

The 2003 First Annual FLYC Yak-In

John Pennekamp State Park
Key Largo, Florida
August 16, 2002

Cap'n ("You'll get 30-40 hits with *THAT* lure!"; "We must've gotten 50-60 strikes - it's really *fishy* there!"; "Honest, it was *THIIIIIS* big") **Jimbo**, leader, flounder, er - flounder, and driven, uh, driving, force behind the Fort Lauderdale Yakfishing Club (**FLYC**) did decree that a club-wide gathering, liar's convention, boat rigging seminar, and fishing fest & feast, take place in August at the put-in for Rattlesnake Key (RSK) in Key Largo this summer of in the year of 2003 *anno domini*.

Upon further inspection and much reflection, the put-in on Garden Cove Road (despite the signs denoting it ISN'T a launch site!) was found to be OK for putting in, but not for groups & gatherings because the beach was hard coral rock stone-ish, not to mention smallish, and somewhat illegalish (those dang signs again) for group launchings, not to mention residential proximity mixing with post-paddle debauchery long into the night, and then being problemish for spillover parking as well.



Alternatives were called for...

Frank Yak (AKA Frank Yak –see **Cap'n Jimbo** on this one) AKA Scupperfrank, AKA Scupper Pro Frank, AKA –“You son of a...” uh-oh, do NOT ask Sally, not gonna go there... among others, suggested the **Far Pavilions** –well, the far *picnic* pavilions at Pennekamp, that is. He recalled the 2nd Annual South Florida Multiclub Picnic, Paddle, & Pickup held there in 2002, <http://community.webshots.com/album/47176515vhcVNC>, and thought it would be a good enough venue for **The Cap'n** & **FLYC** to at least check out as a site.

Now it wasn't a freebie like Garden Cove, and you'd have to pay to enter the park, but it also had a lot of pretty good attributes. It had covered picnic pavilions –oh, OK, *shelters* -on concrete pads, on-site parking, an on-site put-in/take-out “beach” for our yaks, and close proximity to the park's kayak and canoe rental center. THAT was important because we experienced paddlers could show our camaraderie and the joy of paddling to newbies and first-timers and the dumb rookie tenderfoot tourist yak renters. It ALSO allowed us to show our off **OUR** better-than-**THOSE**-junky-rentals kayaks –our lean, mean fishing machines, our advanced gear (“Look at what I've got...”; “No, lookit what **I'VE** got...!”; “Nah, you

pretenders... Check THIS rig out!!!”), and especially our paddling expertise. In other words, just to show off!

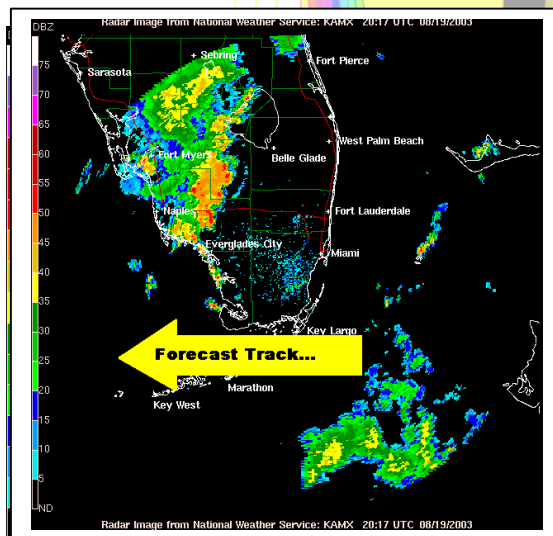
So Jim and SueSea, after having explored RSK and knowing how good inshore skinny water fishing can be in the area (see opening quotes), somehow manage to opportunistically take an exploratory pilgrimage down to the area to scope the place AND the fishing out. “It’s a tough job but **SOME**body’s gotta do it”

The results were positive -the **Olde Cap’n Jimbo** (that’s a metaphor, Jim, in case you’ve learned to read by the time this note makes it into general circulation; besides, we know you’re only an honorary captain...) shines his face upon the waters and finds them good.

He broadcasts an **FLYC** email and immediately calls for the 1st Annual Yak-In to take place in the next 5 minutes –well, maybe not five minutes... But the schedule was, to say the least, ambitious and, in a word, rather too calendar-jarringly and abruptly soon.

After the mutiny, mediators were called from the NTSB, the MLB Arbitrators Board, the NFL Which-Hi-Profile-Rookie-Can-We-Interest-in-Holding-Out-So-We-Can-Continue-to-Generate-Interest-In-Pro-Football-As-Early-As-May Mediation Panel, the ABC, the XYZ, and the Supremes (the courtly ones from DeeCee, not the singers), and a unilateral settlement tolerable to all was forcibly imposed on **Cap’n Jimbo**.

August 16th it was. So...



During the week of the approach to that fateful day, all held their collective breaths –we’d been watching the weather after experiencing a week of drenching rains and whipping winds –not to mention a spectacular, huge waterspout that marched smack down the middle of Biscayne Bay between Miami and Miami Beach! -wrought by the passage of a real honest-to-goodness semi-tropical depression across the SoFla Peninsula – yeah, it was that old 1-2 tropically depressing combination: the Marlins winding down another season –can they hang on? Will they make it? - and the Dolphins inaugurating another season – will THEY hang on, will THEY make it? What?

NOT THAT depression? THE METEOROLOGICAL kind?

Oh. Well, the depression was forecast to move across the Keys and out into the Gulf and sweep across and go on to torment folks on the other side of it (better them than us, right?), and better days were projected for the weekend. All –well, at least those of us here in SoFla! –rejoiced. That was the good news. The unfortunate side of the deal was that my son, who’d I’d invited along to use Sally’s Classic, wouldn’t be able to make as he had to attend his girlfriend’s grandmother’s funeral. On the other hand, maybe that wasn’t so bad after all –I don’t know how he does it, he breaks all the “rules” and violates ALL the

common sense guidelines –and he outfishes me every time we go out... Talk about depression! The OTHER bad news was that maybe there would still be some rain...

So in-between a barrage of emails from the **Cap'm** (probably prompted, at least in part, I must admit, by a barrage of questions from some fool in Coconut Grove) Sally & I bought a bunch of melons, cut'em up, bagged'em, and cooled them down in the fridge. I packed the Jeep full of my fishing lures and piscatorial paraphernalia, as well as all my usual yakking hardware and appurtenances, the night before.

