



THE AUTHOR DISPLAYS A FINE STRINGER OF SNAPPER TAKEN OFF A FAVORITE KEY'S HUMP.

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NO PASSPORT REQUIRED

BY CAPTAIN ORLANDO MUNIZ - *NOMAD FISHING CHARTERS*

WITH STRICT BAHAMIAN BAG LIMITS CURRENTLY IN EFFECT, MANY ANGLERS ARE TURNING TO THE FLORIDA KEYS' DEEP, DARK DEPTHS FOR RELIEF FROM THE HEAT!

Over the last few years, deep-dropping has emerged as one of the most productive fishing methods available to Florida's resident and visiting anglers. Some have even gone as far as calling the technique "catching" rather than "fishing." Just like everything else in life though, successful deep-dropping isn't as simple as it may seem, so don't be fooled into thinking that consistently hauling up tasty deep water fish is a bowl of cherries with no pits. Sure, anyone can drop a baited rig way to the bottom and then flip a switch to retrieve it. Who knows, they may even catch a fish or two every now and then. But accomplished deep water fishermen know that there is much more to successful deep-dropping than only what meets the eye.

During the last few seasons, I've devoted long hours with my eyes glued to the fish-finder trying to make sense of this deep, dark and mysterious world. The vast majority of that time has been spent exploring the oceanside depths bordering the Atlantic coast of the fabulous Florida Keys.

WHILE MULTIPLE SPECIES OF TILEFISH CAN BE FOUND IN THE KEYS, THE LIMIT ON GRAYS (LEFT) IS 5 PER PERSON AND 1 PER PERSON ON GOLDENS (RIGHT).



DO YOUR HOMEWORK!

Contrary to what some believe, you do need to have a plan in play for pinpointing the structure that most deep water species call home. Preparation begins long before you ever step foot on the boat. First, get your hands on the most detailed Florida Keys chart you can, and then spend time carefully dissecting it. Note any sharp drop-offs or ledges that may hold fish. I've found action on spots ranging from the mid 300s to over a thousand feet. The key is structure. Hills, ridges, plateaus and depressions will all attract life. Many of the latest charts reveal the actual bottom composition, so pay close attention to that as well. While jagged rocks and coral will likely hold snapper, muddy sloping edges shouldn't be overlooked.

THE FIRST MISTAKE!

One misconception that I often overhear is that you have to fish Bahamian waters if you want to load up on tasty bottom dwellers. Granted, I, too, have fished there on many occasions and can honestly say, "Yes, solid numbers of grouper and snapper are fairly easy to locate on the steep sloping edges adjacent to most of the islands." However, that doesn't mean that you have to unplug your reels when you return home especially since the Bahamian government changed their fishing regulations and have practically put an end to deep-dropping in Bahamian territory. There is however, talk of amendments to the new regulations, but for now, the law is the law. Factor in high fuel prices and the situation has caused many Florida anglers to reconsider crossing the 'Stream. With that said, there is no better time to dust off your electric reels and sharpen your boat handling skills. If you don't already own electric fishing equipment, it's time to add a new piece of fish-catching equipment to your arsenal because right here in our very own backyard – Key Largo to Key West - exciting deep-dropping awaits anglers willing to refine their skills.

HOME SWEET HOME

What's great about fishing the Keys, especially during the summer months is that you can pursue dolphin or yellowtail snapper in the morning and then make the switch to deep-dropping in the afternoon. Among the species that I have enjoyed hauling up from the depths are vermillion, yellow eye and queen snapper, along with a healthy mix of snowy grouper, red grouper and speckled hinds. These are only a few of the many crowd pleasers that you may encounter during any single trip. Another advantage for visiting the Keys is that once you return to port, you have all of the comforts of home without any of the inconveniences of traveling abroad.



ALONG WITH TASTY SNAPPER, ASSORTED GROUPER ARE ALWAYS WELCOME.

Don't be afraid to ask a few locals for advice. Most tend to be very tight-lipped when it comes to divulging precise coordinates, but will usually be happy to point you in the right direction and general depth.

Once you have found potential honey holes, it is time to put them to the test. It is not unusual to have to invest some time investigating an area before you can reap its rewards. Typically, if you got an "A" on your homework, you'll see strikes within minutes of your baits hitting the bottom. If you don't, spend a few extra minutes experiment with different baits before moving on. And I will tell you what; if you only capture a single fish at any given spot, save the coordinates for a return trip when conditions may be different. You'll find that different depths tend to be more productive during certain times of the year.

From left to right: © FSF Mag, © Captain Orlando Muniz (3)

LET'S ALL THANK TECHNOLOGY

Regularly finding success deep-dropping requires good marksmanship and better than average boat handling skills. Unless you can carefully maintain your position over a particular piece of structure hundreds of feet below, you will only cash in on a fraction of the deep water treasures that swarm the ocean floor.

Ensuring your vessel is equipped with a powerful fish-finder solves a crucial piece of the fishing puzzle. Recently, I had a conversation with Elias Rodriguez, considered by many to be one of the most knowledgeable anglers in all of South Florida. Elias has been working in the tackle industry for decades and is someone who has fished extensively both in the U.S. and abroad. He swears that having your electronics professionally installed will make a huge difference in the equipment's performance. Still, some guys make the mistake of purchasing a powerful color machine only to couple it with a sub-par transducer. High power thru-hull transducers are a must for effectively reading the bottom at such depths while on the drift, and while on the move. Proper placement and installation of the transducer helps eliminate issues with "noise" and "disturbance." Transducers need to be properly matched to the sonar unit and glassed-in by an experienced professional.

