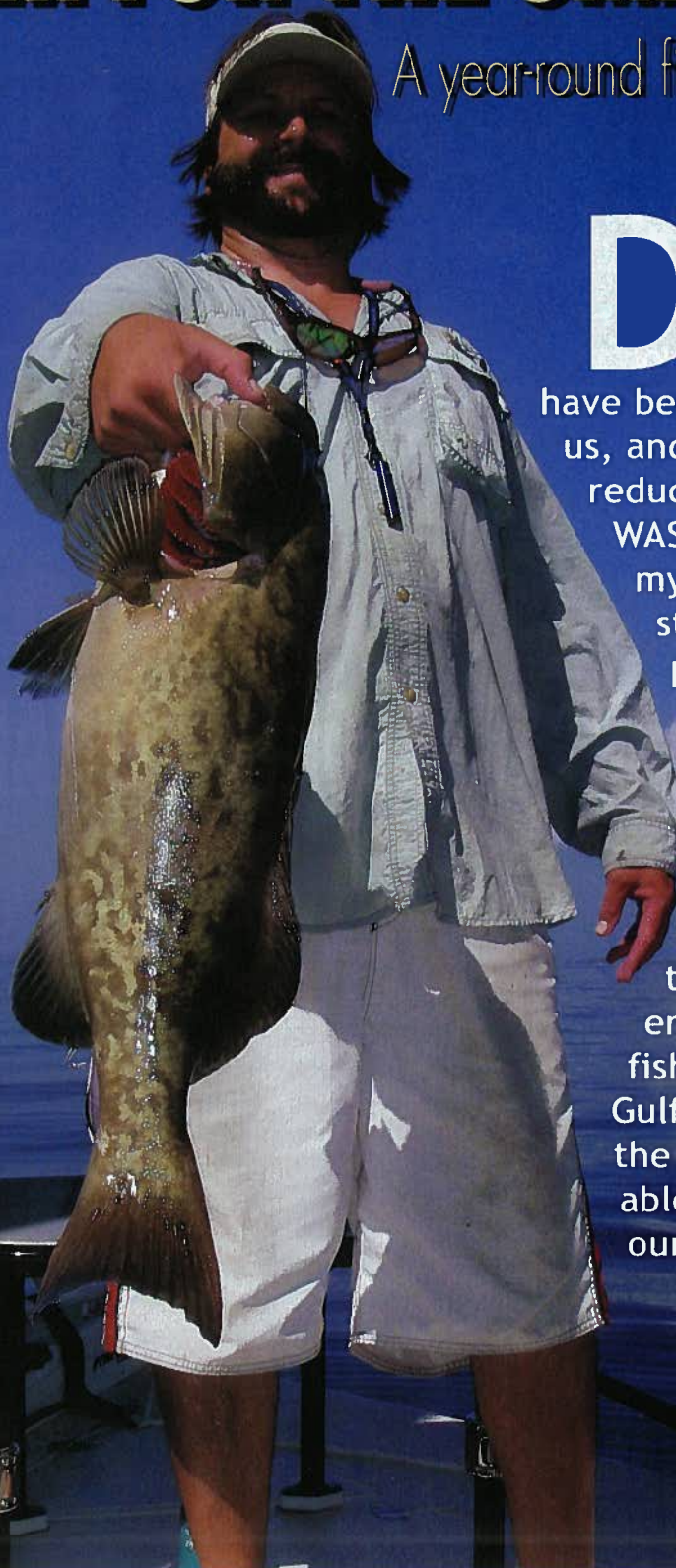


## GROUPEL FOR THE SMALL BOAT

*A year-round fishery at the Skyway*



**D**espite the fact that grouper fishing during the months of February and March have been taken away from us, and the bag limit reduced, gag grouper fishing WAS hot, remains hot, and my guess is that it will stay that way. Being primarily a flats fisherman, the rules, regulations and ups and downs of the grouper bite never really affected me too much. That changed though when I discovered what, in 30 years of fishing the West Central Gulf Coast, just might be the very best and dependable year-round catch in our waters.