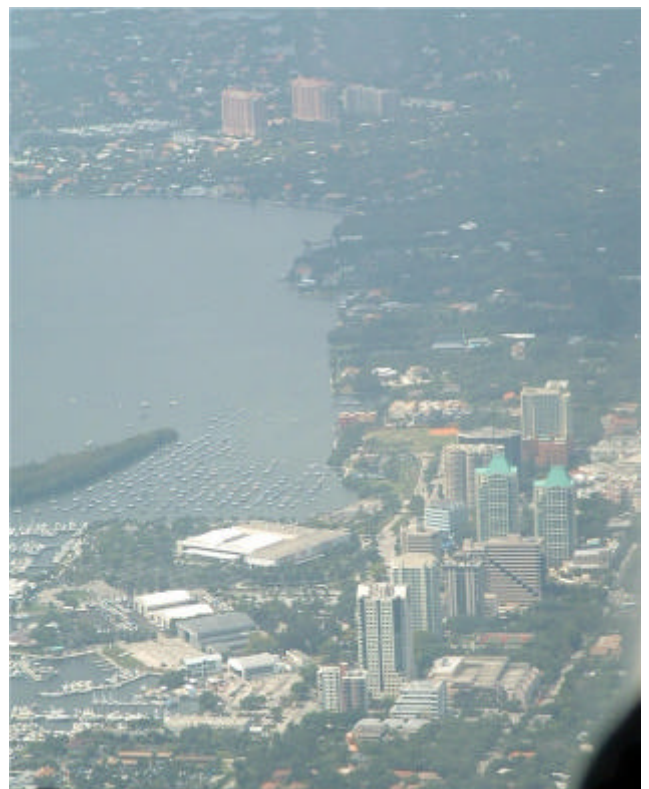
I was almost ready...!



Saturday morning, 5:45 AM... the yakfishing reveille sounds from far away: BZZZZZZZZ! I groggily wake up –and then am FULLY awake! It's Saturday –it's FINALLY time to go yakfishing and prove Sally wrong-I CAN catch fish... So I shower, have breakfast, and grease up with SPF 30 water-resistant sunscreen. **Hint:** do this **before** you go –plenty of time for it to dry a bit – and just as importantly –no slippery hands on either the paddle OR the steering wheel! By this time Sally has arisen to see me finishing breakfast

and making the last of the preparation rounds. I unlocked the Scupper Pro and carried it out and put it on the rack and cinched it down. I must admit the Jeep didn't look QUITE right without Sally's raspberry red Classic tied down along side... I went back in, loaded up the coolers and snacks, and had a last cup of coffee. Cameras and 'weekend/tropical getaway music' CDs in hand, I kissed Sally goodbye, loaded in the authentic Virgin Islands steel drum orchestra CD, and went off accompanied by an admonition to paddle, drive, and be safe.

I drove south on US 1, paralleling Metrorail, down past the older, inner suburbs of Miami, Coconut Grove, and Coral Gables. Down south along South Dixie past the semi-middle-aged semi-middle-situated suburbs of South Miami, and the new old downtown there, then the big box retail building at Snapper Creek Expressway & US 1 at the Dadeland North Metrorail Station. Declining to take the 'high road', the freeway-tollway combination expressway of 878-874-HEFT, I continued on past the towers of Miami's first Edge City, Dadeland, and along the venerable old first Dade, then Miami-Dade, County Main Street. Then on past North Kendall Drive, the arrow through the heart of the prototypical South Florida 'sprawlburg', "Kendall", where I lived in the early 60s –when it was a two-lane, pothole-ridden, humpbacked connector that led to the nowhere of



the wilds of the west of Miami –you know, the area around 87th Avenue –one more step & you fell off the edge of the earth country...!

Heading south along US 1, I marveled at the growth of the past 40 years, as the original hamlet-like places like Princeton and Cutler and Perrine and Naranja and Rockdale have been swallowed up or transformed into 'Urbanized Sprawling Suburban Metro USA' and become the Falls, the Pinecrests, the Palmetto Bays, and the Cutler Ridges that we now know. I also marveled at the Phoenix-like rebirth after the devastation of the Mall and the community of Cutler Ridge by Andrew some 12 years ago.



South of Cutler Ridge, where I did a second part of my growing up, Goulds still somewhat resembled the area I recognized as a teen. But father south, Cauley Square, which was just a little hole-in-the-wall south of the civilization we called the old pre-mall, open-air Cutler Ridge Shopping Center, which grew and prospered in the 80s, was blasted and all but sunk by Andrew that fateful August day in 1992. It still struggles valiantly to return, but hard economic times retard progress there. Indeed, those hard times have affected much of what was "South Dade" and "The Redlands" -the lime industry, once the US leader for production, has shrunk to but a ghost of its former self as Mexican, South American, and Asian areas now dominate much of the world's citrus production, and the large Kendall Groves production plant sits on US 1 as a silent witness to the passage of time and the shifting sands of the world and local economies.

But not all has been lost. Even Naranja, site of some of the more horrific ravages of Andrew, survived the damages and surpassed the former levels of commercial development. Part of the reason? It's more profitable for many former agricultural interests to grow houses than it is to raise crops or nursery plants. And so a seemingly inexorable wave of turnover in land use is not-so-slowly transforming the landscape of our County's once southern truck and ornamental and exotics farmlands into spreading carpets of largely single-family suburbs. And you need retail to support the people who live in those houses.

One of the fallouts from that regrowth benefited me on my way down as I swung off the highway after driving "through" the new, sprawled Homestead, but really, past the 'real' Homestead and Florida city downtowns to the west, was to stop in at Wally World. Wal-Mart, serving America, serving the suburbs... With a Wal-Mart credit card, you can get an additional three cents per gallon discount on an already "reasonable" price. OK, more than a dollar and a half a gallon just is NOT reasonable. I remember getting gas in Homestead before driving down to Key West as a freshman just back from college –and it cost 32 cents a gallon...!

So I filled up, and swung back onto South Dixie Highway, passing under the interchange where the HEFT (the Homestead Extension of the Florida Turnpike) finally ends its trans-state run in Florida City at 344th Street, and headed down the last stretch of “civilized roadway” north of Key Largo along US 1, past the fast food joints and the gas stations and the discount dive shops. And finally past the last Chance Saloon and the Card Sound Road turnoff, US 1, South Dixie Highway, becomes the Overseas Highway, the Main Street of the Florida Keys, and the scenery changes.