KEYS DEEP-DROPPING IS NOT LIMITED TO DAYTIME HOURS.



BOAT HANDLING

Locating hot spots or areas likely to hold fish is only part of the equation. One challenge when fishing the bottom at such depths is maintaining proper boat position. This is where a chart plotter plays a critical role because it allows you to return

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to and accurately mark hot spots. Many deep water demersal species are tightly packed and will usually not stray far from the security of the structure and their brethren. Being off by only a few degrees can completely change the outcome of your trip. And regardless how skilled of a helmsman you consider yourself, attempting to deep-drop on windy, choppy days when your boat is drifting at more than 2.5 or 3.0 knots will prove frustrating.

Use your GPS to determine your drift rate and direction by shifting the boat into neutral and letting the current and wind take over. Once established, you can reposition so that you're fishing directly over the targeted bottom. On occasion, you'll need the aid of your boat's engine(s) in order to maintain your position.

RIGGING FOR SUCCESS

There are probably as many ways to rig for deep-dropping as there are varieties of fish in the Florida Keys. The one thing that is consistent with all rigging techniques is the use of circle hooks. The strain of bringing up two or three fish from so far below at a speed of up to 300 feet/minute will

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cause J-hooks to pull easily. Circle hooks do a much better job of keeping fish connected and require no hook set. Most deep-drop rigs consist of four to six hooks crimped on a heavy leader through the aid of swivel-sleeves or three-way swivels. The rig resembles a king size version of a Sabiki rig with a two to ten pound sash weight attached to the bottom.

TYPICAL FLORIDA KEYS
DEEP-DROP RIG CONSISTS
OF MULTIPLE CIRCLE HOOKS,
A LIGHT SOURCE AND
ENOUGH WEIGHT TO GET
YOU TO THE BOTTOM AND
KEEP YOU THERE.



An important element to your rig when bottom fishing the Florida Keys' fertile depths is the addition of artificial light. Beyond 500 feet, fish are subjected to total darkness and therefore will investigate any strange lights that appear. Once the grouper or snapper comes in for a closer look, the natural scent of the bait takes over and stimulates a strike.

Today, most tackle shops carry ready made rigs designed for all of the popular deep-drop species. Personally, I prefer to tie my own deep-drop rigs because it allows me to experiment with different leader diameters, lengths, light colors, etc. Custom rigging gives you the option of using your favorite hooks, swivels or just changing the overall dimensions of the rig. Regardless of which path you take, do yourself a favor and carry extra terminal tackle because it isn't uncommon to snag the bottom, especially when drifting directly over heavy structure. Some days all of your rigs make it back in one piece and on other days, you may lose a half dozen. Don't forget to rinse your rigs with fresh water after each use.

RODS, REELS AND LINE

Electric reels have come a long way since the early days. Manufacturers have been able to engineer 12-volt reels that draw minimal power and provide excellent performance. Another major change that has revolutionized this fishery is the use of modern braided line. In the early days of deep-dropping, most anglers were limited to using wire line or heavy monofilament. Braided lines offer much thinner diameters and user friendly qualities. Super braids offer great sensitivity and with nearly zero stretch, you can practically feel fish looking at your bait. Consult your local tackle retailer for advice on which set up is right for you.

CHOICE BAITS

Choosing the right baits for deep-dropping can be as simple or as difficult as you would like to make it. In most cases, frozen squid does the trick. Serious droppers like to carry more than one type of bait. Sometimes a simple bait switch can turn fish on and save the day. Favorite baits include oily barracuda, bonito or fresh king mackerel. Bait should be cut into chunky strips and changed often in order for it to provide an inviting scent trail.

KEEP IT REEL

Now that you know what it takes to haul fish up from the deep waters of the Florida Keys, it is extremely important to familiarize yourself with the applicable laws. Deep-dropping can get hot and heavy at times and it can be quite easy to get carried away. It takes a lot of discipline to stop fishing when you're pulling up stringers full of snapper drop after drop. Anglers who suffer from temporary amnesia are usually cured when they bump into an FWC officer. Wildlife officials are known to carry a prescription book that can quickly remedy any situation. Know your species and their corresponding limits. Fish pulled up from the depths usually arrive at the surface with an inflated swim bladder. To release unwanted fish, puncturing the bladder right behind the pectoral fin with a rigging needle can help release the air, allowing the fish to swim back down to the bottom without harm. Doing this incorrectly can cause more harm than good, so if you are in doubt, study up on the procedure.

LET'S GO FISHING...

Deep-dropping the Florida Keys can be an extremely rewarding experience. There is no doubt in my mind that with a little preparation and a bit of home work, anyone can add an exciting page to their Florida fishing repertoire. The Keys also offer countless resorts, marinas and boat ramps that provide both locals and visitors with first class service. All of these amenities make fishing here the perfect summer retreat.

An advertisement for NOMAD Fishing Charters. The top half features the text "NOMAD Fishing Charters" in a large, serif font, with "Specializing in Offshore Light Tackle Sport Fishing" underneath. Below that is "Capt. Orlando Muniz". The bottom half shows a fisherman in a dark shirt and shorts on a boat, casting a net into the ocean. Text on the right side of the image says "Full or Half Day Trips". At the bottom left, it says "25' Custom Sea Vee U.S.C.G. Licensed". At the bottom right, it says "(786)266-0171" and "www.NomadFishing.com".