

## THE FISHING ALTERNATIVE

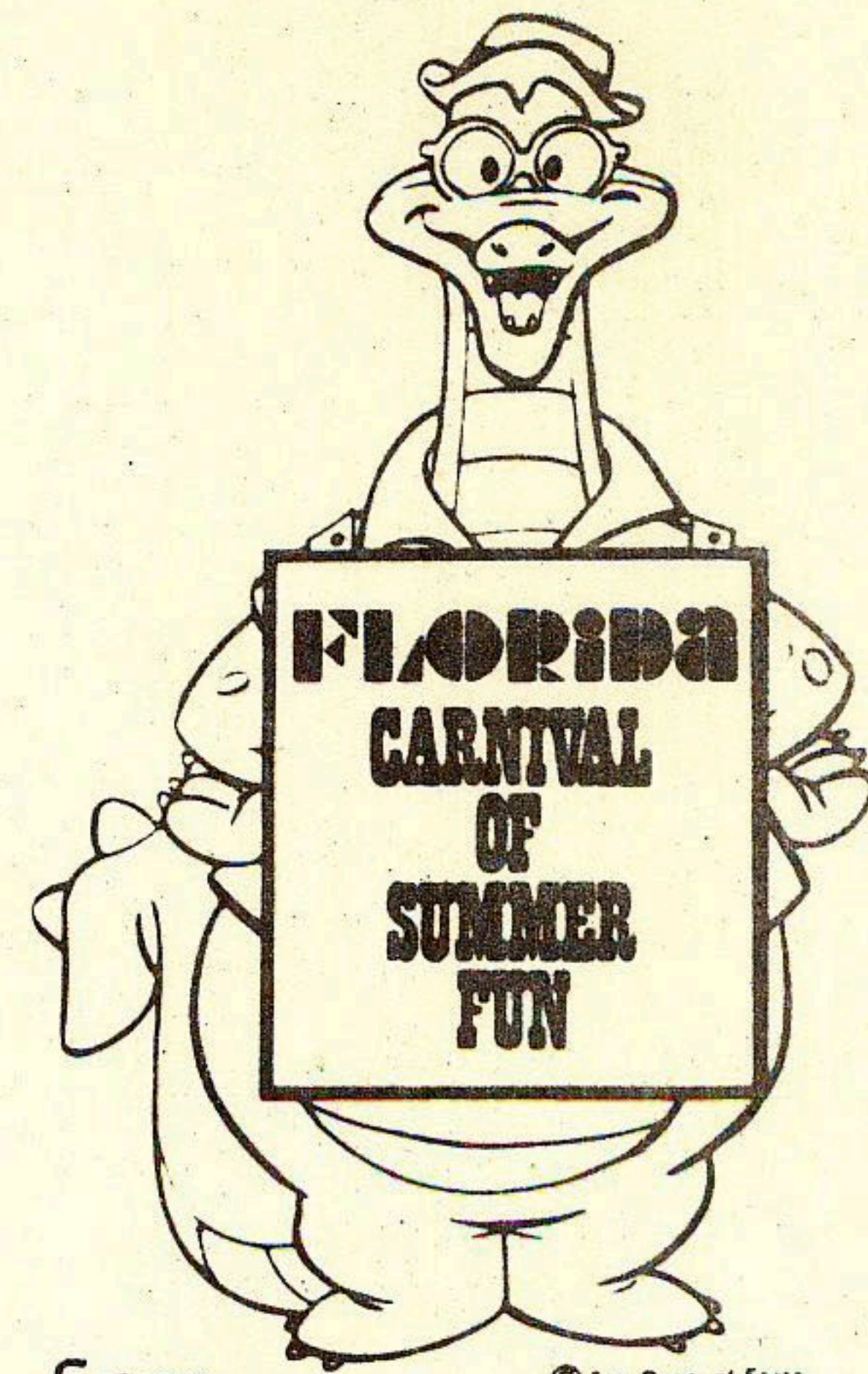
By MARY LOU NORWOOD

Most children and many adults are just not cut out for fishing. Otherwise perfectly honest and upright people, they lack the persistence and patience to stare endlessly at a cork or, worse, untangle a Gordian knot of a backlash for hours.

