Florida Bay Map & Guide

Reading Shallow Water

Some local guides will tell you about the time they got The Sight. Maybe it was after they fished 100 days in four months. Maybe it was after ten years traveling the same waters. Regardless what brought it on, one day they just started to see things they hadn’t seen before, small details in the water, the fish, the winds, and the weather.

Everyone would like to be able to see like these locals. You can, if you're willing to spend hundreds of days on the water each year. Until you get that experience under your belt, you can use these tips to help you distinguish shallow water from deep.

Polarized Glasses. “To see like a local,” advises veteran guide Mike Ehlers, “you need to use the same tools they do.” You need to use your eyes and a great pair of polarized glasses, preferably with amber or vermilion lenses. “Reading the water is something your GPS can’t do,” adds 16-year veteran backcountry Park Ranger Dave Fowler. “Most of the people we find aground have a GPS and charts on board. It didn’t keep them off the banks. They weren’t using their eyes. They got stuck with a towboat bill and a ticket for hundreds of dollars. Worse than that, they tore up the bottom.”

The Color of Water. If you want to graduate from novice to apprentice, practice reading the color of the water. “There are dozens of subtle colors in the Bay,” suggests water scientist Joe Boyer, who studies such things. White mullet mud. Tea-colored Glades run-off. But, for starters, shoals and banks are usually tan or brown. Deeper water is green or blue. Your polarized sunglasses should make the colors pop.

Wading Birds. “Birds aren’t six feet tall,” quips guide George Clark, Jr. If you see a bird stalking the flats, the water where it stands is less than a foot deep.

Mangrove Seedlings. These seedlings grow only on bank tops. The water around them is generally less than 6 inches deep - too shallow to run a boat.

Near Flamingo. The banks that stretch from Conch Key Channel to the mouth of Tin Can Channel are easily lost in the muddy water carried by Flamingo’s main tidal channel. Stray too far south towards Murray, Frank, or Palm Keys, and you’ll find yourself aground. “Outside the channels,” says guide Rusty Albary, “everything’s shallow.” The big rectangle formed by the mainland, Oxfoot Bank, and Whipray Basin is notoriously hard to navigate. Twelve inches of water can look like three feet and vice versa.

Hit this guide before hitting the Bay

“There’s no other place in the States where you can sight-fish for tarpon, bonefish, snook, and redfish,” says Commodore Tad Burke of the Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association. But Burke is quick to add that, “it’s not just about the fish. You can see spoonbills feeding on the flats and crocodiles up in the creeks. If you’re lucky, you might see a flamingo or a sawfish.”

While exploring Florida Bay can be a treat, it’s not for the beginner. Shallow waters, snaking banks and tricky passes make the Bay a challenge even for experienced shallow water boaters.

“Florida Bay is not a body of deep water with a ring of shore around it,” advises flyfishing instructor and Bay veteran Sandy Moret. Instead, it is a few dozen basins (most less than five feet deep) separated from each other by banks where the water is only a few inches deep. Boaters can get from basin to basin by following passes and channels through the banks. Some of these passes are less than 16 inches deep in winter. And some of them twist and turn like a slalom course.

See “Hit This Guide” on back page

Signs of Shallow Water

Birds Wading

Mangroves

Brown = Shoal

Green or Blue = Deep

Calm Patch in Chop
Florida Bay

Legend

- 5-6 Feet Deep. Recommended for boats 25 feet in length or less.
- Less than 5 Feet Deep. Recommended for boats drafting less than 12 inches. Avoid stopping and setting, and shallow drafts may “cater” the bottom when getting up on plane.
- Shallow or bottom. These areas can be less than 1 foot deep. Fishing or trolling motors recommended.
- Wilderness Entry: Paddle-in only. Only boats with motor removed from transom allowed beyond these points.
- Wilderness. Only boats with motor removed from transom allowed in these areas.
- Wildlife Management Area. Closed to any and all entry. Formerly known as the “Crocodile Sanctuary.”

Passes & Channels

**Black**

Very shallow, especially in winter. Can be 14 inches deep or less. Route is often very hard to read. Only shallow draft boats (1 foot or less) at all times. We recommend boater’s use other routes in winter.

