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Magazine September 2026

TAMPA BAY
**Boat
SHOW**



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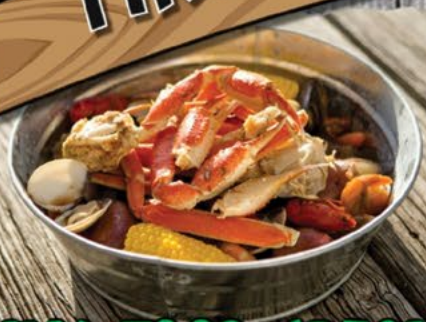


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BOATER TRAINING.

I see a lot of people sharing our waterways that really need a little boater education. I’m not even talking about boater safety class; it goes without saying that everyone on the water should have taken this at some time. I’m talking about getting a basic understanding of the way that powerboats work. To help those who have not yet had the opportunity to learn some of these basics, I provide my top ten tips for operating a powerboat. For those of you who are experienced boaters I’m sorry if I am wasting your time.



#10: Water is wet. If you do not want to get wet it is wise to avoid proximity to water. Wearing a body condom does not help much.

#9: Laying a rope loosely around a cleat is not tying up your boat securely. Tightly wrapping, knotting, binding and otherwise generally tangling up 10 feet of rope all around a cleat so that Houdini couldn’t get it off is also not the way to tie a boat up properly. Use a little common sense when attaching your ropes to cleats. Keep in mind that it is also important to attach the anchor to the boat in a secure manner, before throwing it overboard; I really wish that more of our boat rental customers would remember this.

#8: Know what the tide is doing while you are boating. Going for a nice walk on the beach and coming back to find your boat 50 feet up on dry land does not make for a fun afternoon!

#7: If your boat has a kill switch then it will not start without the switch and lanyard properly in place. **THAT IS WHY IT’S CALLED A KILL SWITCH!!!**

#6: If your boat is in gear (forward or reverse) the motor will not start. Make sure it is in neutral **BEFORE YOU CALL SEA TOW!** If you don’t do this they will laugh at you and call you silly names.

#5: If you are docking and the boat is not quite going where you want it to, giving it more throttle will not fix the problem. When docking, even the best captains occasionally get screwed up by wind or current and wind up bumping the dock. Boats do not have brakes, pushing on the floor with your foot will not keep you from hitting the dock, that is what reverse is for, if used properly. If you are going to hit something, hit it slowly, idle is your friend!!!!

#4: Jet Skis are an exception to #3; they do not steer without some throttle, however with too much throttle they may jump over the dock. It really is just best to avoid these entirely as they are no good for fishing anyway.

#3: When launching your boat at the ramp, it is important to insert the drain plug first. The drain is not a one-way hole; it will let water in too. It is much easier if you put the plug in before putting the boat in the water, the launch ramp is not a nice place for a swim! It is really better to just store your boat in a nice dry stack marina, perhaps somewhere like Belle Harbour Marina in Tarpon Springs.

#2: It is not a good idea to attempt to boat where birds are walking, this usually does not end well for you or the birds.

#1: Alcohol and driving a boat do not mix. In a best case scenario, you can wind up looking really silly stuck on an oyster bar in Fernandina, waiting for the tide and in a worst case scenario, you can do serious damage to your boat and possibly even serious bodily injury to yourself or others.

If you follow these tips you are sure to have more fun and fewer problems on the water.

Merle



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ON THE COVER: A happy junior angler with a nice Mangrove Snapper caught on a recent outing with our very own, Captain George Hastick. Learn how to target this tasty species by flipping to page 8 of this issue!

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 MERLE'S MIND Random Thoughts with Merle
- 10 TIDE CHECK Florida West Coast: September 2026
- 28 FISHING FORECAST & TACKLE TALK with Captain Sergio Atanes

FISHING

- 8 TAMPA BAY MANGROVE SNAPPER by Captain George Hastick
- 14 BEFORE YOU CAST, WATCH THE BAIT by Captain Mike Haynes
- 22 BEYOND THE SCALLOP by Terri B.Huffmaster
- 26 SEPTEMBER 1ST by Captain Justin Searcy
- 30 FINDING BIG REDFISH IN COOLER WATER by Captain Sergio Atanes

HUNTING

- 12 ITS FALL Y'ALL, HUNTING SEASON IS HERE by Misty Wells

FEATURE STORY

- 16 CHASING PIRANHA by Jeff Dudley

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TAMPA BAY MANGROVE SNAPPER

by Captain George Hastick

Tampa Bay offers some of the finest inshore, wreck and reef fishing in Florida. Among the various species available, the Mangrove Snapper (or Gray Snapper) stands out as a sought-after target. They provide fast-paced action, fight hard for their size and are one of the best tasting fish in the bay along with Grouper. While often associated with offshore reefs, thriving populations of Mangrove Snapper remain inside the bay year-round, with exploding action during summer months.

Mangrove snapper love structure. Inside Tampa Bay, look for areas that offer cover and tidal flow. Bridge pilings around The Gandy Bridge, Howard Frankland Bridge, and the Sunshine Skyway along with many of the shipping channel edges are prime locations. The deep edges and rock piles along the main shipping channels hold massive schools. Mangrove shorelines loaded with shallow roots host smaller juvenile snapper, along with many keepers.



