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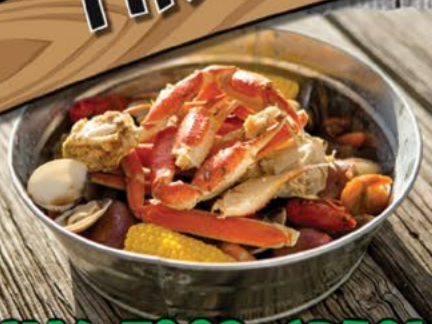


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WHY DON'T PHONES FLOAT?

I'm sure that all of you have experienced the sickening sinking feeling that occurs when you are out on the water and that valuable smart-phone, the one that contains every bit of information you need to survive, goes gently plop in the water. It is such a completely helpless and desperate feeling and there is not a single thing that you can do except go and buy another one.

Well, this feeling is way too fresh in my mind because I lost my phone off the docks yesterday. Years ago, when I lived on a boat, I lost untold numbers of phones into the briny deep, but recently I have been better about protecting my personal connection to the whole world. In the past it was just a phone that I lost, but yesterday it was my entire identity. For several hours I was completely unplugged, my important callers could speak only to the fishes.

I'm not sure if it is good or bad (probably bad), but most of us are completely and totally addicted to the instant communication that our smartphones provide. I am embarrassed to say that I am so addicted that I found myself jonesing for email, facebook, text messages, weather radar, internet searches, Angry Birds, Fart Piano, FML's and so much more, within only minutes after the phone went plop. A little time on the computer or my iPad helped a bit for the withdrawal, but it just wasn't the same. What a helpless feeling it is to be unable to instantly search the total compilation of all known human knowledge to determine whether a duckbill platypus or a Peruvian Screeching Llama makes a better pet. Without my smartphone, I was also quite lost performing my editing duties because I had no convenient way to perform fact checking.

An instant internet search on a smartphone is the best way to find the truth (we all know that everything on the internet has to be true, right???). It was so bad that I only made it for a couple hours before heading to the AT&T Store and plopping down \$500 for a new one.

Unfortunately I had not chosen to purchase the insurance on my old phone because they seem to have a knack for excluding everything that actually happens to me from coverage. I once dropped one in the Arkansas River and even went to the trouble of retrieving it only to be told that the insurance did not cover phones that had been wet. If I had simply left the phone in the river and said that it was lost, no problem, it would have been covered.

I even got one of the new waterproof cases for my new personal communicator, but sadly, it seals the phone up so well that I can't hear it, so it had to go. Anyway...I will continue to seek the perfect condom for my phone.

When I was just a kid in the 60s we were promised that the future would hold great innovation. We were promised all sorts of fantastic futuristic developments that would enhance our lives. I have a sinking feeling that the smartphone may be the extent of the innovation that I will see, in my lifetime. I'm disappointed and angry, I still want my jetpack and flying car. Popular Mechanics promised me these in the 1960's and I still don't have either, do you think I can sue them?

Merle & Flip



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ON THE COVER: Summertime Redfish are heating up all over Florida and our new writer, Captain Mike Haynes, will help guide you to more beautiful fish like this one. Learn more by flipping to page 14 of this issue and thank us later!

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TARGETING TAMPA BAY'S SUMMERTIME BLACK DRUM

by Captain George Hastick

Tampa Bay is famous for its flats and hard fighting sportfish. While Snook and Redfish often steal the spotlight, a dark shadow lurks around the bay's concrete and stone infrastructure. Beat the heat and fish in the shade.

The Black Drum (*pogonias cromis*) is one of the hardest fighting, most dependable species available to local anglers during the heat of summer. Ranging from four pound "puppy" drum to sixty plus pound "bulls," these powerful bottom feeders offer an incredible challenge. If you want to bend a rod on a true Tampa Bay heavyweight, here is how to find and catch these bruisers.

LOCATING THE DARK BEAST

Black drum are structure-oriented fish. They rely on their sensitive chin barbels and strong sense of smell to detect food. In Tampa Bay, the massive bridges like the Gandy Bridge, the Howard



Frankland, the Courtney Cambell and the iconic Sunshine Skyway Bridge act as superhighways for migrating schools. The main shipping channels, deepwater fender systems, and individual concrete pilings attract Drum. Beyond the bridges, Black Drum frequent the

residential canals of St. Petersburg and Tampa, deep shipping ports, and shallow oyster bars. During the winter, low tides push smaller drum into brackish creeks, while spring and summer see massive bulls congregating around deep-water structures.



RIGGING FOR HEAVYWEIGHTS

Because Black Drum live in the treacherous structure imaginable, light tackle will only lead to heartbreak. Barnacle-encrusted pilings will slice through light line instantly.

For large bull drum, use a heavy 7 foot spinning rod with a 5000 to 8000 class reel. Spool up with 40 to 50 pound braided line. Your leader is your lifeline; tie on 3 to 4 feet of 60 to 80 pound fluorocarbon. I also like a conventional set up with 50lb. mono mainline and 4 feet of 80lb. leader when you want the big ones.

Slide on a 3 to 5-ounce egg weight—depending on the strength of the Tampa Bay current—directly onto your mainline followed by an 80- 100lb swivel, then your leader and tie on a stout 5/0 to 7/0 circle hook.

BAITS THAT PRODUCE

Black Drum are opportunistic feeders, but their absolute favorite meal is crab. For giant bull drum, nothing beats a fresh blue crab. Quarter or halve the crab, remove the legs, and pass the circle hook through one of the leg sockets. For smaller slot-sized Black Drum, live shrimp, Fiddler Crabs or freshly cut bait will get the job done.