Having grown up in Tarpon Springs and spending the majority of years to follow chasing snook and reds around the increasingly busy Anclote River area, it was time for a change. So, I headed to the big ol' bridge.

That was about four years ago and I haven't looked back. Lately, I day-dream about what is perhaps the greatest saltwater bite I've ever known, namely, that approximately five-second window in which you have to dig up your fat fish from the endless mess of structure below. Let your rod tip dip too far down or stop reeling for more than four or five seconds and your fish is gone - the fish with a free meal, you just another victim of one of the biggins! Every now and then a Goliath Grouper will take your offering and it's game over. But, some of the bigger gags will hold you down in their haunts, in their rocky limestone lair or home of twisted rebar, concrete and metal from the old bridge. That too can be game over. No doubt, for every bruiser you pull up, two or three will be lost to the rubble. It's a matter of both skill and technique, some luck thrown in, and a first mate who is not new to big water.

Finding this awesome bite is all about being perfectly in the strike zone. Drop your bait out of the strike zone or let the current drag you too far away from structure and over sandy bottom, you'll be wasting your precious time. Surprisingly, the best time to jump on these fish is during the slack tide. Without the ripping current that can yank the best anchors from the bottom and smash small boats into the pilings in the blink of an eye, getting in that all important strike zone is much easier. With fast-moving water, nothing less than 6 oz. of lead will keep your bait in one spot - and often that's not enough. At slack tide or with slower moving water, a 4 oz. lead will suffice, and you can more easily and precisely put your bait right in front of the fish's nose. That precision drop, getting your bait as close to the fish as possible, is the answer.

Remember, these fish have a steady supply of food moving past their mouths on a daily basis. Like snook deep in their mangrove cover with piles of whitebait moving past, these gags are spoiled fish that are only going to slurp

that bait which requires little movement or energy expenditure. They simply have it too good to go chasing food around.

That's where the savvy angler comes in and changes the playing field. Small boats, in particular, have an advantage here. Since the challenge is to get your boat anchored directly over the fish, and this means as close to the pilings as possible without collision, precision anchoring is also a must. Tide, wind and current must all be accounted for and it's not uncommon to miss your mark and have to re-anchor once or twice before getting properly positioned

for your first drop. When you do hit the mark, and this can sometimes mean letting your anchor rope wrap around the piling in order to motor or swing your skiff in between the sets of pilings, you may have found the sweet spot. Now comes the true finesse game. To reiterate, drop your bait outside of the strike zone and it will be the proverbial "fishing, not catching". For those seasoned Tampa Bay anglers who know the bridge well, this may be old hat. In any case, the big pilings do not reach all the way to the ocean floor, rather, they sit down into large, square, concrete bases that are their foundations. Where these



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foundation walls, or ledges for our concerns, meet the bottom, is where you're likely to find fish. Typical grouper baits like squid, sardine and pinfish all work well. In addition to finding gags where the ledge meets the bottom, directly between the pilings there is just about more structure than you'll care to deal with. Even with 100 lb. mono leader, it's 50/50 whether or not you'll get the big ones out.

Two things to keep in mind when bottom fishing for Skyway gags: 1. unlike offshore grouper, these fish sometimes have just a subtle bite... often you won't even know you're hooked up, and, 2. the five-second rule usually applies. So, sometimes, though you may not think you're hooked up, raise your rod tip up and down slowly and feel for resistance. If you think you're on, reel and don't stop reeling until you can see the fish higher in the water column. Give that fish a few seconds to realize they're hooked and usually it's a break off. Get them out of the structure immediately and you'll likely be the victor.

Remember to be patient. In addition to every big gag down there, there are four or five shorts. Last, despite these tips, most people have come back to me over the years, exasperated and complaining of no bite. Heck, can't give it all away. There is no substitute for having a pro show you how to do it right. If you can swing it, hire a veteran Tampa Bay guide and learn something that will last you a lifetime.

# Go Deep!



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