

Backcountry Creek Ways

Explore the headwater streams of the Ten Thousand Islands.

By Chris Duerksen

Minutes from the highway, a kayaker enters deep wilderness. Below: Cardinal air plant.



Down one of the dark squiggles on a Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge canoe map, I am paddling my kayak early in the morning. The water is inches deep, a few feet across, and bracketed by 6-foot reeds and grasses. Gliding past roseate spoonbills feeding in a marsh where the creek widens, I disturb a little gator sunning on the edge; he shoots off into the grasses. In a hammock a hundred yards away, great egrets sun themselves in tall trees as a swallowtail kite soars gracefully overhead. The whoosh of cars on U.S. Highway 41, the Tamiami Trail, my launch point, has faded.

After a mile or so, I begin to wonder if I'm lost, but then I see another trail marker in the distance. As the water gets thinner and thinner, finally I'm pulling the boat over a muddy sand bar blocking the route. Peering around the bend, I see the trail disappears into an overgrown mangrove tunnel. The day may be over without making a cast. Before giving up, I pull

out my trusty cell phone, open the GPS app, and see that back about one-half mile, there is a branch of the creek shooting off to the east that eluded me.

This branch is dotted with dark-colored ponds about one-half mile from the main channel. I will learn that the dark-

er color likely means they are deeper and likely hold fish...as well as being deep enough to paddle. The GPS also reveals some light sand-colored swirls along the feeder creek and the places it flows into and out of the ponds. I will come to find this indicates the presence of tidal currents...which are magnets to fish like snook and reds. Standing water without a good tidal flow rarely holds fish in the backcountry.

Paddling towards those ponds, I spy a substantial swirl up ahead in a little notch in the creek bank. Maybe a mullet, maybe not. I lob a white curly tail grub on a jig head up against the grass, and the hole explodes as a 2-foot snook tail walks out into the channel. I bail out of the kayak and give chase, finally subduing the critter after a sprint downstream.

With a little sleuthing, I had discovered what would become my favorite secret spot, off any official canoe route. The water was so skinny for the first few hundred feet from the main branch that I had to pole rather than paddle. After catch-





Captain Charles Wright, at left, helps Chris Duerksen plan the route that would produce snook (right), encounters with wildlife (white ibis, below) and require minimal tackle.



ing and releasing the first snook, I spook more in a mangrove tunnel, then emerge into that first pond. It's loaded with more nice hungry snook shadowing schools of mullet and a bonus 30-inch red that I catch on a new penny fluke. My GPS reveals that this branch wends all the way to a canal that connects to the Gulf—a freeway for some good fish.

Where: Finding Those Hidden Spots

My quest for solitude and hidden fishing hot spots that didn't involve a multi-day, overnight paddle or motor boat had started a few days earlier with Capt. Charles Wright, local ecotour operator and fishing guru. The good captain listened to my lamentations for a few minutes about wanting to find some peace and quiet on the water, then got up and pulled out a big map. "Why don't you try

some of the backcountry tidal creeks off the Tamiami Trail?"

He pointed out several wavy black lines that funnel out of the Everglades, under U.S. Hwy. 41, into the Big Cypress Preserve and Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, then into the Gulf waters. The Blackwater, the Faka Union, the Barron Rivers. I was intrigued.

"You won't see many boats back in there, especially this time of year when the creeks are low," he explained. "Some are even too skinny for kayaks." He marked a couple of routes. My fishing fever was stoked, and I started planning my first expedition into one of the backcountry creeks.

Later that week, I had done my homework, starting with the web sites for area federal and state parks and preserves. Both the Ten Thousand Islands NWR and Big Cypress Preserve publish routes of

signed canoe/kayak trails. However, the maps aren't detailed enough for actual safe paddling. I supplemented them by route descriptions in guidebooks like Jeff Ripple's *Day Paddling Florida's 10,000 Islands and Big Cypress Swamp*—but soon learned that while the guidebooks are useful, they are often out of date (mangroves grow quickly and can choke off a creek in a season or two) and rarely contain any accurate fishing information or tips. Likewise, none of the commercial maps, even the one Capt. Wright marked up for me, are wholly reliable. Several great routes don't show up on them and others that seem clear are non-existent today. The web site of an intrepid group of local paddlers, the Everglades Exploration Network, is a good source of up-to-date information.

Some of the put-in points for the waters like the East and Blackwater rivers

Backcountry

During the dry season, many of the creeks thin out to the point where you'd need to pull a kayak through stretches.



are improved by state and federal agencies and have adequate parking. Others are more obscure, just turnouts along Tamiami Trail bridges. While these bridge launch points are legal, parking is often tight, and traffic on the road dictates extra caution when you pull off the highway. One of the bonuses of fishing these backcountry creeks is that no special per-

mits are needed from federal or state agencies for paddling, but camping is not usually allowed even if you could find a dry spot. However, it is wise to let friends know exactly where you are going in case of an emergency. You will definitely be in the wilds, often with little chance of others bumping into you if you need help—although fortunately cell phone service

tends to be good because you are never too far from the reach of Tamiami Trail cell towers.