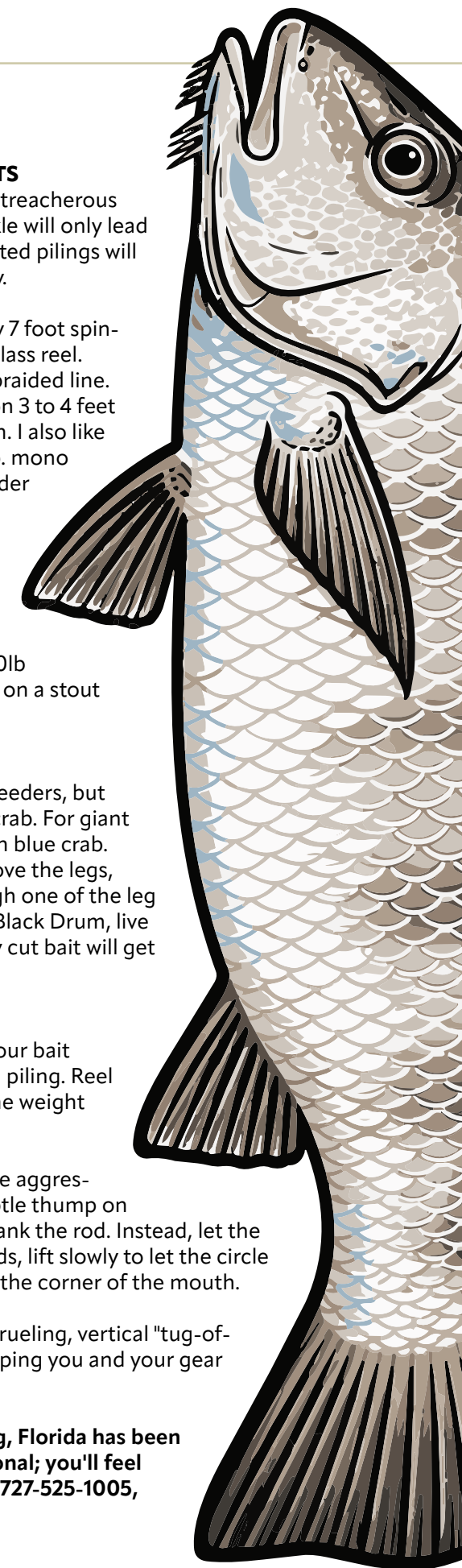
THE PRESENTATION & BITE

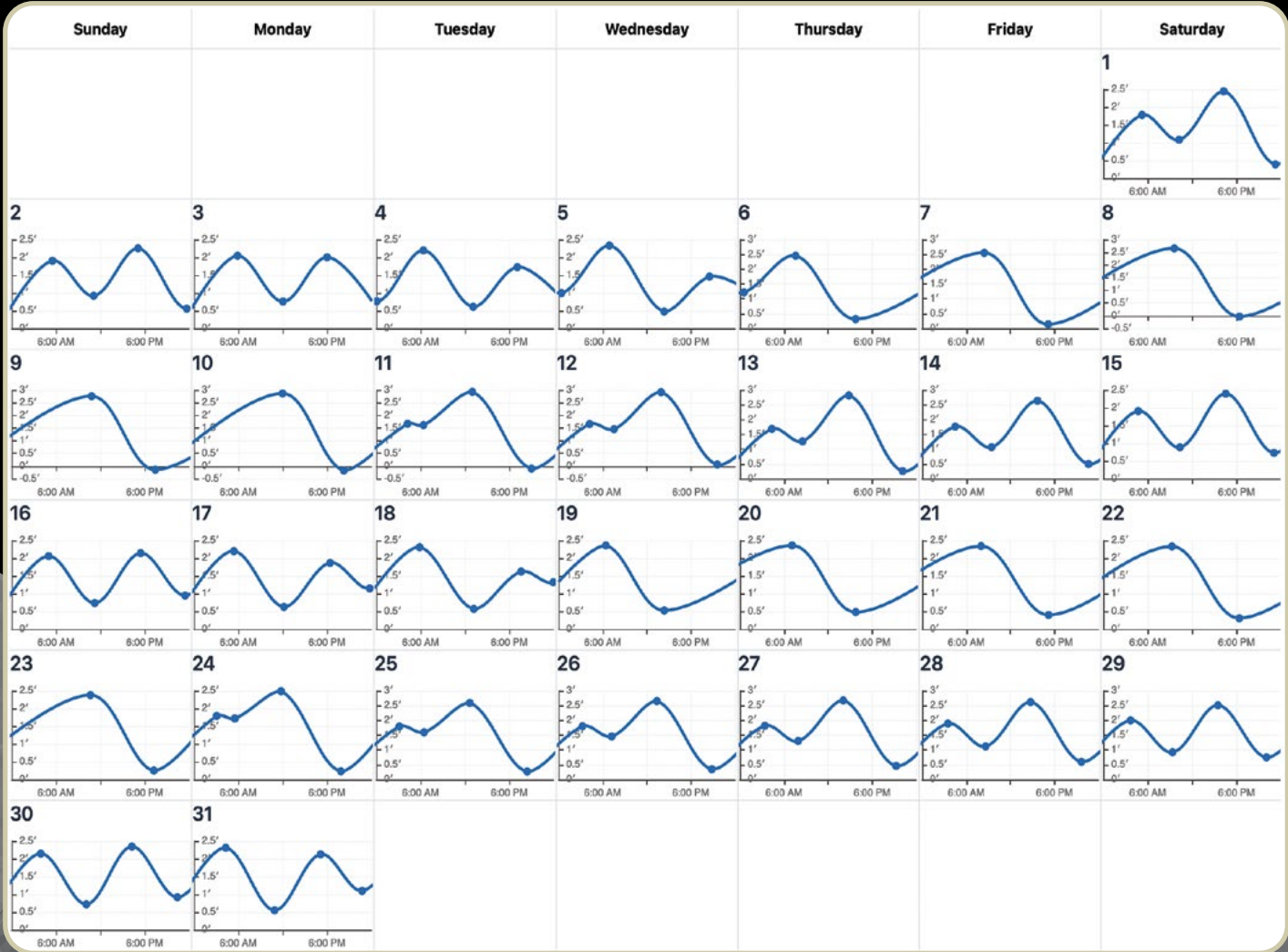
The technique is simple drop your bait directly to the bottom next to a piling. Reel just enough to come tight to the weight but keeping it on the bottom.

Black Drum usually do not strike aggressively. You will usually feel a subtle thump on the rod tip. Resist the urge to yank the rod. Instead, let the fish commit, as the rod tip bends, lift slowly to let the circle hook automatically set itself in the corner of the mouth.

Once hooked, get ready for a grueling, vertical "tug-of-war" to keep the fish from wrapping you and your gear around the concrete! ☑

Captain George Hastick of "Fish Hunter Fishing Charters" in St. Petersburg, Florida has been fishing the waters of Tampa Bay for over 35 years. From novice to professional; you'll feel like you have been fishing buddies for years. For more info, contact him at 727-525-1005, www.FishTampa.com.





Conversions are based off of the St. Petersburg Pier. They are published strictly for reference and are not designed for navigational aid. Onshore-Offshore assumes no responsibility for their accuracy.