I admit was getting really excited about the Yak-In at this point. Here and there along the smooth flat roadway you could see hammocks in the water prairie that stretches away from the road. And traffic was flowing pretty well –surprisingly so, seeing as we were southbound on a Saturday morning, the beginning of the weekend. Windows down, music thumping, I waved at 3 northbound cars with kayaks strapped atop their roofs along the way. The folks behind me must’ve thought I was a bit touched, my arm flapping...



The home stretch of the road passes Card Sound to the east and the Florida Bay “back door” to Everglades National Park on the west. Osprey nests reside atop platforms on power poles along the way. As the long stream of vehicles proceeded southbound, speeds began to slowly slow after we exhausted the “slow-poke”-jumping opportunities of the passing zones. Past Gilbert’s, a landmark neither of the Keys nor the mainland, *per se*, and over the bridge at Jewfish Creek I drove, immersed in the jumping rhythms and catchy melodies of the steel band playing on my CD. Now on this, the last section of road before actually finally coming into Key Largo, things *really* slowed down.

I finally made the last right-hand bend and were finally “in” Key Largo. At last, I’d be able to get around some of the slower traffic and finally get down to the Park! Maybe I’d even stop in at Florida Bay Outfitters, where I’ve shopped and where Sally & I know Frank & Monica, the owners. Monica is the head honcho of Paradise Paddlers, the first official kayaking organization membership we decided on. We’ve been members about three years now, and I enjoy stopping by when we’re in the Keys –they’re good folks and run a nice shop with an astounding array of boats cramming a smallish shop with lots of accessories.



But it just wasn’t to be that fateful Saturday morning.

No passing. And slow driving. The 4-lane divided major arterial, the “only game in town”, Main Street, had been half shut down, and the usual 2 northbound lanes were reserved for the runners and cyclists of the mini-triathlon being run that morning. So traffic generally crept along at perhaps 25 mph or so. Cops on every corner, sweating and panting participants running or pedaling up and down the other half of the roadway, and us, moving slowly along -my Caribbean music was going about twice as fast, and about ten times *happier*, than we were driving...! And as the line of cars went by MM 104, I saw that Florida Bay Outfitters wasn't yet open. So on to Pennekamp it was –on, with, quite literally, “all *deliberate* ‘speed’ ”.

And the -at last! Off in the distance, after passing all the familiar landmarks of motels & hotels, and restaurants and cafes, and shell shops, t-shirt shops, and, of course, all those *dive* shops! –was the big sign for the Park.

And lo and behold, there was the queue, backed up, trying to make the left across oncoming traffic on a two-lane road. The officer finally let a couple of Park-exiting southbound cars out, and held up northbound traffic as a few of us dashed across and – FINALLY –onto Park property.

And into a waiting line...

As I waited it occurred to me that the roadway south of the Park was OK. There, there were 2, 2-lane segments separated by a median, both operating as they were intended to, one-way. Of course! The triathlon's start –the first, swimming section -and the finish line, were there on Park property at or near the beach. No WONDER...!!!

So there I was in line having figured it out –so what? I was STILL in line! But it was OK, the line moved fairly well, and I had to laugh. -A mother and daughter wanted to enter, but they didn't want to be “line-buffers”, I suppose, so they got in the vehicle line behind me, just like they were a car. Keep your speed down back there you two!

Finally, I paid my entrance fee, and drove through the main parking area to the end and drove into the parking area reserved for us.

Loooooo-cy, I'm HO-ooome!

Ah -the site at last! And there was Jim, and SueSea, unloading the same little green car I'd seen photos of and had seen down at the Bogey & Bacall back in February. There was a silver SUV and –say! It's Chefmike!

Amazing how I recognized some of the faces!



So I wheeled in and parked. I got out and said hello to **SueSea** & **Jimbo**. Then I cornered **Old Cap'n Jim** and demanded of him that he set me straight on the most appropriate bait so I wouldn't have to wait out on the Sound and flounder around looking for the right lure without being sure that I'd gotten it right and tied on tight.

So he patiently waded through both my carry-on see-thru small tackle box and my suitcase-sized main tackle box and, after dismissing the lures I'd attached to my two rods, excitedly pointed out, with great—and I must say, quite infectious -enthusiasm a couple of lures that would get me “lots of hits”. So I dutifully followed the **Olde** (notice a theme here, folks?) **Cap'n** Master's baiting insights (his sure hands marked him as an expert) and selected the chosen lures, secure in the knowledge that I, despite a lifetime of being mostly an angling wannabe, would soon be an angling “be”, instead, under the capable guidance of the **FLYC Cap'n** & Crew –HOO-rah!

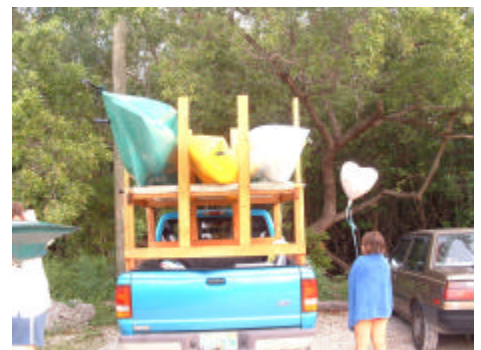


Soon others were rolling up and I was warmly greeting and almost immediately forgetting who was whom. I'm glad they postponed the quiz...! But I seem to be able to recall the kayaks, strangely enough...!

And what a lineup it was! There was **Old Cap'n Jimbo's** infamous yellow S-Pro, and the Orange Streaker, Chefmik's WS Tarpon 160. A pair of very nice, well-equipped, lean mean yakfishin' machines bobbed patiently side-by-side in the water at the put-in. A

Napali and a Tarpon 120, -they belonged to Robert and his brother. George's blue Scrambler XT was there, and David Patlin and his wife and two daughters showed up in two boats –“Big Red”, David's Tarpon 160, and the “Little Brown Jug”, a rec yak (Pungo perhaps?) kinda part-time paddled by his wife and part-time towed by David; _____ the large kid, rides with David, and the smaller one goes with_____.

