the stupidest fish in the water and eat anything thrown at them or they are finicky and although curious won't take even the best of baits. One thing for sure you hook a big one and you got a fight on your hands. This month you should keep a heavier rod rigged and ready as you really don't know what surprise may be in store for you at anytime.

There are just too many fishing possibilities to mention them all but I think you get the idea. This is a great month to fish and fish often. Please do yourself a favor and get out there and take advantage of it.

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Greg Boyko