Conversions for Clearwater Beach Area

High	Low	
-0:02	-0:10	Dunedin, St. Joseph Sound
-0:05	-0:15	Anclote Key, South End
+0:42	+0:42	Tarpon Springs, Anclote River
-0:07	-0:03	North Anclote Key
+0:41	+0:39	Old Port Tampa
+0:33	+0:53	Gulf Harbors
+0:42	+1:05	Hwy 19 Bridge, Pithlachascotee River
+0:50	+1:35	New Port Richey, Pithlachascotee River
+0:36	+0:43	Hudson, Hudson Creek

Conversions for St. Marks River Area

High	Low	
+0:23	+1:18	Everglades City
-1:17	-1:03	Cape Romano
-1:04	-1:08	Marco Island
-1:59	-2:04	Naples
-0:46	-0:09	Indian Bay
-0:59	-0:42	Bayport
-0:25	+0:23	Withlacoochee River

Conversions for Tampa Bay Area

High	Low	
+0:49	+0:58	Gandy Bridge
+1:38	+1:55	Courtney Campbell Cswy.
+1:38	+1:55	Safety Harbor
+0:20	+0:22	Ballast Point
+0:07	+0:26	Hillsborough Bay
+0:21	+0:29	McKay Bay Entrance
+0:41	+0:39	Old Port Tampa
-2:27	-2:24	Egmont Key
-2:53	-2:46	Anna Maria, Bradenton Bch
-2:10	-2:19	Anna Maria, City Pier
-1:24	-0:55	Bradenton, Manatee River
-0:30	+0:14	Redfish Pt., Manatee River
-2:22	-1:58	Mullet Key Channel, Skyway
+0:08	+0:17	Shell Point
-0:22	-0:29	Point Pinellas
-1:34	-1:30	Pass-a-Grille Beach
-1:32	-1:05	Gulfport
-1:18	-0:44	St. Pete Beach Causeway
-2:14	-2:04	John's Pass
-1:40	-1:18	Madeira Beach Causeway
-2:00	-1:25	Cortez, Sarasota Bay
-1:38	-0:58	Sarasota Bay
-2:02	-1:38	Venice Inlet
-0:57	-0:40	Englewood, Lemon Bay
-1:27	-0:59	Placida, Gasparilla Sound
+1:38	+1:56	El Jobean, Myakka River
+1:52	+2:30	Shell Point, Peace River
+1:06	+1:27	Punta Gorda, Charlotte Hbr.
-1:12	-1:56	Boca Grande, Charlotte Hbr.
-0:19	+0:26	Pineland, Pine Island
+0:43	+1:28	Matlacha Pass
-0:55	-1:14	Redfish Pass, Captiva Is.
-0:46	-0:20	Captiva, Pine Island Sound
-2:20	-2:28	Captiva, Gulf Side
-0:25	+0:16	Galt Isle, Pine Island Sound
-0:30	-0:44	St. James City, Pine Island
+2:08	+2:44	Fort Myers
+1:15	+2:02	Cape Coral Bridge
+1:08	+1:40	Iona Shores
+0:51	+0:42	Indian Rocks Beach, ICW

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CRACKING THE CODE ON GAG GROUPER SEASON

by Misty Wells

The 2026 outlook has gotten a bit better for Gag Grouper season with this years opening set for September 1st. This year, thankfully we get a full month on the West Coast of Florida.



However, just like last year there is a lot of controversy in the fishing community about the way fish counts are being totaled and the accuracy of how these numbers get calculated. It seems like they are having more meetings and taking a hard look at the calculations and counts; we are all hoping for some real change. So far they have kept the bag limit the same, 2 per person and the minimum size limit is still 24 inches. For many anglers Gag Grouper season is like an early Christmas; we look forward to putting our skills to the test and landing a beast.

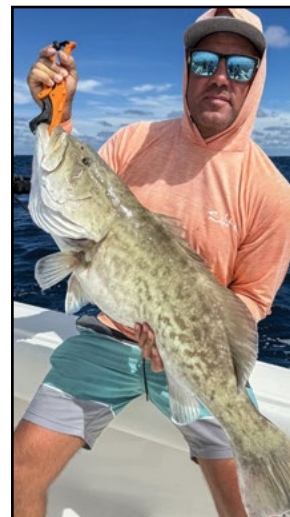
There are several different species of grouper, and everyone has their favorites, I love Gag Grouper it

seems to be meatier, and I know it is harder to catch them, "they can be fast and mean". Now there are many grouper types that I have not caught like Black Grouper, Nassau Grouper, Warsaw and Yellowedge but they are on my list to pursue. Here in Pinellas County, we have a magical place off the West Coast of Florida called the Middle Grounds and this is a good place to start if you are dreaming about landing that prize Grouper.

Let's start with a little history of the Middle Grounds and why the fishing is so "epic" there. The Middle Grounds is about 348 square nautical miles of bottom structure with depths that range from 80 to 160 feet with loads of topical diversity. The Middle Grounds provides limitless steep ledges and peaks that hold baitfish, couple that with strong ocean currents and a bottom that has live coral formations and you have angler heaven. A lot of fishing on the West Coast of Florida is all about your bottom numbers and at the Middle Grounds, if you know how to read a bottom machine, you can easily find great spots to drop down on.

One mistake the an-

glers make in the Middle Grounds, however, is their anchor settings most folks have trouble properly anchoring and may find the fish but can't catch them. These days a lot of vessels have a "Spot Lock" on them which does help quite a bit if the weather is calm. Technology has helped make anglers much better these days, but nothing takes the place of true skill that you learn the hard way.



I took some time to personally interview one of the best captains on the West Coast, Captain Tommy LaRonge of "UnReel

Fishing Outfitters" to help you break the code to Gag Grouper fishing. I asked Captain Tommy what his "go-to" tackle setup is for Gag Grouper. He said, "a Penn 6 ot. with straight 100lb. Momoi line with a Batson Rainshadow blank, topping it off with a 100 lbs. Momoi leader". Depending on the current he uses between a 4 and 12 ounce sinker, with a Gamakatsu 8 ot. 4x circle hook. Of course, having the bait the Gag Grouper love is key. Captain Tommy uses whole Boston Mackerel or hand-size Grass or Key West Grunts hooked in the rear end.



The most important thing to remember is do not set the hook once you get a bite, just start reeling like your life depends on it. If you yank up on the rod three feet the Gag Grouper will pull down three feet at the same time and you will get broke off, Tommy says he sees this happen all the time. Tommy said, "You don't want to give a Gag any room to run because he will break you off". I asked Captain Tommy what happens when a Gag breaks you off? His response "they will rock themselves up and then the drums start". "A Gag Grouper has an internal drumming sound that will alert the other fish and the bite will shut down immediately".

"And, just so you know, all Grouper have this type of communication. It is not just special to the Gag Grouper".



Some interesting Gag Grouper facts are 50% of females mature at 24 inches and 3 years of age and all fish less than 35 inches total length are female while most gag over 45 inches are males. Gag Grouper may also live for up to 26 years and can grow to be 58 inches in length and weigh up to 81 pounds.

