

Success for Summer Seatrout in the Mosquito Lagoon

A SPECIAL REPORT by Captain John Kumiski ©2010

The eastern sky was streaked with rose and salmon, growing brighter each moment. Mosquitoes buzzed around our heads and wading birds squawked at us. "I've been finding some good fish in this slough lately," whispered Dave Brown as he cast his lure ahead of the boat. The counterfeit shrimp hit the surface of the water with a soft splat. It must have attracted the attention of a hungry predator, because Dave's rod doubled over before he even had a chance to move it.

Strategies

Spotted seatrout feed year round in the waters of Florida's Mosquito Lagoon. But they spawn, and therefore get fattest, during the long, hot days of summer. Capt. Dave Brown makes it his business to know where those trout are, and how to catch them. I asked Capt. Dave to share his strategies for catching summer trout.

"First of all, it's important to be out at first light," he said. "The trout feed along shorelines and drop-offs at night. As the sun gets up the fish will ease out into deeper water. It's important to be fishing at first light when the fish are still in shallow water."

"Sometimes they'll move back onto the flats during the early afternoon and bury into the grass to shade their eyes. We don't have any docks or other structure to provide shade for these fish in the Mosquito Lagoon, so they have to use the grass. If you're lucky you can find them up on the flats for a good part of the day."

"Secondly, you have to be absolutely quiet. Trout, especially gator trout, are very spooky fish. Any type of banging or even loud conversation will give them a bad case of lockjaw, especially if they are in skinny water."

Dave prefers using artificials for these fish, although he will use bait if the fish are being uncooperative (more on that later). He believes that any angler should use a lure which he knows how to work and in which he has confidence. Dave's own favorites are two lures made by DOA, the three inch Standard Shrimp and the TerrorEyz, and the Rip Tide Jerk Worm.

"Those Jerk Worms have revolutionized shallow water fishing over grass beds," he says. "You can work that bait through thick grass in water only 10 or 12 inches deep and it stays pretty weed free. And fish eat it really well."

When the water is a little deeper, to about 30 inches, he prefers the DOA Standard Shrimp. "This plastic shrimp is extremely effective, usually more so than a live shrimp. You can swim it more naturally than you can a live shrimp, and you can certainly cover much more water with it. Sometimes a fast retrieve, with the shrimp just barely leaving a wake on the surface, works best. Other times you can just let the bait drop into a sandy hole on the bottom and the fish will pick it up. You can work it very erratically, with frequent twitches. It's a tremendous finesse bait."

He likes the DOA TerrorEyz in deeper water, from three feet on. "I fish it just like a jig, which I guess in essence it is," he says. "Again, I like to fish it with an erratic retrieve. It's got a tight wiggle the fish can't seem to resist."

Dave says that surface plugs also account for a good number of fish. The Heddon Zara Spook, the Rebel Jumping Minnow, the 7M Mirrolure, and the Bagley Jumping Mullet are all effective, especially if you get that early start. The DOA Bait Buster, a mullet imitation, is an excellent single hook soft plastic bait for big trout. Fly rod poppers and streamers also account for some nice fish for those who prefer using the long rod.

Finding Fish

I asked Dave how he finds the fish. "These fish will be in one of three places," he says. "They're either out over the sand near the edge of the grass, right on the edge between the sand and the grass, or up over the grass itself. I fish these areas in succession until I locate the fish. One thing I can assure you- if you fish in an area for awhile and you don't get any strikes, it's time to move and look elsewhere."

Any time you see schools of finger mullet, trout could be shadowing them. Working surface plugs around mullet schools early in the morning (first light early) is a long established technique for summer trout here.

Mosquito Lagoon has a number of bars which provide obvious structure along which summer trout can frequently be found. Georges Bar runs east and west across the north end of the lagoon basin, and is easily discerned in aerial photos (available in my book, *Fishing Florida's Space Coast*). Tiger Shoal, easily found by motoring east from ICW channel marker 25 (be careful not to run aground on the shoal!) is another. About a mile east southeast of the eastern end of Haulover Canal is yet another bar, which is apparently unnamed.

Farther south, on the east side of the lagoon, is Turtlepen Point. A long bar extends to the northwest from this feature. And near the south end of the lagoon the Middle Flats (now often referred to as the Whale Tail) is an excellent area to fish for big trout.

