

February is our last real month of winter here on the west coast of Florida. Early on, we will be dealing with cold fronts, some quite harsh. But, by the end of the month we will be experiencing some very pleasant days. Just like December and January, the key to angling success is to take what Mother Nature gives you.

Sheepshead are a targeted species in February here on the Suncoast. These tasty critters are members of the porgy family and are underrated gamefish, in my opinion. Sheepshead fight hard, taste great, and 6 lb fish are common catches. Not to mention that they bite when the water is cold and dirty, and very few other species cooperate. They invade the area this month, taking up station around structures such as bridges, docks, jetties, and oyster bars. Both passes are very dependable spots to catch a nice mess of sheepies. The rocks at the north end of Siesta Key are arguably the best sheepshead spot around. The water is quite deep, over twenty feet, with ample structure. Best times to fish are slow to moderate tides, if the water is moving too swiftly it is just too difficult to fish.

My favorite rig for fishing for sheepshead in deep water is the simple but effective “knocker rig”. Basically, you tie on 24” or so of 30-40 lb leader on the end of your line. Then, slide on a slip sinker then tie on a 1/0 Eagle Claw or Kahle hook. The weight will rest right up against the eye of the hook. Live shrimp are effective and easy to obtain, but sand fleas, oyster worms, and fiddler crabs will also work very well. As with most bottom fishing, use just enough weight to hold the bottom. The bite is often times very subtle. You will feel several “taps”. Do not move the bait at all, that will spook the sheepshead. Instead, be patient, wait until you feel a steady pull, then reel quickly and set the hook.

The deep grass flats in the area between CB’s Saltwater Outfitters at Stickney Pt south to Blackburn Pt will produce speckled trout, pompano, and plenty of ladyfish on jigs and live shrimp this month. Give each flat 15-20 minutes, and keep moving until the fish are located. The afternoon high tides can be productive, especially for speckled trout. I like ¼ ounce white Cotee jig heads and grub tails in olive, gold, and rootbeer/gold.

This same area has numerous canals and oyster bars that hold snook, redfish, black drum, sheepshead, snapper, jacks, and trout. Plugs, Gulp shrimp, and large live shrimp are all productive baits to fish canals and bars. Low, incoming tides are best for working the bars while the higher stages are great for fishing docks. Phillippi Creek and South Creek are both great spots to cast plugs for snook and jacks.

While the areas south are great when it is cool and breezy, the passes and flats up north will be productive after several nice days, particularly towards the end of the month. As the weather improves, the water will settle down and clear up, and the flats around both passes along with the passes themselves will provide good action on bluefish, pompano, trout, ladyfish, jacks, sea bass, and the occasional flounder. Drifting along and casting out jigs is fun and productive, but free lining a live shrimp will also work well. For those anglers willing to put in the time, the flats up around Whale Key and Long Bar will produce sight casting opportunities for tailing redfish on winter low tides.