

# Family fishing adventure in Florida Bay

With Captain Dean

by Dave Gibson

I rose early before the sun anxious to begin my Florida Bay fishing adventure. After a few obligatory shore bird pictures and a hot shower, I meet my parents whom I've invited to join me. It brings tears to my mother's eyes imagining her daughter, my sister Sue, at this very place a decade ago. There is no trace of the motel that Sue and I stayed at, which was wiped out by Hurricane Wilma in 2005, as we made our way to the marina.

I have arranged for two days of charter boat fishing with Captain Dean Steffen of Chokoloskee, FL, who is on time and ready to depart. The only way I could convince my mom of joining my dad and I this morning was to agree to her terms of allowing her to purchase eyeglasses for me. Wanting her to enjoy a new experience, I acquiesce knowing that I will need them anyway for my driver's license eye exam in May. Having never worn glasses before, I'm tested at a "Magoo-like" 20/80 in one eye and 20/200 in the other and considered illegal to drive. Thanks to my mom, peoples' children and pets on Nederland roads will now be a bit safer! The motorists between Tampa and the Everglades don't know how lucky they were.

We turn west to a spot known as Clubhouse Beach where we land a few small crevalle jacks and spotted sea trout before moving on. The next locale is occupied by another craft that's pulling in nice fish. We angle the perimeter, but are still pulling in only small ones. With barely a tug on my dad's line, he wrests aboard a mighty 6 inch lizardfish slightly larger than the shrimp that it just engulfed. Fishing has gone from fair to worse with dad's trophy the butt of jokes for the next few days. Suddenly my mom has a



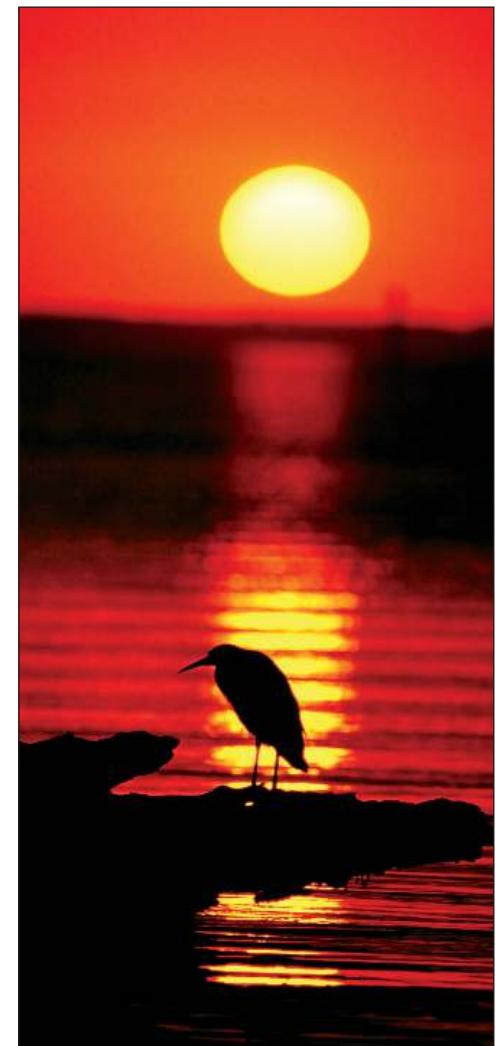
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real arc to her rod and hauls in a 3 lb. bluefish – the best catch of the day! Heading back for lunch, we cruise a waterway through the mudflats passing a small flock of flamingos along the way. The afternoon brings two 17 ½" red drum and decent trout action above the sea grass.

The following day we begin fishing inside the Cape Canal to an incoming tide. We anchor beside an offshoot channel and the

bite commences immediately! After a few undesirable but fun catfish, 2 lb. to 3 lb. black drum take our bait one after another. Dad lands the only sheepshead of the trip with teeth that look like that of humans' or sheep. Captain Dean hooks into a big fish thrashing in the shallows when he hands me the pole and grants me the privilege of bringing it in – a sleek black-lined monster snook which is admired and released. Eventually the fishing slows and flocks of least sandpipers swoosh above our heads. A peregrine falcon dives into one bunch of birds only to come up empty. We can do no wrong today and try a different area, landing some decent size black drum. A bald eagle alights on its nest and ospreys, night herons, and a lone American crocodile greet us back at the marina.

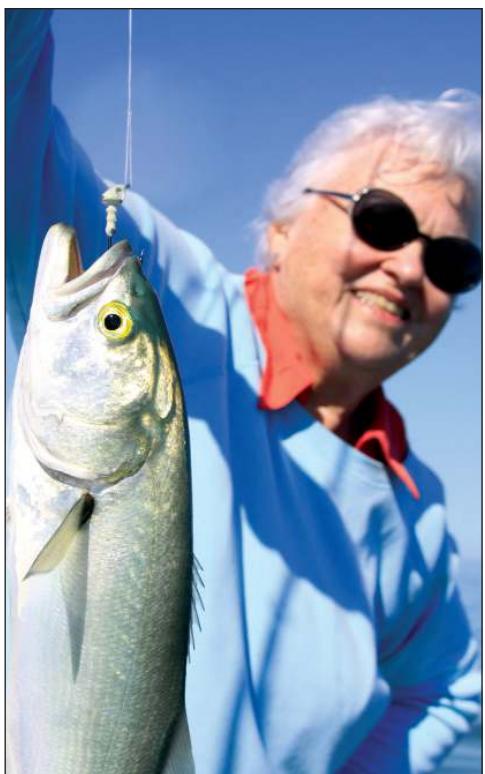
The morning's fishing was phenomenal and it is hard to imagine the afternoon being any better. We set up by one of the nearby keys and cast our shrimp-baited jigs toward the mangroves slowly retrieving our offering along the bottom.



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With the warming waters the red drum bite is on, with the fish all measuring, like the day before, 17 ½". There is a slot limit on red drum with only fish between 18" and 27" allowed as "keepers." We land three or four within the size limits. Now, almost every other cast results in a bite or a fish. Casts closest to the mangrove roots in a particular sheltered cove produce the most. Running through more than a gross of our bait shrimp, our captain warns of the impending close of our adventure. Knowing that I have just a few casts left, I target another curve in the shore to the other side of the boat. I cast and quickly retrieve until I achieve the perfect lob next to root structure. At last my jig drops just inches from the mangrove to a tug on my line. Another jerk and I set the hook into what feels to be a giant fish! Rod bent precipitously, it strips line trying its best to get away. After repeated runs and working the fish to keep my line out of the propeller, I bring him beside the boat and give the order to net it. Aboard, it glistens in the sun when I lug it high in the air. At this large size, red drums are known as bull red drums, and at all of 8 pounds, 28 1/2", this one must be released. After a few pictures the captain revives the fish in the murky water, lest it become shark food, and with a few wags of its tail swims away. The only thing that would have made this day better is if my sister Sue was here to enjoy it with me.

If you're interested in charter boat fishing with Captain Dean Steffen, you can contact him at Chokoloskee, FL, 239-695-4370.



Alice Gibson with nice bluefish.



Bob Gibson with a keeper red drum.



Dave Gibson with his bull red drum.