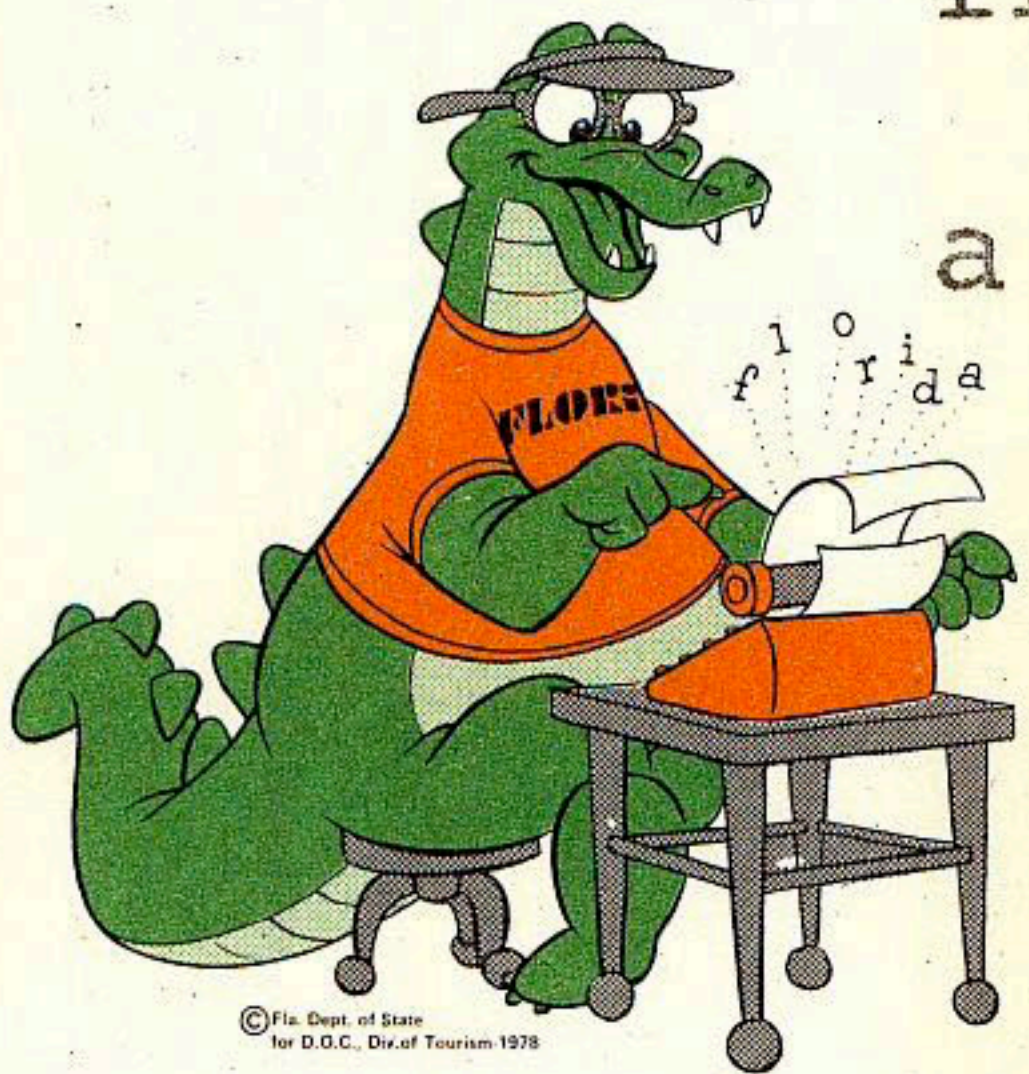
But think not that the cork-hater and line-snarler are flawed people. In Florida, they are usually just innocents tied by marriage or parentage to an avid angler who has been waiting for months to try some of the state's fabulous fishing. But there is an alternative to fishing for the rest of the vacationing family -- crabbing.