The Veingrad Clan arrived -Alan and Marla with their two lime green (these people have GREAT taste in kayak colors) OK tandems –an Aegean piloted by Marla carrying Jeri (8 yrs), and the BIG 16' Cabo pushed by Alan and ridden by Brooke (6) and Ryan (4). Later, Brandon & Christine with daughter Carrera arrived driving “contrarily” -they came “up” from their place on Big Pine. Brandon's got a pickup truck rig that reminds me of a modern-day Conestoga wagon, a huge wooden rack that carries three-count'em, three!, yaks on their sides in “cradles”. Damn thing looks like a –well, let's put it this way –Brandon tells me that people will come up to him in parking lots & such when he's not carrying his boats and ask him why he's got that huge, thick, multi-legged table upside down in (on?) the back of his truck, LOL! Don, artiste



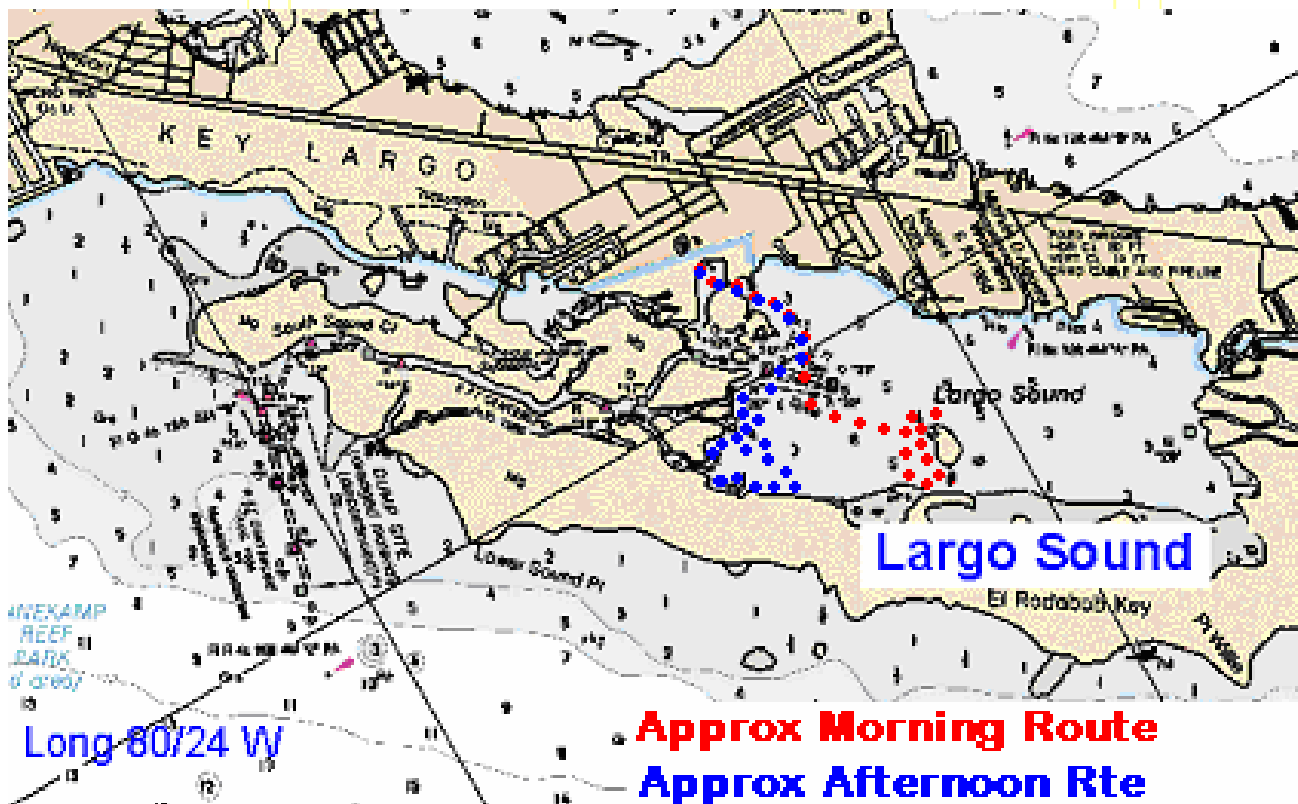
extraordinaire with brush, and artist extraordinary with rod'n'reel, is **Horrors!** a **DarkSider** –he paddles –and -lemme tell ya, one he doesn't particularly baby -a nice,

fast light blue over modestly scarred white **SINK!!!** We SOTers tolerate the guy –but JUST barely, only because he catches fish. Turns out he’s a pretty good guy, too!

So there we are, all later-than-expected marathon-delayed arrivals, setting up our yaks and outfitting them with all the gadgets & paraphernalia of yak angling we were taking along to go get some fish. I’m scurrying around trying to take pictures, trying to remember names (vainly, as it turns out –and I STILL don’t know half the lot of the group!), trying to rig my rods and select the right lures to accompany me on the yak, and to get the Cap’n to instruct me in what to throw at the targeted residents of Largo Sound, when up comes this huge big monster black truck. And who should step out of it? Ken “Super Fly” Staples, who I hadn’t realized was a yakfishin’ bro of the FLYC -semi-small world! Sally and I have paddled with Ken before, and in fact, it was Ken who’d introduced Sally and me to the myriad twisting mangrove channels of Pennekamp over a year ago. So we exchanged greetings and we helped each other get ready and complete our paddling, angling, and in my case, photography, preparations.

The others had pushed off by then, and headed out under the car bridge connecting the main portion of the Park with two other beach sections. I noted the current streaming around the pilings -against us! But once out of the Bernoulli effect of the channel bore, it wasn’t bad at all. We stroked by the main concession stand, then past the main beach and jetty all on our left before paddling across the secondary beach on our right. I could see the FLYC “fleet” strung out before me at varying distances, proceeding towards the far side of the Sound.

Once clear of the beach, we were into open water, and needed to cross the main boat channel running parallel to Key Largo in a generally NE-SW direction down the long axis of Largo Sound. Boats ran the channel at full bore, slowing down when coming



from the north only as they approached the no-wake zone of the mangrove channels to the south, or when going north, going full throttle and getting up on plane as they emerged from the channels. We needed to be aware, and wary, of the speeding boats. At least they provided us with a bit of wave action as they passed...

After crossing the channel, we bore slightly to starboard and paddled a reach across the southern end of the Sound to fish the points and shorelines of the far-side mangroves.