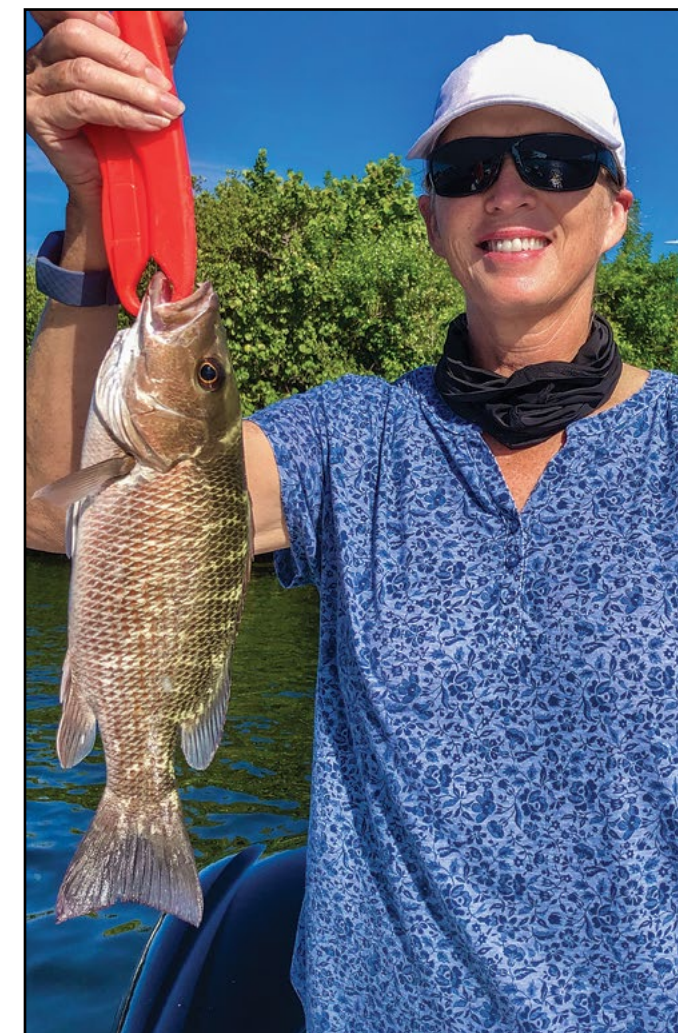
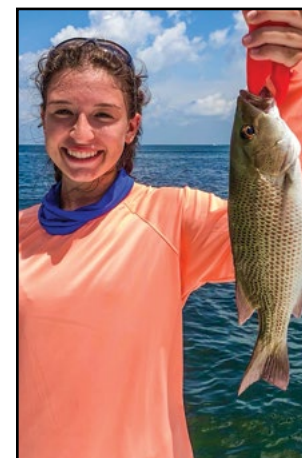
Numerous state-maintained artificial reefs inside the bay provide ideal habitats for mangrove snapper, with fish being caught up to 21 inches well up into the bay. Most fish will average 10-14 inches since the bad red tide of 2021. They are making a good comeback with many larger fish being caught

near the Skyway and the ships channel. Before that event it was common to catch multiple fish up to 18" often. Recently we have seen an uptick in size and quantity of the mangrove snapper up inside the bay. If you can find your own rock piles that is a great way to get away from the crowds.

LIGHT TACKLE RECOMENDATIONS

Snapper have keen eyesight, sharp teeth and hang out by structure. So, you need a balance of light tackle and a decent set up to get the bite but be able to get them away from the structure.

Use a 7.0 to 7.5 foot, medium-fast action spinning rod paired with a 4000 Series reel spool up with 15 to 20-pound Fins Braided Line for sensitivity and strength with the drag tight.



