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NEW YEAR RESOLUTIONS

I truly cannot believe that we have entered the year 2025. I really have no idea where 2024 went. While I usually try to avoid anything remotely related to New Year Resolutions, because they typically set you up to fail. Somehow things this year seem a little different and I kind of feel the need to resolve. A variety of circumstances (including reaching the ripe old age of 68) combine to make me realize both how fragile and how wonderful this life is.



First, I resolve to try to take better care of myself. Someone smart once said "If I knew I was going to live this long, I would have taken better care of myself". This is certainly true in my case. I have almost certainly spent too much of my life really enjoying fine food and drink and too little of it participating in healthy pastimes like punishing myself on the medieval torture devices known to most people as exercise equipment. This has resulted in a physique that can better be described as a keg, rather than a 6 pack. This extra weight coupled with a genetic predisposition toward joint problems has already led me to get 4 new bionic joints and some of the remaining joints appear to be on their last legs, in a manner of speaking. There is a relatively simple solution to this problem; I just have to quit eating everything that I like. As my role model, W. C. Fields, always said, "Why is it that everything that I like is either illegal, immoral or fattening". I can't guarantee that I can instantly change 68 years of bad habits, but I am going to make a real effort to be a little bit better. Besides eating better, I am actually going to try to find some form of physical activity that is not completely objectionable. Perhaps I would excel at bobsledding or the luge, I would think the extra weight should help with these.

Second, I resolve to have more fun. This one relates well to the magazine, because it involves more boating, fishing and travel to cool places where I can do more boating and fishing. Perhaps reeling in more big fish would actually qualify as a form of exercise that I would not find objectionable. At any rate, I do plan to take more time off to do fun stuff, in the coming year.

Third, I resolve to do everything possible to avoid being involved in or being around stupidity. My advanced years have made me much less tolerant of stupidity at a time when the world seems intent on becoming more stupid. This is not intended to be any sort of political statement, it is simply a rather sad statement of fact.

Lastly, I resolve to try to appreciate the good fortune that I have more. I must admit that I am a pretty lucky guy, because my work is mostly pretty much fun. I get to help mostly happy people enjoy using their boats and my rental boats and they all pay me money to do so. I get to play with boats and go out on boats often and I mostly enjoy that too. This is not always true as evidenced by one of my columns from a few years ago that was called "I Hate Boats". Sometimes stupidity infringes on the fun, like when people damage or leave my boats high and dry, but generally the marina is a pretty good place to hang out.

Anyway, have a Happy New Year and spend more of it outdoors, fishing, boating or just running around behind the little animals. Stop in at Belle Harbour Marina in Tarpon Springs during the New Year to see how my resolutions work out, talk to Flip the Bird or rent one of my many fine boats.

Merle & Flip



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ON THE COVER: "Wader Dave" Ulgenalp hit his favorite secret wading spot earlier this month and scored this beautiful Trout! Learn how to find your spot by flipping to page 26 of this issue!

DEPARTMENTS

- 4 MERLE'S MIND**
Random Thoughts with Merle
- 12 TIDE CHECK**
Florida West Coast: January 2025
- 24 FISHING FORECAST & TACKLE TALK**
with Captains Sergio & George
- 28 INDUSTRY INSIDER**
Tool Pass Pro

FISHING

- 8 START THE NEW YEAR WITH A BITE!**
by Captain George Hastick
- 10 EMBRACING JANUARY ON THE WATER**
by Captain Justin Searcy
- 14 "A REEL FUTURE" LIVIN' THE REEL LIFE IN 2025**
by Misty Wells
- 26 FIND YOUR SECRET WADE FISHING SPOTS**
by David Ulgenalp
- 30 BAIT STEALERS OF TAMPA BAY**
by Captain Sergio Atanes

DESTINATIONS

- 22 FISHING ON FLORIDA'S SPORTS COAST**
A Treat for Anglers of Every Level

FEATURE STORY

- 16 STACKED WAY BACK!**
by Jonathan Mulliken

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START THE NEW YEAR WITH A BITE!

by Captain George Hastick

With the water temperatures now in the low 60s it can slow the bite down. But, at the same time, it can concentrate fish in areas to keep themselves warm, which can equal a really good bite. Areas that will hold fish can vary quite a bit depending on how cold it's been or how many warm days in a row we have had. There are times when the fish will move from deeper water that they have spent the night in, to moving up onto an adjacent flat that is very shallow with dark grass that will heat up quickly from the sun as the day warms up.



The types of fish can vary greatly including Snook, Trout, Redfish, Jack Crevalle, juvenile Tarpon and more. Fish like Sheepshead and larger trout like the cooler water and can be a good alternative, if you like fishing for those type of fish. Sheepshead make great table fair and are highly underrated when it comes to a good fight.

Larger Sheepshead in the 18–22-inch range will put up a fight, as if you are catching grouper. On light tackle it is a great fight with the reward of a beautiful, white flaky filets. Look for the sheepshead to be on rockpiles in 8-15 feet of water,

along with bridge pilings, sea walls, docks, under the mangroves and even on the flats. You can catch sheepshead on shrimp, but they rarely turn down a fiddler, tree or mud crab. Be careful if you are going out and rounding up your own crabs for bait. You do not want to get caught with undersized stone crabs, because they are protected. You are not allowed to take them just the claws and they must be 2 3/4" long, so you would be staring at breaking the law twice, once for possessing the whole crab and undersized claws. One of the easiest ways to tell a juvenile stone crab is the distinct stripes they have on their legs, that the others do not.

Now back to the species that get moved quite a bit with the colder water temperatures, especially the snook who must do this for survival purposes. Most fish are cold blooded meaning their body is only as warm as the water they are in. Snook are very susceptible to dying if they get caught off guard by a cold front or multiple fronts in a row and the water temperatures drop fast. For instance, if the water temps stay below 55 degrees for days in a row snook can start to die. This means that along with other fish like Redfish, trout, jacks, tarpon and more, Snook will congregate in places like power plant outflows, backwater deep residential canals, up inside the rivers, the colder



it gets the further upriver they will go, creeks and canals with dark mud bottoms, deep holes on the grass flat and deep channels to name a few places to look.