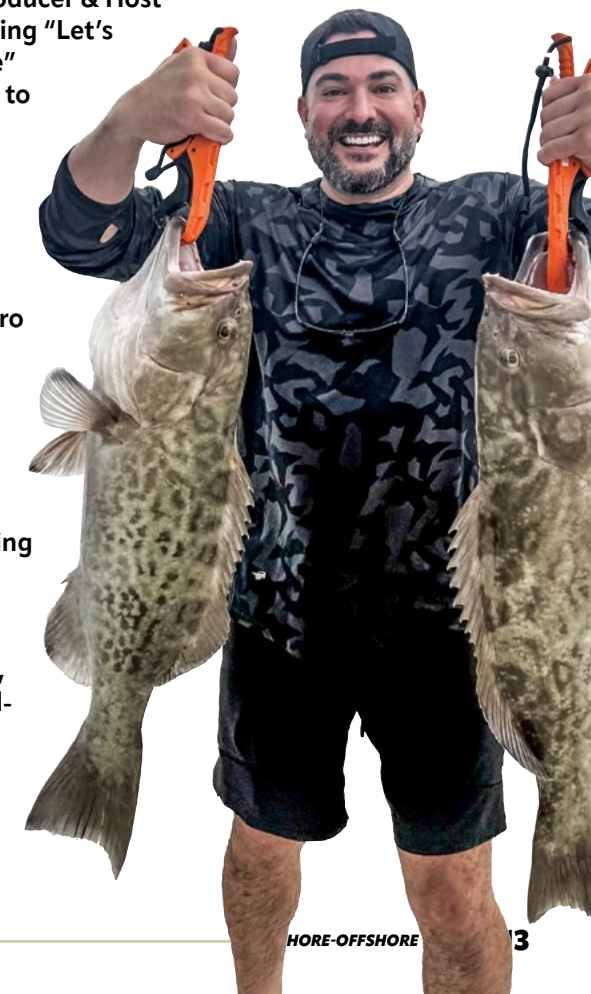
With such limited time this season to catch Gags I would recommend going with a professional captain, but not just any captain will do. As more folks move to Florida or come visit it seems there are new captains popping up everywhere and honestly how do you know who is good and who is not. There is a huge difference between a charter boat captain and a fisherman who is a captain. A charter boat captain has a license and boat and hopefully knows a thing or two about catching fish, while a fisherman who is a captain is someone who knows where the fish are, will put you on them and make sure you get your limits.

Captain Tommy started his fishing career over 27 years ago working as a commercial fisherman learning almost every

square inch of the Gulf and the Middle Grounds. As a commercial captain, Tommy would leave port for up to 5 to 7 days at a time, catch thousands of pounds of Grouper and Snapper and then head back in for a day or two until it was time to go again. This is where the work comes in, learning the waters like your own backyard, and building your book of numbers. What is a "Loran Book" you might ask? It is what I refer to as the Holy Grail, a captain's livelihood where all his fishing number and deepest secrets are kept. Captain Tommy has spent over 27 years searching the Gulf or what lies beneath, the secret ledges, rock piles, crevices and cracks that all are home to our beloved Gag Grouper. And word to the wise, "don't ever come between a fisherman and his Loran Book, if you know what's good for you".

Anytime you go fishing pay attention because you are always going to learn something from your captain, crew or fellow angler. I have learned a lot from Captain Tommy over the 16 years we have been together, and we have landed some huge fish together. If you are looking to fill the box with some "personal best" catches, he is the guy that I recommend every time. Gag season is almost here, no matter who you are fishing with you need to get ready and get out on the water because before you blink it will be over. If you are looking to book Captain Tommy of UnReel Fishing Outfitter go to www.ucatchfish.com.

Misty Wells Producer & Host of Award Winning "Let's Take It Outside" TV show airing to 220 million on Discovery & Discovery GO & Plus & 17 other networks. Bass Pro-Outdoor Pro & Outdoor & Outdoor, Travel Writer. Founder of "A Reel Future" non-profit devoted to teaching the passion of fishing & conservation to foster children, over 4,000 children & counting. Watch at mistywells.com.



THINK LIKE A REDFISH

Understanding the Estuary is Key to Consistently Finding Every Inshore Predator

by Captain Mike Haynes

One of the most rewarding parts of being a charter captain is watching clients catch fish and create memories they'll talk about for years. At the same time, it's also one of the most humbling jobs because every day on the water reminds you that fish don't read yesterday's fishing report. I've had stretches where the fishing was incredible. For several days in a row, we'd catch fish after fish, clients would limit out, and everyone would head back to the dock with smiles on their faces. Then, almost overnight, everything would change. I'd run the same shorelines and grass flats that had been producing, expecting another great day, only to find the water strangely quiet. The redfish weren't where they should have been. The mullet had disappeared. There wasn't a shrimp popping, baitfish weren't scattering, and the water felt lifeless.

The frustrating part was knowing those fish had been there the day before. Redfish don't just pack up and leave an estuary overnight, so something had changed—and I was determined to figure out what it was. As a captain, those are frustrating days. Our job is to put clients on fish, and when the bite suddenly falls apart, you start questioning everything. Was it the tide? The weather? Fishing pressure? I replayed those days in my head over and over, convinced I had missed something. Even after years on the water, days like that can humble you; they remind you there's always something left to learn.

After watching this happen year after year, I finally accepted that the fish weren't the mystery anymore. The mystery was what I still didn't understand about the environment they lived in. I'd spent years learning where to find redfish, but not nearly enough time learning why they—and so many other inshore predators—were there in the first place. That realization sent me down a completely different path. I began researching everything

I could about redfish and the estuaries they call home.

I studied feeding behavior, seasonal movements, tides, dissolved oxygen, water quality, seagrass health, bait movement, and how each one influences the next.

What I discovered changed the way I fish. I realized I wasn't just learning about redfish—I was learning how an

entire estuary functions. The more I understood the environment, the easier it became to understand not only redfish, but trout, snook, black drum, and every other predator that depends on the same ecosystem.

STOP FISHING MEMORIES

One of the biggest mistakes I see anglers make is fishing memories. We've all done it. You catch a great fish on a shoreline, save the GPS coordinates, and convince yourself you've found "the spot." The next trip, you run right back to it expecting the same results. Sometimes it works. Many times it does not.

Redfish—and most inshore predators—don't care where you caught them last week. They're not following our waypoints; they're following the conditions that give them the best chance to feed while using the least amount of energy. Once I quit chasing yesterday's bite and started paying attention to what had changed, I became far more consistent.

SUMMER CHANGES THE RULES

Summer is when those changes become impossible to ignore. As water temperatures climb, the entire estuary begins to respond. Dissolved oxygen can drop in shallow water with little circulation. Seagrass becomes stressed in some areas while thriving in others. Bait relocates, and the predators follow.

One thing that always catches my attention is floating dead seagrass. Most anglers see it as something that fouls a lure. I see it as a clue. It doesn't automatically mean the fish have left, but it tells me to slow down and start asking questions. Is there enough water movement? Has the

bait moved? Is the grass underneath still healthy? Is this area producing oxygen, or has something changed? Those answers often determine whether I stay or keep looking.

