

Florida Saltwater Fish, Plus

By Paul Roat

This brief summary of local fish species should serve as a guide for what you can take home. Fish regulations change often, and although this list is complete as of this date, it is advised to check with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in Tampa at 850-488-6058 for the most up-to-date fishing rules.

Amberjack

Lesser amberjack (*Seriola fasciata*) are olive green or brownish on back with silver sides with a dark band that extends backward from the eyes. They are the smallest of the amberjacks at less than 10 pounds and are found in 200-400 feet of water.



Greater amberjack (*Seriola lalandi*) have a dark strip from the nose to the front of the dorsal fin. The largest of the amberjacks at up to 40 pounds, they are found in 50-250 feet of water, although juveniles are found in less than 30 feet of water.

There is a 28-inch minimum fork length on greater amberjack with a one-fish daily possession limit. Lesser amberjack must be not less than 14 inches or more than 22 inches measured to the fork, with a five-fish bag limit daily.

Cobia

Cobia, or ling (*Rachycentron canadum*) are long, slim fish with a dark lateral strip from the eye to the tail. Juveniles have black and white stripes. They usually are in the 30-pound range, although the largest caught in the state was 103 pounds. Cobia are found both inshore and offshore. There is a 33-inch minimum fork length and a one-fish daily bag limit or a total of no more than six per vessel, whichever is less.



Dolphin

Dolphin (*Coryphaena hippurus*) have a greenish-blue hue on their back, with yellow sides. They have a blunt head and can swim up to 50 mph. They are commonly found offshore, and grow up to 30 pounds, although dolphin more than 70 pounds have been caught. There is no size limit on this species, but there is a 10-fish daily possession limit, with no more than 60 permitted per vessel per day.



Flounder

Flounder (*Paralichthys obliquata*) are brown, flat fish that are predominantly bottom dwellers. The Gulf flounder has three black spots that form a triangle; the Southern flounder does not have the black spots. Flounder are mostly found in backwater areas, although they sometimes venture into the Gulf. Most are in the two-pound range. There is a 12-inch minimum length on flounder, with a 10-fish daily bag limit. You can also spear flounder, but can't use a snatch-hook to catch them.



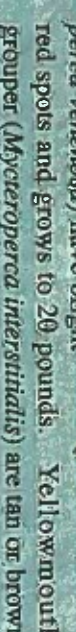
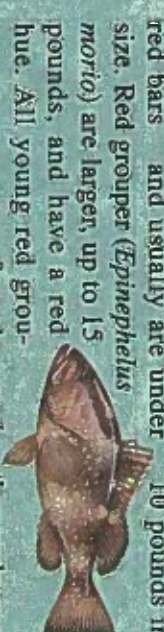
Goliath grouper

Goliath grouper, formerly called jewfish, (*Epinephelus itajara*) are one of the longest-living fish at 50 years. They have irregular dark vertical bars on the sides and can grow up to 800 pounds in size. Goliath grouper were heavily harvested, prompting fishery regulators to class them as a protected species. It is illegal to possess Goliath grouper today.



Grouper

The grouper family is a large, common deepwater species. Nassau grouper (*Epinephelus striatus*) have brown or red bars and usually are under 10 pounds in size. Red grouper (*Epinephelus morio*) are larger, up to 15 pounds, and have a red hue. All young red grouper are female, and then undergo a sex reversal to male as they age. Scamp (*Mycteroperca phenax*) have red-dish spots that tend to be grouped into lines. Yellowfin grouper (*Mycteroperca venenosa*) have bright red spots and grows to 20 pounds. Yellowmouth grouper (*Mycteroperca interstitialis*) are tan or brown



with small spots fused into lines and grow to 15 pounds.

Some of the most common grouper caught in local waters are black grouper (*Mycteroperca bonaci*) and gag grouper (*Mycteroperca microlepis*). Blacks are olive or gray with black spots, and grow between 40 and 100 pounds. Gags are brownish gray in color with worm-like markings and grow to 25 pounds.



Size limits on gag and black grouper is 22 inches in the Gulf, with a catch limit of no more than five per person per day. For red, size is limited to 20 inches, with no more than one per person per day.

Kingfish

Kingfish, or king mackerel (*Scomberomorus cavalla*) are silver in color with black or bluish-green backs. They are slender fish with a tapered head. Kings are usually found offshore in large schools, and grow to 20 pounds, although the Florida record was 90 pounds. There is a 24-inch minimum fork length with a two-fish daily bag limit.



