

Fishing Florida's First Coast



Oyster bars, low tide and redfish - a perfect combination.



Kayaking the grass flats yields a nice redfish for Captain Rich Santos.

STORY & PHOTOS BY CAPT. RICH SANTOS

When it comes time to visit our nation's oldest city, St. Augustine, Florida or perhaps take a business trip to Jacksonville, or just come down to northeast Florida to experience the thrills of NASCAR action at the Daytona 500, be sure to set aside some time to get out on the water and fish. There's a wide variety of angling opportunities and scenic landscapes that you can pursue either by boat, paddle craft or on foot while wade fishing. This ensures that you'll never get bored with the fishing that exists along Florida's First Coast.

FISHING DIVERSITY

Your outdoor adventure in this part of Florida will enable you to target a wide array of fish species while experiencing a wide range of wildlife and diverse ecosystems. Packing your camera along with your fishing gear and photographing the outing should be on your checklist. The specific area I reference in this piece starts from the states most northeast corner at the Fernandina Beach and Amelia Island-Jacksonville area on south through St. Augustine and down to the Flagler Beach-Daytona Beach area. It's approximately 100 miles of saltwater marsh wetlands off the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) and beachfront that you can

FISHING INFO AND TACKLE SHOPS

Here's a list of key spots starting in the northern part of this region and then traveling south.

Amelia Island State Park
 Little Talbot State Park
 Pumpkin Hill Creek Preserve State Park
 Guana River State Park
 Anastasia State Park
 Matanzas Inlet State Park
 Faver-Dykes State park.

OUTFITTERS, GUIDES AND INFORMATION

Captain Rich Santos;
www.flyfishjax.com
 Black Fly Outfitters; www.flyfishjax.com
 Strike Zone Fishing Headquarters;
www.strike-zonefishing.com
 Jax Kayak Fishing;
www.jaxkayakfishing.com
www.321fish.com
Fly Fishing Guide to Florida's First Coast
 by Dick Michealson

venture out into and explore. This stretch of land includes some interesting aquatic landscape changes within the salt and brackish water ecosystems to the north and south of St. Augustine. St. Johns County is the point where the environmental landscape change occurs. It's a great to have these diverse opportunities to explore within a short ride of each other. This stretch of land also includes the benefit of having a better tide conditions that can vary up to difference of three hours. Simply put, you can follow the better tide for better fishing activity

PLENTY TO FISH FOR

This span of area offers you the chance to catch many different fish species all year around. The inshore fishery primarily includes redfish, snook, tarpon, spotted seatrout (or speckled trout), black drum, sheepshead, jack crevalle, bluefish, ladyfish and southern flounder to name a few. Some of the near-shore species include what Floridians call bonito or little tunny (also known as false albacore or albies up north), cobia, kingfish, giant jacks, Spanish mackerel and several varieties of sharks. The primary baits

that the fish prey upon include mullet, menhaden locally known as pogies, mud minnows and crustaceans (mostly shrimp), fiddler and mud crabs. Larger blue claw crabs are also present.

As a long-time resident of Florida and as an avid angler with fishing on my brain 24/7, I've seen and learned a lot about the inshore-nearshore waters of northeast Florida. This fixation has not changed since I started my craze for fly and light tackle fishing back in the old days of wade fishing the Port Jefferson and Mt. Sinai rocky shorelines of the Long Island Sound back in the early 90s. As a matter of fact, a lot of the old fishing techniques and lessons I learned up north are still utilized today, helping me catch fish. The main ingredients still remain: finding structure, locating water movement, identifying bait and understanding predatory fish habit. The main difference today is that I'm not fishing deep water as I did on Long Island and have the added thrill of more sight fishing in shallow water 12 months out of the year.

I've spent most of my time in what is referred to as the backwaters off the Intracoastal Waterway (ICW). With this comes more sight fishing opportunities around the low tide periods. During this time, the wildlife activity also increases. Everything comes to life with predators in hot pursuit of a good meal. This is due to the baitfish becoming more concentrated in the smaller water. You can witness multiple species of wading birds stalking in the shallow water while eagles, ospreys and pelicans often are diving down for bait from the sky above. You might even get to see the endangered wood stork family feeding.

Other wildlife activities include raccoons feeding on oysters, otters and wild hogs in the brush, dolphins and manatees. This is a birder's paradise as well, with many varieties of resident and migrating birds present throughout the year!

A WILD TIME

The atmosphere is "wild". While fishing, you often hear the snapping pop sounds of exposed oyster bars 'breathing' through the air and then the alarming squawk of a marsh hen in the cord grass. It's often like being on a safari. You throw a blind cast in one direction into a deep



Hooked up in the grass.

drop-off where a spotted seatrout might lurk in the moving tide, and then hear the water erupt on a mud flat behind you. You'll turn and see a redfish feeding on a pod of shrimp bait while a snowy egret shadows over him in close pursuit in hopes of catching an easy, airborne meal that sprays out from the water's surface. Low tide fishing can be entertaining, dramatic and productive.

