The **TOP TEN SPORTFISH** of the **FLORIDA KEYS** (AND WHEN TO CATCH THEM!)

A Guide for Getting the Most out of Your Greater Amberjack, Bonefish, Dolphin, Grouper, Mutton Snapper, Permit, Sailfish, Shark, Swordfish, or Tarpon Charter

by **CAPTAIN DAVE SCHUGAR**

24-YEAR VETERAN OF THE KEYS
The TOP TEN SPORTFISH of the FLORIDA KEYS (AND WHEN TO CATCH THEM!)

By Captain David Schugar

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GREATER AMBERJACK
THE BULLDOG OF THE DEEP

**AMBERJACKS** are named after their appearance, with an amber color on their back and sides. They also have a very distinguishing black or dark bar that runs from their forehead over their eyes. Amberjacks are very strong fish and can reach over one hundred and fifty pounds. These fish are by far one of the best sportfish because they don't give up. They will fight you all the way to the boat.

Amberjacks are found in many different habitats: you can locate them on the reef, on shallow wrecks and natural humps, and as deep as one thousand feet. You will find most of your larger ones in depths of two hundred feet or more. Amberjacks are caught year round in the Florida Keys. But the best months are March and April when the fish are spawning.

I can recall a fishing trip in 2005, while my clients and I were fishing for yellowtail snapper on the reef, a group of amberjacks showed up. When I’m fishing for yellowtail snapper, a small member of the snapper family, I like to use light tackle and fifteen-pound test line and I drift my line back in the current and wait for a strike.

“On this trip, however, these thirty-pound amberjacks were eating the yellowtail we were reeling in. Every time we would hook up, an amberjack would eat the yellowtail, and on the fifteen-pound test we could not get a fish to the boat.

“After a while, the amberjacks were getting filled up and we were able to get some of the yellowtails past them. I asked my client Rob if he wanted to catch one of these monsters. Of course he said yes, because he had never seen an amberjack before.

“I rigged up a 50-pound outfit with 80-pound leader and an 8 oz. lead.
We dropped a yellowtail down to the bottom to catch one of these amberjacks. As Rob was dropping the bait down to the bottom he got hit on the decent.

“The amberjack hit with such power he backlashed the reel. (Backlashes are basically a gigantic mess that happens when the line gets all tangled in the reel. The tangle is so bad that the line can’t come off of the reel.) With the reel backlashed, and a powerful amberjack on the other end, the line snapped and we lost the fish.

“After I fixed the reel and got the backlash out we dropped down another yellowtail, but this time Rob was ready. He was able to flip the drag on as he got his bite. After a thirty-minute, back-breaking fight on a heavy 50-pound outfit, rob saw what was eating his yellowtails. He was so worn out after the first amberjack, he had to go sit down and drink some water. At the end of the day Rob and his friend caught ten amberjacks with the largest one tipping the scale of 40 pounds.

“We released all but one of the amberjacks. At the end of the trip we had a bunch of yellowtails, one amberjack and one black grouper to boot. Rob is one of my regular customers now and he reminds me of that trip every time when he comes down to the Keys on vacation.”
BONEFISH are, undoubtedly, the strongest fish pound for pound. Anglers around the world would kill to hook a bonefish. Known as the Grey Ghost, the bonefish has the ability to come in unnoticed to feed and disappear without a trace. This amazing fish is very difficult to see if you don’t know what you’re looking for.

The body of the bonefish is silver and slender with a bluish or greenish back. On the upper half there are dark streaks with cross bands connecting to the lateral line. The body is also rounded and has a long downward aiming snout. The dorsal and caudal fins are black. Bonefish can be found in warm waters on top of the flats and in the channels surrounding them. Bonefish can reach almost twenty pounds, but most are from one to seven pounds. The bonefish will take a fly, and is considered to be one of the hardest fish to catch on fly. The months of November & December and April & May are the four best months to catch bonefish down here in the Florida Keys.

I may be a charter guide, but I love to fish all of the time. I love to spend time fishing with my father, since he’s the guy who got me started. Before I moved to Florida my family used to come down to the Keys on vacation during winter break. My father would take me fishing from the flats for bonefish to the open ocean for whatever would eat our live bait. I didn’t realize at the time, but the first time I went fishing for bonefish, I fell in love with them.

“I can remember fishing around Stiltsville in the month of December. It was warm, the wind was blowing ten to fifteen miles an hour, and the sun had just broken the horizon. Our captain, my father, and I were blasting over the silvery flats of Biscayne Bay.