Winter doesn't mean the fish aren't biting, it just means they are feeding in different areas. Good luck and catch 'em up! 🎣

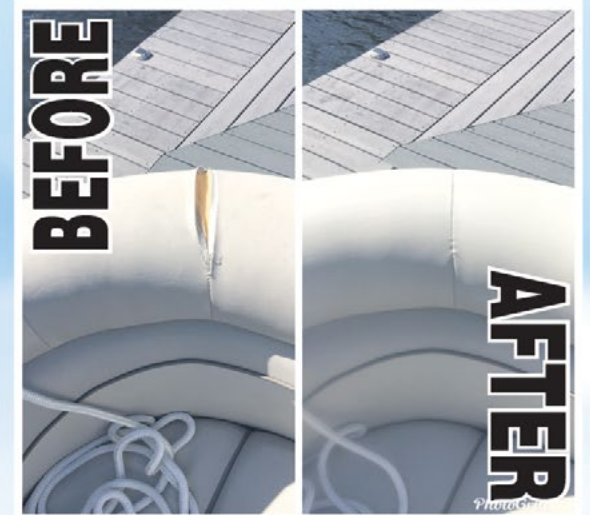
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EMBRACING JANUARY ON THE WATER

by Captain Justin Searcy

As the New Year rolls in, I can't think of a better way to kick it off than spending time on the water. January on Florida's Gulf Coast is special—cooler mornings, calm tides, and plenty of fish waiting to give you a fight. It's a time to reflect on the past year while looking forward to what's ahead, and if you ask me, there's no better place to do that than with a rod in hand.

Winter fishing has its quirks, but for those willing to adjust and get after it, January can be downright magical. The water temps drop, the fish slow down a bit, and they group up in all the right spots. It's a month of patience and precision, but when you hook up with a redfish or feel the tug of a trout, it's all worth it.

Redfish: The New Year's MVP

Let's start with redfish, because they're the stars of the show this month. These fish don't mind the cooler water, but they do move to where it's warmer—think shallow flats near mud or oyster beds. Low tide is your friend this time of year,

especially if you can spot a tailing red digging around for crabs or shrimp.

For bait, you can't go wrong with live shrimp or a soft plastic on a jighead. Cast it near their feeding zone and let it sit for a second. These fish aren't in a rush, so a slow presentation is key. The strike might feel subtle, but when you set the hook, hold on tight. January reds have a way of reminding you why we love this sport.

Trout: Winter's Showstopper

Speckled trout are another winter gem. You'll find them hanging out in deeper water early in the morning, then sliding up onto the flats as the sun gets higher. Look for sandy potholes and grass flats where they're hunting shrimp and baitfish.

I like to use a light jig or a suspending twitch bait for trout this time of year. Work it slow—twitch,



pause, twitch—and pay attention because they'll hit when you least expect it. Landing a big trout in January feels like you've struck gold, especially when that silver body catches the sunlight.

Snook: A Winter Bonus

Now, let's talk about snook. They're not the easiest to find in January, but when you do, it's game on. These guys are picky in the cold, so you'll want to target canals, docks, or anywhere the water's a little warmer. Residential canals and power plant outflows are great places to start.

Live shrimp or small pilchards will give you the best shot, but patience is the name of the game. Snook are still a little sluggish, so don't expect them to come running after your bait. When you hook one, though, it's worth all the effort. Just remember, this time of year is all about catch and release for snook—they've got a season of their own.



Embracing January on the Water

January fishing isn't just about catching fish—it's about soaking up the quiet beauty of the Gulf Coast. The cooler air, the glassy water, and the promise of a new year all come together to remind us why we love what we do. It's a chance to reset, refocus, and spend time doing something that feeds the soul.

So, whether you're chasing a redfish, landing a fat trout, or just enjoying a day on the boat, this is your time. Take it all in. January is here, and it's full of opportunities to make memories on the water. Here's to a year of tight lines, good vibes, and plenty of fish stories. I'll see you out there. 🎣