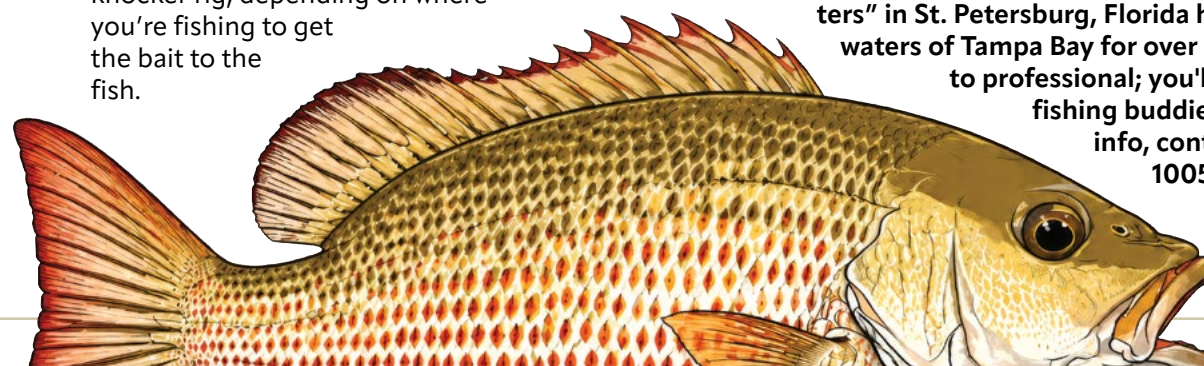
TAMPA BAY SNAPPER BAIT CHECK

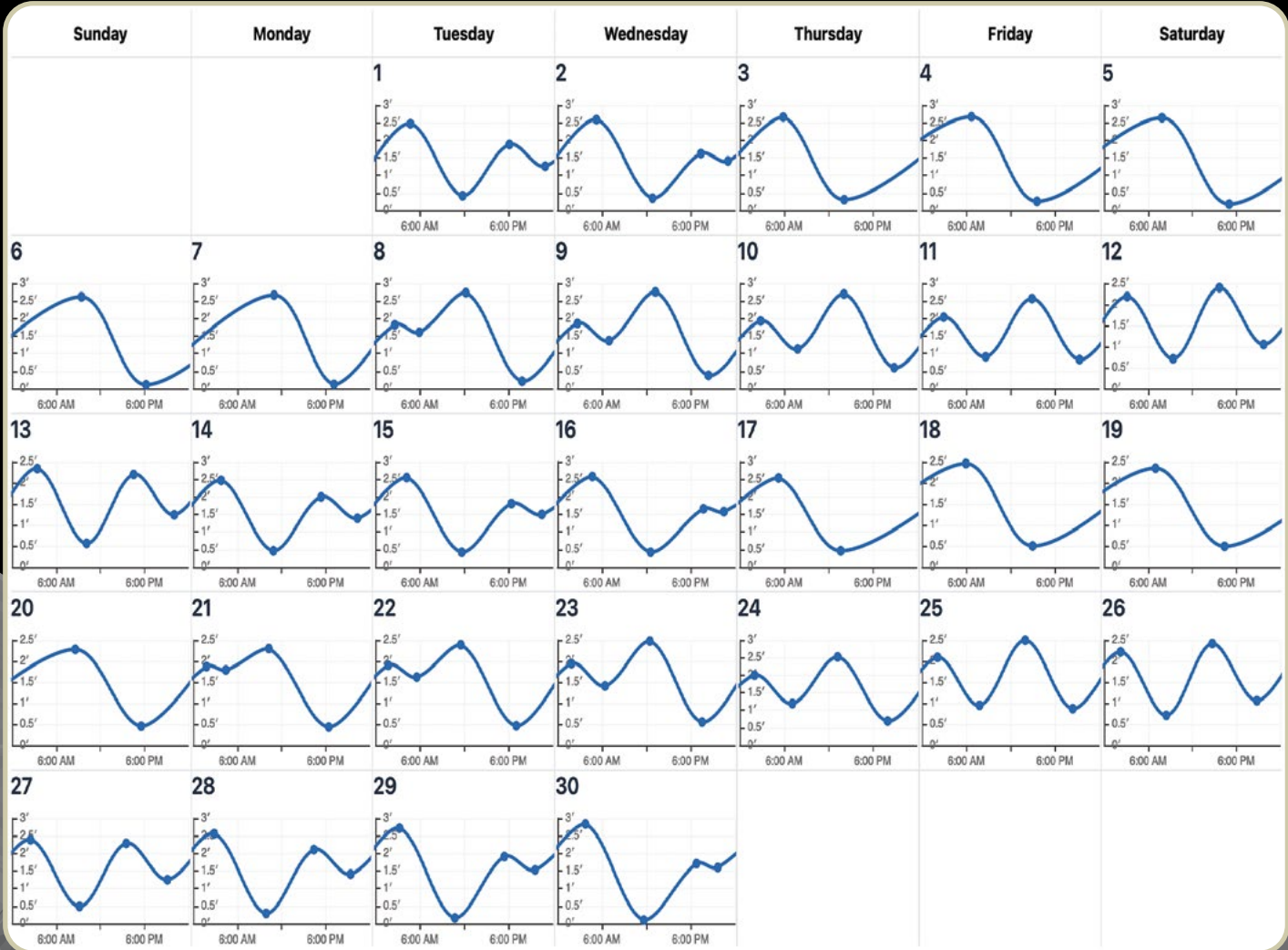
Live bait like Scaled Sardines (whitebait), Threadfin Herring and live Shrimp are deadly but when they get finicky those same baits cut into pieces can get the job done. Live chumming whitebait or pieces being thrown overboard can turn the dinner bell on. They will often come right to the surface to eat your offering. In this situation freelining your live bait or cut bait with the chum in the current is a deadly presentation.

Now, the last thing to do is get out there and catch some tasty Snapper for dinner! 🎣

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.

Tie on 4 to 5 feet of 20-pound Seaguar Fluorocarbon Leader. Upgrade to 25 to 30-pound if fishing heavy structure with a #1 or 1/0 owner mutu light circle hook. (check laws). Use no weight to the smallest weight needed, or knocker rig, depending on where you're fishing to get the bait to the fish.





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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IT'S FALL YA'LL, HUNTING SEASON IS HERE!

by Misty Wells

While Florida is famous worldwide for its coastal fishing, fall in the Sunshine State transforms the terrain into a premier destination for white-tailed deer. From the expansive swamps of South Florida's Zone A kicking off in August to the hardwoods and pine flatwoods of the Panhandle running into late winter, pursuing Florida whitetails offers a unique challenge across diverse ecosystems. Navigating the state's distinct hunting zones, many specialized weapons seasons, and public Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) require precise preparation, but early-season bowhunters and late-fall rifle enthusiasts alike will find ample opportunity to fill their tags across the state.



I am both a bow and rifle hunter like many of you, but after the summer season of fishing I am sometimes a bit rusty and need to get back into the mindset of hunting. Preparing for bow season in Florida required managing extreme heat, high humidity, thick foliage that has grown over the summer rainy season and heavy mosquito pressure. To get back in the groove for bow hunting you need to condition yourself back into shooting under physical stress.

First and foremost, you need to shoot your gear, practice shooting while wearing your full early-season outfit. Include everything from your light gloves, safety harness, to your face mesh. If you are using a climber or stand, practice your

elevated shots and set up targets at steep downward angles. It also helps to simulate your heart rate, do a quick set of push-ups or cardio before drawing your bow to mimic the physical toll of the adrenaline rush of a buck stepping into a lane.

Thermal, sweat and scent management is key to a successful day in the woods, a lot of hunters don't pay attention to these few simple things. First "Golden Rule" is use scent control and make sure to use it anytime you are in the woods. When you are scouting, hanging cameras, putting up or moving stands, cutting shooting lanes, planting food plots or filling feeders. Don't put on your hunting clothes until you reach your destination, your truck has a lot of odors. Put your hunting clothes in a non-scented plastic bag or something similar, dress outside when you arrive. Spray from your boots up then be sure to spray and cover your head. Pack light and move slow, cut unnecessary weight from your pack, slow down to keep your core temperature low to minimize sweat.

Remove your hunting clothes after leaving the woods and put them in a non-scent bag or hang outside in the open air until the next day. Hunters think about it, we don't get much time to hunt, on average we get about 6 to 10 days a year. Doesn't it make sense to do everything you can to be successful? Something as simple as scent control can make a difference between going home successful or with nothing.

Stand Setup & Access Preparation
Some of the best stand locations will be along heavy traveled cor-



ridors like game trails, ditches, ridges and draws between primary bedding and feeding areas. Trim your shooting lanes but try not to "over trim", cutting away brush and limbs around your stands or blinds giving away your location and cover. Rake or trim entry trails well before opening day, stepping on dry palmetto fronds, vines, or dead branches will blow your cover. Sit in your stand or blind and draw your bow or shoulder your gun in all directions to be sure you have a clear line of fire when the critical time comes. Tip: Give your stands and blinds the "silent treatment" there is nothing worse than a squeaky creaky stand that alerts the deer at the worst possible moment. High humidity and salt air corrode straps and metal quickly, check all webbing, ropes and safety harnesses for dry rot.