“Since we could not pole around on the flats because the wind, we
anchored up and chummed for bonefish in sandy areas. **The sand was key...the bonefish stand out against the white sand just enough so that you could make out a fast moving shadow.** Once we saw a small school of bonefish we would cast past them, and slowly bring the shrimp to the bonefish. Bonefish spook very easily, and I'll tell you, when a bonefish hits your line, he will take a hundred yards like it was nothing.

“That day we caught eight or nine large bonefish with some up to eleven pounds. What an experience – **these fish are relatively small, but they pack unbelievable power and speed.”**

If you like to toss flies, or fish with bait for a species that can run like a dragster on injected alcohol, bonefish are a fish you should not miss while on your trip to the keys!
**DOLPHIN** are known as Mahi-Mahi or Dorado, and should not be confused with the mammal that has the same name. This surface feeder has a very short life of three to five years. Dolphin can grow up to twenty pounds a year and rarely exceed sixty pounds. The current world record is eighty-six pounds and the Florida state record of eighty-two pounds was caught this past year in Pompano FL.

Dolphins are unlike most fish, in that you can tell the sex of the fish from looking at them. The Males, which we call Bulls have a large square shaped head where as the females, which we call Cows, have a rounded sloping forehead. Dolphin are usually shiny blue with bright neon blue fins when you see them in the wild, but as they get tired or excited they can turn a green/yellow color in a split second – like a light switch. Dolphin can be caught year-round in Florida, but the best months for the large ones are April and May. Dolphin can be caught on light tackle and they are readily caught on fly, too. Dolphins are a highly prized for their food quality and their beauty.

2007 was a very impressive season for dolphin, but there was a week of fishing in the month of April, which really stood out. For an entire week we were catching double digits of fish weighing over twenty pounds.

“We were fishing relatively close in, only about three hundred to four hundred fifty feet of water, moving back and forth in those depths looking for bird activity. We found a pair of birds working in about three hundred and
fifty feet of water. When we got over to the birds two rods went off.

“We ended up bagging two nice fish weighing over thirty pounds. Once we got everything set back up, I spotted another pair of birds working just to the west of us. Once we got over there we hooked up again with another pair of dolphins weighing around eighteen to twenty-five pounds.

“There were high-fives going around when I noticed another set of birds working a little further to the west. Instead of trolling to those fish we picked up and ran over there fast. I had my client pitch a bait under the birds with a light spinner. We hooked up with a nice twenty pounder.

“As the fish got closer to the boat, I noticed two more fish trailing the hooked one. So I instructed the other two anglers to pitch a bait to the other fish one at a time. Now we had three big dolphins on light tackle!

“This is what it is all about: bent rods, clients laughing, and everyone smiling. We ended up losing one of the fish but boated the other two. Unfortunately, we lost the forty-pounder but we picked up two cows that weighed right at twenty-five pounds each. At the end of the day we caught sixteen fish that had a combined weight of four hundred pounds.

“I had many days like this that week. Even after the end of May, the dolphin continued to show up till the end of October.”

Dolphin are known as the BEST eating fish in the water, and they freeze incredibly well...there’s something NICE to take home to help remember your vacation throughout the year, as you enjoy them on your dinner table for months afterward!
GROUPER
GOLIATH, BLACK & GAG

Down here in the Florida Keys we have many large GROUPERS to choose from. The largest of course is the GOLIATH GROUPER. This fish can reach in excess of eight hundred pounds. Although this particular species is protected right now, they’ve come back in full force in recent years. Hopefully they will open up the season for harvesting these giants again in the near future. You can identify this grouper by the large vertical blotches going down his back. They tend to have a musty green and yellow body that is covered with a scattering of little black dots.

Another grouper that gets really big down here is the BLACK GROUPER. It is one of the most common groupers along the reef. They can exceed one hundred pounds but most fish are between fifteen and thirty-five pounds. They are hard fighters even when they are small. They like to use their surroundings to their advantage. We generally use heavy stout gear to get them out of structure before it’s too late. The reef and the wrecks are very sharp and can cut the monofilament leader like a hot knife through butter. These groupers tend to stay very close to (if not inside) any type of hole or crevice, though at times they will venture from their home and look for food. They do gather in the months of February and March to spawn out in the deep. They will congregate around wrecks and large natural formations from the sea bottom. A black grouper has an olive or gray body, with black blotches and brassy color spots.

