

INSHORE FISHING REPORT

JULY 2003

Capt. Tommy Thompson

Well, “Scallop Madness” is upon us! And, what else can I say but to remind everyone to act safely and responsibly and to watch out for those who won't? Remember that the rules relating to dive flags changed last year and that boats are certainly going to be checked more thoroughly this year by the FWC than at any time during the year. It seems to me that this is their big opportunity to be sure that everyone's safety gear is proper and aboard, as well as to check for current fishing licenses. Remember that anyone over 16 must have a current saltwater license to harvest scallops and that kids should always wear appropriate-sized flotation vests while the boat is underway. Scallop reports have been varied at the time of this column's production, so all I can do is advise that you contact a local marina at the port you'll be using. So far, both Steinhatchee (Sea Hag Marina) and Crystal River (Best Western Resort) have reported good catches. Also, be sure to mark your calendar for the GOFC Scallop Outing on August 9th at Steinhatchee.

If you're not particularly interested in the scallop harvest, or you've been once or twice already, you'll probably want to go ‘fish fishing’. The combination of all the rain we've had in the Big Bend area during June and early July and the oppressive heat has done their usual damage to some areas. The constant howling of boat motors and splashing and hooting of scallopers hasn't helped, either. I suggest that you spend your hot summer fishing days with an early start on close-in bars, preferably on the rising tide (The first couple of days following the July GOFC meeting on the 22nd look very promising to me.). Fish with topwater plugs and you'll likely find a solo gator Trout or a big Redfish. As the day warms up and the tide rises to flood, fish covered bars and points with soft plastics. This time of year you'll do lots of casting, but you need to cover lots of ground. This is also a great time for those of you with little-used poling platforms and pushpoles to get into the swing of things. The pushpole is an essential tool for me when I'm up close and have another fisherman aboard. I'm able to move a little, stop when I need to cast or net a fish, and move from spot to spot as quietly as is possible. Try moving as slowly as possible, as fish can not only hear you, but feel the surge of water pushed by your boat.

Another option to avoid “Scallop Madness” is to try fishing some places that are not affected by all those crazies. In the GOFC fishing area, I suggest you give either Yankeetown or Waccasassa a try. Actually, either port will do, as I think the best fishing is found in the areas between the two rivers. Fish the bars and points in Lows Bay and near Porpoise Point on the rising tide for great catches of oversized Redfish. Remember, though, that Waccasassa means “It's time for a new lower unit.” in the ancient Indian tongue, so take it easy and keep a good lookout for submerged bars and rocks. You might also try anchoring and chumming in the areas NW of the “Trout Stake’ (29 02.488'N 082 50.404'W) off of Porpoise Point and see what happens. It's always a good spot for some Spanish Mackerel and an occasional Cobia (or Shark! —yikes!!).

Give some areas outside the GOFC fishing area a try during August and early September. As scalloping is limited to areas north of the Pasco/Hernando line, you might try fishing near Tarpon Springs in northern Pinellas County. It's a bit of a drive, but there's a great county boat ramp with good access to nice deep flats, mangrove islands and Anclote Key. A trip to Tarpon Springs is a good fun destination for a family trip, as well. There are even **white sand beaches** nearby and the old Sponge Exchange is worth seeing. And, if you get the chance, don't miss the huge food portions at Mr. Souvlaki on Alt. US19—it's the best Greek food in Florida.

Other easy trips from Gainesville are to the fishing grounds north of Sisters Creek Ramp at Jacksonville,

which offer great surf action near Nassau Sound and backwater fishing in the feeder creeks of the Sawpit River. *Team Lucky Dog* recently spent a couple of days there and did well, despite some unpleasant weather.

It's definitely a great place to fish. You might also consider the St. Augustine area, launching at the Vilano Bridge public ramp or Matanzas/Crescent Beach, launching at Devil's Elbow Fish Camp. Either place offers great access to terrific backwater fishing or close-in fishing near the beach for Kingfish, Tarpon or Redfish, which regularly attack the Pogie pods. Just be prepared for bigger-than-West Coast surf when you're running the passes or inlets over there.

Finally, my monthly thoughts on boating safety. Remember that when you're scalloping or just trying to navigate around the scallopers, to be sure and give them plenty of distance. Unless you've got business with another boat, particularly when their dive flag is flying, there's no need to run fast or close to them. There's enough water out there for everyone, so take it easy!

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