Setting up game cameras in Florida's thick, humid terrain requires specific tactics to scout whitetails effectively while protecting your gear from moisture, sun, and dense foliage. Practice strategic camera placement, focusing on pinch points and trails. In thick Florida brush, deer naturally travel along the edge habitat. Target water and early food

sources, late summer and early fall force deer to key on reliable water sources, acorn drops and such. Try not to enter the woods to scout during dusk or dawn as this is when the Whitetail are moving the most, don't break their pattern and alert them to your presence. Be sure your target area is at least 5 to 10 yards away; you have a clear line of sight

that you have pre-checked your camera settings. Make sure to format your memory card, re-check your settings on the game camera, and use scent control when hanging your camera's. So many hunters forget to use scent control when prepping and they ruin a great location. Position facing north and south, low morning and evening sun in Florida will blow out images with glare and trigger the camera. Elevate and angle down, mounting cameras 6-to-7 feet up a tree and angling them downward keeps them above the direct line of sight for cautious deer.

Scrapes and rubs are a great sign, but don't judge a buck by the size of his scrapes or rubs. Bucks use scrapes to make their declaration of dominance by leaving scent from his nasal, preorbital and forehead glands. When the scraping work is done the buck will paw the ground and urinate to excite and draw in does and try to deter any bucks from his claimed area. Keep in mind does look for these areas and urinate in the bucks scrapes and paw areas to let the bucks know what stage of the breeding process she is in. The size of the tree can help determine the size of the buck, pretty much all bucks will rub a tree that is 1-3 inches in diameter, however, larger trees generally will be rubbed by bucks three years old or older. Rub lines reveal routes, note the side of the tree they are on and note they can also show the way to crucial bed-to-feed travel patterns. Take note of the direction of the scrape. If all the scrapes are on the south side of the tree, the buck most likely is traveling north.

Practice safety, file a hunting plan & let someone know where you are hunting and when you will be back. If you are hunting in a tree stand or a climber, DO NOT leave for the ground unless you properly have on your safety harness. My buddy Brad can tell you all about this rule from his wheelchair, he did not have a safety harness and fell and broke his back. His whole life was changed in an instant. Never carry equipment up and down the tree, use a haul line to raise and lower your gear. Do not modify your stand from its original design; I also recommend wearing gripping boots and move slowly up the tree or to the stand.

Using these tips should help get you in the right place to safely harvest your deer and spend some time unplugging in the woods. Just like you I am ready to kiss the heat of summer goodbye, get into the woods. **Stay safe, shoot straight and let's go hunting!** ☑

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.

BEFORE YOU CAST, WATCH THE BAIT

by Captain Mike Haynes

After enough days on the water, you start realizing that some of the best fishing information isn't coming from your electronics. Sometimes it's swimming, jumping and scattering right in front of you. Most fishermen know the old saying, "find the bait and you'll find the fish." There's truth to that, but I think there's another step that gets overlooked. Don't just find the bait. Watch what it's doing.

BEFORE I MAKE THAT FIRST CAST

Before I approach a shoreline or decide where I'm going to make that first cast, I like to take a few seconds and watch the surface. I'm looking for schools of mullet, but I'm also paying attention to smaller baitfish and, more importantly, where they're positioned. Wading birds working a shoreline usually tell me there's something up there for them to eat.

From there, I look at the wind and tide. If bait is holding around a shoreline, oyster bar, sandbar or point, I try to figure out why. Baitfish aren't going to spend all day fighting strong current and burning energy. They'll look for places where they can feed, find protection and get out of the strongest flow. That may be behind an oyster bar, along the protected side of a point, tight to a shoreline or anywhere structure gives them some relief. Once I understand where the bait is likely to gather, the next question is simple: Where would a predator position itself to take advantage of it?

Sometimes the water answers that question for you. Little glass minnows suddenly scatter across the surface. Shrimp start popping out of the water. Something is making them move. It could be a redfish, snook, trout, jack or something else, but at that mo-

ment the species isn't as important as the message. There's a predator feeding in the area.

READING THE STRIKE

If I see a predator crash a school of bait, I don't just watch the strike. I pay attention to exactly where it happened. Was the fish tight to the shoreline? Ten feet off? Twenty feet off? If I'm fishing a point, was it right along the edge or farther out toward the end? I also watch how the fish attacked the bait. Did it explode on top and send bait flying? Did it swipe underneath the school? Was there just a boil or quick push of water? Those details can tell me something about how aggressively the fish are feeding, where they're positioned and how they're attacking the bait. One strike doesn't make a pattern, but it gives me a clue. If I see the same thing happen again, now I'm starting to narrow down where my next cast should go.



A CLEAR WINDOW INTO WHAT'S HAPPENING

One advantage I've had fishing around Crystal River is our clear water. In many areas, I can actually watch what's happening below the surface. I can see how baitfish position themselves around grass, bottom changes and current, and sometimes watch how a predator approaches and



reacts to them. Over the years, that clear water has taught me a lot about what I'm seeing on the surface. I can watch bait shift with the current, see how it uses grass or bottom changes for protection, and then watch a predator take advantage of the same situation.

But you don't need crystal-clear water to make these observations. Many of the clues I'm looking for happen right at or near the surface. Mullet suddenly change direction. Glass minnows scatter. Shrimp start jumping. Bait gets pushed against a shoreline, or birds suddenly begin working an area.

Crystal River has simply given me a better window into what's happening underneath. Being able to see those interactions has helped me understand what some of those surface clues mean. When I'm fishing water where I can't see the bottom, I can still recognize those same signs and have a pretty good idea of what may be happening underneath. And sometimes, even in the clear water of Crystal River, you can't see everything.

A HUNDRED YARDS MADE THE DIFFERENCE

I remember fishing with a client one day on a flat where we were already catching redfish. There were plenty of mullet around, and we were picking off a few fish here and there while staked out near a large school. It wasn't bad fishing. But while my client was working the area in front of us, I kept seeing a surface explosion about a hundred yards away. There wasn't anything obvious about the spot from where we were sitting. No shoreline, no point, no oyster bar. Just open flat.

But it kept happening. After seeing it several times, I finally told my client, "Reel in. Let's move down there and see what's going on." We repositioned the boat so he could cast toward the activity. He threw out a pinfish and within a couple of seconds was hooked up. We landed that fish, baited up again and made another cast.

A few seconds later, he was hooked up again. That pattern continued for the next twenty minutes. Almost as soon as the bait hit the water, another fish was on. Once we got over there, the reason started to make sense. There was harder bottom in that area, and the tide was pushing water against a grass wall. That moving water had concentrated the bait along the edge, and the redfish were taking advantage of it. From the surface,



I couldn't see the bottom change or exactly how the bait was being positioned.

