

Sheepshead

DEEP AND SHALLOW

A Northeast Florida specialty, these delicious members of the porgy family are well worth the effort.

By Terry Lacoss

Sheepshead are easy, yes? Not so fast. When it comes to consistently catching the big ones, details count. Captain Michael Foster added an interesting detail one day while fishing a few miles off the St. Marys Inlet, at the Florida/Georgia border.

“A federal marine fisheries boat motored up to our anchored boat,” Foster recalled. “One of the officers climbed on board and was soon checking our fish box, hoping to find a few fish for his survey. For some reason I quickly turned off my GPS/fishfinder, hoping to keep my location a secret. Seconds later we began to catch a lot of sheepshead and from that day forward, I don’t leave my sonar on when sheepshead fishing; I believe the sound spooks deepwater sheepshead. The officer remained on our boat until the bite slowed down, which presented an excellent opportunity for documenting freshly caught sheepshead.”

Foster regularly guides his bottom fishing charters to artificial reefs where excellent eating sheepshead could weigh over the 10-pound mark.

The species is widespread in Florida coastal waters, but perhaps nowhere as abundant—nor so highly regarded—as in the northeasternmost counties.

“KBY artificial reef encompasses a huge area including two square miles of broken concrete and rubble from the old Kings Bay Naval station,” Foster said.



“There have been a few small barges placed here as well. The cracks in the rocks and debris seems to hold a lot of marinelife and shellfish, which is the big attraction for offshore sheepshead.”

Foster has a unique way of anchoring when targeting sheepshead.

“One thing you don’t want to happen is your boat swinging back and forth on anchor,” he said. “Once the bow of my boat is anchored securely so that we’re over the bottom structure, I will drop down a grappling anchor off from the transom which will quickly grab a rock, then tie the anchor line off to the transom. Double anchoring keeps my boat from swinging back and forth. This is extremely important when trying to detect the light strike of the sheepshead, especially when fishing with light tackle. Also, it is very important to keep baits

It's something of an art form, detecting and reacting to those gentle nibbles in deep water. Braided line and slower tide phases help. This angler is fishing the Amelia Island railroad bridge.

dead on the bottom.”

As for those bait rigs, Foster uses spinning tackle with 20-pound-test green-tinted braided line, and he ties on about 12 inches of 30-pound fluorocarbon leader using uni-knots. Next, he slides a 4-ounce egg sinker onto the fluoro, then ties on a 30-pound black barrel swivel and 2 more feet of 30-pound fluoro. Finally, a No. 1 kahle hook is attached to the business end. A small piece of fresh clam is then barbed and fished dead on the bottom. Occasionally raising and lowering the bait seems to attract attention, Foster added.

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There's also an art to collecting these guys. Hint: Bury that container, set out a few boards, come back later and corral 'em up. Below: Rigged to go for jetty sheepshead.



Sheepshead fishing is also excellent around the Northeast Florida jetty rocks. Amelia Island's Capt. Danny Flynn offers excellent advice.

"My favorite sheepshead waters include the St. Marys jetty rocks," Flynn said. "Here sheepshead will congregate close to the low areas of the jetty rocks during the low tide periods. My favorite tides to catch sheepshead include the last few hours of the falling and the first few hours of the incoming."

Like Foster, Flynn typically uses 20-pound spinning tackle with braided line. He slides a 1- to 4-ounce egg sinker onto the line, ties on a barrel swivel, and finishes with about 12 inches of 20-pound fluoro leader and a No. 4 kahle hook. Why such a small hook? Some think it matches the leg of a fiddler crab, perhaps the best bait for inshore sheepshead.

"Keeping a tight line, while raising and lowering the rodtip, is a good tip for detecting sheepshead that are trying to sneak off with my fiddler crab," Flynn explains. "When a strike is detected, I simply raise

my rodtip firmly."

Another Northeast Florida sheepshead vet, Capt. Kirk Waltz guides his parties to the fishy Jacksonville jetty rocks.

"I like to fish with a light leadhead jig and live shrimp combo dead on the bottom and right next to the rocks," Waltz said. "This is a very successful tactic not only for sheepshead but also redfish, flounder, black drum and seatrout."

One of my own favorite inshore Amelia Island sheepshead locations is the deep mouth of Tiger Basin. Here, a large tree has fallen into the water and become encrusted with barnacles and shellfish. The best sheepshead action typically comes

during the last of the falling and the first of the incoming tides. There are also many boat docks nearby that harbor excellent sheepshead fishing; one of the best is on a deep turn in the channel where the end of the dock has 10 to 20 feet of water.

When targeting docks (your own or with the owner's permission), scrape some of the grass and barnacles off of the exposed pilings into a bucket. Toss a few of the barnacles and grass into the water for chum, barb a live fiddler crab and fish the crab just a few inches off the bottom and close to the pilings. Put the rod in a nearby rodholder where the rodtip can be watched closely for the slight and delicate strike of a foraging sheepshead. When the tip begins to move ever so slightly, I pick up the rod and feel if there is any weight. If there is any resistance, I set the hook and the fight begins.

Sheepshead are one of the best-eating fish found in Northeast Florida waters. They can be a little tricky to hook, but they aren't hard to find. Winter and spring finds big concentrations on nearshore fish havens and artificial reefs, as the fish gang up to spawn. The Jacksonville Offshore Fishing Club will hold its annual El Cheapo sheepshead tournament on March 9. The largest sheepshead will be worth a \$75,000 Carolina Skiff boat, Suzuki outboard and Magic Tilt trailer. For more information, visit www.Elcheapo.com. **FS**

Sheepshead for the Table

Don't forget: Starting March 1 and running through April, sheepshead fishermen may keep no more than 50 per boat. The individual bag limit is 8 per person, but collectively, your boat may have no more than 50 during this time. Minimum size remains 12 inches total length. These are FWC rules, but in the case of sheepshead, the rules extend into adjacent federal waters. Treble hooks or other multiple-point hooks may not be used in



These Fernandina anglers know the score: Let the "just-legal" fish go and save that cooler space for big ones like these.

conjunction with natural bait.

Also keep in mind that a just-legal size sheepshead fish yields paltry filets. Best to wait until you've bagged a few bigger ones before committing to keeping those 12- to 15-inchers, if at all.