



# Clowning Around

Urban angling in Florida is full of exotic opportunities, but among the weirdest is the clown knifefish.

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Florida's transplants come from every corner of the world. They move to the Sunshine State for the climate. The easy living. They've made themselves at home and proliferated.

Every time someone dumps a fish tank into a canal or smuggles a live fish across the border, an opportunity for another non-native fish population emerges. Whether these fish were brought in as a potential food source or to plow money into the aquarium trade, once they hit the vast network of freshwater canals, retention ponds and drainage ditches, they are afforded the same opportunity as any outlander who comes here looking for a new life. And they've taken advantage of it. The environmental impact is debatable, but no one can deny the fun factor for urban anglers.

Of the vast number of oddball fish found in Florida, snakeheads, peacock bass (which is actually a cichlid, not a bass) and the clownknife are the most sought after by anglers. These species reach double-digit weights, fight like gamefish and with their weird shapes and vibrant colors, they make people stop dead in their tracks when scrolling through Instagram.

But no fish is as weird as the clown knifefish. A platypus of sorts, the clown knife has a thin, compressed body that undulates like an eel and comes to a point at the tail, much like a knife blade. Its small head sits below a humped back and looks kind of like a barramundi. Their mouths are full of fang-like teeth that also stick out of the middle of their tongue. You don't want to lip these things. Their silvery skin flashes like a bonefish, and several false eyes ringed with white circles run down their backs. They gulp air and can swim backward. They jump like a tarpon and pull like a largemouth.

Originally from the rivers of Southeast Asia, the clown knifefish has been thriving in southeast Florida since the 1990s, with the largest population in Lake Ida and its network of canals in Palm Beach County. I've been living in Florida since 2002, a transplant myself, but I only became aware of this strange fish a few years ago and had yet to catch one. I mentioned this to my friend Sam Root when I bumped into him at a trade show last summer. Sam is a talented photographer who works for the tackle company Savage Gear. "I've got the guy," Sam said, and about a week later, I was at the gate of Lake Ida Park in the darkness of early morning, waiting for someone to open it.

When the park attendant showed up at 6:30, I cruised through the entry and made my way to the launch ramp where I would meet Miguel "Migs" Figueredo. The 36-year-old guide grew up in Loxahatchee, Florida, an inland farming community between Palm Beach and Lake Okeechobee. Figueredo started guiding full time five years ago and specializes in catching exotics. When targeting clown knifefish, he usually throws a cast net to catch shad for bait. But this day was different. We wanted to catch them on artificials, which is much more difficult because of the way they feed.

Root brought a giant, blue Ikea bag full of the latest Savage Gear soft plastics, and Figueredo went right for the Structure Gill, a small paddle-tail swimbait that looks like a baby bluegill. The weighted lure would be perfect, as clown knife are bottom feeders. "The clown knife suspend right off the bottom unless they come up for air," Figueredo said. "When oxygen levels are low during the warmer months, we see them come up and gulp air and then go straight back down to the bottom."

Figueredo motored his 18-foot Action Craft skiff a few hundred yards from the launch ramp, and we cast our lures, let them sink and bumped them along the bottom. The guide was first to hook up. "As soon as you feel a tap, set the hook," he instructed. It took some getting used to. Root caught the next one, a large fish about the length of my arm. I missed my first few bites and then finally came tight — to a rubbery-lipped tilapia.

The first thing I noticed about Figueredo's skiff was the missing poling platform. I quickly found out why he'd customized the platform so it can be removed. After running under an I-95 overpass to the echo of downshifting semi trucks, we came to a low-lying pipe stretching across the canal. We had to lay on the deck to slide underneath and keep running north. This network of manmade waterways stretches through Lake Osborne to Palm Beach International Airport, about 15 miles north.

In the midday heat — the worst time to catch a clown knife, as they prefer to hunt in low light — I finally came tight to a sleek, silvery fish. The alien fish stole line and jumped twice just as Figueredo went to net it. When we got the fish on board, I held it by the gill plates and was mesmerized by the long anal fin waving like a windsock. Figueredo estimated it at 5 or 6 pounds, about half the size of the largest ones he catches here.

"Some of those double-digit fish are incredibly disproportionate looking," he said. "Their shoulders are big, and the rest of their body is tiny. Once you get into the 8-pound range, the fight changes. They dig a lot more. They're more hardy and jump like tarpon when you first hook them."

After a round of photos, we slid the fish back into the water and watched as it did a quick backstroke, slinking away like a snake. Some believe it's better to throw the non-indigenous fish up on the bank for the birds. Florida might not be the clown knifefish's natural habitat, but when I look around and see highways, landfills and miles of canals, it's obvious that humans have done much more to alter the environment than any fish. I'm fine releasing the clown knife back into this weird world called Florida.

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