The fish showed me.

Since then, I've gone back to that same area at certain times of the year and under the right conditions, and

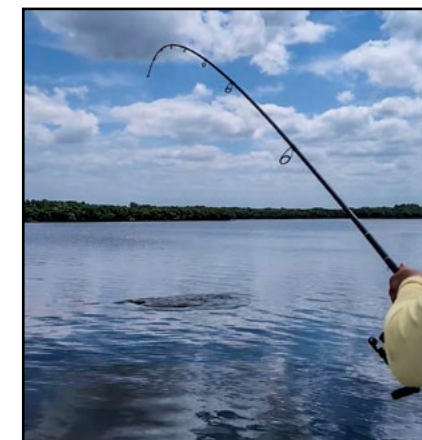
it has consistently produced fish for my clients. That day reminded me that sometimes the fish will show you something about an area you couldn't see on your own.

WATCHING THE WHOLE FEEDING CYCLE

Bait is part of the same feeding cycle as the predators we're trying to catch. It's looking for food while trying not to become food itself. Tide, current and wind influence where that food gathers, which helps determine where the bait goes. Once the bait gets positioned, predators are usually not far behind. That's why I don't just look at a school of bait and think, "There's bait here." I want to know why it's there. Is it feeding? Is it tucked out of the wind? Is it holding behind structure? Or is it simply moving through? If a school keeps moving, I'll watch where it's headed. If it stops and sets up on another point, shoreline or structure, that tells me something changed. Even while my clients are fishing, I'm watching the bait, birds, wind, tide and surface activity. I'm trying to figure out where the next feeding opportunity may happen.

TIMING THE FEEDING WINDOW

I also pay close attention to when in the tide cycle those fish are feeding. Sometimes the bite may not turn on until an hour after high tide, once the water starts moving out. Other times it may be the first hour or two of the incoming tide, when current begins positioning bait in certain areas.



Timing matters. Predators don't need to roam around all day looking for food if tide and structure are going to bring it to them. That's why choke points can be so productive. A creek mouth, the end of an oyster bar, the edge of a point or a cut through a flat can funnel bait

into a smaller area. When the tide reaches the right stage and bait starts stacking up, predators can sit in position and feed. So I'm not just watching where the bait is. I'm also watching when it gets there. That can be the difference between fishing a good-looking spot with nothing happening and coming back an hour later when everything has lined up.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Watching bait, wind, tide, birds and feeding activity may sound like a lot to think about when you're simply trying to catch a few fish. But over time, many of these observations become second nature. You begin to notice where the bait is holding, whether it's feeding or simply moving through, when the tide turns an area on and how predators are reacting. None of this guarantees you're going to find fish every time.

That's still fishing. It just gives you more information to work with. Instead of seeing bait and simply thinking there should be fish nearby, ask a few more questions. Why is that bait there? What is it doing? What changed? Where would a predator position itself to take advantage of it?

Sometimes the answer to where you should make your next cast is already happening right in front of you. You just have to watch the bait. ■

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.



CHASING PIRANHA

AN AMAZON RIVER FISHING ADVENTURE WITH JEFF DUDLEY



Fishing for piranhas in the Amazon is one of those experiences that feels both primal and exhilarating at the same time. Among the most commonly caught species are the white piranha, the red-bellied piranha, and the black piranha. All known for their sharp teeth, aggressive strikes, and surprising beauty when seen up close. Their shimmering scales, contrasted by flashes of silver, gray, and in the case of the red-bellied variety, vibrant orange-red hues, make them as visually striking as they are thrilling to catch.

The piranha is one of the Amazon River basin's most fascinating—and misunderstood—fish. Found throughout the freshwater rivers, lakes, and flooded forests of South America, piranhas are known for their sharp, triangular teeth and powerful jaws. Although several species can be meat-eaters, many piranhas have a varied diet that includes



fish, insects, crustaceans, seeds, fruit, and other plant material. Their teeth are remarkably well suited for cutting and tearing food, but the image of piranhas as relentless predators is largely exaggerated.

Piranhas play an important role in the Amazon ecosystem. They help recycle nutrients by feeding on injured or dead animals, while also serving as prey for larger fish, birds, caimans, river dolphins, and other predators. Some species travel and feed in groups, which can provide protection from predators and make it easier to find food. During the Amazon's seasonal floods, piranhas move through newly submerged forests and water-



ways, becoming part of the extraordinary web of life that connects the river, its forests, and its wildlife.

One of the most authentic and rewarding ways to fish for these piranhas is by using a traditional cane fishing pole. This simple yet effective method strips fishing down to its roots with no reels or complicated gear, just a flexible pole, a sturdy line, and a hook. It creates a direct connection between the angler and the fish, where every nibble, tug and strike is felt instantly through your hands. It's an approach that has been used for generations by local fishermen in the Amazon and it still remains one of the most exciting ways to target these notorious fish.

The bait of choice on this trip? Surprisingly simple. Small chunks of raw steak. The scent of fresh meat in the water is irresistible to piranhas. Start off by creating commotion in the water by striking the tip of your cane pole hard against the water's surface several times. The commotion in the water catches their attention. Once



the bait hits the surface, it doesn't take long before the water starts to stir. You might feel a few quick taps at first, piranhas testing the bait with lightning-fast bites. Then suddenly, a stronger pull. That's your moment. A quick lift of the cane pole, and you've got a piranha on the line.

What makes this style of fishing so unique is how fast paced it can be!

Piranhas are aggressive feeders, often traveling in groups, so once you catch one, there's a good chance more are nearby. It's not uncommon to pull in several fish





within minutes, each one putting up a surprisingly strong fight for its size. Their energy, combined with the simplicity of the gear, makes every catch feel earned and exciting. The gear consists of a cane pole, a wire liter attached to a hook, and a short bit of line. That's all you need!

Beyond the thrill of the catch, this experience offers a deeper connection to the Amazon itself. You're surrounded by dense jungle, the sounds of wildlife echoing in the background, and the calm yet mysterious waters beneath you. It's not just fishing its immersion in one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet.