THE BAIT USUALLY KNOWS FIRST

Long before I start looking for redfish—or any inshore predator—I'm looking for signs of life. Shrimp snapping across the surface. Finger mullet pushing wakes. Whitebait flashing along a mangrove edge. Birds working over nervous schools of bait. Healthy bait tells me the system is functioning. If an area that normally holds life suddenly feels empty, I don't waste much time trying to force fish to be there. Instead, I start figuring out why everything else left. More often than not, the redfish—and usually every other predator in the area—aren't far from the answer.

READ THE WATER BEFORE YOU PICK UP A ROD

One habit that's helped me more than anything is taking a few minutes to simply observe before making the first cast. I usually slow the boat down well before I reach the area I plan to fish. That slower approach isn't just about avoiding spooking fish—it's about giving myself time to read what's happening around me. Most clients think I've already picked the spot before we get there. The truth is, I'm often making that decision during the last couple hundred yards as I watch the water come alive—or stay completely quiet. I'll study the current. Is the tide moving fast or slow? How is the water flowing around an oyster bar, point, or mangrove island? Water movement tells me where bait is likely to collect and where redfish and other inshore predators have the best opportunity to feed.

Then I start looking for life. I like seeing what I call "happy mullet." They're casually jumping and cruising instead of racing around in panic. To me, that's a sign of healthy water quality and an ecosystem that's functioning the way it should. If the bait is comfortable, food is available, and the water conditions are good, redfish usually aren't far away—and neither are trout, snook, or black drum. I'll watch for shrimp popping, schools of bait flickering across the surface, birds diving, or even a single redfish blowing up on bait. Any predator feeding on the surface tells me the ecosystem is active.

I'll also pay attention to the wind. Is it helping me make a quiet presentation, or is it pushing the boat too quickly? Is it concentrating bait against a shoreline or scattering it across a flat? Small changes in wind and current can completely change how I approach an area. Every shoreline has its own

story. Creek mouths funnel food. Oyster bars break the current and create ambush points. Grass edges provide cover, while nearby potholes give fish a place to stage before moving onto the flat. When you start putting all of those clues together, the water begins to make a lot more sense.

THE FISH ARE THE BEST TEACHERS

Some of the best lessons I've learned haven't come from books, videos, or fishing reports. They've come from paying attention. Watching how fish position themselves during different tides. Looking at what they're feeding on. Examining the stomach contents of legally harvested fish. Noticing how a strong afternoon thunderstorm changes an area the following morning. Those observations taught me something I wish I had understood years earlier. Every fish caught—and sometimes every fish not caught—is another piece of the puzzle.

TECHNOLOGY DOESN'T REPLACE EXPERIENCE

Today's electronics are incredible. Satellite imagery, GPS mapping, and detailed charts let us study an area before we ever launch the boat. I use those tools all the time. But they can't tell you whether the grass is healthy today. They can't show you whether shrimp are popping along a shoreline or whether mullet have abandoned a flat. Technology helps us find structure. Experience helps us understand why fish are using it.

THINK LIKE A REDFISH

Looking back, those slow charter days that frustrated me the most ended up teaching me the biggest lessons. They forced me to stop chasing fish and start understanding the world they live in. These days, before I ever make a cast, I ask myself a different question. If I were a redfish, where would I want to be today? Where would I find the easiest meal? Where would I spend the least amount of energy? Where would the water quality be the best? That's the question that starts the process, but I've found the same way of thinking applies to every inshore predator I target. When you start asking those questions, fishing changes. You stop chasing reports. You stop depending on yesterday's waypoints. Instead, you begin understanding the water in front of you. The fish haven't disappeared. Redfish—and every other inshore predator—are simply doing what they've always done: responding to the conditions around them.

Once you learn to recognize those conditions, you'll spend less time wondering where the fish went and more time meeting them where they are. ☑

Capt. Mike Haynes is the owner of Fishbonz Charters in Crystal River, Florida, and co-host of Fishing Adventures Florida and the Florida West Coast Fishing Report. He enjoys helping anglers better understand fish behavior by learning to read the water and the ecosystems that support it. Learn more at www.fishbonzcharters.com.



ARTICLE BY: QUINLYN HADDON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: JULIO TELLES



Yacht Camping In **PARADISE!**

Cabo San Lucas is known for its outstanding Marlin fishing. They have blue, black and striped marlin; all found only a few miles offshore. The marlin are so close to shore that on occasion they'll be spotted in the marina waters.

Autumn and Winter are the peak times of year for catching marlin, but there are still many fish worth hunting in the summer. Even if you miss out on that trophy marlin, I believe the incredibly bizarre rooster fish to be far from a consolation prize.

For the entire month of July, I decided to head to Cabo all by myself to work and live on the Blue Sky fishing boat. It was confirmed by many people that I had lost my mind. A 26 year-old female travelling alone to live at a marina in Mexico does sound a little crazy, but it was one of the best decisions that I have ever made.

The marina community made staying on the boat a really special experience for me. It was a unique lifestyle that I can only describe as being like that of a homeless Queen. Many days, the neighboring boats would invite me over for fresh sashimi, ceviche and cold beers. Everyone was extremely friendly and generous; I rarely wanted for anything. To top it off, some nights, when the boat was too hot to sleep in, I would go to the top tower and fall asleep in the cool breeze as I watched the stars.

One of the rare days that we did not have charters, one of the first-mates and I took out the kayak for some bottom fishing. He had never kayak fished before, but since I do it a lot in Florida I felt confident that we could

head offshore together in a two person kayak. The two of us headed out with determination and a thick language barrier in a kayak with no seat attachments and no rod holders. He selected a point 11 kilometers away and we began to paddle there. In the beginning the waves weren't overly large and we were able to ride the current a little bit. It took us a few hours to get to the spot and by that time the wind had begun to pick up creating some white-caps.



We set up over the spot and dropped down our bait. Immediately I hooked up with a triggerfish and as I reeled it up, there was another fish following it. With a heavily rolled 'R', Julio started shouting "rooster, rooster". We rigged up with a bigger hook and tried to entice him back, but to no avail. The current was picking up and pushing us into the rock wall, where the waves were breaking 30 feet tall. Julio was getting a little nervous and was unable to steer us away quickly enough. We got into a rhythm where he would rig up the bait while I paddled for 10-20 minutes to get back to the rock bottom. We had time for one drop as we drifted back a quarter mile and repeated the process for hours. I was exhausted and it was too rough to even stop to eat my lunch.





A few hours later, we decided to call it a day.

We paddled back into the current as the wind picked up significantly. With no rod holders, I pinched a rod between my legs to troll a top-water popper-lure for roosterfish, all the while paddling and steering hard to keep from being spun by the waves. It took about 3 hours to paddle back and each boat we passed stared at us and took photos. Apparently kayak fishing isn't very popular in Cabo and I now understand why.

