Tampa Bay Fishing Cheat Sheet

Hillsborough • Pinellas • Manatee Counties — FishSonar.com

Top Species: Snook / Redfish / Seatrout | Best Months: Oct – May | Water: Inshore Flats, Passes, Backcountry

Common Snook

Centropomus undecimalis

Oct – May | Slot 28–33" | C&R Summer



WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Mangrove shorelines on falling tides
- Dock lights at night in Tampa Bay proper
- Pass mouths (Boca Ciega, Johns Pass, Pass-A-Grille)
- Grass flat edges adjacent to deeper cuts
- Residential canals after cold fronts

BEST TIMES

Fall mullet run (Oct–Nov) is peak season. Snook stack at pass mouths and are aggressive. Spring (Apr–May) is excellent before the summer closure. Avoid June 1–Aug 31 when harvest is closed.

REGULATIONS

Slot: 28"–33" total length. Limit: 1/day. Season closed June 1–Aug 31 and Dec 1–Jan 31 on Atlantic side. Saltwater license + snook permit required.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Live pilchards or threadfin herring at passes
- Live pinfish or greenbacks on the flats
- DOA Bait Buster 7" on beaches in fall
- Rapala Skitter Walk topwater at dawn/dusk

TACKLE SETUP

Medium-heavy spinning, 20–30lb braid, 30lb fluoro leader. Circle hooks (3/0–5/0) for live bait.

Red Drum (Redfish)

Sciaenops ocellatus

Year-Round | Slot 18–27"



WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Shallow grass flats in Hillsborough & Tampa Bay
- Oyster bars on low tides — watch for tailing fish
- Terra Ceia Aquatic Preserve (Manatee County)
- Cockroach Bay Preserve flats
- Port Manatee spoil islands

BEST TIMES

Year-round in Tampa Bay. Fall and winter are most consistent — reds school on flats 1–2ft deep. Look for tailing fish on low tides over mud and oyster bottom.

REGULATIONS

Slot: 18"–27" total length. Limit: 1/day per angler. Saltwater license required.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Johnson Silver Minnow gold spoon (weedless)
- DOA shrimp free-lined or under cork
- Live blue crab on oyster bars
- Cut mullet for larger bull reds

TACKLE SETUP

Medium spinning, 20lb braid, 20–25lb fluoro leader. 1/0–2/0 weedless hook or 1/4oz jig head.

Spotted Seatrout

Cynoscion nebulosus

Oct – Apr Best | 15" Minimum



WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Grass flats throughout Old Tampa Bay
- Middle Tampa Bay near flats and channels
- Weedon Island Preserve grass edges
- Rocky Point area flats
- Sand-grass transition zones, 2–5ft deep

BEST TIMES

Late fall through spring is peak. Trout most active in water 60–72°F. Cold fronts push them to deeper channels. Best bites at first light on grass flats in 1–3ft of water.

REGULATIONS

Minimum: 15" total length. Limit: 3/day. Enhanced size limits may apply — verify at myfwc.com.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Gulp! shrimp (3") under popping cork
- MirrOlure 52MR suspended plug
- Live shrimp on 1/8oz jig head, free-lined
- DOA shrimp paddle tail on grass flats

TACKLE SETUP

Light-medium spinning, 10–15lb braid, 20lb fluoro leader, 1/8oz jig head or small circle hook.

Sheepshead

Archosargus probatocephalus

Dec – Mar Peak | 12" Minimum



WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Dock pilings throughout Tampa Bay
- Sunshine Skyway Bridge fenders and pilings
- Gandy Bridge and Howard Frankland pilings
- St. Pete pier structures
- Rocky outcroppings and oyster bars

BEST TIMES

December through March is the prime spawning run. Sheepshead stack on bridge pilings and nearshore structure. They're structure-dependent year-round but numbers peak in winter.

REGULATIONS

Minimum size: 12" total length. Bag limit: 15/day per angler. Saltwater fishing license required.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Live fiddler crabs — the #1 bait
- Fresh shrimp (whole or pieces)
- Oyster flesh scraped from pilings
- Barnacles knocked off dock pilings

TACKLE SETUP

Light-medium spinning, 10lb line, Kahle or wide-gap hook 1/0–2/0. Light or no weight. Set the hook at the first "thump" — they steal bait fast.

Spanish Mackerel

Scomberomorus maculatus

Spring & Fall | 12" Minimum



WHERE TO FIND THEM

- Tampa Bay mouth and lower bay beaches
- St. Pete Beach and Pass-A-Grille nearshore
- Shell Key Preserve area
- Pinellas Point and Boca Ciega Bay mouth
- Anywhere baitfish schools break the surface

BEST TIMES

Spring migration (March–May) and fall return (Oct–Nov). Schools move with water temperature — follow the bait. Morning blitzes are common when small baitfish surface.

REGULATIONS

Minimum: 12" fork length. Bag limit: 15/day. Wire leader required — Spanish mackerel slice through mono instantly.

BEST BAITS & LURES

- Clark spoon (1.5" silver or gold) trolled 6–7 knots
- Gotcha plug cast into breaking schools
- Live sardines or pilchards free-lined
- Small white or silver bucktail jig

TACKLE SETUP

Light spinning or trolling rod. 15–20lb braid. 20lb single-strand wire leader 12"–18". Fast retrieve is essential.

Tides & Timing — Tampa Bay

Falling Tide — Best for Snook

Snook and redfish stage at mangrove points waiting to ambush bait washing off the flats. Work the last two hours of outgoing tide with live bait or swimbaits.

Rising Tide — Best for Redfish

Reds move onto grass flats as water rises. Look for tailing fish on shallow flat edges. First 2 hours of incoming is prime. Use a gold spoon or weedless shrimp.

Slack Tide — Trout Time

Spotted seatrout are less current-dependent and hold on grass flat edges during slack tide. Work subsurface plugs slowly when the bite has slowed elsewhere.

Night & Dock Lights

Snook under dock lights after dark is Tampa Bay's signature experience. Use a live pilchard in the shadow line. Best October through May in lower Tampa Bay.

Top Gear for Tampa Bay (Amazon)

DOA Bait Buster 7"

Fall snook on the beach — nothing beats it

~$12

Buy on Amazon

Johnson Silver Minnow Gold Spoon

Classic weedless redfish lure — 70+ year proven record

~$7

Buy on Amazon

Seaguar Blue Label 30lb Fluoro

Snook are line-shy in clear Tampa Bay water

~$23

Buy on Amazon

Gulp! Alive Shrimp 3"

Deadliest trout bait in Florida — period

~$15

Buy on Amazon

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