When to Paddle

Winter and spring—December through April—is the best time to explore the Ten Thousand Islands backcountry creeks as the snook, tarpon and reds seek warmer, sheltered waters. But some are home bodies and year-round residents. The main caveat is that some creeks may not be navigable during dry months. As on my first foray, I've discovered a few times after a mile of paddling through muck that the promising creek disappeared into impenetrable stands of mangroves, reeds, or saw grass. On the other hand, a wet period in late November or early December may inject a surge of freshwater into the creeks, driving salt-water fish back towards the Gulf.

Studying the tides is also a key. The best fishing is typically when tides are surging in or out, especially in the channels where fish like to hide. Remember, there is a 2- to 5-hour difference between tides on the coast and the inland headwaters. It's worth a look at the put-

RUGGED SHARK®

GO WITH THE FLO...

The Starboard is a modern athletic style with quick-slip bungee style lacing and a venting mesh upper. The Hexagrip™ rubber traction pads provide sure footing in wet environments.

Our H2FLO-VENT™ technology circulates air within a new, lightweight outsole system and drains water for total foot comfort.

TAKE 20% OFF

USE PROMO CODE: **FSFMAR1520**

ON THE GREAT WHITE BOOT

*Only at RUGGEDSHARK.COM. Coupon code cannot be combined with any other offer. Offer ends April 30th.



RUGGED SHARK® is an SG Footwear Company © 2015 Rugged Shark, LLC

H2FLO-VENT™
WITH
TECHNOLOGY



NEW
Starboard
By Rugged Shark

THIS AND OTHER STYLES AVAILABLE AT **RUGGEDSHARK.COM**

in point a day or two before your trip to gauge the tide.

As is true in most places, early and late in the day are often best in the backcountry creeks and lakes—just make sure to leave enough time to paddle out in evening. Believe me, it's no fun to be in a mangrove tunnel in the dark, your mind conjuring up visions of big golden orb spider webs or lurking gators and crocs.

Fishing Tactics

Most fish in a backcountry creek will face into the current, which may be upstream or down depending on the tide. The best approach is from behind them, casting and letting the lure drift and bounce to them. That's why it is important if you are going to be fishing the channels and tunnels to time your trip so you can be headed into the current, coming and going. I concentrate on deep outer bends in tunnels, snags and points in the ponds, and entrances to side creeks where wind or current will flush bait into the main channel. Schools of mullet can frequently be spotted circling around the shallow backcountry ponds, and often they are stalked by snook and reds. Casting on the edge of schools can bring explosive strikes.

On a bright, cool day, reds and snook will sometimes sidle up into very shallow flats and nooks and crannies along the edge of channels or ponds to warm up. Being more exposed, they can be very spooky, so a careful approach is essential.

My golden rule is to wade whenever possible. It is often much easier to spot fish standing in the water than sitting low in a kayak, and easier to resist the impulse to paddle over and spook them.

But what do you do with the kayak when you are wading? I drag it behind, secured with a 10-foot stretch of nylon rope hooked through a belt loop with a brass clip. If I spot a snook or red, I clip



Charles Wright's shop, Chokoloskee Island.



Anchor, extra paddle, cell phone, charger.



the rope to the nearest mangrove or drop my little anchor and proceed stealthily.

Gear and Tackle

If the creek you are scouting disappears into a green forest on Google Earth or your GPS, that usually means a mangrove tunnel covers it—and they are rarely straight.

I always take a single-blade collapsible paddle in addition to my double-bladed kayak paddle. Channels and mangrove tunnels in backcountry creeks are often

Chokoloskee and Everglades City

Two of the best guide books are Jeff Ripple's *Day Paddling Florida's 10,000 Islands and Big Cypress Swamp*, 2003, and Johnny Molloy's *A Paddler's Guide To Everglades National Park*, 2009

For fishing tips and outfitting around Everglades City, Capt. Charles Wright's Everglades Area Tours, on Chokoloskee Island, is open daily. Call 239-695-3633 or email info.EvergladesAreaTours@gmail.com. One of the few creek kayak fishing guides is Rich Jones. He can be reached at 239-451-1829 or see his blog at kayakfishingtheeverglades.com. For tackle in Everglades City, visit True Value Hardware and Everglades Bait and Tackle (which opens faithfully every day at 6 a.m.).

Chokoloskee Island Park and Marina is a good choice if you are in an RV or trailer. It has a shop with bait, ice, and some tackle. A more upscale option is Outdoor Resorts of Chokoloskee Island. Both rent kayaks and canoes. Everglades City has a small grocery store and several gas stations/convenience stores. Good eats after a long day on the water can be found at Camellia Street Seafood or City Seafood.