The party split into several groups of a single to a few kayakers each. I drifted around and found a channel between two mangrove islands with a bit of current running. I tossed my **Cap'n Jimbo** select topwater towards the mangroves and gave it the old twitch, rest, fast retrieve, stop, twitch, fast retrieve technique. Nada on the first few casts, but then I saw a sizable shadow flitting along the "bank" of stilt roots in the shadows of the overhanging branches. I cast, twitched, and retrieved –and was rewarded with a following ripple. I sped up the retrieve. The ripple source followed. I stopped, twitched, let it rest. Nada. Same thing happened twice. I was certain it was a wise old Cuda messin' with another fool fisherman's mind...

Here and there I saw the other anglers of the crew in the distance all around me –some were finding fish, some were finding new spots to try, and some –namely ME!!! –were finding trouble. It was about this time I initiated my avian tendencies, and my troubles continued. I started throwing birds nests.

What a TERRIBLE thing to have happen to a fisherman. To have it happen to an adult angler with even a smidgen of ANY experience at ALL throwing a spinner rig was tantamount to 100%, full-blown, dumb-fool idiocy. I felt like a kindergartener out there... I tried my other rod, and fared a bit better –only one nest. A rather derogatory whoopee YAAAY...

But it was pretty nice out, the wind was down to mostly a breeze, and the sky was high and blue save for "that quadrant over there..."

Paddling close to the mangroves not too far from Jim, Suzie, Mike, Roberts and a few others we observed a bust-up almost in the center of our loosely arrayed pod of yakfishers. None of us could take advantage of the opportunity, however. As I retrieved my lure and brought it back, I neglected to wind it in far enough. Swinging around, the hooks caught my bow pointer –great, just great...

Suzie wasn't far off, so I paddled over to her and plead my case of klutziness. She was kind enough to come to the aide of a foolish lure-flinger, and removed the trebles from the bow line. As an aside to Cap'n Jimbo –there's another good reason for pinching down your barbs! Now Suzie is known not only as SueSea the Mango Mama, but as the Happy Unhooker as well. See, I must admit, I did the same dadgummed thing 2 more time in the space of 20 minutes and she "got me off the hook" each time...

I paddled around and watched Jimbo smarty pop his spinners into the shallows, then went over the Tarpon 140 and Napali of Robert and his brother as they hit some very shallow, very backwater sections. They said they had hits and released a cuda. I paddled farther back into the mangrove channel and saw plenty of minnows and mosquito fish swimming about in the water. The water was amazing –it was fairly shallow, and crystal clear, but tinged almost orange by a combination of the bottom and the drip of mangrove leaves into the pool, staining the liquid a golden hue. And it was relatively warm in the noonday sun. We might SEE fish, but would they feed in these conditions? Would they even chase a lure? Probably not. So I headed back out. Along the way, however, I saw a big, dark shape moving aft the starboard side of my S-Pro. It might've been a tarpon –but that big a fish of THAT type THIS far back was unlikely; it might've been a red, but I think not. It was probably a shark. Mike had earlier said he stalked one –a nurse shark –so I took that as a confirmation and paddled on.

After coming out of the creek, I paddled between some small islands that were little more than clumps of mangroves –but they provided shade, and possible ambush points. And sure enough, there –over THER, was a commotion. So I cast in that direction. Nada –well, not exactly nothing. While I couldn't even get a Mr. Teeth to chase anything since I anchored up in the 'tween-islands channel a while back, I DID manage to snare a mangrove seedling on the retrieve. I paddled as close as I could but was touching bottom and was separated by at least ten feet. So I tugged on it, hoping against hope that I wouldn't end up in one of those fishing bloopers narratives. I finally was able to dislodge it and not have it come zooming out at me.

Thank goodness for small miracles...LOL!



I saw Suzie off in the distance sunning herself, and saw Mike, our Chef Extraordinaire (tho' we knew it not just yet...!) throwing flies. It was beautiful to watch him. He'd gotten out of his blazing orange Tarpon 160 and was stalking fish on foot, wading in knee-deep water, flowing his fly rod forward, backward, forward, backward, and laying

his line down nicely out front. It was a joy to watch...

I paddled around and threw some lines, and another bird's nest or three, and watched a ray go by and that was about it.

I paddled some more and came upon Jim sitting sideways in his Mellow Yellow Scupper Pro TW (that man has GREAT taste in kayaks, I say!) tying on a lure. By this point he's drifted backwards into the mangroves, and while not threatened with being tipped by an errantly

protruding branch, was suddenly bothered. While I swear I had nothing to do with it, the otherwise idyllic scene of a fisherman practicing one aspect of his craft was rudely and wildly interrupted by a puzzled look, followed by flailing arms, and exclamations about the ancestry of a certain species of natural mangrove-frequenting wildlife that had suddenly discovered one of the beneficial aspects of our fearless leader: his BLOOD! Jim was suddenly found to be rather animated, by golly! I don't know why, but the mosquitoes didn't bother with me in the least.

Jim was kind enough to show me a nice knot for attaching leader to line –and in fact, did just that for me. When I appraised him of my extraordinary ability to throw birds nests, informing him that one formed at the rod tip AFTER I'd cast, and not at the spool as is the normal case -that I literally threw one (!), he dryly informed me that perhaps it was time to change my line. I guess it was, seeing that line must've been on my spool for a good ten years, and I'd not had more than the first 40 or 50 yards of it off in all that time. The previously unused mono came off the spool in spirals so well-defined you could drill wood with it, LOL! The 30# line I was told to use as leader was every bit as bad if not worse. I thank Cap'n Jimbo for his patience and wisdom and instruction and aid –now all I gotta do is do what he sez...!



I accompanied Jim for a bit more then struck out towards open water a way. I again looked around me and saw members of our group scattered around all points of the compass at various distances. I saw Ken off to my left, and closer, George on his blue Scrambler off to my right. Bob and his brother were farther off, and a fellow in a SINK –a SINK, in the midst of all our SOTs, was fishing as well. I was told that this guy was a pretty fair angler despite being a Darksider, and that it was he who created the beautiful renderings that adorn the FLYC emails. Don B turned out to be a fine fellow.

Jim had originally estimated that we'd be out until perhaps 3 or so. But the weather began to threaten around 1 or so. The cloud cover off in the distance when we set out had gradually been building throughout the morning, and "that quadrant over there..." had been transformed into something truly ominous. Now, that distant buildup was a huge bank of heavy dark gray cumulonimbus clouds beginning to tower over us. Worse, it was moving in on us.