- Captain Justin Searcy

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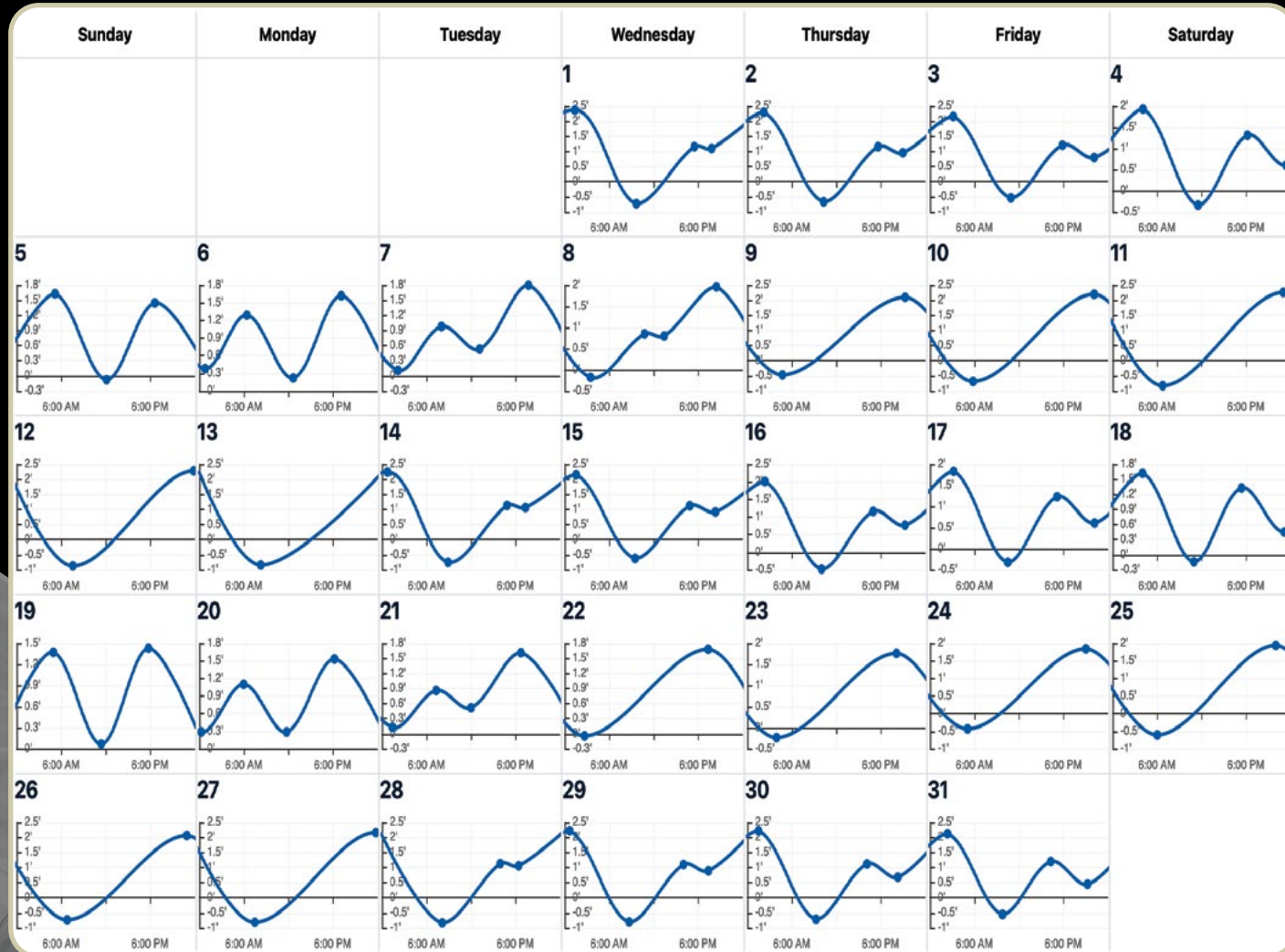
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Conversions for Clearwater Beach Area

High	Low	Location
-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	Location
+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	Location
+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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"A REEL FUTURE" LIVIN' THE REEL LIFE IN 2025

by Misty Wells

This year was the 10-year mark for "A Reel Future" the non-profit I started with just a few hundred dollars of my own money with high hopes for fishing with foster children. Fast forward 10 years and I can't believe we are still going strong, taking over 4,000 kids fishing and gearing up for the new year. This past year has been very exciting for "A Reel Future" as we have done something we have never been able to do before; destination based fishing trips.

I met an amazing lady at ICAST this year named Krissy Wejebe. She is the founder and the passion behind the "Jose Wejebe Foundation". The "Jose Wejebe Foundation" is devoted to making fishing dreams come true and to celebrate the life of fishing icon, Jose Wejebe. Jose Wejebe was the host of one of the most popular fishing shows on tv called "Spanish Fly" and he led the way in areas of conservation and encouraged viewers to get out on the water.

The "Jose Wejebe Foundation" is lead by a passionate team of dedicated anglers and



folks that have a passion for helping others. Krissy Wejebe is the driving force behind this foundation, and I am so grateful that I met her. This past year Krissy and I were talking and she suggested setting up some trips to the Keys to fish for some of the foster kids of "A Reel Future". Of course, the first thing I said was, my non-profit does not have the budget for anything like that. Without hesitation she immediately said, "don't worry about that, that is what we do".

So, July came around and we had planned for three groups of foster children to come down over a period of three weeks and we gave them the trip of a lifetime. Krissy and her team had everything lined up from the 5-bedroom house with pool to the inshore and offshore fishing trips for everyone. Kylie and I were excited to spend the next 22 days down in the Florida Keys fishing and hosting these amazing kids for the trip of a lifetime.

Our first group was from Live Oak Florida, the second group was from Safety Harbor and the third group came from Auburndale. The foundation had everything well planned and the captains that we fished with were 5-star all the way and really taught the kids a lot about fishing. We carefully selected the kids and decided to choose kids that were older and will possibly "age out of the system" to show them a different perspective on their life.

In 2014, I realized entire generations of children are growing up in foster care and at



the time, it was something I did not know much about. Did you know at any given time in the United States there are over 400,000 children in foster care right now as you read this article? The median age of children in foster care is 6½ and over 20,000 youth "age out" of the foster care system between the ages of 18-21 annually. I did not know what "age out" meant at that time, but it means kids that never get adopted and they reach legal adulthood, and then they are sent out on their own.



I meet entire families of siblings that are all growing up in foster care

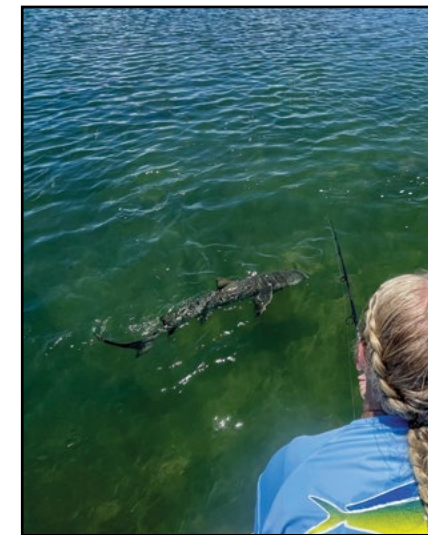
together or apart, and most likely will not get adopted. With hundreds of thousands of children not being exposed to nature, our waterways, parks, and beaches, how are they going to develop a love for nature and the desire for conservation? Tenn years ago, I decided to take action and start "A Reel Future" a non-profit designed to take children in foster care fishing and teach them about nature and conservation. Of course, I did not have any donated funds at the time of starting this venture, so in the beginning, my husband Capt. Tommy and I were paying out of our own pockets to get it going. You see this hits very close to home as my husband Capt. Tommy was given away at age 6 by his parents and spent the rest of his youth in the foster care system. Capt. Tommy was one of the 20,000 kids that aged out of the system. The only thing that kept Tommy on some type of track was fishing, being abandoned by his parents he was angry and sad, fishing was the only thing that saved his soul.

