

Here a Trout, There a Trout, Everywhere I Seatrout

By Joshua W. Broer

The Red tide of 2005 did serious damage to the spotted seatrout population in our Tampa Bay area waters. I remember zipping along the flats and beaches of St. Joseph's Sound and Honeymoon Island in my old tower boat and nearly shedding a tear at the sight of masses of dead snook, redfish and especially seatrout. For most of the following two years, trout were gone from my tried and true grass flats, potholes, beaches and passes. Snook and redfish began to rebound rather quickly, but, the seatrout population was decimated. When a steady bite did return approximately two years later, the majority of the fish were small and under-slot. Rarely did you get into a good school of trout that met the minimum 15" requirement, and when you occasionally did, you could

not with good conscience keep them for the dinner table. It was evident that the stock was making a comeback, however slowly.

Fast forward to the fall and winter of 2008/2009 and you'd never know that the nasty red tide had hit. Trout catch reports up and down our west central gulf coast are about as good as I've ever seen.

The bite is now on fire, better yet, there are big fish in the mix. This past fall, some of those great old spoil island haunts that we'd all come to rely on in years past were now producing easily reached bag limits, often times with landed fish above the maximum 20" slot. Large seatrout, "gators" and "yellowmouths" as many folks refer to them, resurfaced rather quickly. When winter hit, the ultra-shallow grass flats warmed by the late morning sun came alive with a non-stop bite. Creep up

to a sandy pothole in those shallow areas and you might just come across some of the biggest trout you'll find all season. Currently, whether fishing Tampa Bay, the panhandle or as far south as Boca Grande, you will likely find a great trout bite in grass flats as shallow as a foot of water to as deep as 10 ft.

During colder days, focus your approach on the deeper flats where the fish are seeking warmth.

On warmer days, scout those shallow areas as skinny as your skiff will go or where there is enough water to wade. Many folks stick to using live shrimp, the classic wintertime bait. Others opt to break out their arsenal of artificial lures and put those to work. Small pinfish can also be effective. Whichever method you choose, you should not have a problem finding the bite and landing all the fish you want.

My personal favorite and go-to lure is the root beer colored plastic jig. In the 29 years I have been fishing the Tampa Bay area I have caught more seatrout on this simple lure than anything else in my box. As always though, try to follow the match the hatch rule. Dark bottoms call for darker colors and light bottoms call for lighter colors. Mix it up and see what works. Nevertheless, usually I can out fish any other artificial with a 1/8th to 1/4 oz. red jighead matched with a root beer body. Top-water plugs work great too, especially



Unbeatable tools of the trade for wintertime trout fishing: clouser minnow flies, rootbeer jigs, plastic shrimp and soft-plastic jerk baits.



Good friend James "Spoonfly" Davis with a slot size fish sight-casted while wading in a mere few inches of water.

in the early a.m. Seatrout aren't really all that picky when they're hungry. Hard-body plugs, jigs, soft-plastic jerk baits, artificial shrimp and even spoons will work. I have a buddy who won't use anything but a smoke colored plastic shrimp tail and jighead combo and he can almost always prove why with all day catches of keeper size trout.



Some winter mornings are so cold and wet you wonder why you're even on the water - solo at that. Then a 20+ inch fish on your first cast reminds you.

and well-placed fly (usually just on the perimeter of the hole where the sand meets the grass) you'll lure that fish up from the bottom to the top of the water column and get hit before you can count to three.

Popping bugs and surface flies work great, but my preference is the good old-fashioned clouser minnow. This fly, because of the weighted dumbbell eyes, has about the same sink rate as a light jig. Most seasoned fly fishing anglers will swear by a chartreuse and white pattern for just about anything that swims on the flats. So, you can't go wrong with that. But try darker patterns too.

If you tie your own flies, get creative and mix and match colors until your heart's content. You'll be surprised at what works. I have been tying nothing but red and white clouser minnows with just a touch of crystal flash all season long and cannot seem to keep enough in stock. Ladyfish, unfortunately, do account for some quickly chewed up flies. They fight like hell but ruin flies fast!

Now that our seatrout fishery has recovered from the devastating red tide of 2005, it is now more than ever especially important to practice conservation with these great game fish. Practice catch-and-release as much as is possible. If the fish is undersized or out of season, leave the trout in the water and use a de-hooking device to safely and gently remove the hook. To keep seatrout continuing on the rebound, try keeping fewer fish than the bag limit allows.



Two upper slot size fish in the live-release well, a fair amount to take to the dinner table that night for a recovering fishery.

Please keep up-to-date on regulations as they've changed throughout the years. Remember that the season is closed in November and December in the south region and in February in the north region. If you're in a closed region you can of course still fish em, just don't ice em! With state regulations and our own good catch and release ethics we will all prosper when it comes to productive seatrout fishing in the future. Hopefully, someday, a researcher will come up with a preventative measure to combat Red tide. In my book, that would be nothing short of a Nobel Prize. ☑

Joshua Broer, a Tarpon Springs native, is the Facilities, Safety & Security Manager for the College of Arts & Sciences at USF. Having spent most of his life on or under water, his specialties include flats & bass fishing, scuba diving, canoeing & kayaking, and photography. He can be reached at 813-765-7381 or jbroer@tampabay.rr.com.



The author with a big ol' "gator" caught on a red and black clouser minnow, one of his favorite trout flies.