For those looking to experience this adventure first-hand, trips like this are easily arranged through VIP Amazon Tours. They specialize in providing guided excursions that blend authenticity, safety, and excitement. Whether you're a seasoned angler or someone trying fishing for the first time, their guides walk you through



the traditional techniques, help you bait your hook, and ensure you get the most out of your time on the water. The guide can even cook your catch for you right on the beach, setting up an elegant riverside dining experience.

Catching white, black, and red-bellied piranhas using a cane pole and steak bait isn't just about landing fish, it's about embracing a time-honored method, feeling the raw energy of the Amazon, and creating stories you'll be telling for years. ☑



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BEYOND THE SCALLOP

Discovering the Hidden World Beneath the Big Bend

by Terri B. Huffmaster

As another scallop season begins to wind down in Florida's Big Bend, many people will soon make their last trips onto the water, fill their bags, and head home with memories of another summer spent searching the clear, shallow Gulf waters for one of Florida's most popular treasures.

For many scallopers, the goal is simple: find the scallops. But if you take the time to slow down and look around while you are on the bottom, you quickly realize that the scallops are only a small part of what makes these waters so special. Beneath the surface is an entire underwater world. There are starfish slowly moving across the bottom. Sea urchins crawl through the grass and sand. Small crabs hide beneath shells. Tiny fish dart through the seagrass. Snails leave trails across the bottom, while beautiful shells rest partially buried in the sand. Some are empty, while others are home to living animals. The bottom of the Big Bend is much more than a place to find scallops. It is a living community, and once you start paying attention, it can be hard to stop looking.

THE END OF ANOTHER SCALLOP SEASON

Bay scalloping has become a summer tradition for many Floridians and visitors to the Big Bend. Families load their boats,

bring their masks and snorkels, and spend hours in the warm Gulf water searching through seagrass beds.

The 2026 recreational bay scallop season in the Franklin County region runs from July 1 through September 24. That area includes popular locations such as Carrabelle, Lanark and St. Marks. Farther east, the Fenholloway through Suwannee Rivers zone, which includes areas such as Keaton Beach and Steinhatchee, has a season that runs through Labor Day. (FWC) That means the end of summer also means the end of another scalloping season.

For those who enjoy it, there is something special about knowing the season is temporary. It gives people a reason to get out on the water, enjoy the summer weather and appreciate the Gulf while they can. But as the season comes to a close, it is worth remembering that the Gulf doesn't stop being alive when scalloping ends. In fact, there is an entire underwater world waiting to be noticed.

LOOKING BEYOND THE SCALLOP

When most people get into the water during scallop season, their eyes naturally search for the familiar round shells of bay scallops. Once you find a few, however,



try looking around instead of immediately searching for the next one. The seafloor can be surprisingly colorful and interesting. Seagrass moves gently with the current. Small fish disappear into the blades. Tiny shrimp and crabs move quickly across the bottom. Shells of different shapes and sizes are scattered across the sand.

Then, sometimes, you see something that catches your attention. A starfish. Seeing a starfish resting on the bottom can be one of those simple moments that makes you stop and appreciate where you are. Starfish, more accurately called sea stars, are part of a much larger group of marine animals that includes sea urchins and sea cucumbers. Sea stars move slowly across the bottom using hundreds of tiny tube feet. They may not seem like fast-moving animals, but they are perfectly suited for life on the seafloor. And they are just one piece of the picture.

SEA URCHINS: THE LITTLE SPINY RESIDENTS

Another animal you may encounter while exploring the bottom is the sea urchin. At first glance, a sea urchin can look like a little ball covered in sharp spines. But these fascinating animals are important members of the marine community. Sea urchins move along the bottom using their tube feet and spines. Some feed on algae and other material associated with seagrass habitats. The Florida Museum of Natural History notes that sea urchins can move into seagrass areas at night to feed. (Florida Museum) That means the seagrass beds where people search for scallops are not just fields of grass. They are feeding grounds. They are shelter. They are nurseries. And they are home.

THE SEAGRASS IS THE HEART OF IT

It is easy to look at a patch of seagrass and think of it simply as something growing on the bottom. But seagrass beds are among the most important habitats in shallow coastal waters. They provide food and shelter for many different types of marine life. Small animals can hide among the blades, while larger animals may visit the grass beds looking for food. The Florida Museum of Natural History describes seagrass habitats as rich environments for invertebrates, including animals that feed on organisms living on and around the grass. (Florida Museum)

When you are snorkeling or scalloping, it can be easy to focus only on what is directly in front of your mask. Look closer. A single patch of grass may contain dozens of tiny creatures. A small fish may be hiding between the blades. A shrimp may suddenly shoot away. A snail may be slowly moving across the sand. A crab may disappear beneath a shell. The more carefully you look, the more you see.

A TREASURE CHEST OF SHELLS

One of the most beautiful parts of exploring the bottom is seeing the variety of shells. Some are bright and clean. Others are worn smooth from years of being moved by waves and currents. Some are almost completely buried in the sand, while others sit on top where they can easily be seen. Every shell has a story. At one time, that shell belonged to a living animal. After the animal died, the shell became part of the seafloor community. Eventually, another creature may use it. Hermit crabs, for example, depend on empty shells for protection.



A shell that looks like an ordinary piece of debris to us can actually become a home for another animal. This is one reason it is important to remember that not everything we see on the bottom is simply something to pick up and take home. Some shells are empty. Some are occupied. And some are part of the habitat itself.



THERE IS MORE DOWN THERE THAN WE REALIZE

One of the most amazing things about the Gulf is how much life exists below the surface without most people ever seeing it. We may spend hours fishing or scalloping and never realize how many animals are living around us. The water may look calm from the boat. But below the surface, there is constant activity. Small animals are feeding. Fish are moving. Crabs are searching. Snails are crawling. Sea stars are slowly traveling across the bottom. Sea urchins are grazing. Tiny organisms are breaking down material and becoming part of the food chain. The Gulf is never truly still. Even when the surface looks peaceful, the bottom is alive.

THE BIG BEND'S UNDERWATER BEAUTY

The Big Bend is especially interesting because of the combination of shallow Gulf waters, seagrass beds, sand, oyster areas, tidal creeks and coastal marshes. The region offers a wide variety of habitats that support marine life. For someone who spends time on the water, it is easy to become attached to the places that seem ordinary. A favorite scalloping spot may simply look like a shallow stretch of water. But beneath the boat could be a busy little ecosystem. That is what makes exploring the Gulf so rewarding. Every trip can be different. One day you may see a large number of scallops. Another day you may notice more fish. On another trip, perhaps the scallops are not what catch your attention at all. Instead, you notice a beautiful shell, a sea star sitting in the grass or a sea urchin moving across the bottom. Sometimes the smallest discoveries become the memories we remember longest.