So, you may ask why fishing? So far after taking over 4,000 foster kids fishing, I have never been with one child that did not laugh and have the best time of their lives catching their first fish. Fishing is such an even playing ground for anyone because they don't have to be the fastest, strongest, smartest, or even have any experience to land a catch. I would say 80% of the foster children I take fishing have never been on a boat, caught a fish or learned anything about conservation. It is amazing the self-confidence that these children receive by learning to fish; they even start to begin to help the other children once they get the hang of it.

What should our New Year's Resolution be for 2025? I think it should be making the commitment to living "A Reel Life", not only for ourselves, but for the next generation. As we all sit back and look around for the next generations out on the water what do you see? Frankly, I do not see very many adults taking their kids or other kids fishing or making the time to get them engaged in the outdoors. What I mostly see is the tops of kid's heads as they all look down at their tablets, phones, and portable games. Most of the kids nowadays engage in posting 300 selfies daily on their Instagram, Snapchat and Tik Tok profiles. But what are they posting? I can assure you that not many of them are doing anything worthy of posting about.

Adults must slow down and take the time to put a line in the water and take a kid fishing, but let's be sure to avoid some common mistakes that can turn kids off to the sport of fishing.

Here are some tips for developing a love for fishing with kids. First off, don't wait until they are a certain age. If they can hold a small rod and reel, take them out for a bit and get them started early. Kids have a short attention span, especially if the fishing is slow, so be sure not to stay too long unless the kids don't want to leave. Try and make their fishing experiences easy by targeting a species that offers a lot of action. You're in luck as size does not matter and remember their measure of success is different their ours. Let them have fun, no matter what they catch. Remember to teach them right away as they are learning about safety and conserva-



tion; they are the future of our fisheries, they need to protect it. Give them a sense of accomplishment and ownership and explain why they are releasing that fish and why we leave our fishing spot better than we found it. Teach them to also tie a hook, bait a hook, net a fish, and release a fish, don't do everything for them they want to learn.

There are lots of organizations and ways to take a kid fishing. If you have a kid, take them fishing and let them bring a friend. There are kids with special needs, kids in a single parent home, kids on the wrong path that need a positive diversion and kids looking for anything fun

to do. It is not hard to find an organization that you can be a part of for a day, week, or all year long. I promise you this, you will get way more out of it than you give it. I have taken over 4,000 kids fishing so far and I am not stopping anytime soon, so come join the "Reel Life" with me in 2025. For more information or to make a donation on both of our non-profits visit www.josewejebefoundation.org and www.areelfuture.com. ☑

Misty Wells is producer & Host of "Let's Take It Outside" TV show airing to over 320 million on Discovery Channel, Waypoint TV, Bally Sun Sports, H2O, Pursuit Up, Hunt Channel, MOTV, TCT, Discover Florida Network & Carbon TV. Bass Pro-Outdoor Pro & Outdoor & Travel Writer. Founder of "A Reel Future" non-profit devoted to teaching the passion of fishing & conservation to foster children, over 3,800 children & counting. www.mistywells.com

This time of the year is a good time to target fish that are hiding way back in the residential canals, or deeper backwater creeks. We like to target fish that are pushed back seeking shelter from the frequent cold fronts, high winds, and extreme low tides that occur in the winter months. The wade fisherman and those fishing from seawalls, should take advantage of the canals and creeks that are easy accessed, because these tend to hold the fish throughout winter. Casting from land in public parks, back along river banks and similar places that you can reach on foot while staying dry is a great strategy this time of the year. If you can stand to wade out to reach areas that still hold water on a negative low tide, you may find them full of fish. The secret to locating a pile of fish up a creek, river or canal is finding the dark water that can hold at least 4ft of water on a low tide. Fish can still hold in shallower flats, but the bigger numbers of fish usually come from a place with deep water nearby.



Jon Mulliken used his kayak to reach fish over a mud bottom flat still holding a couple feet of water on a negative low tide. Photo by Bernard Ward



Sam Root of www.saltshores.com, snook fishing in winter...focusing on seawalls facing the rising sun. Photo credit: Spencer Goodwin

The temperatures here are always changing, so try to think like a fish. In the colder mornings, fish will be seeking heat. Look for things like that seawall radiating heat, or dark colored mud. Sometimes the fish have a really lethargic attitude. Waiting for the sun to come up and warm things up often will yield more fish activity than getting out real early. "Focus on the seawalls facing east, as they face the rising sun when targeting a mid-morning bite with cooler air temperatures." This is a great tip Spencer Goodwin shared with me while talking about fishing the backwaters. Even though our weather has not been very chilly for long, the trout we are finding have been laying low in their winter areas and not moving too far from their safe haven until the approach of spring.

My new fishing partner, Capt. Mike Teegarden, and I often find ourselves lost in vast systems of canals in search of the schools of spotted sea trout. We search for signs of life in places that have the most potential to hold a stack of fish and we always plan a trip right before a cold front arrives. The high pressure really seems to turn the bite on to the max. One of the many things the Captain, who is an ex-commercial fisherman, has recently taught me, is to focus on where the majority of fish would hold, not where a fish or two could possibly be. When selecting a spot to try, it is always a good sign to see mullet, as well as any type of bait fish, and crabs. Switching up

baits, or having two anglers on the boat, gives me the satisfaction of knowing that we covered the water from top to bottom. With one angler working a jig slow on the bottom and another throwing one of the many suspending stick baits or something mid column you can quickly cover the water when trying to locate fish. When a speck is hooked, we quietly drop the anchor off the bow to work the area more thoroughly and to find out just how many fish we stumbled upon. We seldom find trout sitting solo!



