

Shrimping on the St. Johns River at Green Cove Springs

If you're looking for something different to try during the hot summer months and don't mind a little physical exercise, you might want to go shrimping. The St. Johns river is a shrimp super-highway during the summer (July through September, season may vary), and Green Cove springs seems to be a consistent shrimp stop.

There are two ways to go about harvesting shrimp when they make their summer time run up the St. Johns River, both involve the use of a cast net. You can bait them at night in the shallows with chum, or look for them during daylight hours on the channel edges. I'm going to describe the later method as it seems to produce better catches and makes life a lot easier since you can see what you're doing.

First off, how do you get to Green Cove Springs. If you're leaving Gainesville, head north on Waldo road and continue as it becomes US 301 until you reach Starke (please go slow through Waldo to avoid the speed traps). At Starke take SR 16 East until you reach the junction with US 17, you're now in Green Cove Springs. I like to launch from the public ramp at Governor's Park, which is about 2-3 miles north of the junction of SR 16 and US 17 on the right hand side. There is another launch ramp about ½ mile up the road at Black Creek, but I'm not sure if it's a public ramps or not.

What do you need to catch shrimp? Well you really only need 2 things: a boat and a decent cast net. I'll go into more detail on the cast net later. A fish finder is also a big plus, as it will allow you to spot the channel edges, and more importantly, mark the shrimp in deeper water. Another handy item is a wash basin/tub for emptying your net into after you've made a cast. Look for one with a 3-4 ft diameter. This makes culling your catch much easier and allows you to quickly re-deploy your net after a successful cast. When your arms need a rest you can go back and cull out the by-catch from the tub and then pour the remaining shrimp right into a cooler. Some people like to use a laundry basket; I like a basin better as it hold water which keeps the shrimp and fish alive until you're ready to cull.

Where are the shrimp? They seem to hang out in the same areas year after year; here are the 3 spots that I have found to be most productive.

Spot 1: Black Creek.

N 30-02.515, W 081-42.590

If you go North on the river after leaving Governor's Park Black Creek is approx 1½ miles on the west shore line. The shrimp congregate just west of the bridge. Usually the shrimp run smaller here but the numbers can make up for it. Be careful not to throw your net too close to the bridge pilings, many a net have been lost here!

Spot 2: West shore of the river just north of the Shands Bridge (SR 16).

N 29-59.049, W 081-37.655

Head south from the ramp towards the Shands Bridge. Look for the pier that extends a couple hundred yards from shore just north of the bridge. The channel edge here drops away quickly from 3 ft to 20ft. It's on the channel edge where the shrimp will be congregated. This spot is the most consistent best bet.

Spot 3: Just South of the Shands Bridge on the eastern shore.

N 29-59.151, W 081-36.645

At this spot the channel edge is almost cliff like. It goes from 3 ft to 30 ft in a span of 10 yards. Look for the shrimp to be hanging around the middle depths approx 15-25ft. This spot is a bit more sporadic, sometimes it produces mightily and other times it's all but barren. Give it a look though, I once limited out in 4 casts here.

There are several things to keep in mind in regards to cast nets used for shrimping. Make sure you have a long enough hand line. I've got 45 ft on mine and need every last inch when casting in 30ft of water with current. If you're going to use a net specifically for shrimping it's a good idea to "tape" it. Apply a ring of duct tape, in overlapping foot long sections, to both sides on the net 5 inches above the lead line. This will keep the net from "coning" when it's sinking. Some shrimp nets even come ready made with a webbing material similar to the stuff on lawn furniture. Mesh size, I like 1/2 inch best. Some use even 5/8 to avoid catching the smaller shrimp, I use the 1/2 mesh because I like keeping the medium shrimp for pinfish bait. Just don't go over 5/8 inch and you should be just fine. Lastly a word about net size, the old adage "bigger is better" doesn't necessarily apply. The bigger the net the more shrimp you can expect to catch per throw. But a bigger net requires more muscle to throw. It's a bit of a trade off, a big net won't require as many casts to achieve a limit. However, if the shrimp are running slow you may get tired after a couple of hours when using the bigger net, where as a smaller net can be thrown all day long.

Here are a few more general pointers. Use your depth finder. The shrimp will show as a thin line or light cloud close to the bottom. I don't bother throwing the net unless I can see them on the finder. If you see marks farther up off the bottom these are likely bait fish and not shrimp. I like drifting versus anchoring, unless the shrimp are really concentrated or I'm around a lot of boats. Drifting also helps minimize "blowback" when there's a strong current, which will prematurely close you net. If you have them, take two nets with you, a big one and a small one. Throw the small one until you start catching shrimp then bring out the big daddy when you they are there. You can also switch back to the small net if you get too tired throwing the bigger one. The first hour or so after the change of tide seems to be the best shrimping, with the outgoing tide being a bit better than the incoming. Lastly, the limit on shrimp is 5 gallons, heads on, per person or vessel which ever is less. Good luck and good peeling!

By Sanford Boye
GOFC