LEAVE THE BOTTOM BETTER THAN YOU FOUND IT

As scallop season comes to an end, conservation becomes even more important. The Gulf's resources belong to all of us, but they are not unlimited. Florida Fish and Wildlife



Conservation Commission regulations currently allow recreational bay scallop harvest only by hand or with a landing or dip net. The 2026 rules also establish personal and vessel limits that scallopers need to follow. (FWC) Following those

regulations is important, but responsible scalloping goes beyond knowing the bag limit. It means paying attention to the habitat. It means avoiding unnecessary damage to seagrass. It means being careful with anchors and props in shallow grass areas. It means leaving living creatures alone when you are not harvesting them legally. And it means remembering that the Gulf is more than a place to collect seafood. It is a home.

One current FWC reminder is particularly important: scallop shells should not be dumped in shallow inshore areas commonly used for swimming because piles of shells can create hazards and damage seagrass habitat. (FWC) The goal should always be to enjoy the Gulf without leaving unnecessary damage behind.

A DIFFERENT WAY TO LOOK AT SCALLOP SEASON

Maybe the best way to think about scallop season is not simply as a few months when people can harvest scallops. Think of it as an opportunity to experience the Gulf. The scallops are what bring many people into the water. But once you are there, take a few minutes to look around. Look underneath the boat. Look through the grass. Look closely at the sand. You may be surprised by what you find. A scallop may be sitting beside a shell. A tiny fish may be hiding in the grass. A sea urchin may be slowly moving along the bottom. A sea star may be resting nearby. There may be dozens of small creatures living in an area no larger than your backyard. And suddenly, what looked like an ordinary patch of Gulf bottom becomes an underwater neighborhood.

WHEN THE BOATS COME HOME

Soon, the scallop boats will begin making fewer trips. The summer crowds will thin. The warm days will slowly give way to fall. The masks and snorkels will be put away until another season. But the underwater world

will remain. The seagrass will continue to move with the tides. Fish will continue to travel through it. Sea stars will continue their slow journeys. Sea urchins will continue feeding. Crabs will continue searching. Snails will continue leaving their tiny trails across the sand. And the shells will continue resting on the bottom. The Gulf does not know that scallop season has ended. Life simply continues. That may be one of the most important things to remember when we leave the water. We are only visitors.

MORE THAN SOMETHING ON THE DINNER TABLE

Bay scallops are certainly a wonderful part of the Big Bend experience. They bring families and friends together, create summer traditions and give people a reason to get outside and enjoy Florida's coast. But scallops are only one small part of the incredible world beneath the surface.



The next time you are in the water looking for scallops, stop for a moment. Look beyond the scallop. Look at the grass. Look at the sand. Look at the shells. Look for the starfish. Watch the sea urchins. Notice the tiny

fish and creatures that move around your feet. Take a moment to appreciate what is happening beneath you. Because beneath the surface of the Big Bend is a world that most people never get to see. It is colorful. It is busy. It is fragile. And it is beautiful.

As another scallop season comes to an end, perhaps the greatest treasure isn't the number of scallops brought back to the boat. Perhaps it's the appreciation we gain for everything else we saw along the way. The scallop may be what brought us into the water, but the underwater world is what reminds us why these waters are worth protecting. There will always be another scallop season, but the responsibility to protect what's beneath the surface belongs to all of us, every season. 🌊

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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SEPTEMBER 1ST: THE GULF'S BEST OPENING DAY

by Captain Justin Searcy

This year, the 1st of September gives us three openers on the same morning. Snook, gag grouper, and greater amberjack all back on the table at once.

Before you head out keep in mind that September is also the peak of hurricane season. Not the start, the peak. The storms that stack up in the afternoon can be faster and meaner than what we deal with in June, and they can build quickly behind you. I have watched a flat calm slicker turn to whitecaps in half an hour.

Check the forecast the night before, check it again before you head out, and keep radar open. Somebody on land always knows where I am going and when I plan to be back. Running home through a squall line is not the most fun. Some of the best captains I know are the ones who will look at the sky, shrug, and go get breakfast instead.

Now, the fishing.

Snook harvest is open in Tampa Bay and Sarasota Bay regions through November 30. One fish per person per day, 28 to 33 inches total length, and you need a snook permit on top of your salt-water license. These fish are

coming off the spawn and a lot of them are still hanging around the passes and bridges before they slide back into the bays and backwaters. Live whitebait on a light fluorocarbon leader is hard to beat. Fish the moving water and fish the low light. A snook that ignores you at ten in the morning will eat that same bait at first light or as the sun goes back down in the evening.

Snook regulations are intentionally conservative. When the season is open, anglers are limited to one fish per person per day within the legal slot. If a fish is going back whether it's outside the slot or you simply choose to release it, remember to handle it carefully, support its belly, minimize its time out of the water, and get it swimming again quickly. Good regulations and responsible anglers have both played an important



role in protecting our fishery, and it's important to see that continue for our future generations.

That last part is worth sitting with. Every good season we get out here traces back to somebody who fought for the water before we showed up. And now groups like Captains For Clean Water and the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust are doing some of that work right now, one on freshwater flows and Everglades restoration, the other on the science behind our flats species and the habitat they depend on.

Offshore, gag grouper is open in Gulf state waters through the end of the month, with federal waters

running a little longer. If you are fishing for either one off a private boat you need the State Reef Fish Angler designation, and it renews every year. Take care of that at the kitchen table, not standing at the ramp. Always make sure to check what's current for rules and regs. All of these seasons can move by executive order, so check MyFWC.com before you leave the dock.

Live pinfish and grunts on the bottom over hard structure will get you bit by gags. Bring enough rod to turn and pull the fish before it gets back in the rocks. For amberjack, mark the wreck, find the fish, and get ready to earn it. And don't forget to stop at @GetBentLiveBait, your local bait dealer for the freshest!