Pretty soon the unmistakable warning rumbles of thunder were echoing off the Sound. I didn't like this one bit. Lightning and Florida go hand-in-hand; unfortunately, lightning and bumps on the water ALSO go hand-in-hand –especially when those bumps are wielding lightning, er, fishing -rods! -holding them up in the air, waving them around, even!

I looked around and figured it was probably a fairly propitious time to close on the nearest of the group and get them moving back home. I stowed my rods, joined a group loosely clustered around Jim and Mike, and began to paddle back to the picnic grounds. I saw the others in the distance, so I took out my whistle, gave a couple of blasts, and waved them

along with the spontaneous flotilla I'd sort of gathered around me now straggling it's way back.

I hooked up with George, and still in sunlight, we paddled together back across the Sound, across the channel, and past the rapidly emptying –but surprisingly still at least partially populated –beaches. We stroked past the main concession stand as the rain finally started. We went under the connecting bridge around the kayak and canoe rental docks (why DO those people tether their boats so they float out into the middle of the channel...???) and across the marina lagoon to the beach.

It was starting to come down fairly steadily at this point, so we pulled our boats on the beach and got under the shelter that Cap'n Jimbo & SueSea had been careful to designate as reserved for the Yak-In.

Didn't make no difference. There was a family seemingly oblivious to the balloons, and food, and everything ELSE there, not to mention the "reserved" sign hung out by Jim & Suzie. They were semi-settled at the shelter, amazingly unmindful of their immediate environment. It rather reminded me of driving in South Florida...

So I calmly began stacking my rods and my paddle and anything else I could find up against the post, and took out my digicam and shot some pics of the rain. Soon we joined by the others making it back through the surprisingly intense downpour. Equally surprising, and far happier, was the fact that we didn't seem to be hearing as much

thunder as we had on the way in. At least our salted kayaks and seats were getting a nice freshwater rinse!



And then it started letting up and drying out. While we were out, Brandon Ondrey and his family (wife Christine and daughter Carrera) had arrived, driving up from Big Pine Key where they live. Brandon had followed us out but had not met up with us, so we were ignorant of his whereabouts. Also arriving after our initial foray were two other families –the Veingrads and their lime green tandem OK tandems, and another family who wasn't attached to our group.

The latter family had a white Cobra tandem that Mon paddled along with the two daughters, and Dad had a sleek glass South African surf ski, which he paddled competently. Had they been attached to the FLYC, I'd have asked –no, demanded! –the opportunity to make a fool of myself on it by trying to paddle it and stay upright at the same time.

Hey, I CAN walk & chew gum at the same time. What? I CAN'T...?



Then I saw Grayhawk –Rick Bartoli from Paradise Paddlers, my “home” club, who has a place on Key Largo. I’d invited him (with the Cap’n’s permission, of course) to join us, and he hadn’t made it by the time we left earlier. But he’d paddled over from his place on the water perhaps a mile south of the park and joined us at least. He’s a photographer as well as a paddler, and it’s because of Rick that I’m actually SEEN at some of the events I’ve gone to. So Rick took some pics as well as I (it’s his shot of the group that appears later on –thanks, Rick!).

Jim and a wet Suzie arrived a bit later, Suzie having inexplicably tipped out of her faded orange –OK, OK, ma’am –her MANGO Scrambler. The Mango Mama was wet but fine.

The skies gradually cleared and we all agreed that as time marched on our hunger wasn’t, and that it was a good time for “**The Feast**”.

Darksider Don, the artiste with the paint set, turned out to be an artiste with a fishing rod as well. Even though we had burgers and franks, we’d all been **COMPLETELY** assured by Cap’n Jimbo that we’d have fish –PLENTY of fish –parable of the Loaves and Fishes amount of fish for the feast. Thank goodness for Don –he was the only one of our motley crew who returned with anything in his creel. He’d managed to nab some juvie cuda and some small –but legal! –mangrove snapper.

So as Mike and Jim stoked up the grills, and the rest of us put our contributions on the picnic tables, Don cleaned up his catch. We milled around, having a beer, conversing, getting to know each other in the flesh after having only read about each other, or seen those of us who’d sent pics in to Jim for the FLYC website,



Meanwhile, Brandon STILL hadn’t returned, and Christine was getting a little worried. We assured her that he was probably safe and sound out there, somewhere, and that he’d probably return at the time originally set by Jim in the email sent to FKYC Yak-In participants –around 3 PM for “**The Feast**”.



So preparations continued. I got to speaking with ChefMike, and found that he’s a chef at the world-famous Doral Resort and Spa in the Doral area (duh!) of the Airport West area of west Miami-Dade County. Mike is an avid fisherman, and brings a long history of fishing in the Northeast to South Florida and yakfishing. He claims to be a novice –and maybe he is, as far as his boat mode is, but he’s an accomplished fly-flinger and spinning gear caster.

And lemme tell ya –that guy can COOK!!! Don arrived with his cleaned fish fillets, and Chefmike waves his magic chefly hands over them, then in some obscure religious right known only to aficionados of the Food Channel, lays hands –and spices –on those babies and lets them marinade while he attended to the more mundane tasks of grilling burgers and overseeing the roasting of numerous ears of corn-on-the-cob in their own native green wrappers.



Three PM comes and goes and Christine puts on a brave face but now really wonders about the downpour, the bad visibility, the rare but still present thunder-following lightning strikes, and way-finding of Brandon, who I later found out had never ever been to Pennekamp. And some of the rest of us were beginning to wonder as well...

But did THAT get in the way of us having a beer while we waited in the FOOD? NO WAY!

And SueSea, Mango Mama, the Happy Unhooker, proved her worth once again. As I pulled my first Bass from the cooler, I realized I didn't have a twist off on any of the beer I'd brought. And I didn't have a bottle opener, either. Talk about desperation! But I saw Suzie suckin' on a beer, and figgered –hey, where's there's smoke, there's a fire, right? So I asked her if she had something to render aid in this trying time, and lo and behold –a MIRALCLE! She had a mini-church key on her key ring. HALLELUIA, sister!

So I had a beer and a cigar (no WONDER the mosquitoes hadn't bothered me out on the water!) and helped arrange some of the vittles on the table and talked to some of the group.

