

Record-Breaking Sailfish Action in the Florida Keys

A stretch of hot fishing in spring 2020 leads to a new record

By Capt. Jen Copeland | Updated: August 5, 2020



Main Attraction Sportfishing mate Clint “Digger” Rodamer sent out a group text that had Capt. Marty Lewis reviewing a set of conditions he observed a day prior. With a feeling of great sailfishing in the immediate future, Lewis followed up the text with plans to depart Key Colony Beach, Florida, on Easter Sunday at 5:45 a.m.

Main One, a 49-foot custom charter boat and the largest of the Main Attraction fleet, loaded up on pilchards and headed out to 200 feet of water, where the Gulf Stream had pushed in with the southeast wind, creating tailing conditions and powder blue water for the migrating sails.

Sailfish use these particular conditions for traveling, mostly. By surfing the waves created by the fast-moving current, the fish swim just below the surface and resemble black garbage bags, or even take on the brown color of a floating log. With only their tails sometimes visible above the surface, the tailers are best spotted from the tower. And with the light blue water—in the powder—they stick out like proverbial sore thumbs.

Ending up all alone at the Saddlebunch Keys' American Shoal—just offshore of Sugarloaf and Big Pine keys—Lewis and the *Main One* team of Rodamer, Steve Fitzgerald, Shelby Bentley, Aaron “Nautical” Sutcliff and Joe Marino located the bite at 10:00 a.m. when the first of 70 fish was landed—and the day was just getting started.

Forty minutes later, five light-tackle sails were on the board, and pandemonium was on the verge of setting in. Hooking and releasing fish one after another, re-rigging rods as fast as they could and grabbing live baits from the well at an astronomical pace, the crew danced around each other on autopilot as one multiple hookup after another had them either stretched out off the bow or nearly spooled from the cockpit.

As soon as one was released, Lewis would scream from the tower, “Get ready!” Rodamer, accustomed to the sound of his captain’s voice after 10 years, even in mayhem, looked up only to see Lewis’ arm pointing in the direction for him to cast.

The wind picked up throughout the afternoon, settling in at a gusty 15 to 25 mph. The release numbers continued to climb, and by 3:15 p.m., the team had released 40 sailfish.

Lewis and his crew are no strangers to high numbers of springtime sails. The team managed to catch 61 in spring 2018—the same day Capt. BJ Meyer’s *Silent Hunter* broke the assumed Florida Keys record with 65.

With plenty of daylight hours left, the crew thought the possibility of breaking *Silent Hunter*’s record was within reach. At 5:00 p.m. Lewis’

wife, Katie, received a simple text: “60.” That text was quickly followed up with: “Holy sh-t.”

The adrenaline was pumping and the crew was absolutely on their A-game, baiting and releasing all but two of the fish they saw—and those didn’t eat—eventually ending up in Key West, some 30 miles south.

At 6:35 p.m., another text: “70 and done.” Beating the record by five fish, Lewis and his exhausted but stoked *Main One* team now owned the Keys record for catching and releasing the most sailfish in one day—a feat not for the faint of heart or for the noncompetitive. Being at the right place at the right time certainly does have its advantages.

But Lewis would hold the record for only about two weeks. On April 22, Capt. Sam Milazzo noticed the wind was lining up nicely for another tailing condition in Islamorada. Big numbers had been posted up by many Keys teams over the previous month, so he reached out to professional bass fisherman Scott Martin, owner of a 42-foot Freeman called *Vice Versa*, to find out if he’d be interested in going out; he was.



Team Vice Versa, led by Capt. Sam Milazzo, now holds the Florida Keys record for the number of sailfish released in a single day at 76. Courtesy Macoy Fisher/SMC Productions

Looking for handle turners, Milazzo contacted freelancer Lee Gahagen, and shortly after, the *Vice Versa* team was assembled. The day started out just like any other fishing day in the Florida Keys would, meeting at the boat the next morning around 6:00. Milazzo, Martin, Gahagen, Ben Zdan, Tyler Rodriguez, Macoy Fisher, Brandon Simmons and John Polhill were excited to get after it, and scooped every last bait from the cage. By 8:30 a.m., they were hooked up to the first fish of the day in front of Tennessee Light off Long Key.

While Polhill fought the first fish, another sailfish was spotted tailing down-sea, and for the next hour, the team amassed eight releases. At 10:19 a.m., the 14th sail of the day was released, and for the next three hours, it was a 10-fish pick.

With Milazzo in the tower, Zdan, Gahagen and Rodriguez rotated from the deck to keep fresh eyes on the waves that were holding the tailing fish. Seventeen more fish were released by 3:07 p.m.—making the total 41—when just 20 minutes later, the floodgates opened. Single after single, a few doubleheaders and a triple had the numbers racking up as the team continued to bait fish, even when stretched out on others. Forty minutes later, the 50th fish of the day was released, and the team was working like a well-oiled machine.

“There wasn’t a fish that made it past us,” Simmons says. “Milazzo kept us on them, making all the right moves and setting us up for some perfectly made casts.” Both agreed that 70 would be a hard number to beat but thought they had a real chance to exceed it.

By 5:00 p.m., the tension was growing, but the team kept their eye on the prize, reeling in the 70th fish just 24 minutes later. Zdan broke through the 70-fish barrier at 5:39 p.m., and the team went crazy with excitement.

Now at Alligator Light, the day had turned to dusk. Milazzo finally came down from the tower to fight the team’s last fish of the day, no doubt his reward for such a hard day’s work. “I felt honored that they wanted me

to catch the last one,” Milazzo says. “Simmons and Gahagen put me on one. I made a cast and came tight, and after a couple of minutes, we had released number 76 and headed home.”

“It almost didn’t even feel real,” Simmons says. “We all worked our asses off, and 76 sailfish is an incredible number. Some of the best fishermen in the world fish in the Florida Keys, so it’s only a matter of time before someone else sets the bar even higher—and when that happens, we’ll be ready.”

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