The action is almost continuous (sometimes frantic). The techniques can be mastered by any schoolage youngster and some skills by even younger children. Because blue crabs are found in almost any tidal water in Florida, crabbers and fishermen frequently share the same shoreline. This makes it possible for a family to separate into fishers and crabbers and still be together.

-more-



© Fla. Dept. of State  
For D.O.C. Div. of Tourism



© Fla. Dept. of State  
For D.O.C. Div. of Tourism 1978



The tackle for crabbing is quite simple: a crab net, a ball of stout twine, a container in which to hold the captured crabs (a big bucket, a burlap bag or a cheap styrofoam cooler) and a sack of fish heads or chicken necks. The whole outfit should be under \$10 and probably closer to \$5. Crabbing could be the most economical adventure of your whole Florida vacation.

Each crabber should have a piece of twine about 50 feet long, one end tied to a stick or the crabber's wrist and the other end tied securely to the bait. The bait is then thrown out into the water about 30 feet, and retrieved when a crab seizes it. Pulled slowly into shallow water, the crab is quickly scooped up in the net and shaken out into the holding container.

As crabs are less skittish than fish, crabbers will win points by staying at least a hundred feet and down current from anglers. But if the fisherman is rigged for bottom fishing, stay close enough to hear his call because the odds are excellent that he will occasionally find a crab is eating his bait and summon a netter.

Crabs work in and out of sloughs and creeks and other shoreline irregularities with the tide. Searching, always searching for tidbits and morsels to satisfy their rapacious appetites, they scuttle along sideways and parallel to the shore.

In a word, blue crabs are scavengers. That's why fish heads and chicken necks, the riper the better, are such good bait. If that turns you off, just think of them as Mother Nature's little housekeepers tidying up the seashore. In fits of this tidying activity, crabs will grab hold of your bait with one claw and tear bite-size hunks off with the other.



Blue crabs are such eager eaters, they can be pulled almost up on the shore. They will hang on to the bait of pier and bridge fishermen to, and sometimes above, the water's surface. But unless the pier or bridge is very low to the water, crabbing is better from bank or beach because crabnet handles are only about 5 feet long.

Crabs caught on open ocean and gulf beaches in the summertime have a high percentage of females. If there is a spongy, yellow-orange mass underneath the crab, it is an egg-bearing female and must be thrown back.

There is no size limit for crabs caught for personal consumption. However, those with shells smaller than 4 or 5 inches from point to point may not yield enough meat to make keeping them worthwhile.

Cooking and cleaning crabs is not difficult, but it is somewhat tedious. You'll soon discover why fresh crabmeat and crabmeat entrees are comparatively expensive. It is, however, delicious.

The best way to learn to cook, clean and pick crabs is to get someone to show you. If it seems like too much trouble, give your catch to someone with access to a kitchen. Or better yet, return them to the water where they can provide another family with an alternative to fishing tomorrow or the next day.



## TIPS ON CRABBING

1. Borrow some weights from the family tackle box and secure them to the bait end of the line to make throwing easier.
2. Put a foot on the shore end of the line to avoid throwing everything into the water.
3. Hold the crab line about two feet from the bait and use a whirling motion to get momentum into your throw.
4. Initially throw out and retrieve the line several times to get accustomed to the feel of an empty line.
5. Retrieve the line at a slow and steady pace; if the crab seems to let go, stop the retrieval and it will usually come back to its dinner.
6. Bring the crab as far in as possible because the shallower the water the easier the scoop.
7. Avoid sudden moves by both retriever and scooper because the crab can see you almost as clearly as you can see it.
8. Scoop from beyond the crab back toward shore so you can get a second chance if you miss the first time.
9. Handle the crab with the net whenever possible and respect those claws, for they are as wicked as they appear.
10. If you must pick up a crab, use the crab net handle to pin and hold the crab flat. Then carefully grasp the crab from the rear, putting your thumb on one side and your index finger on the other side between the rear flipper and the last leg. Both of the crab's rear flippers should be under your palm and the claws separated from your hand by the crab's body.