Finally the GAG GROUPER is found more prominently in the Gulf of Mexico, but we do catch them on small ledges and wrecks in the ocean around the Keys. They tend to lie in the sand around the structure and wait for food to come by. They are gray with odd shaped
blotches of darker gray in no distinct pattern. They can reach up to eighty pounds but are commonly caught from ten to thirty pounds. Even though they are smaller than the black grouper, they seem to fight harder. All of the groupers are excellent to eat when they’re less than thirty pounds. The larger fish tend to be a bit... “fishy.” The best months to fish for gags are in the two months of March and April.

One of my most memorable moments involving groupers doesn’t even involve catching them. During the winter, the Spanish mackerel get really thick in the bay, so much so that you can have non-stop action. I like to use ultra-light tackle to fish for them. Eight- and ten-pound outfits are lots of fun since the mackerel are ranging from two to ten pounds.

“On this particular occasion, while catching these Spanish mackerel, an enormous goliath grouper showed up. He had to have been over three hundred and fifty pounds. He sat right under the boat like a shadow. I decided to see if he would eat a whole mackerel, so the next fish we caught, we let it sit for a minute instead of putting it in the fish box.

“All of a sudden this goliath sucked down a ten pound mackerel as if were a Scooby Snack. My customers at the time asked if they could feed the goliath some more of the mackerel. I let them feed this goliath fifteen ten-pound Spanish mackerels. It was absolutely amazing.

“I went to this spot numerous times after that to feed this goliath. It was a highlight for the day. It still astounds me that this fish ate one third of its weight in one sitting. I fed this goliath for two years until one day he was gone, never to return.

“There are many smaller ones there now. I once caught twenty-eight goliaths ranging from two to sixty pounds. These fish tend to act like other groupers: the smaller fish group together but the largest ones are loners; Otherwise the smaller fish would be eaten for sure.”
MUTTON SNAPPERS
A PRIZE CATCH FOR EVEN SEASONED CAPTAINS

Sometimes mistaken for a genuine red snapper, MUTTON SNAPPERS have a greenish back and light pink on his sides with a black dot on his lower back. The muttons found in the deep water have no green backs and are more red than pink. These fish tend to school together as do all snappers. Some do become loners, but always gather during the summer months to spawn on the full moon.

They are more or less everywhere on the reef, from inside on the patches and out to three hundred feet of water. These fish are hard fighters and are a prize to the most seasoned captains. Muttons are very smart fish, they require fluorocarbon leader to be very successful. Muttons will eat live bait on the surface in the shallow water and sometimes they will even eat bait that’s trolled real slowly.

Mutton fishing this year was very good. My best day I had sixteen fish ranging from fifteen to twenty-five pounds. I actually found a spot where a school had formed over the sand. At the time I thought it was a wreck, because the marking I found was over two hundred feet long.

“Later in the day I went back to the spot where I had been catching them to find out that they were gone and there was no wreck. I was dumbfounded. I thought it was a new wreck, but only turned out to be a very large school of muttons.

“After thirty minutes of looking for the fish, I decided to go back to the spot I first saw them. They were back as if there was a homing beacon on that spot. That’s when I knew that I found a great school, chilling in
the sand and feeding on anything they found. The bite was great. We would drop two rods and drift over the spot. As soon as we started to mark the fish, both rods would bend over.

“During the months of May, June and July we can have regular catches like this, but as the year progresses, the fish scatter all over the place.”

Another of the finest eating fish in all the sea, fisherman come from all over the world to have a chance to bring some of these prized fish home!
PERMITS are silver with dark or iridescent blue on top, shading to silvery sides. In dark waters, they show golden orange tints around their chest. Permits are a fly fisherman’s nemesis. They are the hardest fish to catch on fly other than a bonefish. They eat small crabs, shrimp, and other small crustaceans.

Permits are very strong fish and it is not uncommon to catch them over twenty-five pounds. The world record permit is fifty-six pounds and many people catch them up to fifty pounds every year. They stalk the flat’s edges for crabs and shrimp, and often times you can see them schooled up in the deep water next to the flats. They will also be up on top of the flats when the tide is high enough. You can find them in many numbers during February and March on the flats, but in June and July they gather out on the wrecks and spawn. They will be on wrecks as deep as one hundred and thirty feet.

When I first started coming to the Florida Keys on a regular basis, I became friends with a guy named Little Mickey. He asked me if I had ever fished for permit before, and I told him I had with a charter captain off of Biscayne Bay.

“Had I fished for them in the deep? he asked. I told him no, but at that time I didn’t know that they ventured away from the flats.