An up close look at a Seatrout, with my preferred Yo-Zuri suspending lip ring. Photo credit: Jon Mulliken

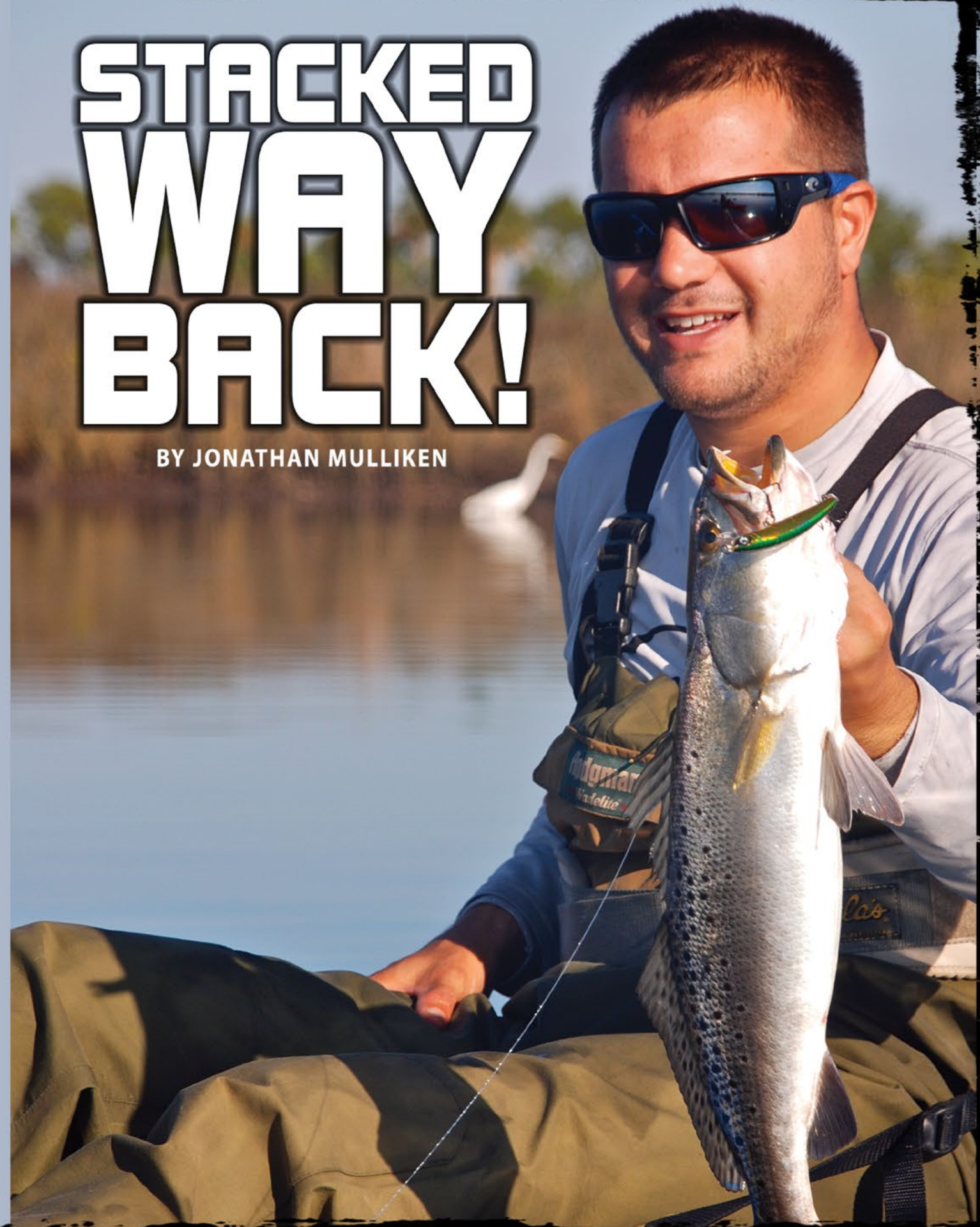
We usually encounter much more than just trout because these residential canals harbor more fish than many realize. Sheepshead are common and when you are equipped with fiddler crabs its can be like feeding candy to a baby. A small hook and a split shot will pick up the convicts and also any black drum that happen to thrive the same surroundings on the same food. Many people come out from their property never knowing that fish moved through their backyard! 🍷

Alexis Gonzalez with a slot trout, found in a deep rock bottom area, the only place left that holds water on a negative low tide. Photo credit: Jon Mulliken



STACKED WAY BACK!

BY JONATHAN MULLIKEN





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TALES FROM THE OLD GUY

by David Mallory

With the "cold" Florida weather upon us, I guess it is time for another ice fishing story in Vermont.

My boss at "Champlain Oil" loved to fish, but didn't have the equipment for Summer or Winter. How lucky could I get? John would come into the sales office when I was alone, and ask me if I wanted to go fishing? I said, "Of course!"



I planned my weeks to take care of my customers on four days a week, always leaving Thursdays open to catch up or call on new potential customers. It was January, so, the agenda for that Thursday would be ice fishing! John asked if he could bring along his friend, Bob, who was a director in the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department, who also was the guy I almost went to work for several years before. I agreed, so we planned on Thursday. We set a time and place. I said I would get the bait, so I would have exactly what I wanted.

We met in Grand Isle on Lake Champlain. I told John and Bob I would drill the fishing holes the way I wanted them and showed them how I wanted the jacks set up in the

holes. I drilled 36 holes we would use that day. Lake Champlain is a very large lake (112 miles by 13 miles) and we were allowed 15 jacks each. A jack consists of three sticks; two to form an X across the hole and the third held the reel which went into the water. The reel spun around when you had a bite and tripped a wire with a small flag which waved in the air.

I usually put a big minnow on the first jack for northerns, and the next two smaller minnows for perch and, maybe to draw the northerns into the jacks. Sometimes, if we got a bite early, I would put another jack or two near the one with the bite in case a few big fish were hanging around the area.

Now, we were ready to catch some fish!

We had a few potential bites, but false alarms. A fish might have grabbed the bait and let go, or the wind might have tripped the flag. Bob caught a perch, and John caught a small northern, but nothing big enough to keep. When the weather is nice, we often eat lunch while we fish. Someone would sit on the equipment sled and another on a minnow bucket or whatever we could grab. We really never had much time to sit around. That day we ate some lunch and relaxed as we had a few flags go up and caught a few perch and a couple small northerns.

