

Ask Professor Flounder

Capt. Tommy Thompson

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Q: I'd like to start using topwater plugs for trout and redfish. Any helpful hints?

A: Topwater plugs are great for both trout and reds if you fish them right. That means not only the right action, but also the right time of day. First, determine that the plug you're using comes close to 'matching the hatch'. For example, if trout are eating all the glass minnows and letting the white bait get away; don't try a popping plug that chugs along the surface. Use something that looks more like the bait they're eating, such as a small silver jig or small deeper running minnow-style plug! On the other hand, if the fish are striking small to medium mullet on top of the water, you're in 'topwater territory'. I have good luck with plugs that pop as well as those that don't for reds and trout. I recommend Rapala Skitter Walks or Mirrolure Top Dog Jr's for non-poppers and Chug Bugs and High Roller Poppers for great popping action. I find that poppers work best in the very lowest light and I fish non-poppers as the sun comes over the horizon, which is the trick to fishing topwater plugs. **Get there early!** Remember, it gets light about 30 minutes before the sun comes up and that's when the fish bite best.

Q: What's the easiest way to keep live shrimp alive?

A: The 'standard' Big Bend method is to have the bait shop put them in a plastic bag. Put the bag in your boat cooler on a piece of newspaper (Today's news, tomorrow's fish wrapper!), which will keep them from coming into direct contact with the ice. They will usually keep several hours and at worst, will be 'fresh dead' and not soggy from dying in a live well. Don't ask for your shrimp this way south of the Pasco/Pinellas county line, as they will call for the men in white coats to come get you!

Q: My fishing friends laugh when I tell them I want to learn to fly fish. Is there something 'un-manly' about fly-fishing?

A: Not at all. Many fishermen use both fly and conventional tackle, including the Bush boys (Jeb, Dubya and Dad), Stu Apte, Lefty Kreh and Andy Mill (Although I don't particularly like that cute bandanna neckerchief he wears on OLN TV!). You'll learn lots of great fishing skills as you learn to fly fish, such as patience, the ability to visually spot fish in the water and a desire to hone your casting accuracy skills. You **will not** fill the cooler while fly-fishing, but you **will** spend lots of money on rods, reels and line. It's fun and challenging and has been called one of the 'sports of Kings'. Just think about a 200-pound Tarpon on any rod you currently own and then think about it on a 5-ounce stick of carbon fiber—that's manly!

Q: How do successful fishermen seem to always understand just where the fish will be lurking?

A: Think like a fish! Take into consideration tidal flow and the nutrients (bait) the tide moves. Analyze currents and remember that fish would rather lay in wait in slower moving water (they almost always want moving water) than to have to swim hard to stay near the bait. Structures allow ambushes. Fish are predators and will look for the weaker fish in a school to attack (Popper and chugger-style plugs look like wounded baits on the surface). Pelagic fish like Spanish mackerel and kingfish strike more often on the perimeter of a school of baitfish and sometimes herd up the smaller fish. Trout and redfish like to hide in and near sand spots on the flats so they can easily ambush baits. Grouper love ledges and limestone holes in deep rocks. Again, think like a fish.

Q: Why have all of this year's GOFB fishing tournaments been cancelled due to bad weather?

A: It's a weather conspiracy. Actually we've just had an unlucky year. You wouldn't believe how many phone calls are made the two days before any tournament. Board members check many weather sources, including NOAA, The Weather Channel and some independent sources, and there's lots of gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair before we cancel an event. The bottom line is that we're interested in your (and our) safety and well-being and hopefully make the right decision in time that you can make alternate plans for cancelled tournament days. Let's hope for fair skies and light winds in the future!