“We got to talking and he invited me to come with him out to one of the wrecks that hold a huge number of large permits. So we went out with a dozen crabs, two fishing poles with fifteen-pound test and a handful of 3/8-ounce jigs. We pulled up to the wreck in his grandfather’s twenty foot Shamrock, hooked the crab on our jigs and let them descend.

“Mickey told me to let out about sixty feet out and hold it. With sixty
feet out the bait would be about 30-40 feet down. We made our first drift with no bites. So we picked up and tried again, and this time both of us were hooked up. I got mine to the boat first and it was a nice fifteen pounder. Mickey had to fight his fish for about forty-five minutes, but it was close to forty pounds. I was absolutely amazed with the size of his fish, and the fact that we were catching permit in one hundred feet of water.

We exchanged high-fives and went back for another drift.

“We ended up catching eleven permit ranging from fifteen to forty pounds, and lost one fish to the wreck. What a trip...I was floating on cloud nine the rest of the day. Thanks to Mickey, I now take some crabs this time of the year when I go dolphin fishing and stop on that wreck on our way back in. My charters dig the experience just how I did when I first learned about that great permit fishing in the deep. There’s nothing like feeling a permit turn sideways and rip off another few hundred feet of line, right when you think they’re tired and coming into the boat!”
Unlike all of the rest of the billfish, the SAILFISH has a dorsal fin shaped like a sail on its back. Its color changes with the level of excitement of the fish. For the most part, the dorsal is blue with dark cobalt blue spots. Sailfish have a dark blue back fading to silver on its belly. They also have rows of spots that change colors that run the length of the body. These fish feed primarily on small fish and squid from the surface all the way to the bottom.

They can be found inside of the reef on the patches to far offshore. We generally fish for them on the outside of the reef during the cooler months. We catch them year round, but the best months are from November to March. It is not uncommon to catch more than one at a time because they mainly travel together and hunt together. You may see them free jumping or cruising with their dorsal fins protruding out of the water.

There are many tournaments that draw lots of people to the Florida Keys to catch these magnificent fish. They are very acrobatic and fast. Some can reach speeds of forty-five miles an hour and can leap ten feet out of the water. I have seen them run a hundred yards of line off the reel in seconds.

One of my most memorable experiences with sail fishing is when we got four sailfish on at once. What a chaotic experience. At the time I was first mate for a well-known captain down here in the Florida Keys. The day started out just like any other day, with slow trolling live bait in about one hundred feet of water.

“All of a sudden our baits got real nervous... and then it happened.”
One line went off, followed by two more. I had my anglers grab the rods and start working the fish. I only had three anglers so I decided to reel the fourth line in and get it out of the way. But it was too late – another sailfish grabbed the bait and we got four sailfish on. I told the clients to keep their lines taught and work their fish to the boat. The sailfish had another agenda.

“The four fish went different directions. Now we had a problem, as one client had almost no line left on his spool. So I told the captain to follow his fish. An average fight lasts twenty to forty minutes but it took over three hours to land all four fish. Just as one guy would get some line back on the reel he would lose it because we had to chase down another client’s fish that had no line. The captain did a great job of keeping line on the reels, and the clients...well, hats off to them for not panicking when they had almost no line left. I have had days where we hooked four fish but never landed them all. That is almost an impossible task if the fish go in different directions. To land a quad is something I'll always be looking forward to again.

“Everyone’s arms were about worn out as we all sat back with a sandwich and relaxed for a bit. We ended up catching two more doubles and five singles that day for a total of thirteen releases that day, still my best to this day.”

Watching a sailfish “dance” on top of the water is one of the most exhilarating natural phenomenon you will ever witness, whether you are a fisherman, or not! But hooking one UP, and getting him in close for a picture is a memory NO person will ever forget!
SHARKS
THE ULTIMATE PREDATOR OF THE OCEAN

We have hundreds of different species of **SHARKS** down here in the Florida Keys, but the most common are the hammerhead, bull, lemon, black tip, spinner, tiger, silky, and the gray reef sharks. They are found everywhere, even in canals. There are no fences to keep them out in the open ocean.

**You can catch sharks all year round, but they congregate out on the reef in great numbers in the springtime.** There are many methods of fishing for them and you can even catch them on fly. During the tarpon run in the summertime, sharks come to the shoreline looking for tarpon to eat. Many tarpon fisherman have witnessed their tarpon get eaten right at the boat when they are trying to release the tarpon.