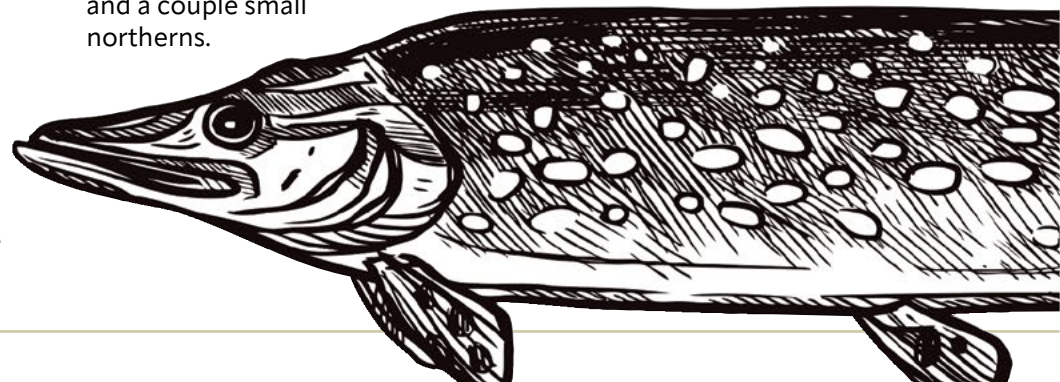
Bob could fillet a northern better than anybody I knew and he had even written a book on how to do it; so he kept a couple.

We had two flags go up at the far end of our flags. John and Bob went to the one at the right side and I went to the one a little ways away. Well little did John know that his fish had grabbed the bait and swam around my line. I pulled up my line and saw it was caught on his line, so it was time to have some fun. I held the line and John gave a tug. I gave a tug back and John thought he had a big fish.

He yelled at me to bring the gaff so he could get his fish in safely through the hole. I yelled back I would come over but I had a fish on also. I kept pulling on his line and he thought he had a really big fish, but it was just me. After we "fought" back and forth, Bob looked at me and saw I was pulling the line, and not a big fish. He started laughing and John looked over at Bob and me and realized I had his line. After some choice words from John, we all had a good laugh. I let go of the line so John could pull it in, without a fish!

We did catch some good fish to bring home for all of us: but the best part of the day was the "big fish" for John. ☑

- David Mallory





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are excellent picks. They're perfect for catching catfish and various panfish. With their diverse ecosystems, these rivers are great for anglers of all experience levels.

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Captain Sergio Atanes

January means big sheepshead move into Tampa Bay around the rock piles, ledges and artificial reefs. Fiddler crabs and shrimp are the ticket to success. Snook have made their way into creeks and deepwater canals. The bite might be slow, but the challenge is there to get them to bite. Look for plenty of trout action along the edges of drop-offs. Negative tides are your friend forcing the fish into potholes and canals. Artificial baits are best for Flounder, Trout and Redfish. Power plant spillways always have action this month for Sharks, Trout, Snook, Cobia and Pompano.



Captain George Hastick

January is a colder water month and with that brings an influx of larger Trout and Sheepshead, along with a few more targeted wintertime fish, like Black Seabass and Silver Trout. Large Sheepshead will be on the same rockpiles you were catching Mangrove Snapper in the summer; 8 to 15 feet of water. They will also be around docks, bridge pilings, mangroves and sea walls. Shrimp and crabs are the best, widely available baits for them. Soft plastic like the Lit'l P&V on a 1/4 ounce jighead is a great bait to throw in the 6-10 feet of water over shell and grassy bottoms for Speckled Trout.

ABOUT THE CAPTAINS

Captain Sergio and Captain George Hastick fish the Florida waters, specializing in and around the West Coast of Florida and Tampa Bay. Their show, Fishing Adventures Florida, is about two captains sharing their knowledge and experience of the local waters. Encouraging others to share in their love of what the outdoors has to offer. Their goal is to educate, entertain and share the experience of fishing opportunities the state has to offer.

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FIND YOUR SECRET WADE FISHING SPOTS

by Dave Ulgenalp

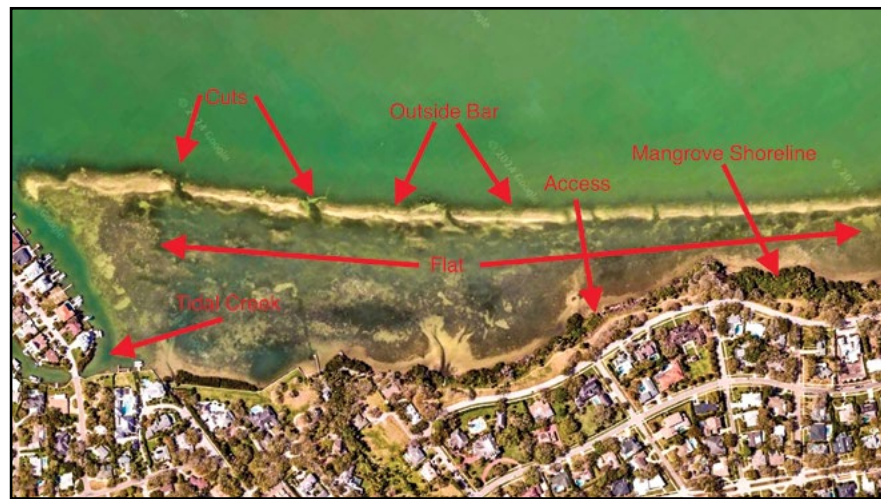
If you've been following my series of articles on everything to do with wade fishing, hopefully you understand the concept and know what gear you need, but now you need to know where to go. Most fishermen don't like to share their favorite fishing spots and likely consider them state secrets. I don't like to share my spots either, but I will explain how you can find your own secret spots.

Let's start by listing the characteristics to look for when trying to identify a great spot.

(1) Access to the spot is essential. If you can't get to the spot, it doesn't matter that it has all the characteristics below.