When a cold front blows in and the fish hibernate, a good retreat is the excellent little Museum of the Everglades. It documents the history of Everglades City, a planned company town with wide boulevards founded by the inimitable Barron Collier, the colorful advertising tycoon who built most of the Tamiami Trail.

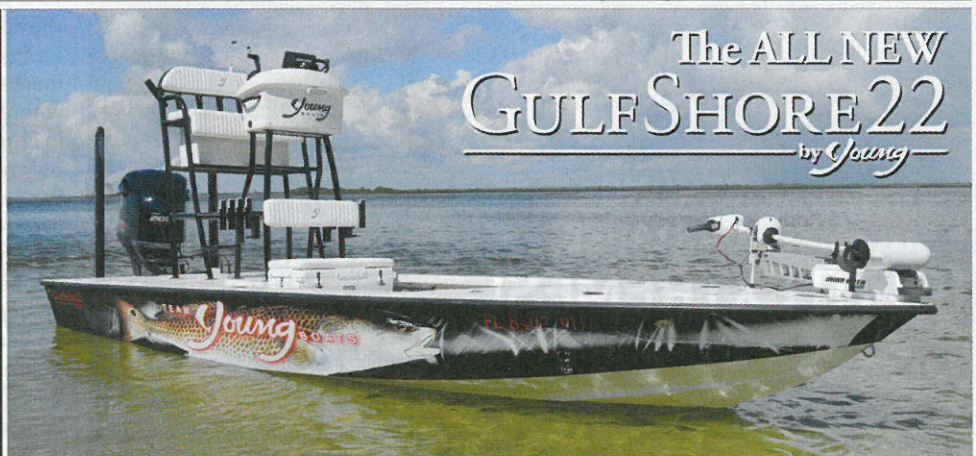
narrow—leaving no room to use a long paddle. I find that my pedal kayak with a rudder is particularly adapted for these waters, although the downside is that the running gear sometimes hangs on submerged logs. The gods did not intend for fishing these waters to be easy!

You will also learn the hard way not to have anything protruding or hanging from your boat, like a rod or paddle hitched to the side, while navigating a mangrove tunnel. The same is true of tall, thick reeds along narrow channels

Young
BOATS

See us at the Tampa
Outdoors Expo & Boat Show
Florida State Fairgrounds
FEB 27th - MAR 1st

352.447.1330
INFO@YOUNGBOATS.COM
WWW.YOUNGBOATS.COM



Backcountry

that will grab everything. Your boat will look like a mangrove salad bar as your rod, paddles and other paraphernalia clip off vegetation...if they don't get pulled overboard in the process. Make sure your rods are lying flat inside the boat and pointing to front or rear with as little overhang as possible.

Shorter is also better when it comes to rods. And stout. I favor medium-heavy rods 6 to 6 1/2 feet to winch snook and tarpon away from mangrove roots. You'll

be spending time casting in tight tunnels where the fish often hang out in deeper holes. Usually I take two rods—one rigged for surface/shallow water lures and one with a jighead and plastic grub for deeper holes. Fly rods are okay in the backcountry ponds, but forget them in mangrove tunnels.

The fish in the backcountry, where the water is often stained or cloudy, are usually not leader shy. I recommend at least a 30-pound fluorocarbon leader, espe-

