

**D**espite the state's recent decision to close grouper fishing for the months of February and March, there has been something special going on at the Skyway Bridge all winter and spring. This special something is really nothing new, and, if you've discovered it, you might say it's worth its weight in gold – Gag Grouper gold that is, "Tampa Tea"... ok, you know the rest. While it will not make you a millionaire, it is one of the richest fisheries I have ever known. This is no secret to locals. On any given day, though mostly weekends, it is a common scene at the big bridge to see large and small boats alike trolling deep-diving plugs near the bridge pilings and all along the outside edges of the Egmont Key shipping channel. Trolling big-lipped plugs and heavy, skirted jigs along the rocky bottom of the bridge and channel areas has been a tried and true method of bagging gag grouper for many folks, for many years. It has proved to be a sustainable fishery as long as the bay water is healthy.

Over the years, I've landed my fair share of gags this way trolling plugs from my humble little 17 ft. flats boat. It has always produced. Always! However, there is another method, a "deep-sea" method if you will, of fishing these grouper that just seems to be unbeatable lately. It reminds me of one of my favorite Jimmy Buffett songs. Bottom fishing the Skyway Bridge pilings, if done with proper technique, is just about the most productive and consistent method I have used to put a nice slot size fish or two in the icebox.

This method is nothing new. For many decades, local anglers have been bottom fishing the new bridge pilings and the public fishing pier pilings that are the ghosts of the old bridge. They all hold fish, which is good news, indicative of a healthy, growing and thriving grouper population. Some days the bite is so good you can catch these grouper until your bait runs out. Directly underneath the bridge, at depths ranging between 20 and 35 feet, these fish will give heavy spin tackle a good workout and even put a good pull on stout sticks. It can truly be all day fun fishing action for you and your buddy or the entire family.



Fishing buddy, Ryan Morris with his first fish of the day.

There's nothing quite like watching a child's eyes light up when they realize they have hooked up, and the battle is more than they had anticipated. We are, however, looking for the biggins!

While bottom fishing for gag grouper, whether way out in the Gulf of Mexico or underneath the Skyway, many anglers choose to use frozen squid, sardines, and an array of other cut-bait. Others use live pinfish, croakers and grunts. The most savvy bottom fishermen learn to adjust to the bite and use whichever kind of bait helps to stimulate the bite. To stimulate a slow bite, stinky squid can't be beat to get smaller fish like seabass and grunts feeding which should eventually draw in larger fish like grouper. This is true whether fishing in 80 feet of water out in the Gulf or 20 feet underneath the bridge. However, that special something I made mention of earlier comes not with squid, sardines or any cut bait. That special something is what I now call the "pinfish dance". Any pinfish can do the dance, but, it's the larger ones that perform the best. If you plan to fish the pilings, do yourself a favor and load your livewell with the biggest pinfish you can find. You can usually find good size pins in about three to six feet of water on the grass flats, or around small dock and bridge pilings. A tiny hook baited with almost any kind of cut bait and a small split-shot sinker is all that's needed to pull in one pinfish after another and fill your well with bait. Once you've done so, it's time to dig!

Anchoring properly at the bridge is perhaps the most difficult part of executing the piling fishing technique. There is almost always some sort of current at the Skyway and when it is ripping, anchoring close to the pilings can be both a difficult and dangerous game. With a strong current moving beneath the bridge you must have a relatively heavy fluke style anchor and at least five or more feet of anchor chain. With any luck, your anchor will catch on structure and you will hold quickly. But since luck is not always on your side, it is common to feel your anchor dragged across the sand and rock bottom and simply not catch at all. Never turn your boat motor off until you're



Grouper candy. Time to make these guys dance!



Leaving the bridge for the day, the author reflects on another successful trip.



Four keeper gags in the box which is now all that two anglers can keep in a day on the water.

confident of a solid anchor set. At any time you may need to hit the throttle and "get out of Dodge" before smacking your vessel into a piling.

It is wise to use at least 100 feet of anchor line in order to give yourself plenty of time to gauge your drift up next to the piling. If you know that you are anchored well, you can then let out line until the current takes you, hopefully, in the direction of the piling. To fish it correctly, you should try to be within 15 feet of the piling on either side. It is best to be in a position that allows you to fish up-current of the piling because a swift current will very quickly take your bait out of the strike zone – often before reaching the bottom. Also remember that attaching your vessel to the bridge pilings or the shipping lane bumpers is illegal and will quickly result in a citation if you are caught.

Because pinfish are such a hardy and lively baitfish, they will almost always keep on the move and display lots of action. But in order for them to do the dance, there is a trick involved. Although you can catch keeper fish just about anywhere underneath the bridge, getting your bait as close to the bottom of the piling as possible is the goal. A four oz. lead egg sinker is the minimum you will need in order to keep your bait in place. It is there, in that very narrow strike zone, that you'll most often feel the dance. When your pinfish is spotted and pursued by the predator below, the bait will become nervous and dart to and fro trying to avoid the inevitable jaws of the aggressive grouper. This is the dance! Sometimes the dance will continue for half a minute or so, sometimes it is a short-lived waltz.

Prior to the mandate of circle hook use for reef fishing, this is when you would raise your rod to the sky and feel that awesome power the grouper shows while trying to take you into their protective haunts, sometimes resulting in a break-off. Now that circle hooks are mandatory, when your pinfish becomes nervous and erratic and it feels like the grouper has taken the bait, you need only to start cranking down on your reel and the circle hook will set itself. Usually it is a firm set in the fish's lip rather

than a traditional J-hook gut hook. Better for you, better for the fish. In addition to the required circle hook (6/0 to 8/0 is a good range) I recommend using at least three to five feet of 100 lb test leader and four ounces of lead if not more. Even with 100 lb test leader, with the endless structure below the bridge, you will get broken off as much as you will land fish. And even those fish you land will sometimes be hanging by a thread! Last, remember this rule: "The bigger the bait, the bigger the bite". Use the biggest pinfish you can get your hands on.

Please remember that in addition to the new February and March closure, there are three new tools and tackle rules to follow when reef/bottom fishing. You must use circle hooks, a legal "de-hooking" device rather than standard needle-nose pliers, and must have a swim bladder vent tool onboard while fishing. While the new tools and tackle rules make sense to most bottom-fishing anglers, one has to wonder about the new closure months. For a fish that has proven to be plentiful during the winter months in our nearshore Gulf waters where our community of smaller boat anglers can go, it seems a shame to take away that already short season fishery while commercial fishermen take huge quotas of gags (1.32 million lbs per year). In addition, our recreational bag limit has been cut from five down to two gags per day. It just doesn't feel right. However, this past February, the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council banished longliners to water at least 300 feet deep. I think that was a huge step in the right direction. But, that is another story for another time. In the meantime, now that the season has re-opened, get out there with your big reel and meat stick, and make that pinfish dance. ☑

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