(2) Shallow flats with firm bottom, a mixture of grass and sand and structure like oyster beds, potholes, rocks or dead trees and an abundance of feeding opportunities.

(3) Shoreline structure like mangroves and/or rocks that provide fish with feeding opportunities, a place to hide in or under



during high water periods and/or wind protection.

(4) Adjacent channels or deep water for fish to move into on low water or when conditions make shallow water unsuitable.

(5) Shallow outside bars with cuts, separating a flat from deeper water that create feeding zones for game fish on incoming and outgoing water.

(6) Tidal creeks or guts at the shoreline that create feeding zones for game fish on outgoing water.

(7) Wind protection or exposure to prevailing winds depending upon the season.

Once you know what to look for, start your search for spots with these characteristics using your favorite satellite imagery source. It's not so easy to find spots that offer all these characteristics, but it can be worth the time spent searching as these spots will likely offer good fishing throughout the year and under a variety of conditions. However, the priority you place on them should change depending upon the season, weather, and tide. You might also find yourself fishing in areas or under conditions that don't offer any spots with all seven characteristics and will have to look for spots that offer the most favorable characteristics under those conditions.

In the winter, access to deep water should be a priority, as that is likely where the fish will find food and/or favorable conditions. Protection from north winds should also be a priority under cold conditions as water temperatures are likely to be higher and more suitable for the fish than in areas with exposure to the wind. Having an adjacent flat isn't the highest priority but it's al-

ways nice as cold mornings turn into warm afternoons and fish move from deeper water onto the flats with an incoming tide.

Spring, summer and fall will have fish feeding anywhere from the shoreline to the flats to adjacent deep water, depending upon the tide phase, water temperatures, wind direction and even time of day. Therefore, finding spots with as many of the preferred characteristics as possible will provide the greatest opportunity to catch fish as conditions change throughout the day.

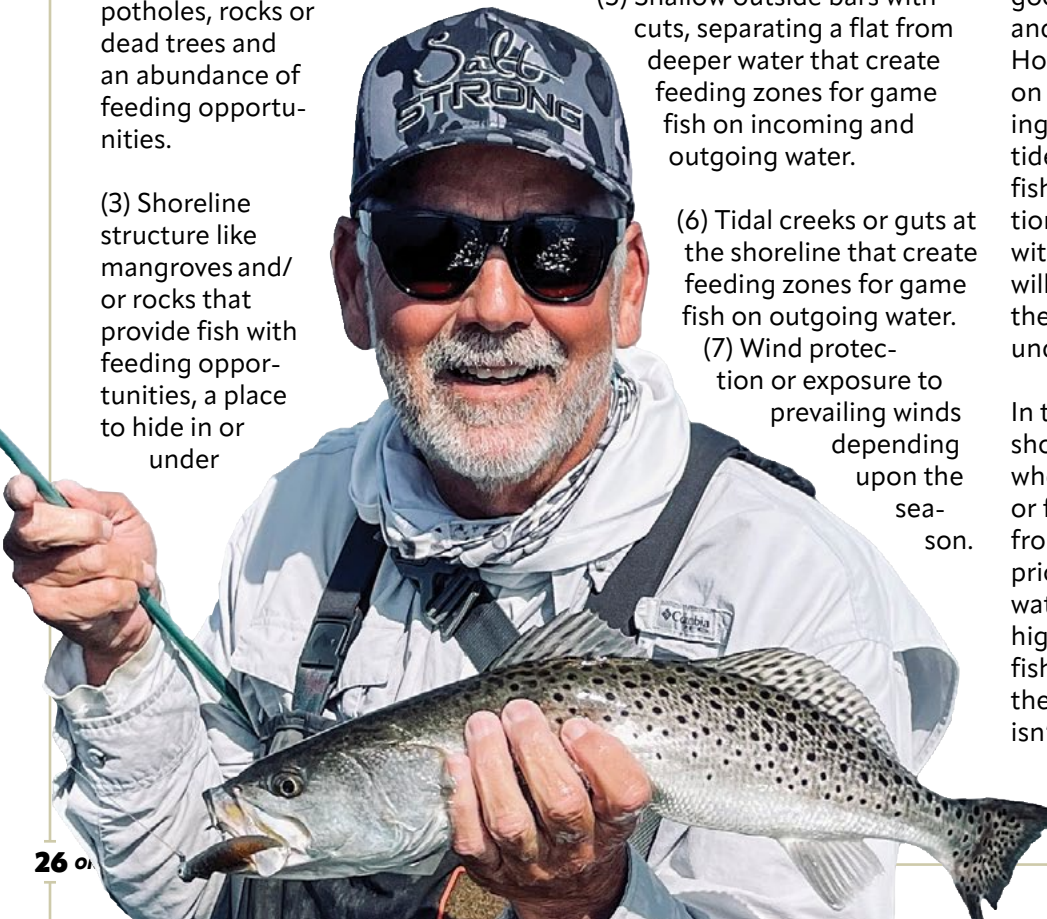
I list access as the first and most important characteristic, but there's more to consider regarding access than meets the eye. You might think it's better to have safe and secure parking and a short walk to your access point. However, you'll likely find that the longer and more difficult the walk to your access point, the less likely you'll have to share your spot with other anglers, and fewer anglers means less fishing pressure and most likely better fishing for you.

Conversely, some of my most productive spots offer the easiest access and are in full view of thousands of people as they drive by them every day.

If you don't know where to get started in the search for your secret spots, consider any of the causeways that connect the mainland to barrier islands or one side of a bay to another. Almost all of them offer easy access, shoreline structure and close proximity to deep water as well as wind protection on one side of the causeway or the other. Also, look for boat ramps and kayak launches as they are often adjacent to flats and/or deep water and have easy access and parking nearby. There are also numerous waterfront parks throughout the Tampa Bay area with access to spots offering the characteristics you should be looking for.