Three-fifteen. Do you know where your Kayak Fisherman is? Some talk about somebody or bodies going out on a Brandon hunt



Food's cookin', lookin' good. Time to chow down. We line up and partake of the goodies –a burger or two, some nice sides, something to

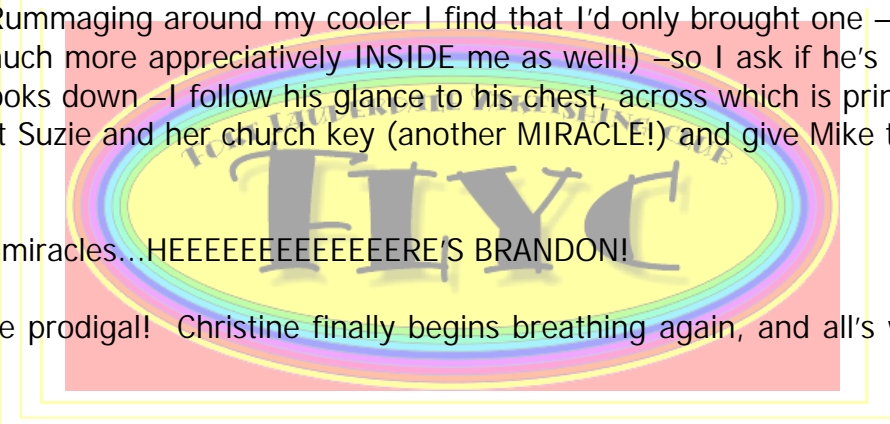


drink, and a wonderful array of three relishes created by Mike for us barbarians in the mists. The food really is quite good. David Patlin had brought a dump truck's worth of salad –he tells us to have some, he BEGS us to have some –PLEASE! They're camping at the park –

maybe they can't store it overnight? Maybe his two beautiful daughters, cuties both of them, really don't want salad for dinner and salad for breakfast...

Other visitors drop by. Bill and his wife stop in, yakless. Bill asks me about my setup and I tell him about the flush-mount rod holder and the basket with my 'rocket launchers' tied in, bungeed in the Pro's tankwell behind me. Carol also wanders in, having just arrived after driving down from Miami. Just in time for lunch. Can that woman schedule an arrival or what! Also yakless, she's looking for advice on a yak to buy –of course, Jim and I heavily promote the Scupper Pro.

Now some of us (moi...???) are going back for seconds. Mike is cooking up the Donfish. He is, somewhat surprisingly, not getting too much action re. who's waiting in line for some. I ask him if he'd like a beer –the cook NEEDS sustenance in situations like these, y'know. I tell him that I've got Singha, which he, despite his culinary erudition, is unfamiliar with. I inform him that it's a fine Thai beer, a lager brewed in an old-fashioned manner. Showing him mine, I relate that it's a yeasty, aromatic, and foamy beer unlike the common popular domestic lagers which I tend to find rather weak and bland. He buys the spiel and says he'll take one. Rummaging around my cooler I find that I'd only brought one –and it was in my hand (and much more appreciatively INSIDE me as well!) –so I ask if he's mind a Bass. He laughs and looks down –I follow his glance to his chest, across which is printed the Bass logo. So I revisit Suzie and her church key (another MIRACLE!) and give Mike the cold Bass Ale.



And speaking of miracles...HEEEEEEEEEEEEEERE'S BRANDON!

The return of the prodigal! Christine finally begins breathing again, and all's well with the world.

And at this point, the fish is done.

Let me tell you, folks, it don't get much better than this. Chefmike had "whipped up" this rosemary-garlic-something-something else marinade, and grilled the fish on a sheet of aluminum foil on the park-provided charcoal grill, and made a little magic right then and there.



Fantastic fish, heavenly. At least as good as I had in Charleston when Sally and I found an opening in the booked-solid reservations list at the posh Peninsula Grill at the elegant Planter's Inn and had some truly fantastic triggerfish. Thanks Mike!

Well, we all milled around as the meal settled down and jawed about this and that and inspected each other's fishing setups. I got to talking to the erstwhile elusive Brandon and found him a likeable fellow when he

indeed was there. Meanwhile, the kids were fishing off the beach and looked like they were having a great time of it. I'd spoken with Robert about his Napali, noting its high finish in the Bacall at the FBO Demo Day races earlier in the year, and told him I was anxious to try one. He kindly offered his well-equipped fishing machine as a demo boat for me to take a lap or two around the marine lagoon. Taking my own paddle, I dropped into his red-to-yellow "sunset flame" boat and took it for a spin. It was, as advertised, a pretty quick SOT. But I felt loose on it it was so wide. Even with a good, thigh as well as back-supportive seat, I didn't feel "snug". I guess I'm just too damn used to the old Pro... It paddled well and turned pretty well, but not QUITE as well as my Pro. I returned and thanked Robert, who was heading back.



The other family with the surf ski and Cobra tandem put out. Man, was I ever envious of the guy and his surf ski! I briefly spoke with him and he was nice enough to ignore the drooling –he said that his kayak, with two hatches, fore and aft, and a rudder, a sleek fiberglass stiletto speedster, was a South African boat that cost \$1100. Wow, I thought –given WHAT it is, and what the ski market in general is, and what it's MADE of, it seemed downright cheap! I watched stroke away across the marina lagoon... Ah....

Now that the groups had feted and were sated, the follow-up "twilight" trip out to Largo Sound was being discussed. While we'd really not arrived early enough to truly hit the morning good fishing time, we WERE her for the sunset-approaching afternoon good time. I was a little worried –it was late –approaching 5 PM. The park would close at 8 that evening. It would be maybe a half-hour out, and the same back, and I really wondered if we'd be able to fish and travel AND make the deadline seeing as how we were out there for 3 or 3-1/2 hours in the morning and it was only reluctantly, under threat of hydro-electrocution, that the crew came in.

I asked around, and most everyone was driving back. They wouldn't keep ALL of us locked up inside the park all night, now, WOULD they...???

