

# BRADENTON HERALD

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FISHING & BOATING

## Outdoors Column | COVID-19 takes a big bite of fishing charter captain's business

BY JON CHAPMAN *SPECIAL TO THE HERALD*  
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After growing up in Sarasota, captain Aaron Sutcliffe slowly fished his way south along the Florida coast. A graduated of Booker High School, Sutcliffe acquired his captain's license in 2008 when he began to run charters around Englewood and Charlotte Harbor where he fished the backcountry.

In 2011 he took the opportunity to move to a fisherman's dream, the Florida Keys. Now he is a captain for a fleet of five boats, Main Attraction fishing charters.

"I run all them at different times, but the Main Attraction V is my main boat. We do a little of everything but mostly fishing offshore is our specialty," Sutcliffe said.

But right now the Keys are nearly empty. At the end of March all hotels and vacation rentals were closed. The only road in, U.S. 1, saw a checkpoint put up allowing no visitors. For an industry that relies on tourism, COVID-19 has devastated Sutcliffe and his fellow captains.

"The only people who have stuck around are snowbirds with long-term rentals. They booted everyone out. Essentially every client we would have is gone," said Sutcliffe.

“The thing that sucks is this is the time where we make money to get through the slow season. I’m broke, living paycheck to paycheck. I don’t know what kind of effect it’s going to have down here long term. It might sound crazy but it wouldn’t surprise me if we already had the virus around here. So many people from Europe and Asia get off cruise ships, rent a car and drive from Miami to Key West or Key West to Miami. We saw a lot of this from November to the beginning of March. Right now we’re not overrun with it and I think that surprises a lot of us. We might have already seen it.”

To get back to a bit of normalcy, Sutcliffe went fishing. He joined a group of fellow captains and anglers to target sailfish in the nearshore waters on the Atlantic Ocean side of the Florida Keys.

“This time of year we get into the end of sailfish season. The fish start to migrate toward the Gulf and they post up. Basically you find a big congregation and stay on them. They stay on the waves, using them to swim into the current. You see them in schools of three or more, throw a live pilchard or threadfin up current and can hook a lot of fish this way.”

Around 10 a.m., the first sailfish was hooked up by Sutcliffe. Then more showed up, and the action got hot. Within the first hour they had caught and released five. By noon they had released 16. Sutcliffe recalls a conversation, where one angler said they “were going to catch 20, and that it would be a great day.”

That’s when the action really picked up.

“We would see three sails, and hook up on all of them. Then two more would show up and now you’re fighting five going every direction. Each angler would try to land theirs as quick as possible.

“When you’d land one you would have to rerig as soon as possible because more sailfish showed up. We just kept going and going, fighting and catching more fish! Then here comes more and more!”

An hour and half after having 16 on the board, the crew now had 50-fish landed.

At 6:35 p.m/, the 70th sailfish had been caught and the crew finally took a breath as they prepared to ride home. The previous Main Attraction record of 61 and the Florida Keys record of 65 sailfish in one day had both been beaten.

Perhaps the craziest bit of it all is how few other boats they saw while fishing. Spring is when boats should be full of anglers, each fishing much like Sutcliffe and his friends. But Sutcliffe recalled seeing only two other boats.

“Nobody has really been fishing. But we knew this was the time of year to get big numbers,” he said. “I think we all want the Keys to reopen as soon as possible. There’s a lot of us who are depending on it.”

Sutcliffe says when the Keys reopen, he’ll be ready for business. You can visit [www.mainattraction.org](http://www.mainattraction.org) or call 305-289-0071 for booking information.