Permit

Permit (*Trachinotus falcatus*) are a South Florida fish that is starting to extend its range into local waters. This bull-headed fish has a gray back with silver sides and is similar in shape to pompano, although much larger at 25 pounds. They are found in offshore and inshore waters. There is a 11- to 20-inch slot limit on permit, with a six-fish daily bag limit. You may also possess one fish of more than 20 inches, although the vessel can't possess more than two big permit on any trip.



Pompano

The Florida pompano (*Trachinotus carolinus*) is similar in shape and coloration to pompano, although their bellies. They are found both inshore and offshore, and usually grow to three to six pounds. There is a 11- to 20-inch slot limit on pompano, with a six-fish daily bag limit. You may also possess one fish of more than 20 inches daily, although like permit, no more than two big pompano can be on a boat at any time.



Redfish

One of the more popular local fish, redfish or red drum (*Sciaenops ocellatus*) are copper-colored with a distinctive black spot at the base of the tail. Juveniles are found inshore, and migrate offshore to spawn, usually from August to October. The Florida record for redfish is 51 pounds. Permit size for possession of redfish is within the 18- to 27-inch slot limit, with one-fish-daily possession allowed per fisher.



Black drum (*Pogonias cromis*) have a highly arched back and a gray to black colored body with pairs of whiskers under the chin. They are bottom dwellers found both inshore and offshore, and adults grow to 30 pounds, with the Florida record weighing 93 pounds. They live to more than 35 years of age.



There is a 14- to 24-inch slot limit, and five fish may be taken daily. One fish greater than 24 inches may be taken daily.

Black mullet

Striped or black mullet (*Mugil cephalus*) have bluish-gray or green backs and silver sides, with horizontal black stripes along the back. This inshore fish has a small mouth and seldom takes a hook. Mullet usually do not reach more than three pounds in size, although grown in aquariums they have reached more than 12 pounds. Similar species are fantail mullet (*Mugil gyrans*) which seldom grow larger than one pound, and white mullet (*Mugil curema*). There is no minimum size limits on mullet, although there is a 50-fish daily bag limit from Feb. 1 to Aug. 31, or 100 fish per vessel; from Sept. 1-Jan. 31, the limit is 50 per person or vessel, whichever is less.



Bluefish

Bluefish (*Pomatomus saltatrix*) are blue or greenish-blue on the back, silver on sides, with large, prominent teeth. On the west coast of Florida, bluefish are generally less than three pounds, although Atlantic bluefish are much larger. The Florida record for this species is 22 pounds. They usually travel in large schools, and are found inshore in spring and summer, migrating offshore in the fall and winter. There is a 12-inch minimum fork length, with a 10-fish daily limit.



Catch-and-release regulations

Sea bass

Black sea bass (*Centropristis striata*) are generally dark brown or black in color and are found near reefs or other offshore debris. They are generally in the two-pound range.

There is an 10-inch minimum size limit on sea bass, with no bag limit in Gulf waters, although in the Atlantic there is a 20-fish daily limit per day.



Shark

Several species of sharks are found in local waters. Makos (*Isurus paucus*) are have deep blue backs with white bellies, and are usually seen offshore near the surface.

They are common to 300 pounds, although the Florida record is 911 pounds for a mako. Bonnethead sharks (*Sphyrna tiburo*) are gray in color

with a distinctive shovel-shaped head. They usually are found in bays and estuaries, and grow to four feet in length. Hammerhead sharks (*Sphyrna lewini*) are brown to olive in color with a hammer-like head. They too are found both inshore and offshore, and can reach 14 feet in length.

There is a recreational limit of one shark per person or two sharks per vessel per day, whichever is less; the harvest of sawsharks, sawfish, basking sharks, whale sharks and spotted eagle-rays is prohibited. Also prohibited is finning or filleting at sea.



Sheepshead

Sheepshead (*Archosargus probatocephalus*) is one of the more popular winter fish caught near docks and piers in the area. They are in color, with distinctive vertical black bands along the

sides. Near-shore sheepsheads grow to 22 pounds; offshore fish can reach up to 80 pounds. There is a 12-inch minimum size limit on sheepshead, with a 15-fish daily bag limit.



Snapper

Snapper are another numerous species of offshore fish. Blackfin snapper (*Lutjanus buccanella*) are generally bright red with common a-shaped

pectoral fins. They usually grow to 20 inches in length. Cubera snapper (*Lutjanus cyanopterus*) are gray with a reddish tinge. They have distinctive canine teeth.

They usually grow to 40 pounds and are found inshore as well as offshore. Dog snapper (*Lutjanus jensenii*) are brown with enlarged canine teeth.



and a blue line under their eyes. They grow to 30 pounds in size.

