

Ask Professor Flounder

Capt. Tommy Thompson

GOFC Newsletter

September 2003

Q: What's a good rig to use when trolling for Spanish mackerel?

A: I like the method taught me by Ed Ellett. It's simple, easy to rig and catches good limits of those tasty, toothy speedsters.

Ed uses a short wire leader, generally about 12" long. I think he uses 'store-bought' ones with a snap on one end and a swivel on the other. I personally make mine up from light coffee-colored wire, tying the swivel and jig on with haywire twists. In either case, the swivel is important, but remember not to use one too big and to use a black one (You don't want the fish to strike the swivel!). The 'business end' of this rig is a Flowering Floreo jig. I prefer the ½ oz size with a red fluorescent head and a yellow tail. Before unwrapping the jig, I cut the tail back to the end of the hook with a pair of scissors (It's easy to cut this way, as the plastic package gives you something to cut into.) Cutting back the tail keeps the fish from 'short striking' and missing the hook. I typically keep 6 or 8 of these rigs ready to go, as they WILL get shredded after a couple of fish.

To fish this rig, first attach a small strip of mullet belly that you've cut up a few days earlier, salted heavily and refrigerated. The salting toughens the meat. A strip about 1 inch long is adequate. I've tried FishBites for this, but the jury is still out. Mullet just smells SO GOOD! If you don't have mullet, try to catch a mackerel using a bare Floreo, then use his belly for strips. Troll this rig about 50 feet behind your boat at a slow speed, maybe 4 to 5 knots. As you troll, you need to be constantly pulling the line forward and letting it drop back, almost letting it hit the bottom. Mackerel always seem to strike as the jig falls back and this method is much more productive than just putting the rods in the holders and dragging the baits along at a constant speed and depth.

I think it's also important to use moderately light tackle for Spanish mackerel. I use 7' casting rods with Ambassadeur casting reels loaded with 20# Power Pro. That's plenty of pulling power but the small line diameter gets the jigs down fast and the non-stretch line really helps set the hook fast and true. It also gives you plenty of action with a 3 to 4-pound fish!

Q: Please explain the depths I see marked on nautical charts.

A: It's really pretty simple --- and complicated, too. How's that for an educated answer?

Assuming you're using NOAA Nautical Charts, as compared with fishing charts that are sold commercially (and are probably using the same data, just not as detailed), the depths marked on charts showing the inshore and near shore Gulf of Mexico coastlines are shown in feet at MLLW. MLLW means Mean Lower Low Water. That's a statistical, historic average of the lower low tides. To me, this means that at a low tide shown on your tide table is generally slightly higher than the number on the chart, but that in extreme cases (wintertime morning lows and summertime evening lows) the actual water in an area could be less than on the chart. I usually figure about a 1-foot error for extreme tides in the Big Bend, as we usually have a 3 to 4 foot tidal range. So...if you have an 'average tidal day,' usually when the moon is not full or new (neap tides), you can pretty much count on there being the amount of water shown on the charts. If your tide table (see the next question in this article) shows a negative low, you might count on there being less water than

charted.

A final consideration when reading depth information is the age of your chart. My NOAA #11408 (*Florida, Crystal River to Horseshoe Point*) chart was last updated in 1998, and that chart is the 27 th edition! There's no telling just when it was originally surveyed, and updates just mean that reported changes have been made (For example, the road between Jena and Horseshoe Beach, destroyed by the 'Storm of the Century,' has been deleted from the 1998 chart.). It's a good idea to keep your charts as current as you can. And remember, personal knowledge is really important. I suggest you keep written notes in you boat log or on your chart as to differences you find from the charted depths, as these depths do change with storms and increased river flows.

Q: Are there any good tide programs for my computer?

A: Yes, there are several.

I've been using TideMaster for about 6 years now. It was originally written for older PC's running DOS and has been upgraded lately to run under Windows. It's an easy program to use, but costs \$25 for two years of tables for Florida. It has nice graphs and a fairly good selection of locations. It's available from Zephyr Systems in New Mexico (Of all the places that need a tide chart!). Their phone number is (412) 422-6600.

Recently I did some searching on the Internet for a replacement for TideMaster. I wanted a program that had more locations and that, most importantly, was free. I found a program called WXTide32, and it's a doozy!

WXTide32 predicts tides until the year 2037 at 8500 tide level stations worldwide (100 in North America) and has all kinds of bells and whistles. It has a nice graphic interface in Windows, good graphics and the ability to output printed data. And it's FREE. Just logon to www.wxtide32.com and follow the download instructions! I'm going to start using this program on my PC from now on. It has a slightly higher learning curve than TideMaster, but it's worth the effort if you're a more-skilled-than-average computer geek.

For those of you using Palm Pilots and the Palm OS, there's a great (free, too!) program called Tide Tool. When Rick Davidson first showed it to me I was amazed. It's essentially the same as WXTide32, but for your PDA! I found the program online by searching 'free Palm programs' and have since lost the link, but if you're interested, contact me and we'll arrange a meeting where I can 'beam' the program to your Palm Pilot.