Still another series of structures that frequently hold summer trout are the spoil islands on the west side of the lagoon, between the Haulover Canal and Oak Hill. The best area here are the islands that have deep water between them, allowing the fish easy access from deep water to the flats behind and back out again.

Other than hiring a guide who knows where the fish have been holding, there's no substitute for putting your time in and searching all these areas until you turn up some fish. Unfortunately summer trout fishing with artificials here is at its best for an hour or two in the morning, which doesn't give you much time to hunt.

Strategies, Part 2

It was mentioned earlier that fish spawn in the summer. According to Brown, this activity occurs over sandy areas in water ranging from one to four feet deep. It was also mentioned that Brown will use bait if artificials don't produce. The bait of choice is a small fish known as a pigfish.

"Pigfish eat trout spawn," says Dave. "Trout will seek out a grunting pigfish and attack it just to kill it, even when the trout isn't particularly hungry. They do it to defend their eggs, just like a largemouth bass will attack a bluegill." So pigfish make a deadly bait when the fish are being finicky.

Brown uses seven foot spinning rods loaded with eight or ten pound line for this fishing. He ties on a good quality swivel (drifting with or retrieving the pigfish will twist the line otherwise) and the attaches 12 to 18 inches of 20 pound test as a shock tippet. Tied to the business end is a 2/0 to 5/0 Kahle hook, depending on the size of the pigfish (they're two or three inches long early in the summer and five or six inches long by September). The baitfish are allowed to swim freely, with no float or sinker used. The pigfish are hooked just above the anal fin, which makes them grunt. When they're cast out into the water- instant fish caller.

Brown uses two different techniques while live baiting with pigfish. He will get directly upwind of a spot which he knows from experience will be productive, usually near the edge of a grass bed. He wants to be far enough away that he can work over the sandy area near the bed and the edge of the bed itself. He doesn't like fishing pigfish right over the grass bed, since the baitfish tries to hide by burrowing into the grass.

"I cast directly downwind to the target area," he says. "I'll drift in toward the edge of the flat with the wind. If I get a strike I anchor immediately. Often a concentration of fish is there and I can catch three or four more before they wise up." Once they stop biting he simply lifts the anchor and continues drifting in the same direction until he either finds some more fish or gets too close to the edge of the grass. Then he moves to another spot and repeats the procedure.

His other technique involves drifting with the wind over what he calls a "spotty" bottom, one composed of mixed sand and grass, in three to seven feet of water. He'll cast the pigfish out at a 45 degree angle, quartering behind the boat. The baitfish swims towards the bottom, so he lifts it up periodically. When the bait is directly behind the boat he reels it in and casts again.

"The idea here is that when the boat floats over a fish, the fish will move," says Dave. "If you're quiet, the fish thinks the boat is just another piece of flotsam, and circles back to take up his original position. Ideally, he sees or hears the pigfish and eats it. They usually strike after the bait has been lifted and is heading back toward the bottom. If you're noisy the trout won't return to its original position, but will spook away from the boat. I can't stress enough how important it is to be quiet when fishing for trout."

I've been out fishing with Dave Brown enough to respect his skills and knowledge. The trout he hooked, described at the beginning of this piece, weighed in at a solid five pounds. He gets larger fish on a regular basis.

If you'd like to fish with Capt. Dave Brown, give him a call at (386) 427-1991.

Obtaining Pigfish

The easiest and probably best way to get a day's supply of pigfish is to buy them from someone. These baitfish cost about 50 cents each, and you'll probably need 50 per person for a day's fishing. One place you can usually get them is at Kelly's Bait and Tackle in Oak Hill, at the north end of the Mosquito Lagoon (phone (321)345-0990. Action Bait and Tackle in Titusville carries them during the summer, too.

The bait sellers get pigfish by trapping them in small wire traps similar to crab traps. Bait trappers get hostile if they find you messing with their traps. If you run into any traps while out on the water do yourself a favor and leave them alone.

You can castnet pigfish at the edge of spoil islands or grassflats. Use a little bit of oily cat food to chum them up close, then throw the net over them. Although I wish you the best of luck, expect progress filling your livewell to be slow!

Conclusions

Although not as good as in the "good old days", Mosquito Lagoon is still one of the best places in Florida to catch big trout. Summer is a prime season. Keep in mind some other fish like crevalle, redfish, or even tarpon may interrupt your search for trout (not necessarily a bad thing!).

Try the strategies suggested in this Special Report, and watch your summer seatrout score soar!

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