Fort Lauderdale Fishing Cheat Sheet

Broward County — FishSonar.com

Top Species: Sailfish / Snook / Tarpon | Best Months: Nov – Apr Offshore / Year-Round Inshore | Water: Offshore, Inshore & Reef

Sailfish

Istiophorus platypterus

Nov – Mar Peak | Catch & Release Only | Offshore / Gulf Stream

WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Gulf Stream edge 3–10 miles off Port Everglades
- Weed lines and color changes in the Stream
- Temperature breaks where Gulf Stream meets inshore water
- The "sailfish highway" in 80–400ft of water
- Follow live pilchard schools on the surface

BEST TIMES

November through March is the legendary Fort Lauderdale sailfish season. Cold fronts push massive pods of fish south. The Gulf Stream runs just 3–5 miles offshore in winter. Fish early morning when the surface temps are coolest and fish are most active.

REGULATIONS

Atlantic sailfish: catch-and-release only. No harvest permitted. Use circle hooks with live bait to maximize release survival. Always verify current FWC rules.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Live pilchards kite-fished on the surface
- Live goggle-eyes slow-trolled
- Ballyhoo rigged under a skirt on color changes
- Spreader bar with squid teasers

TACKLE SETUP

20–30lb class spinning/conventional. 50lb braid. 80lb fluorocarbon leader 6–8ft. Circle hooks 5/0–7/0 for live bait. Kite fishing setup recommended.

Mahi-Mahi (Dolphin)

Coryphaena hippurus

Spring – Summer Peak | 20" Fork Length Min

WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Sargassum weed lines in the Gulf Stream
- Floating debris, pallets, crab trap buoys offshore
- Color changes and current rips in the Gulf Stream
- 6–20 miles offshore in blue water
- Surface temperature breaks where warm and cool water meet

BEST TIMES

April through August is peak mahi season off Fort Lauderdale. Gulf Stream delivers massive weed lines thick with small forage fish. Find the weed, find the mahi. School mahi (1–5lb) are common; bigger bulls and cows roam the weed edges.

REGULATIONS

Federal waters: 20" fork length minimum. 10 fish per person per day. Verify current FWC and NOAA rules before harvest.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Ballyhoo under a skirt trolled on weed lines
- Live pilchards pitched under floating debris
- Bucktail jigs (1–2oz) jigged vertically through schools
- Bright offshore trolling lures: pink, chartreuse, blue/white

TACKLE SETUP

Medium to medium-heavy spinning/conventional. 30–50lb braid. 50lb fluorocarbon leader. Keep tight pressure as mahi jump repeatedly. Keep one in the water to hold the school.

Common Snook

Centropomus undecimalis

Year-Round | Slot 28–33" | C&R Summer/Winter



WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Port Everglades Inlet — top urban snook fishery
- New River bridges and dock lights
- Hillsboro Inlet — excellent on outgoing tides
- Dania Cutoff Canal and C-10 Canal system
- Las Olas and 17th Street bridge shadow lines at night

BEST TIMES

Port Everglades is a year-round snook destination. Night fishing the New River under dock lights is a Fort Lauderdale tradition. Spring (April–May) sees snook staging at inlets before the summer spawn.

REGULATIONS

Atlantic coast slot: 28"–33". One fish per day. Closed Dec 15–Jan 31 and Jun 1–Aug 31. Snook permit required. Verify current FWC rules.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Live pilchards free-lined in Port Everglades current
- Live mullet in inlet or canal mouths
- DOA Shrimp glow under dock lights at night
- Topwater plugs at dawn on the inlet jetties

TACKLE SETUP

7' medium-heavy spinning. 20–30lb braid. 40lb fluorocarbon leader. Go heavier when fishing Port Everglades rocks and jetty structure.

Tarpon

Megalops atlanticus

Mar – Jun Migration | Mostly C&R | Tag Required Over 75"

WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Hillsboro Inlet — a legendary tarpon migration corridor
- Port Everglades — tarpon stack during spring migration
- New River bridges — resident tarpon year-round
- Boca Raton Inlet during the spring run
- ICW bridges between Boca Raton and Deerfield Beach

BEST TIMES

March through June is the prime tarpon migration along Broward's coast. Hillsboro Inlet sees massive schools of 80–150lb fish rolling on the surface. The migration peaks in May when water temps reach 75°F+. Resident tarpon in the New River can be targeted year-round.

REGULATIONS

Tarpon over 75" require a $50 tarpon harvest tag. Most fish released. Tarpon permit required. Verify current FWC rules before any harvest.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Live crabs — top bait at Hillsboro Inlet
- Threadfin herring and large pilchards free-lined
- Black/purple soft plastics under bridges at night
- Toad swimbaits slowly worked through inlet current

TACKLE SETUP

Heavy spinning/conventional. 50–80lb braid. 80–100lb fluorocarbon leader. Circle hooks 5/0–8/0 for live bait. Bow to the fish when it jumps. Expect 20–45 minute fights.

Yellowtail Snapper

Ocyurus chrysurus

Year-Round | 10" Fork Length Min

WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Broward nearshore reefs, 60–200ft depth range
- Hollywood Ledge and Dania Beach reefs
- Artificial reefs in 80–120ft (100+ permitted sites in Broward)
- Natural reef structure from Fort Lauderdale south to Dania
- Deep wrecks when fish school in summer

BEST TIMES

Year-round on Broward reefs. Most concentrated spring through fall when water is warm. Chumming is essential — a consistent chum slick pulls fish up off the reef into a frenzy. Night trips produce bigger fish on deeper structure.

REGULATIONS

Minimum 10" fork length in federal waters. Verify current FWC and NOAA South Atlantic regulations before harvest — rules vary by zone.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Pilchard chunks in the chum slick — the classic method
- Fresh shrimp pieces with minimal weight
- Gulp! Alive shrimp on a tiny jig head in the chum line
- Live pilchards for larger "flag" yellowtails

TACKLE SETUP

Light spinning. 10–15lb fluorocarbon or mono (avoid braid — too visible). Size 1–1/0 hook. Use as little weight as possible — let the bait drift naturally in the chum slick.

Tides & Timing — Fort Lauderdale / Broward County

Outgoing Tide — Best for Inshore

The prime tide at Port Everglades and Hillsboro Inlet. Snook and tarpon stage at the inlet mouth waiting to ambush baitfish pouring out of the lagoon. Work live pilchards and mullet in the current.

Incoming Tide — Canal and ICW

Snook push up into canals and ICW structure as the tide rises. Tarpon move in from the ocean through Port Everglades. Work bridge shadow lines with swimbaits and live bait.

Winter Offshore Strategy

Gulf Stream is closest in winter (Nov–Mar). Run 3–8 miles out from Port Everglades Inlet to find the color change. Deploy a kite with live pilchards on the surface. Sailfish season is epic — days with 5–10 releases are not uncommon.

Night Dock Lights

New River and ICW dock light snook fishing is a Fort Lauderdale tradition year-round. Use DOA Shrimp glow on a slow retrieve through the shadow line edge. Best October through May before summer closures.

Top Gear for Fort Lauderdale (Amazon)

Penn Spinfisher VI Live Liner 5500
The Fort Lauderdale sailfish live-bait reel
Buy on Amazon

DOA Shrimp 3" Glow
Night snook in the New River — a local legend
Buy on Amazon

Seaguar Blue Label 80lb Fluoro
Sailfish leaders in the clear Gulf Stream
Buy on Amazon

Berkley Gulp! Alive Shrimp 3"
Drifted in a chum slick for yellowtail
Buy on Amazon

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