I was fishing for tarpon and snook at Vaca Cut in marathon on a thirteen foot Boston Whaler one night. We were casting large lipped plugs for snook and tarpon. My buddy Mark hooked up with a nice tarpon, about forty pounds. When the fight got close to the end the tarpon jumped into the boat, almost knocking me out of it in the process.

“Trying not to get hooked by the two big treble hooks the tarpon finally flipped back into the water and was attacked almost immediately by a ten-foot bull shark. If you have never been on a small boat like the one we were on it’s a little disconcerting that the shark was as big as the boat. He ate the tarpon with such veracity, I was sure that if I had fallen in that night it would have been me getting eaten.

“Another time, I had a dolphin charter and we didn’t do so well, so we
went to the hump to find some tuna. We were catching some small tuna – bait size fish. So I rigged up an amberjack rig and we dropped one of the small tunas to the bottom. As soon as our bait hit the bottom we got a strike. We reeled up a nice forty-five pounder. We then set up for another drop and got a bite as soon as we got to the bottom again. But, this fish was considerably bigger. The fish fought hard for about forty-five minutes. Eventually we started to see the fish; it looked as if it were at least eighty pounds.

“Just under the boat a shark about eighteen feet long snapped up the amberjack as if it were a snack. We fought this shark into the darkness of night, only to lose it after a three-hour battle. What a great time, though it would have been nice to bring it up for some photos.”
SWORDFISH are found off the edge of the continental shelf. When you see one in the daytime, they are strikingly beautiful, with bright cobalt blue on its back fading to silver gray on its belly. Swordfish are deep-water feeders and they have enormous eyes, almost the size of a baseball, even on small fish. Their bills look just like a blade of a two-handed broad sword from a knight’s era. Their bodies are round and they have twin finlets on the side of their enormous tail. They have a small sickle shaped dorsal fin.

Sword fishing was for a long time done only at night, but in the past few years we have been targeting them in the daytime. It seems that they are here all year round, but they depend on the current to bring them food, like some other species. Their main diet consists of squid and any small fish they can catch.

I have been fishing for swordfish for over six years now and have caught a great deal many of them. You can fish for them at night closer to the surface, but lately I have been targeting them at the bottom in two thousand feet of water in the daytime.

“The last time I went out we caught one that weighed around three hundred pounds. We caught him late in the day after an entire day of trying. We finally got a bite and the fish took a lot of line. I had to keep backing down on the fish so that he would not take all of my line. After a quick thirty minute fight the fish jumped out of the water a few times. By this time the fish came closer to the boat, and I was able to grab the leader. The fish would not budge. After a twenty minute wrestling match the fish wore me out and I had to let go of the leader.

“The fish sounded all the way back to the bottom, which was about thirteen hundred feet of water at this time. After about two more hours we
got the fish to the boat and stuck him with the gaff. It took three of us to pull the fish over the gunwale and into the boat. We took some photos, exchanged high-fives and shot home. But oh, what a fish: its fillets filled a fifty-gallon drum to the top.”
**TARPON** are sought after by anglers all over the world, and found from Africa to the southern United States and as far south as South America. Tarpon are silver with a dark back that can be blue to green. They have an under-slung jaw which gives them the ability to suck in prey from underneath. They have very large scales and some are as big as a bread plate. **Down here in the Florida Keys, they can be found year round, but the best months for catching these large migratory fish as they move through the keys are the months of April, May, and June.** The size of these fish can be anywhere from forty pounds to two hundred pounds. These fish are usually targeted around fast moving currents caused by the tides. We mainly fish for these fish around the bridges connecting the Keys.

Every year, hordes of people infiltrate the Keys in search of the Silver King. During this time we fish for dolphin during the day and tarpon at dusk. On one trip, while we were leaving the dock and passing by the bridge, I noticed a school of baitfish. I couldn’t tell what they were, but I decided to throw the cast net on them. As I pulled in the net, I noticed that the baitfish were mullet and some of them got away. As they swam off, tarpon started to crash them.

“I decided to fish for some tarpon before we headed offshore. My first thought was to slow troll the mullet along the edge of the bridge, and we were in luck. The first bait got cut off by a barracuda, but the second bite ended up being a tarpon of about seventy-five pounds.

“Tarpon fishing can be done on the flats or in channels, and even (for some people) in your backyard. These fish tend to be scavengers and will eat the scraps that you throw into the water.
Thanks For Reading!

If you have any questions about the Keys, I’m here to help! I’ve been fishing and the Keys for over 24 years, so whether you’re planning a great fishing trip, or trying to find the best lodging/food/etc., feel free to contact me!

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