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seemed to warm to it a bit. For one, the 4-Tec weighs 880 pounds, on par with most flats skiffs. Its relative light weight and shallow running surface allow it to get into skinny water. In fact, that's why the Islamorada guides hate waterbikes so much. They've witnessed too many riders ruin a fishable flat by blazing across it and spooking the bonefish. Blame that on ignorant drivers, not the bikes. Handled properly, a waterbike can get onto the flats quietly and effectively. At full throttle, our 4-Tecs make just 69.5 dB-A, thanks to their 155-hp four-stroke engines. That's quieter than most two-stroke outboards at idle. Plus, that four-stroke technology gives them great fuel economy and range. The 4-Tec has a 4'1" beam, making it wide enough to remain stable on the flats. The low freeboard and flat step pad aft make it well suited to landing fish.

After a few hours, Tim and I develop a technique for drifting the flats. We select an area we want to fish, make a wide arc around it, and idle onto it at a point where the tide or wind will carry us across. We kill the engines, stand on the cooler or seat, and start fishing. We're remarkably unobtrusive. When we do drift aground in particularly skin-

ny areas, the bikes are easy to dislodge. And when operating in shallow water, our propless craft left no ugly scars that litter the grass beds of the backcountry. Those scars—mostly from the outboards on flats boats—deplete the beds and do more harm to the ecosystem than any jet wash could ever do.

Being realists, we have to admit that fishing from a waterbike is not perfect. Flats fishing is often a team sport, with a captain poling the skiff and sighting the fish from the back while the angler stands at the bow ready to cast. Fishing from a waterbike is a solo act, making you alone responsible for setting up your drift, sighting the fish, making the cast, and managing your craft during the fight. Also, most waterbikes are too short to accommodate a push pole, so you're at the mercy of the wind and tide. Bringing live bait is a challenge, but it can be done by adapting a pump to bring water into the cooler. Without the pump, most baits other than shrimp won't survive an extended stay onboard. So you'll wind up fishing with artificials. Fly fishing isn't easy because there's no deck to strip your line onto and there's no place to stow an assembled 9' rod on a 10'11" craft.

If you overlook these obstacles, flats fishing from a waterbike has its rewards. You can get into the skinniest of waters and, with the new four-strokes, do it silently. You can zip from one flat to the next and maneuver into tight channels that other boats might not fit through. You can set up a drift and sight fish and—here's the kicker—if you hook into a monster, get towed on the ride of your life. Even our reluctant guide saw a benefit. He thinks that the most effective and least obtrusive way to fish the flats is by wading. With a waterbike you can reach almost any flat, stake it off, and stalk the fish on foot.

Taking this all in, working the last flat of the day as the sun is setting, Tim and I are feeling pretty good. We've proven that fishing from a waterbike in skinny water can be effective and fun. I look up and Tim is at it again with another bend in his rod. I'm idling in a channel on the edge of the flat, and a flats boat is approaching. Maybe the driver will see Tim with a fish on and we'll win him over. Maybe he'll show his appreciation for our pioneering spirit. He aims his boat right at me and turns at the last second, showering me with a wall of spray. Maybe next time. ↴

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But we at BOATING Magazine had this crazy notion. If you think about it—we obviously have too much time on our hands—a waterbike would make a nifty little flats skiff. It's lightweight, has no prop to get stuck in the marl or scar the grass beds, can get into skinny water almost as well as an airboat, and—with a four-stroke engine—is quiet and clean. To test this theory, we tried to enter a few bonefish tournaments and go head-to-head with the world's best backcountry anglers. But every one turned us away, some less politely than others. You're crazy, they'd tell us. You're not welcome here, they'd snarl. Don't ever call here again, they'd say.

Well, we don't like to be told we can't do something, especially if that something makes sense. So we picked up two Sea-Doos, trekked to Islamorada, and set our sites on proving everyone wrong.

Getting Our Drift

The sun is high, the water is barely rippling, and Tim McKercher and I are standing atop our respective 4-Tecs, scanning the flats as we drift in less than 10 inches of water on a falling tide. Tim is positioned on the cooler of his custom-rigged bike, which he's outfit-

ted with two welded rodholders configured by Quality T-Tops (\$500; 727/942-4397) and a Garmin GPSMap 188 Sounder (\$1,000 with transducer and internal antenna; 800/800-1020, www.garmin.com). The cooler, set into a holder welded to the rodholders, serves as a baitwell, poling platform, and observation deck. From there, Tim can survey the flats and spot any fish in the vicinity.

I'm fishing from a stock 4-Tec. Most people probably won't use their waterbike primarily for fishing and therefore won't want to invest in custom rigging. And you can fish from a basic model just the same. I stand on the seat and peruse the flats as we drift. There's a small lemon shark cruising not 20 feet from me, completely unaware of my presence. It's not a bonefish but, what the heck, I make the cast. The shark turns toward my lure, recognizes it, and charges—right on past it. He swirls a few times, thinks better of it, and dashes out of sight. I look over at Tim fishing 200 yards away. He's got a bend in his rod. So there you go: success.

We're being aided in our pursuit by a local Keys guide operating from a mothership of sorts, a Fish Hawk 220 Bay Flats. Tellingly, he asks to remain

anonymous. "I don't want to get black-balled down here," he explains. We enlisted him for two reasons—to give our pursuit credibility and for protection. Nobody, we hope, will mess with us if we travel in tandem with his boat.

We get a lot of strange looks as we travel from flat to flat. Our guide seems to hunker down a bit whenever we pass a captain he might know. Maybe it's because we resemble two fighter jets escorting Air Force One. Or maybe he's just thinking about fish.

Along a well-known tarpon pass, we try to tangle with some brutish silver kings. Tim and I envision what it would be like getting towed around by a 150-pound tarpon while aboard a waterbike. We imagine all those nonbelievers staring at us with mouths agape. We'd be heroes. Of course, Tim hooks up first. I admire the bend in his rod but notice, too, the lack of jumping and general mayhem. It's a nurse shark. The hero worshiping will have to come later.

Fish-Ability

Though our backcountry foray failed to yield a trophy tarpon, it did convince both Tim and me that a waterbike can be an effective flats skiff. Even our guide

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