One more fish worth a mention and one of my favorites to catch are tripletail. My buddy Kyle Kenyon sent me a picture from a recent trip of a nice one, and an underwater shot of the structure he found them on.



That underwater shot is the entire tripletail lesson summed up. They love floating things. Buoys, weed lines, markers, debris, even a crab trap or whatever drifts by. They lay over on their side near the surface trying their best to not be noticed. Idle in from up current, shut down, and pitch a live shrimp past the fish instead of dropping it on his head. Tripletail should be kept at eighteen inch minimum, two per person, hook and line caught only.

Kyle has also recently taken over Belle Harbour Marina on Anclote river and been steadily making some pretty exciting changes, including getting a boat rental fleet going. If you have been looking for an easier way to get your family out on the water, call them up and they will help with it all. Then drift on over to one of my favorites, Rusty Bellies, an on the water restaurant that is just about a rocks throw away.

Off the water, much of my time lately is spent with my insurance business building teams, coaching agents, and helping both families and business owners make decisions. It's similar to running a boat, you read the conditions, give guidance, and get them home in better shape than you found them.



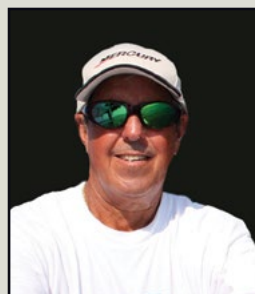
Between that, and finding time where everything aligns to get on the water, I will be serving as Tournament Director for the 2027 RCTS Memorial Fishing Tournament. Put on by the Rotary Club of Tarpon Springs, April 25 and 26, 2027, at Rusty Bellies on the Anclote River. It will be a Snook, trout and redfish, catch, photo, release tournament. Stay tuned and make sure to register!

Sponsorship and registration information will roll out over the next few months. Follow me on instagram @capt_justin_searcy and you will see it first.

Opening day is a gift so remember, keep a fish if you want one, take the picture, and bring someone new with you to share and enjoy the experience. See you on the water and tag me at @capt_justin_searcy with your September catches! 🎣

FISHING FORECAST

THIS MONTH'S OUTLOOK WITH CAPTAIN SERGIO ATANES



As cooler weather approaches, bay activity will begin to increase. Snook will start moving back onto the flats and into cuts along the mangroves. Depending on water temperatures, Mackerel may return from the Skyway and move back into the Humps inside the bay, often with Cobia close behind. The Mangrove Snapper bite is expected to slow somewhat; however, larger fish can still be found around deepwater rocky areas and ledges. Flounder activity should improve and quality Trout can be targeted in deeper seabed areas with steady current flow. Redfish will remain a primary target and while their exact timing and location are never guaranteed, they typically arrive in September and provide excellent action.

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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FINDING BIG REDFISH IN COOLER WATER

by Captain Sergio Atanes

September is my change-up month. I shift away from my usual mackerel, trout, and shark routine and turn my attention to big redfish. With a little luck, the weather begins to ease, the sun feels a bit less punishing, and the fishing becomes enjoyable again. It is also the time of year when I trade live bait for fresh-cut threadfin sardines.

This is not the time I spend much effort hunting redfish across the flats. Instead, I look for them around docks, bridges, and deep cuts along oyster beds. After a long, hot summer, redfish often slide into cooler, deeper water. Their anatomy tells part of the story: their eyes sit high on the head, while the mouth points downward, making them natural bottom feeders. That is one reason so many fish are missed on top-water plugs or live bait—just before the strike, the redfish can lose sight of the prey.

The first step is finding docks with moving water. I like the start of an outgoing tide around docks in the upper Tampa Bay area. Once I am within casting distance of the dock's shaded side, I chum with small pieces of cut threadfin sardines to draw fish out and keep them feeding.



For tackle, I keep the rig simple. I use either a 1/0 J hook or a 2/0 circle hook, depending on the angler. For clients with less experience, I choose J hooks because they naturally tend to pull when setting the hook. For seasoned redfish anglers, I prefer circle hooks. My standard setup is a 30-inch section of 30-pound fluorocarbon leader tied to 15-pound braided line with a surgeon's knot. Other knots will work, but the surgeon's knot is simple, fast, and dependable. Because I am usually fishing 3 to 8 feet of

water with some current, I add a 1/8- to 1/4-ounce split shot to keep the bait close to the bottom.

Of course, not every dock will hold fish, and some will consistently outproduce others. Time on the water is the only way to learn which ones are worth fishing. Around docks, the larger redfish usually stay near the deepest water or tight to nearby structure. Winter can help you build that knowledge. Cold fronts and high pressure often bring extremely low tides, and those low, clear-water days are ideal for studying local docks. Look for rocks, old pilings, debris, and other structures that will hold fish when the water returns. I have found docks with furniture, rocks, and leftover construc-



tion debris beneath them, often from homes-built years earlier. Make notes about what you find and where it sits, then return in spring and fall when the redfish move back in.

When September arrives, do not overlook the shade beneath the docks. The big reds are there, waiting for the right bait to drift by. ☑

Captain Sergio Atanes is the host of Fishing Adventures Florida on YouTube, Waypoint TV, Carbon TV, Outdoor Action TV and Angling TV. He is CEO of ReelFishy.com Fishing Cahrtrs. For info call 813-973-7132 or email: atanes@msn.com.



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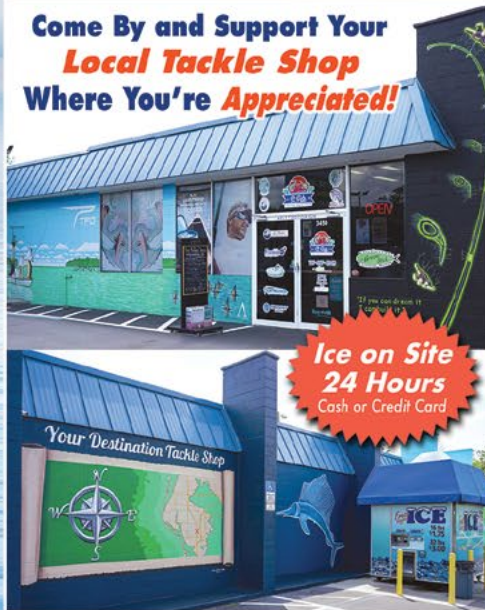
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