So, get on your phone, tablet or computer, log onto Google Earth, Bing Maps or Smart Fishing Spots and start looking for your secret wade fishing spots. It will be worth the effort! 🎣

Dave Ulgenalp, aka "Wader Dave," is Tampa Bay's Premier wade fishing guide. You can find out more about him and book a trip at www.wadersguide.com or follow @waderdave on Instagram. Also, be sure to check out the numerous videos he's featured in on SaltStrong.com and YouTube by searching for Wader Dave.



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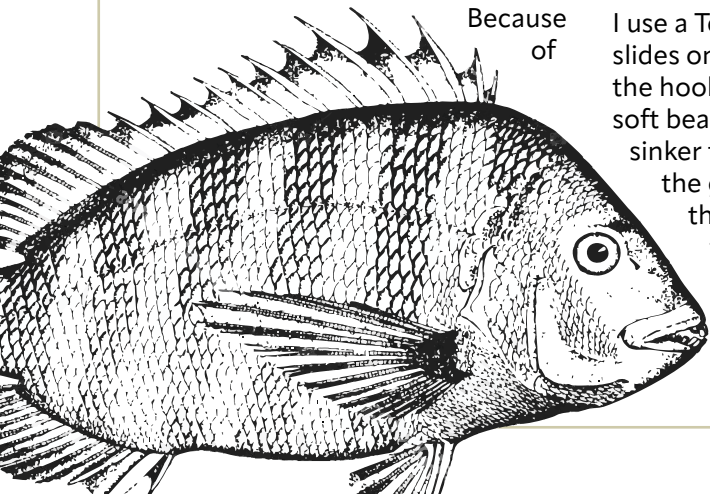
by Captain Sergio Atanes

January is usually the month for one of my favorite winter species to catch, the Sheepshead or *Archosargus Probatoccephalus*. An inshore member of the porgy family, Sheepshead are a common North American species spanning from Cape Cod down to Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. After a long summer, like we have had this year, it is a good break from catching snook, redfish and trout. I look forward to catching these thieves, or often called convict fish of Tampa Bay, for they have a knack of stealing your bait before you even have a chance to fill the bite.



The diet of Sheepshead consists of shrimp, fiddlers, small crabs, bloodworms, sand fleas and

barnacles. Because of



this foraging of crustaceans, Sheepshead can most frequently be found around docks, bridges, and other similar structures. Sheepshead are great fighters on light tackle, especially the big females that can range upwards to 12 pounds. These big females migrate in from the Gulf of Mexico to spawn. Based on the water temperature, the females will arrive in mid to late December and leave around early March.

WHERE & HOW TO CATCH THEM?

Tackle changes depending on where you are fishing for them. Around bridges and docks, medium spinning tackle, 15-pound test braid line and 25-pound test fluorocarbon leader with a #1 hook will work simply fine. Fish that hang around these areas tend to be smaller, and most are males in the 1 to 3-pound class. The big females on the other hand, prefer the deeper waters of the bay, hanging around the ledges, wrecks, and rock piles in anywhere from 12 to 30 feet of water. They average in size from 4 to 12 pounds. I prefer to use heavier tackle, a 7-foot rod medium action with a 3000 spinning reel with 15-pound test braid line and 20-pound test fluorocarbon leader tied with a loop knot to a 1/0 hook.

I use a Texas rig where the sinker slides on the leader just ahead of the hook. I also use a small glow soft bead because this keeps the sinker from hitting the knot and the glow beads seem to draw the attention of the larger fish. The weight is based on depth and tide movement. I start with 3/8 oz and can go as heavy as 1



oz. The lighter the weight, the easier it is to feel the bite. If there is not enough weight used, your bait could drift from the bottom, therefore, making it harder for the sheepshead to find it and eat.

Another good method when you are fishing during slack or slow-moving tides are Yellowtail jigs nothing more than a 1/0 hook weighted hook the name coming from the keys where they use them as the word implies for Yellowtails on the patch reefs.

HOW TO FIND THE FISH?

Coast Guard charts are still the best is showing rocky bottom and



ledges or wrecks. New software chips are showing the contour of the bottom with rocks and ledges which were not available a few years back. C-Map Reveal and Navionics Platinum to me are the best with C-Map Reveal being a little better.

Locations

From shore, focus on bridges, docks, and rocky areas. On the water, their favorite spots are artificial reefs, wrecks, ledges and rocky bottoms. Remember, deeper water usually holds the bigger fish.

Shore Fishing

- Northside of St. Pete Gandy Bridge plenty of rocks along the shoreline.
- The Weedon Island Fishing Pier sits on an oyster bed; great for fishing all year round.
- Skyway Fishing Piers; north and south piers. South pier, you can drift a live shrimp on a cork with outgoing tide over the rock piles from the old bridge. Big sheepshead in the Winter months.

Boat Fishing

- Howard Franklin Bridge rock jetties on Tampa side, Gandy Bridge rock piles on edge of channel; southside of Gandy Blvd. on the St. Pete side.
- Port Tampa rocks
- Rocky seawall on the north side of the St. Pete airport
- Skyway Bridge
- Range markers
- Artificial reefs
- Wrecks

Fishing for Sheepshead can be a fun and rewarding experience. Hooking and fighting an 8 or 10 lb. sheepshead will put a big smile on your face, and if you have kids, they will love the experience. 🎣

Captain Sergio Atanes | Phone (813) 973-7132
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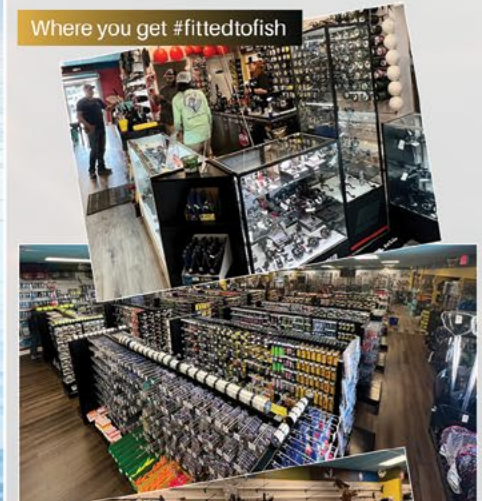
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