Gray, orange snapper (*Lutjanus griseus*) are dark brown or gray with reddish-orange spots in rows along their sides. They grow to 12 pounds in size and are found near mangroves and seagrass beds inshore, near rock reefs offshore.

Lane snapper (*Lutjanus synagris*) is silvery pink in color with pink and yellow lines on sides and often a black spot near the dorsal fin. They usually grow to one pound in size.

Mahogany snapper (*Lutjanus mahogoni*) are grayish olive in color with a dark spot below the dorsal fin. They are found in clear water near reefs offshore.

Mutton snapper (*Lutjanus analis*) have olive-colored backs with a red belly. They have a black spot under their dorsal fin, and are found near offshore reefs. They grow to about 15 pounds.

Red snapper (*Lutjanus campechanus*) are pinkish-red in color with a white belly and are found offshore to 20 pounds in size. Vermilion snapper (*Rhomboplites aurorubens*) are red in color with yellow streaks on the sides. These small fish, generally less than one pound, are also found offshore near reefs. Yellowtail snapper (*Ocyurus chrysurus*) have olive or bluish backs with a yellow stripe running from the eye to the tail. They are found offshore over sandy areas, and grow to about three pounds.

In Gulf waters, there is a 16-inch minimum size on red snapper, with a limit of four per person per day; 16-inch minimum on mutton snapper, with no more than 10 per person per day; 11-inch minimum on dog, mahogany, blackfin and yellowtail, 10 fish bag limit; 12- to 30-inch slot on Cubera (may possess two more than 30 inches), 10 fish bag limit; 10-inch minimum on mangrove snapper, five-fish limit daily; 11-inch minimum on vermilion, 10-fish bag limit; and eight-inch limit on lane snapper, 10-fish bag limit.

Snook (*Centropomus undecimalis*) are powerful fish that are usually found in bays and estuaries. They have a mouth with a protruding lower jaw and a distinctive black lateral line. Snook grow to eight pounds, although the Florida record is 44 pounds.

Snook

Snook rules changed July 1. For linesider anglers off Anna Maria Island, the "slot limit" for snook is now 28 to 33 inches. There will also be a closed season expansion which is now from Dec. 1 to Jan. 31, as well as May through August. There is also a one-fish daily bag limit to catch snook and a special snook stamp is required on your fishing license.



Spanish mackerel

Spanish mackerel (*Scomberomorus maculatus*) are smaller than king mackerel at about 20 pounds. They have green backs and silver sides with yellow irregular spots on their sides. A schooling fish, Spanish mackerel are found inshore and offshore. There is a 12-inch minimum length on the species, with a 15-fish daily bag limit.



Spotted seatrout

Spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*) have dark gray or green backs and numerous black spots on their sides. They grow to about four

pounds locally, and are found inshore near seagrass beds. There is a 15- to 20-inch slot limit on spotted seatrout, with a four-fish daily limit, and you may possess one of more than 20 inches.

Seatrout season is closed Nov. 1-Dec. 31 in the "south region," which includes Anna Maria Island.

Tarpon

Florida's premiere gamefish, tarpon (*Megalops atlanticus*) have dark blue or greenish black backs that shade to bright silver on the sides. They have huge scales and are primarily an inshore fish, although

offshore. Most adults spawn in the 50- to 100-pound range, although the Florida record is 243 pounds. There are no size limits on tarpon, although there is a two-fish-per-day limit, and fishers must have a \$50 tarpon tag on your Florida fishing license to possess or kill silver kings.



Islander Illustrations: Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Division of Marine Fisheries Management, Illustrations by Diane Rome Peebles

Want more information?

There is a wealth of information about saltwater and freshwater fish available through the state of Florida.

Best source for up-to-the-minute fishing regulations is via MyFWC.com/triaine, which is the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Web site. It has all sorts of information as well as the slot limits of all the fish, seasons, regulations on catch and the like.

Another good place to go is the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute in St. Petersburg, at <http://research.MvFWC.com>.

Please remember that you generally do need a fishing license to get out on the water and hook the big ones. Licenses are available at most of the local bait and tackle shops. If you want to venture online for that information, go to MyFWC.com/license, or call 1-888-FISH FLORIDA.

Florida residents are charged \$13.50 for a one-year license. Snook permits are an extra \$2 per year, and tarpon tags are \$51.50 per year, but the tarpon permits are only available at local tax collector's offices.

If you're a Florida resident and want to splurge, get a "lifetime" saltwater fishing license at \$301.50.