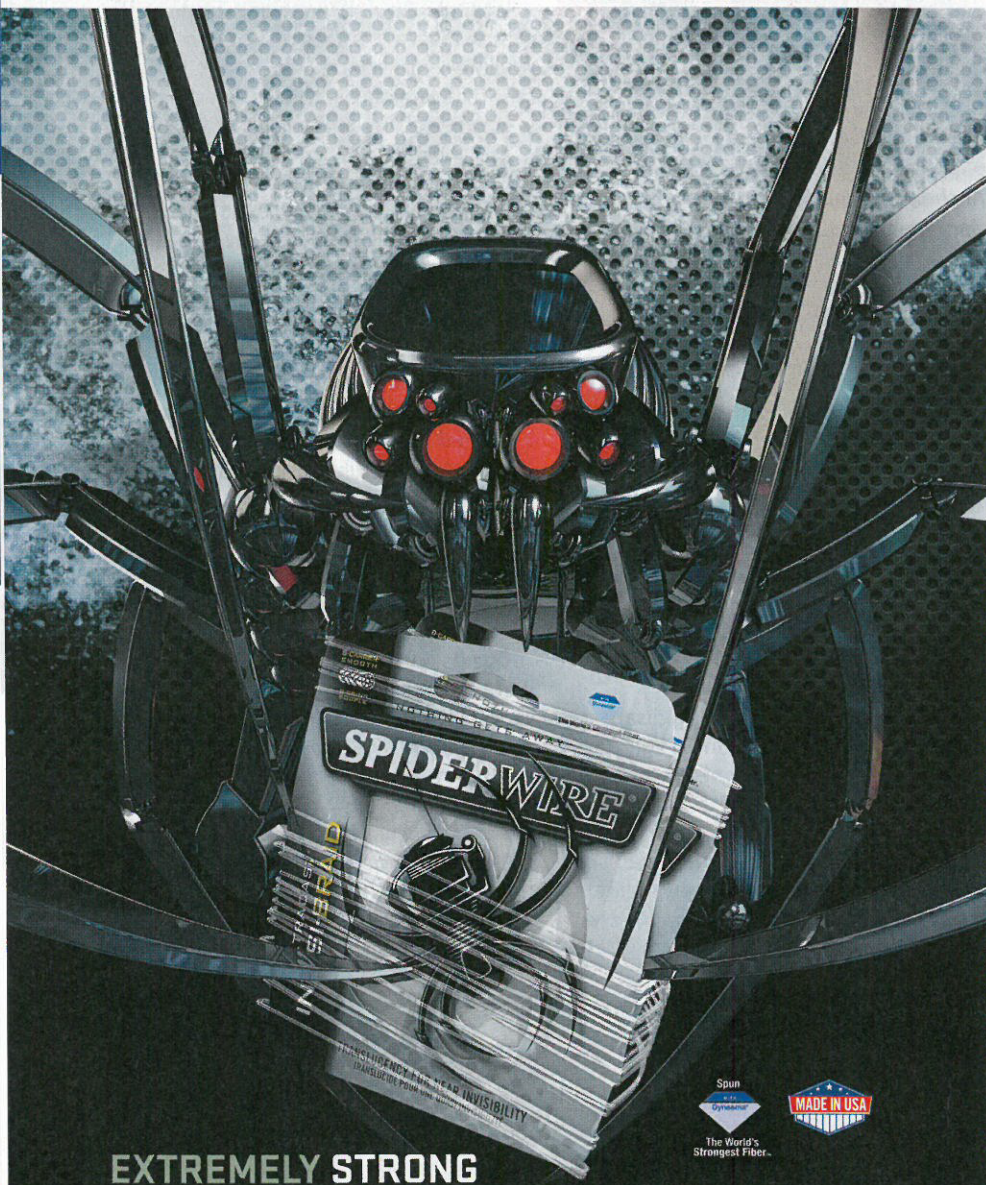
cially for snook and the occasional baby tarpon.

Most of the ponds in the backcountry are shallow, so I pack walk-the-dog and chuggers for surface action. The bottoms are often covered with moss and muck so I prefer gold weedless spoons and new penny color flukes rigged weedless on 1/16-ounce weighted-shank worm hooks for subsurface. For the occasional deeper holes, especially in the mangrove tunnels, my go-to combination is a 1/8-ounce jighead with a white or pearl curly tail. For snook and reds in shallow, clear channels, I like to drift in the current a medium-sized live shrimp hooked through the tail on a small jighead.

An anchor can come in very handy when a good fish is hooked in a narrow channel or mangrove tunnel. As soon as a big fish strikes I set the hook and then throw the anchor overboard. I use one of the small multi-fluke styles, finding the water often too deep in the tunnels for a pole-type anchor. Without an anchor, a good snook will tow you right into the mangroves, your only option then being to bail out of the boat and pursue on foot...and it can be quite a surprise when the water is chest deep or the bottom mushy muck. A tip: Don't open the anchor flukes in a mangrove tunnel—waiting roots will bite and not let go after the catch is released.

I also favor neoprene, hard-soled flats wading shoes and I strap on neoprene gravel guards to keep the muck out. Not something I'd wear to a fashion show, but very functional. Of course I have some fishing buddies who are Florida natives and wade barefoot. Your choice.

Again, a GPS app on smartphone in waterproof case or a hand-held GPS like those made by Garmin, Lowrance, and others is essential gear. Commercially available maps are not accurate or detailed enough. You must often follow your progress in creeks on GPS to choose the correct channel at forks, which can be frequent. This is true even on routes marked by state and federal agencies, where signs can mysteriously disappear in crucial spots. I make my own maps before each trip by printing out Google Earth screen shots of the creek and then using self-adhesive laminating sheets to waterproof them. I also carry a small cell phone recharger which can be a life-saver, because most GPS apps suck a lot of power, and you don't want your phone going dead as you try to find your way home. Battery-powered handheld GPS devices last longer without a recharge. **FS**



EXTREMELY STRONG
EXTREMELY CASTABLE
GO TO EXTREMES!

Ultimate fishing line for ultimate performance
SpiderWire® Ultracast™ NOTHING GETS AWAY™



SPIDERWIRE



SPIDERWIRE.COM