

# Half and Half

Splitting your fishing day in the Florida Keys offers an excellent shot at an endless list of inshore and offshore gamefish! **By Jeff Merrill**



The saltwater lagoon at Hawks Cay is surrounded by sand, lounge chairs and tiki umbrellas and is a great spot for snorkeling, swimming, or relaxing while enjoying a good book and a cold beverage.

It's easy to get accustomed to the laid-back, no worries, and come-as-you-are life-style of the Florida Keys. A stark contrast for vacationers who visit other popular areas of the Sunshine State and often encounter traffic jams, congested malls, endless fast food restaurants and time-by-calendar waits for dinner, The Keys offer an island experience with mainland conveniences. Water sports are king here including diving, snorkeling, parasailing, canoeing, kite boarding and cruising though it's safe to say if you love to fish, this is the place to be. After all, there are few destinations around the globe offering an opportunity to catch marlin, sailfish, mahi-mahi, king mackerel and blackfin tuna as well as a variety of snapper and grouper in the morning before exploring the flats and backcountry for snook, redfish, tarpon, permit and bonefish after enjoying a stone crab and mojito lunch! Regardless of the month on the calendar, time of day or what direction

the wind blows, there's a long list of inshore and offshore gamefish to tangle with here.

The Overseas Highway stretches 126 miles from Key Largo to Key West and 42 bridges connect the small islands of The Keys, which are often no wider than the road itself, while offering picturesque views of the Atlantic Ocean and Florida Bay. Three of these bridges have been named National Historic Sites including the Old Seven Mile Bridge, Bahia Honda Bridge and Long Key Bridge and a trip from Key Largo to Key West will include 18.8 miles over bridges alone and roughly 15% of the travel time. Keep your eyes on the road since every point of interest in The Keys along the Overseas Highway is referenced by mile markers simply indicated as MIM on maps and in publications. Marinas abound along the entire length of The Keys on the ocean and bay sides and range from small fuel stops with limited bait and tackle, sundries and services to

full-service facilities with restaurants, lodging, and fully-stocked marine stores and tackle shops.

Located a little over two hours south of Miami, Duck Key, the midway point between Key Largo and Key West at Mile Marker 61, encompasses 300 acres and is actually five tiny islets connected by small bridges to form one island. Beautiful oceanfront and canalfront homes line the shores and lagoons where

The fire pit adjacent to the Terrace Restaurant is a popular gathering place each night for resort guests at Hawks Cay.



year-round residents and winter vacationers are at the doorstep of some of the best fishing this fragile island chain has to offer. Here is where you'll also find Hawks Cay Resort and Marina, one of the most luxurious, fisherman-friendly, family oriented facilities in all of The Keys. Home to the Saltwater Experience and Tailwalker television fishing shows which appear each week on Versus network, Hawks Cay ([www.hawkscay.com](http://www.hawkscay.com)) has recently undergone a \$35 million renovation and offers several choices of accommodations including 177 guest rooms and suites in addition to 225 two- and three-bedroom villas with garden, ocean and pool views among its 60 acres. Five freshwater swimming pools and a saltwater lagoon provide a cool retreat after a day on the water and the renowned Dolphin Connection is where guests can experience hands-on interaction with Atlantic bottlenose dolphin.

Hawks Cay offers a full service 85 slip marina with launch ramp and has cable TV, telephone, shower and laundry facilities, gasoline and diesel fuel. The Dockside Store is open daily and features groceries, clothing, hardware, sundries, sandwiches and beverages. The fishing tackle section has all the gear that's needed for guests who trailer their boat or arrive by water and a variety of live and frozen bait is available for any species targeted. The fishing office can arrange a charter with several boats based at Hawks Cay and can also provide local



For many, poling the flats of The Keys with a fly rod in search of bonefish, tarpon and permit is the ultimate in saltwater fishing.

knowledge as to what's running and where. Other water-based activities available at the marina include scuba diving, snorkeling, SNUBA, watercraft rentals, parasailing, waterski school, boat rentals and sunset cruises. Camp Hawk features structured kids club programs for children ages 5-17 including sports and educational activities, take-home crafts, pool games, movie nights and creative tournaments.

Five restaurants at Hawks Cay offer breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dishes range from global Latin favorites and tropical island cuisine at Alma and Bar Alma to soups, salads and sandwiches at the Beach Grill. Tom's Harbor House is located at the marina and the bar area here is where captains and fisherman hangout after a day on the water to share fishing tales and a cold beverage. (They also offer the Catch and Cook menu where guests can have their catch cooked various ways.) Away from Hawks Cay you'll find several excellent restaurants within a short drive offering a variety of cuisine to please the most demanding palate. Most feature local seafood and island-style dishes and many are more than happy to cook your catch. The Hideaway Café is an off-the-beaten-path gem that's located in the Rainbow Bend Resort at MM 58 Oceanside where steaks, chops, seafood and pasta are elegantly served. The Island Fish Company at MM 54 Bayside offers waterside picnic table-style dining with succulent seafood dishes a specialty. For sandwiches, wraps, Paninis, soups and salads stop by the Deep Drop Deli located at Duck Key Marina.

The most difficult decision any angler makes during a visit to the Florida Keys is what to fish for when planning a visit. The close proximity of the Gulf Stream makes the offshore fishing hard to pass up as the area in front of Hawks Cay including Tennessee Reef and Alligator Reef and beyond is home to numerous pelagic gamefish species. Short runs to productive structure make catching a



The abundance of sailfish in The Keys offers young anglers a chance to score their first billfish catch here.

variety of inshore and offshore species possible, even on a half-day trip. Most species are available year round though some are more abundant during certain seasons. Fall through spring offers the best shot at sailfish and king mackerel while mahi mahi, blackfin tuna, wahoo and blue marlin action is best from spring through fall. Look for tarpon, permit, redfish and bonefish along the flats and backcountry all year round while snook action drops off a bit from its peak during December and January. Reef, wrecks and lumps hold several species of grouper and snapper as well as cobia and amberjack for most of the year. Keep in mind winter cold fronts that heat up the action for offshore species may force flats and backcountry species searching for warmer water. Our most recent visit to Hawks Cay in the fall included a morning trip with Captain Scott Walker aboard his beautiful Tailwalker 2. Stopping at a couple nearby reefs we quickly got into fast action with mangrove snapper, grouper and yellowtail as we searched for bait for sailfish. After cast netting a few dozen ballyhoo, we headed just outside the reef and scored two sailfish releases and a pair of 25-pound dolphin and we were back at Hawks Cay in time for lunch! As they say, just your typical half day of fishing in the fabulous Florida Keys! **m/**

The reefs and wrecks off Hawks Cay are home to a variety of tasty bottom dwellers.