I worked almost every day that I was there, as the lovely crew and I would take one to three charters out daily. We would spend most of the time during the trips trolling a variety of lures for tuna, Dorado and marlin. The days when we were unsuccessful during this off-season, we would head inland to bottom fish. On the days when we were successful catching the game fish, we would raise a flag for each fish with an image of the species. It was interesting to see all the boats at the marina at the end of the day flying the flags of their recent catches and it provided a great opportunity for bragging rights.

We were able to catch several roosterfish this month including two five footers that were replicated for trophies. I was informed that the roosters of this size are very intelligent and can only be tricked into taking a hook using pink fluorocarbon leader with a line test of no greater than 50 pounds. We also used medium sized 5/0 j-hooks with live bait. It seemed that the type of bait was not as important as it was to have it be lively. All of the roosters were caught about 100 yards from the shoreline, both near sand beaches and rock outcrops.

The roosterfish may not be known for its consumption quality, but it is one of the hardest fighting fish for its size. Both of the trophy fish took over twenty minutes to land. If you are looking for a different kind of fishing in a place with good food and great people, come to Cabo for your trophy rooster! The FishBrain App will be running a contest in

the near future to win a trip on the Blue Sky fishing yacht. Download the free mobile app and check in at fishbrain.com for more information. I look forward to being your host for this trip!

The locals don't fully understand the appeal of catching this species, but since this unique critter is not found in many places in the world, it is definitely sought-after by many tourists.

During the month of July in Cabo, we experienced the nearby hurricane Dolores.

For a few days it had affected the success of catching marlin and Dorado, but the rooster and grouper bites remained consistent both before and afterwards. The bottom fishing is always a guarantee and lush with gorgeous and colorful species I had never seen before.

I thoroughly enjoyed my month of yacht camping on Blue Sky in Cabo San Lucas and I have to give a huge thank you to my sponsor Dorsal Brand for sending me! To all of the crew, Captain Juan, Julio, Mario and the boat owner, Jim, thank you for the stellar hospitality-- see you again soon! ▀

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PHOTOS BY: Julio Telles
Dorsalbrand.com
BlueSkyFishing.net



FLOUNDER OF FLORIDA'S BIG BEND **Masters of the Shallow Coast**

by Terri B. Huffmaster

The waters of Florida's Big Bend are famous for their incredible variety of fish. Anglers from across the Southeast travel to the region in search of Redfish, Spotted Seatrout, Tarpon, Cobia, and Spanish Mackerel. Yet one fish often goes unnoticed until it appears at the end of a fishing line or on a dinner plate. That fish is the Flounder.



Flounder may not leap into the air like a Tarpon or make long runs like a King Mackerel, but they have earned a loyal following among fishermen. Their unique appearance, excellent table quality, and challenging fishing techniques make them one of the most interesting fish found along Florida's Gulf Coast.

The Big Bend region, stretching from around the Wakulla County coastline westward through Taylor, Dixie, Levy, and Citrus counties, provides ideal habitat for several species of flounder. With miles of marshes, oyster bars, tidal creeks, sandy flats, and river mouths, the area offers everything these remarkable fish need to survive and thrive.

A FISH UNLIKE ANY OTHER

Flounder are among the strangest fish in the ocean. Unlike most fish, both eyes are located on one side of their head. This unusual feature allows them to lie flat on the bottom while keeping both eyes pointed upward to watch for prey and predators. Interestingly, young flounder begin life looking like normal fish. Shortly after hatching, they swim upright with one eye on each side of the head. As they grow, one eye slowly migrates across the top of the head until both eyes rest on the same side. At the same time, the fish begins swimming on its side and settles onto the bottom for the rest of its life.

Their upper side usually matches the color of the surrounding bottom. They can even change shades to blend with sand, mud, shell, or seagrass. This

camouflage is so effective that anglers often walk or boat directly over flounder without ever seeing them. Their lower side remains white since it rests against the bottom and is rarely exposed to sunlight.

SPECIES FOUND IN THE BIG BEND

Several flounder species inhabit Florida waters, but anglers in the Big Bend are most likely to encounter the Gulf Flounder and the Southern Flounder. The Gulf Flounder is the most common species caught along much of Florida's Gulf Coast. These fish usually display numerous dark spots across their body and thrive around sandy bottoms, passes, bays, and estuaries. Southern Flounder are less common but are occasionally caught in rivers, estuaries, and shallow bays. They tend to favor slightly muddier bottoms and can tolerate lower salinity than many other flatfish. Both species are excellent eating and behave similarly, making them equally popular among recreational anglers.

PERFECT BIG BEND HABITAT

The Big Bend is unlike almost any other coastline in Florida. Instead of towering condominiums and crowded beaches, much of the shoreline remains undeveloped. Thousands of acres of salt marsh stretch inland while shallow grass flats extend for miles offshore. This untouched habitat provides ideal conditions for flounder.

They commonly inhabit: sandy potholes within grass flats, oyster bars, creek

mouths, river channels, tidal marshes, boat channels & docks, rocky areas & mud bottoms, as well as, bridges & passes connecting bays to the Gulf. Flounder prefer areas where tidal currents carry shrimp, small fish, and crabs directly toward them. Rather than actively chasing prey over long distances, they simply bury themselves in the bottom and wait for food to come within striking range.



MASTERS OF CAMOUFLAGE

Few predators in the marine world are better adapted for ambush than flounder. They spend much of the day lying motionless on the bottom with only their eyes exposed. Their body coloring closely matches the surrounding sand or mud, making them nearly invisible. When baitfish swim overhead, the flounder explodes upward with incredible speed, inhaling its prey before settling back onto the bottom. This feeding strategy conserves energy while allowing the fish to capture surprisingly large meals. Many anglers have watched a hooked flounder spit out partially swallowed mullet or pinfish nearly half its own size.

FEEDING HABITS

Flounder are opportunistic predators. Their menu changes throughout the year depending on what prey is available. Favorite foods include shrimp, Finger Mullet, Mud Minnows, Menhaden, Pinfish, Croaker, Killifish, small Blue Crab and juvenile baitfish. Although they will occasionally feed during bright daylight, flounder become especially active during low-light periods around sunrise, sunset, and nighttime. Incoming and outgoing tides also trigger feeding activity because moving water brings food directly past waiting fish.

SEASONAL MOVEMENTS

Flounder behavior changes dramatically with the seasons. During **Spring**, as water temperatures warm, flounder move into shallow bays, creeks, and marshes after spending winter in

deeper Gulf waters. Spring offers excellent fishing opportunities as hungry fish begin feeding aggressively.

Throughout **Summer**, Flounder spread across shallow flats, grass beds, oyster bars, and river mouths. They often remain close to structure where tidal currents deliver food.