Florida's First Coast fishery offers very unique fishing that's just known only to this region. It's certainly the inshore fishing highlight of the area. Fishing the flooded grass flats presents a lush water world filled with underwater green grass meadows and marine life that attracts and holds tailing redfish, sheepshead and black drum. The term tailing refers to the fish's tail sticking up above the water's surface while they are rooting down into the grassy bottom for small nickel-sized crabs like fiddlers. You're sight fishing in knee-high crystal-clear water over spartina grass that is rooted into a hard clay bottom. These conditions are ideal for wade fishing during the tidal periods around spring tides. Careful planning is in order for you to hit it right. Wind and atmospheric pressure are also sometimes factors as to whether these areas will flood and empty in a way that's optimal for prime fishing.

These fishing grounds certainly have become more of a hide-and-seek type game with plenty of visual excitement. It's been mostly about trying to fool and catch wily redfish

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Fishing for First Coast redfish in the fall can be very productive.

whose favorite feeding game is to prowl the extreme shallow flats in search of a meal. You'll see them cruising with their back and tails out of the waters, swimming with a slow, serpentine motion during low tidal phases. Then you can move on to the high tide flooded grass flats for more tails in the air. I've seen most newcomers here experience a serious case of buck fever. So be prepared. It's not all sight casting. Blind casting toward structure is also productive and accounts for about 25 percent of my time out there, depending on the daily fish behaviors and patterns.

TO THE NORTH

North of St. Augustine includes marsh wetlands with stained water during the warmer months that becomes clearer during the colder months. Water temperatures move up into the 80s during the summer and low 50s on average during the deep winter. As the water temperatures drop the water clears, making ideal conditions for catching spotted sea trout. Experience teaches that the stained water also allows for less spooky fish and that clear water requires more stealth and smaller lures. The backwater bottom structure here varies from shallow mud flats and some sand bars to deeper pockets and sloughs averaging about five foot in depth within the backwater creek system. The area is covered with several varieties of spartina or cord grass, and is laced with some deep to shallow-water finger creeks. It can be a maze of adventure, often with an angler in complete solitude. Within these areas you'll spot roseate spoonbills wading on mud flats and feeding on shrimp during the summer. The oyster bars act as a reef does in the ocean holding marine life with a variety of bait and predators. Casting around the bars is most productive. The Hammock Islands hold plenty of wildlife. The shoreline structure includes 100-foot tall Slash Pine trees and a variety of subtropical shrubs and shell mounds created by the Timucuan Indians about 500 years ago. This northern area also has larger tide swings than areas more to the south. The water movement between low and high tide periods produces lots of bait

movement and predatory fish activity. The key to finding and seeing fish in an eating mood is to fish around the low tide periods. This is when baitfish become concentrated, making for easy prey. Redfish can be seen and caught in the backwaters up to a whopping 35 inches, weighing in up to about 15 pounds.

AND TO THE SOUTH

To the south of St. Augustine, there is more of a subtropical scrubland environment with cabbage palms and small, black mangrove tree shorelines replete with snook and sand beaches. Here is where the mangrove species begins southward in the state of Florida. There is a smaller tidal movement here and harder bottom structure that can easily be wade fished. Snook are also commonly found here during the warmer months. When I first visited these areas many years ago, I felt that I was very fortunate to have access to a blend of two remarkable fishing environments. It is as if I can always wake up to something different from the last time I fished.

In Florida, as anywhere else, I've learned that you have got to venture to where the fish live and feed. Find the bait and predatory fish follow. My most successful fishing techniques include covering a lot of ground, which means continuously moving to different spots during the tide stages. This creates more opportunities to be successful in finding bait and then honing in on the gamefish. One needs to mainly fish structure like oyster bars, grass bank points, feeder creek mouths and deeper cuts against the concave grass banks; that is where the bait and predators will lurk and hold. I will continuously cast to various parts of the area I'm fishing using different retrieval rates that cover the complete water column. I'll work an area until I determine what approach yields results. I'll spend no more than five minutes in a small spot and move on to another likely holding area to find fish. Stealth and good bait presentation are the keys to success. In this area, cloudy to overcast sky conditions and light winds prove the best for catching fish.

GEAR CHOICES

Fly and lure selection in general include dark, colored patterns for the most part. Some favorite imitations are baitfish replicas like mullet and mud minnows (killifish species), fiddler and mud crabs and shrimp. My favorite flies are EP Baitfish flies, Kwan Shrimp flies, Black Seducers, Clouser Minnows, Spoon Flies, Wiggle Minnow flies, Deerhair Sliders and Gurgler patterns.

Using spinning gear with artificial lures like soft plastic jerk baits on ¼-ounce jigs, Johnson Spoons, swimming plugs like walk-the-dog types and sub-surface imitations often have the advantage and work the best during the range of fishing conditions.

My all-around favorite times to fish the area are the extreme low tide conditions of the late fall and early spring and most of all the high tide flood grass flats fishing during the summer and early fall. The latter I prefer fishing by kayak. This gives me the best opportunity to get up close and sight fish for reds.