Well, if they could do it, so could I. But I –wisely, I believe –decided to solely paddle and not fish. Actually, I'm certain both Cap'n Jimbo and SueSea, as helpful and good sports as they were, were overjoyed that I'd not be fishing and needing their parental guidance, hook extraction, and knot tying assistance on the water during the 'evening session'...LOL!!! But they were cool and never mentioned a word of my hapless hooking etc. Actually, earlier in the morning, on my first forgettable fishing foray, Jim had advised me that my bigger rod – especially equipped with 20-pound test mono regardless of the line's age or condition – really wasn't the best for skinny water work. In fact, he alluded to the fact that it was probably a hindrance, noting that it was much better suited for ocean and mid-Biscayne Bay fishing, and not flats fishing. So that was that –bird's nests, hooked painters, and inappropriate rigs all combined to suggest that I really ought to leave well enough alone and just go along for the fun of it.

And that I did. I lit up a nice El Rey Del Mundo and stroked out with the group, taking only my stogie and my disposable underwater camera along. This time it was truly a flotilla that would have done the Spanish Main armadas proud –a drifter or two, two big Tarpon 160s, and a Scrambler and two Scupper Pros, two tandems –an Aegean, and a huge Cabo, the SINK, and a semi-paddled but mostly-towed Pungo! There probably were more –but who’s counting? It was a fine sight as we set sail –set paddle??? –past the second beach on our way to cross the mid-Sound boat channel.



I sprinted ahead, cutting across the floating line of buoys into the swim-designated area, and positioned the Old Pro so I’d have a shot or two of the fleet as it paddled past. Sun sparkling on the near shore of Largo Sound, our crew went by against the low-rise shoreline background of the Key Largo subtropical hammocks in the distance. What a terrific sight –over a dozen of us an almost every conceivable type of kayak harmoniously paddling together towards a common

destination, all enjoying another great day in the Fabulous Florida Keys.

I stroked along side Alan Veingrad & crew. Alan paddled the huge Cabo -his younger daughter and his son sitting in front -with surprising ease –either that, or he masked the strain quite well indeed! I thought I’d taken a shot of this intrepid trio tranquilly traversing the shoreline, but alas, there was none to be found on the roll. His son like my cigar, I think...

The group was stringing out, now, with the real anglers making for the mangrove shorelines to flick their lures below the overhanging mangroves slowly turning orange as the sun began its descent in the west. David and his group –his wife and one daughter in the Pungo, the other sitting with Dad on the Tarpon, were having family fun as all four variously fished, observed, and kibitzed. I followed Jim and SueSea for a while, and then went farther north along the shore towards ChefMike in his orange Tarpon.

I followed Mike around for a while and we talked of fishing ‘up north’, and a number of other unimportant things, just pleasantly whiling the late afternoon away fishing and enjoying the moment. Mike did say one thing that resonated with me –he said that, while paddling, he’d never met a jerk.

I reflected a minute, and had to agree.

A little while later I decided to return in the direction of the main group.

Wonderfully, it was the magic hour, as those around me variously excitedly reported hits, strikes, and hookups



with shouts of joy. On the way over, midway across the bight, a huge black back rolled in front of me, not more than 10 feet away, off my port bow –wow! Could it have been a tarpon...??? I looked around, but there was nothing else to be seen, so I paddled on. About a hundred yards away, over at the Patlins' party, it looked like a good size fish had been caught –was it one of the kids who'd hooked it?. Don actually caught and held up a small snapper for a picture.



Finally, it was time to go. Suzie had already turned it around, and was paddling back towards the Park and the put-in. I took a picture of her stroking off into the setting sun, and she –at my insistence, of course, was coerced into reciprocating, LOL!



By this time, Mike had caught up with me and we paddled back together the rest of the way. The beaches were all but deserted, no one really swimming, and just a scattered handful of beachgoers still on the sand. We went by the jetty defining and separating the main beach from the channel to the marina, where a white heron stealthily and deliberately strode the shallows, stalking dinner. I slowed and, as quietly as possible, maneuvered

my kayak as closely as I dared, then shot two frames. He was the nicest one I'd had to date –and didn't stop his stalking and fly off as virtually all the others I'd approached under ostensibly similar circumstances.

All too soon it was around the bend and under the bridge once more –this time aided by the tidal flow –and across the marina lagoon and a landing on the "beach". I stood and stretched and got my stuff off the yak and dropped it in the pavilion. Pretty soon the others paddled back in ones and twos, until the last remnants of the **FLYC 1st Annual Yak-In** had all returned to home port.



show up. Not too long after, so did the mosquito control truck, noisily belching its

Slowly, we all began to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Boats were stripped, gear packed away, some small talk and assistance shared among the yakkers to lift boats back onto racks. The sun sank farther down, and the tables were cleared and leftovers packed and parceled out among the desirous and/or willing. A few departed and the parking lot began to clear. About that time some Florida friends from the insect world, mostly absent during the day's events (but Jim swears quite the opposite) began to

insecticide spray-fog around the Park, coming down into our end of the parking lot, much to the dismay of Alan and Marla. Alan vainly –or maybe not –it DID turn around, after all –tried to show the truck away.

And that was pretty much it. We stowed our stuff, racked our boats, said our farewells and departed Pennekamp on a fine August afternoon in the summer of 2003. The FLYC's First Annual Yak-In was over. But I must think that it was agreed by all, that a good time was indeed had by all!

So I once again put on my steel orchestra tape and headed north, this time along a full four-lane divided highway. There were no runners, no bikers, no marathoners, and traffic flowed smoothly. I once again drove past Florida Bay Outfitters, and, once again, no one was home –the shop was shuttered and closed for the day.

The sun was going down in a last flare of red-orange brilliance in the west, off to my right as I drove north past Jewfish Creek, and as I crossed the draw span, there was a gorgeous sky-blue pink and fuchsia sky with blue and purple clouds lending drama to a beautiful scene. And then I was driving along the eighteen mile stretch. I was traveling in the midst of a pack of bikers, two of whom roared by me to catch up with their mates ahead. And of course, there were the impatient drivers, too – passing me not 30 seconds before the passing lanes, in a vain effort to cut their travel time between Key Largo and Homestead. As a professional transportation planner with more than 20 years experience, I can flatly tell you that it's fools like these, and not the number of lanes, that makes that road unsafe, friends.



And so I traveled back north to Coconut Grove, another fine day of paddling behind me, one for the books. An hour or so later, I pulled into my driveway, safe and sound, happy for the experience. All's well that ends well.

The End

1st ANNUAL FLYC YAK-IN

August 16, 2003

John Pennekamp State Park

Key Largo, Florida



Marla, Alan, Jim, Frank, Mike, George, Ken, Suzie, Robert, Robert's Brother And Two Young'uns