Fall season; many experienced anglers consider this the best flounder season. Cooling temperatures trigger annual migrations toward deeper Gulf waters for spawning. Large numbers of fish concentrate around creek mouths, channels, passes, and river entrances, making them easier to locate.

During **Winter** most adult flounder spend it offshore in deeper water where spawning occurs. Only smaller fish generally remain inside estuaries during the coldest months.

Speaking of spawning, unlike many inshore species, flounder usually spawn offshore. As autumn progresses, mature adults migrate from bays and estuaries into the Gulf where spawning occurs during late fall and winter. Females release enormous numbers of eggs that drift with ocean currents. The tiny larvae eventually return to coastal estuaries where they undergo their remarkable transformation into bottom-dwelling flatfish. These protected nursery habitats are critical for maintaining healthy populations.

FISHING FOR BIG BEND FLOUNDER

Flounder fishing requires patience and careful presentation. Since these fish rarely chase fast-moving lures, anglers must keep their bait close to the bottom. Popular artificial lures include soft plastic paddle tails, curly tail grubs, shrimp imitations, Bucktail Jigs, Gulp! Brand soft plastics and small swim baits. Most are fished on jigheads that allow the lure to bounce naturally across the bottom. The retrieve should be slow. Many successful anglers simply drag the lure along the bottom with occasional pauses.



Live bait is equally productive for Flounder and popular choices include live shrimp, Mud Minnows, Finger Mullet & Small Pinfish. A Carolina rig or jig head keeps the bait close to the bottom where flounder are waiting.

One of the biggest challenges in flounder fishing is recognizing the bite. Unlike Redfish or Trout, Flounder often strike softly. The angler may feel only slight pressure or a gentle tap. Often the fish grabs the bait and holds it before swallowing. Experienced fishermen frequently wait several seconds before setting the hook, especially when using live bait, allowing the fish time to position the bait inside its mouth. Modern circle hooks have also become popular because they reduce deep hooking while still providing solid hookups.

BEST PLACES TO LOOK

Big Bend anglers consistently target several key locations. Creek mouths are especially productive because tides wash shrimp and baitfish into deeper water. Oyster bars create current breaks where flounder wait in ambush. River mouths provide changing salinity that attracts bait throughout much of the year. Boat channels often feature sandy edges where flounder bury themselves. Docks and seawalls also produce fish, especially where lights attract bait after dark. Any place where moving water meets structure deserves careful attention.

**FLOUNDER AS TABLE FARE**

Few saltwater fish receive more praise in the kitchen than flounder. Their white flesh is mild, flaky, and nearly boneless. Even people who normally avoid seafood often enjoy flounder because of its delicate flavor. Popular cooking methods include pan frying, baking, broiling, blackening and grilling. Stuffing whole fillets is popular and Flounder make great fish tacos or sandwiches. Fresh flounder requires little seasoning beyond butter, lemon, salt, pepper, and a few herbs. Its mild taste also pairs well with Cajun spices and seafood sauces.

IMPORTANCE TO THE ECOSYSTEM

Flounder play an important role in the Big Bend food web. As predators, they help control populations of shrimp and small fish. At the same time, they serve as prey for larger predators including Sharks, Dolphin, large Red Drum, Cobia, and various seabirds. Healthy flounder populations indicate healthy estuaries. Because they rely on marshes, seagrasses, oyster reefs, and clean water throughout their life cycle, protecting these habitats benefits countless other marine species, as well.

Like many coastal fish, flounder face several challenges. Habitat loss, declining water quality, shoreline development, and heavy fishing pressure can all reduce local populations. Fortunately, much of Florida's Big Bend remains one of the least-developed coastlines in the state. Large protected areas, including wildlife refuges, aquatic preserves and state parks help safeguard critical fish nursery habitats.

Responsible anglers also contribute to conservation by following current size and bag limits, releasing undersized fish carefully, using appropriate tackle, respecting seagrass beds, avoiding damage to oyster reefs and properly disposing of fishing line. These simple actions help ensure future generations can enjoy flounder fishing.

A HIDDEN TREASURE

Many visitors come to the Big Bend dreaming of catching trophy redfish or giant tarpon. While those fish certainly deserve their reputation, flounder quietly provide outstanding fishing opportunities throughout much of the year. Their unusual appearance, fascinating life cycle, stealthy hunting techniques, and outstanding flavor make them one of the Gulf Coast's most remarkable fish. Whether hiding beside an oyster bar in Steinhatchee, buried in a sandy pot-hole near Keaton Beach, resting along the Suwannee River estuary, or waiting beneath a dock in Cedar Key, flounder continue to thrive in the diverse habitats that make the Big Bend one of Florida's greatest natural treasures.

For anglers willing to slow down, fish the bottom, and pay attention to subtle bites, these flatfish offer exciting action and some of the finest seafood the Gulf has to offer. As long as Florida's Big Bend remains a healthy, productive estuary, flounder will continue to be an important part of its rich coastal heritage—rewarding fishermen, delighting seafood lovers, and reminding us that some of nature's most remarkable creatures are also its most overlooked. ☑

For more adventures, please check out Facebook: Terrie B Huffmaster, Instagram: Terries_dusk_2_dawn_fishing or TikTok: T's Dusk 2 Dawn Fishing.





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MASTERING THE DOG DAYS

August Lessons from the Gulf

by Captain Justin Searcy

August separates the prepared angler from the unprepared one. The thermometer reads ninety before the coffee cools, the afternoon storms build like clockwork and the fish have no intention of meeting you halfway. My responsibility on the water this time of year is simple: keep everyone safe, put them on fish, and send them home knowing more than they did at sunrise. Give me the next few minutes and I will do my best to show you how to do August properly.



LESSON ONE: THE WEATHER

The most important adjustment this month is not tackle. It is discipline. The bite is finished by ten in the morning, so we work the first three hours of light with intention and we are off the water before the storms assemble.

Now allow me to put my captain's hat on. August afternoons on the Gulf produce lightning that will humble any man. Study your radar before you leave the dock and

keep studying it. If the sky is stacking up, you are already late. Leave. File a float plan, carry a working VHF, keep your kill switch lanyard attached, and see that every child aboard is in a properly fitted life jacket before the lines come off the cleats. Hydrate before thirst, and watch your crew for the quiet signs of heat exhaustion: headache, chills, confusion. A good captain watches his people more closely than his rod tips. No fish is worth a life.

If mornings do not suit you, just fish after dark. Dock lights and bridge shadow lines hold Snook, Trout, and Redfish feeding in cooler water. Run slow, use your navigation lights, and extend courtesy to the homeowners whose docks you fish.

