

# TAMPA BAY GAGS

The hottest grouper  
bite in town





remember a time when I devoted about 95% of my time to fishing the flats. A full day of fishing for me meant blacking out my livewell with whitebait at sunrise, then motoring fast to far away mangrove haunts and honey holes until I found a mess of fish. That would be the obvious thing to do in a flats boat, you know, a boat that one typically uses to fish shallow water. Fishing the flats for me, however, is happening less and less now that I've learned the best grouper bite in town. Depending on what boat ramp you choose, this unique fishery is only five to ten minutes away. How's that for saving at the pump?

I do still love the thrill of wrestling a slob of a snook out from the mangroves. And finding a pile of redfish that you can sit on for an hour of bull-dogging, rod-bending action never gets dull. But I think it's time to admit that my heart lies in deep-water fishing, whether it's 40 miles out in clear blue water over a wreck, rock pile or ledge, or, in this case, fishing semi-deep water right here in Tampa Bay. My target species is gag grouper. Despite what both national and state regulation agencies claim about the gag population being in trouble and the subsequent inshore and federal water closures we've seen in the past few years, the gag grouper bite just never seems to quit.

There's no question about it, there are tons of gags in Tampa Bay. Trollers find them along the outside of shipping channels, year after year after year. Live bait diggers find them around the Skyway Bridge and rock piles scattered throughout the mouth of the bay. Folks fishing from the public piers routinely pull up keeper fish. The good news - there seems to be



an endless population of juvenile fish out there. On every trip, we catch at least 10-15 shorts mixed in with our two-per-angler keepers. These shorts are healthy and aggressive, devouring the same large baits that get crushed by the bigger, slot size fish. After the end of the state's now routine February through March closure, I hit my spots on opening day. I quickly ran out of bait!

I can't speak directly to the offshore bite, but, all my friends and guides who fish in 60-100 feet of water say the bite is strong, the fish are big and there are plenty of them.... sounds familiar to the red snapper debate. I've always been a firm advocate of biological research into the health of our fisheries and reasonable changes to our seasons and bag limits, but

I really wonder what's going on here. Based on time on the water and experience, I can say with confidence that Tampa Bay is rich with gag grouper. That was the case years before the reduction in bag limit and the closure months and remains true today.

One last thing in reference to our state water gags. In shallow water, it can be a tricky bite that can elude even the best anglers (sheepshead fishing comes to mind). Countless times I've watched a boat leave a spot without a single bite. Minutes later, on the same spot, my rod is doubled over. So, whereas it's almost always about location-location-location, with shallow water gags it's very much technique-technique-technique. Learn it and you'll be spoiled forever!