**Green**

Wide channels that are usually deep and easy to read. Good for beginners. 58S, boats drafting more than 18 inches not recommended.

**Red**

Some portions might be less than two feet deep and require tight turns. Boats are required to avoid damages to the bottom. Only shallow draft boats (1 foot or less) at all times.

**Choosing Routes**

Use the deepest route to get to where you’re going. A boater could use two routes from A to B. The best would be the green channel west of Barbuda then a 15 mph speed limit. The point is to avoid the shallow draft areas or use other routes if possible.

**Channel Mouth & Markers**

Size up the channel from a safe distance. Stay on plane, but when you come, Channels are shallow.

- To join your motor. Enter if there are no obstacles, stay between them.
- If there is only one stake, stay as close as possible to it. Avoid crossing channels if only one stake where you should be.

Use as a companion to NOAA Chart 33E - Do not use for navigation - Use as a companion to NOAA Chart 33E - Do not use for navigation - Use as a companion to NOAA Chart 33E
Rate Your Skills in Shallow Water

Veteran Park Ranger Dave Fowler, a friendly, chat-over-the-back-fence kind of guy, has a simple grading system for the dozens of people he’s taught to navigate the Bay. Clean white trail of prop wash and you pass. Brown in the prop wash and you fail. Pieces of cut grass in the prop wash and… don’t ask. To graduates of Dave’s boating course, brown in their boat’s wake is like muddy boots on an expensive rug.

Clean white trail of prop wash and you pass.

Clean, white prop wash is the best indicator that you’re running the Bay correctly. Follow these expert tips and you’ll keep your trail clean.

Trim your motor up when running through channels and passes. “A small change in the engine’s trim angle,” says Fowler, “raises the propeller a few inches in the water and directs the propeller a few inches in the engine’s trim angle, so you pass. Brown in the prop wash… don’t ask. To graduates of Dave’s boating course, brown in their boat’s wake is like muddy boots on an expensive rug.

World-record fly-fisherman Billy Pate has his own scoring system for boat captains. He believes in courtesy on the water. Many fish and birds that haunt the flats are extremely skittish. Flats anglers and nature watchers often pole or paddle a few hundred yards to silently stalk them. If you get within a quarter mile, you can spook the animals and ruin the person’s day. Stay well clear of any craft moving under hand-power on the flats and you’ll pass Billy’s test.

Outfitter Sandy Moret has one last piece of wisdom. “You shouldn’t ask yourself ‘can I go’? Instead ask ‘should I go?’ And if you don’t know, don’t go. It’s that simple.”

Give yourself time to learn the Bay. It won’t happen in a weekend.

Island Blues

Jerry Lorenz has quit smoking. But, when his work gets stressful, he sometimes wants a cigarette. A few weeks ago, Lorenz watched a whole year’s work go down the tubes. Today, as we ask him to recount the story, he looks like he needs a smoke.

What line of work is Lorenz in? His sun-reddened face and scratchy drawl suggest “fishing guide”. Though many of his friends are fly anglers, Lorenz is not a guide. Lorenz is a scientist. His line of work, and the cause of his stress, is roseate spoonbills.

In December and January, Jerry watched the Frank Key spoonbill colony - the second largest colony in Florida Bay - go bottoms up. In the Everglades, spoonbills nest on islands in Florida Bay. Frank Key is next to an unmarked tidal channel that motor boats and paddlers frequent. The boats didn’t kill the birds, but they helped. Clever birds like crows had learned to key in to the sound of a boat motor. When the spoonbills spooked, the crows swooped in and quickly feasted on eggs and baby spoonbills. Over a few weeks, almost three-quarters of the nests failed. Veteran fishing guide Dale Perez was taken aback by the news. For him and his clients, seeing spoonbills on the Bay is the pleasure of fishing it. “Spoonbills are part of what makes Florida Bay,” he said.

Keys in Florida Bay are vitally important to spoonbills. In 2006, the channel next to Frank Key will be closed until March 15 or until the spoonbills fledge, whichever comes first. In 2006, Sandy Key will remain closed, as it has been in years past. The water around the two keys is a small piece of the Bay’s almost half-million acres, but a piece that could make a huge difference in the spoonbill’s future.