LESSON TWO: MANGROVE SNAPPER, THE PERFECT CLASSROOM

If August has a headliner, it is the mangrove snapper. They are gathered on bridge pilings, rock piles, and nearshore reefs, and they are feeding with conviction. Fifteen to twenty pound fluorocarbon leader, a small knocker rig with fresh-cut sardines or whitebait, anchored up-current of the structure, chumming with patience. Snapper are leader-shy and intelligent. If the bite is slow, go lighter before you go louder.

My challenge to you this month: take a young person fishing. Steady action catching snapper holds their attention, the table fare is excellent, and no long offshore run is required. Someone once extended that generosity to you. Pay it forward.



LESSON THREE: READ THE TIDE FOR REDFISH

High summer water pushes the redfish deep into the flooded mangroves. On the high stages of the tide, present cut pinfish or ladyfish along the mangrove edges where the reds are rooting in the shade. As the tide falls, the water draws them out to the oyster bars and channel edges. The principle beneath it all: find moving water and shade early, and you will find fish. The tide is a patient teacher.

Snook are on the beaches and passes right now, and the season remains closed through August because they are spawning. If you pursue them for sport, do it properly. Heavy tackle so the fight is brief. Wet hands. Keep them in the water and hold them into the current until they kick away with authority. Warm water is unforgiv-

ing. Conservation is not a rulebook. It is respect, handed down the same way casting was. These waters have given me everything I have. The least we can do is return the favor.

For those heading south, the regular Spiny Lobster season opens August 6 and runs through the end of March. The opening weeks offer the mini-season reward with considerably more civility. Carry your license and permit, measure in the water, mind your dive flag, and treat the area with care.



BRINGING BACK A TARPON SPRINGS TRADITION

Many of you will remember the Peter T. Assimack Memorial Tournament, one of the great fishing traditions of our community, last held in 2019. I fished that final year and was fortunate to sigh cast and place the biggest redfish of the event, just shy of forty inches.

So here is some good news: with the support of the Rotary Club of Tarpon Springs, we are bringing it back for Spring 2027. A new name, the same spirit, the same format anglers loved. Snook, redfish, and trout, all catch-and-release, photo-finish only. The mission is large now: honoring all we have lost, who loved these waters.



Our tagline says it best: **Fish with Purpose. Respect Our Waters.** I am humbled to serve as Tournament Director, and I will share announcements and sponsor spotlights first on Instagram at @capt_justin_searcy. If you fished the old tournaments, or you own a local business that wants to help, make sure to reach out and keep Spring 2027 open.

August tests your preparation more than your skill. Rise early, watch the weather, take care of your crew and every fish you touch, and beat the storms home. Bring someone who has never been. The water has a way of setting things right.

And when this column helps you put a fish in the net, tag me at @capt_justin_searcy. The best reader photos and lessons may find their way into a future column.

Stay safe, stay positive, and see you on the water! 🎣

@capt_justin_searcy

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August is one of the hottest months in our area and that can certainly make fishing tougher than usual. Focus on deeper holes, bridge cuts and even better, venture out at night and fish around docks with lights. Believe it or not, live shrimp can be a 'gamechanger' after dark. Freeline them under the docks and let them slowly drift into the dock lights to produce big Trout, nice Redfish and Snook. Tarpon will be holding around the shadowlines near the major bridges, so try tossing large live Threadfin Sardines. Last but not least, the Black Drum bite is also hot right now; use fresh cut Blue Crab on a 3/0 circle hook paired with a 2-ounce sinker. And, be sure to bring heavier tackle for these bad boys.

ABOUT THE CAPTAIN

Captain Sergio Atanes has been fishing the waters of Tampa Bay since the age of five years old. He has seen all the changes over the last 50-years and loves to share his knowledge and experience with anyone interested in fishing especially kids which are the future anglers and captains. His goal is to educate and share the experience of fishing opportunities all over the Tampa Bay area.

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SUMMERTIME BLUES

by Captain Sergio Atanes

Every August, anglers around Tampa Bay seem to ask the same question: where did the fish go? There's no doubt the bite gets tougher this time of year, but the answer is rarely one thing. Heat, rain, changing salinity and scattered bait all play a part in the summertime blues.

Some years August stays dry, water temperatures climb into the upper 80s and even over 90 degrees, and fish slide into deeper, cooler water or bury themselves in the shade of mangroves, docks and bridges. Other years, heavy afternoon rains push too much freshwater into the bay, dropping salinity and moving bait and game fish out of their normal patterns. When the greenbacks disappear from the flats, it can feel like the fish disappeared with them.

This year has been rough on baitfish, especially greenbacks. They showed up as expected in March, but by mid-May many of the flats were already thin. If you worked hard and put in the time, you might have caught enough to fish with. On several trips, I still had to buy shrimp as backup, and that is not a bad plan for August.



Around docks I like a 7-foot rod for accuracy and control. On the flats, I prefer a 7.5' rod for extra casting distance. A 1/0 hook, 30-pound fluorocarbon leader and 20-pound braided line give me enough strength to turn a fish before it gets under the dock. Even with the right tackle, expect to lose a few.

Bridge fishing at night is a different game, and your tackle needs to be a little heavier because you never know what is lurking in the dark water under Tampa Bay's bridges. Over the years I have caught tarpon, black drum, trout and some big redfish there. For trout and tarpon, use lighter spinning tackle and let a live bait drift naturally from the dark side into the light.



Assuming this August follows the usual Summer pattern, the key is to adjust. Fish cooler periods, target moving water, and look for shade, structure and lights.

Here are a few ways to improve your chances on the water:

- (1) Fish early and be in position at daybreak. Artificial lures can help you start casting right away along mangroves, points and potholes before the sun gets high.
- (2) If you can, catch greenbacks the day before and keep them in a bait motel. This works well if your boat stays at a marina or if you live on the water.

- (3) Try fishing at night around dock lights and bridge lights. Shrimp work great after dark, and the cooler water makes it easier on both the angler and the fish.

- (4) Change tactics this month and spend some time along the edges of the Tampa Bay Shipping Channel. Mangrove Snapper, Gag Grouper, Key West Grunts, Black Seabass and Cobia can all be found around deeper structure and hard bottom.

- (5) Pompano, Sheepshead, Black Drum, Tarpon and Trout are all possible around the Howard Frankland, Gandy and Sunshine Skyway bridges, especially when there is good current.

This month I plan to do most of my fishing at night around docks with underwater lights, because those lights draw bait and, in turn, better fish. If you have greenbacks, use them, but medium to large shrimp will often get more bites.



For bottom fishing, step up to medium tackle with a larger spinning outfit or conventional reel, at least 30-pound line and a 40-pound leader. Fresh cut blue crab is hard for black drum to refuse, and live threadfins are excellent for tarpon. Position the boat up-current and under the

bridge so your baits drift back to the pilings. With light tackle, let the bait slide past the shadow line into the light where trout and tarpon are feeding. ▣

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