



Plan B

Biscayne Bay's shallow water grouper fishery.

By Captain Orlando Muniz

The day's fishing trip started like so many others. I began my morning by grabbing a strong cup of coffee before rushing out the door. The second I crossed the threshold, I realized that once again, my big plans were crushed. The previous evening's marine forecast had called for northwest 15 - 20 knot winds with two- to four-foot seas - ideal sailfish conditions. As I laid my head on the pillow that night, thoughts of tailing billfish flooded my mind. My high expectations were short-lived though, as the wind was now howling east at 20- to 25-knots with gusts nearing 30.

I was faced with one of the toughest decisions any angler can make. Scrap the entire fishing idea and spend the day shopping with my wife, or revert to Plan B. After weighing the options for a lengthy two seconds, I chose Plan B – fishing Biscayne Bay. Where else might a South Florida angler find 70,000 acres of pristine, sheltered water hosting such a wide array of highly-desired game fish.





UNDER MOST CIRCUMSTANCES, 15 LB. SPINNING GEAR GETS THE BISCAYNE BAY JOB DONE.

Every sailfish season this same scenario unfolds. Anglers spend their valuable time, effort and hard-earned money preparing their boats and gear, only to realize that once again, nature's fury has all but demolished their weekend plans. A fast moving incoming front has unexpectedly stalled, bringing with it high winds that make it all but impossible to head out in search of blue water.

Many of these weekend warriors have been licking their chops all week long looking forward to getting a few shots at leaping billfish, colorful dolphin or maybe even super-fast wahoo. Well fortunately for the angling community residing in and around Miami Dade County, another option exists - spending the day in Biscayne Bay. The beautiful waterway is not only loaded with bonefish, tarpon and permit, but an array of highly-prized species inhabit the bay's intricate shallow water terrain - intricate shallow water terrain which is surrounded by deep-cut channels. Many of these 'fish highways' are lined with rocky ledges which grouper, in particular, call home.

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Many in the state's angling community are still under the misconception that the only way to target these hard-fighting bottom dwellers is by bouncing sinkers over deep water wrecks and reefs or deep-dropping extreme depths with the aid of an electric fishing outfit. Well, I, and anyone who has spent any amount of time poking around Biscayne Bay, will attest that grouper can be found in some very unlikely places. Prior to delving into the tactical approaches for enticing these structure-huggers, one must first be able to effectively locate them.

If you are interested in exploring this fishery, I will make your job as easy as possible. Look closely at the finger channels just south of Stiltsville. The rocky shorelines around the Cape Florida Lighthouse and the shallow patch reefs off Elliott and Soldier Keys are also 'hot spots.' I have also connected with plenty of nice grouper along Hawk's channel, and regularly hear of outstanding catches coming from the deep holes on the flats.

The coming months of March and April are the ideal time of the year to target these fish. During this often breezy period, grouper are in the cross-hairs of many avid shallow water enthusiasts. This means that there are as many ways of catching Biscayne Bay's grouper as there are varieties of the species. Most of the quality fish taken in and around the bay are black grouper and gag grouper. However, red grouper and goliath grouper are also encountered from time to time.

Grouper, like all predatory game fish, require at least two things to insure their survival. First, they need an ample food supply which is typically provided by moving water. Second, they need shelter in the form of reef and rock formations and/or overhanging ledges. If you can locate this sort of submerged debris, you have found a potential 'Honey Hole.' The next step is to persuade these tasty denizens from their cozy living quarters without creating too much unnecessary commotion which may disturb their neighbors - your future victims.

Once you have determined where in Biscayne Bay you want to search, the next step is to decide just how to go about fooling these wary prowlers. The most popular and effective techniques being employed today are trolling and live bait fishing. Yes, you heard it right! Trolling has a place in bay fishing as well. Newcomers to Biscayne Bay may choose to troll large-lipped diving plugs because they can cover a lot of water in little time as they familiarize themselves with the area while searching for concentrations of fish. If you choose to do so, you will want to pay very close attention to the many patch reefs and deep channel ledges. Ideally, present your plug as close to the bottom as possible without getting hung! It is always a joy to see the look on someone's face when a chunky black grouper darts out of its lair and inhales an eight-inch plug - only to race back for cover as line screams off the spool.

Opting for the trolling method does offer some distinct advantages over live baiting. First, you won't have to lose time or sleep or invest any money in a supply of baitfish. Second, larger fish are easier to land, though not nearly as challenging, on the heavier 20- to 30-lb. trolling tackle. I should mention that innovations such as high-tech braid have made diving plugs more deadly than ever before. The ultra-thin, ultra-sensitive line allows

these lures to perform with minimum resistance. Braided line's no stretch factor is equally as important, especially when attempting to turn the head of an angry grouper headed straight for cover. Drags should be set at nearly full position in order to prevent the powerful fish from gaining momentum from a running start.

You'll encounter the best results trolling the perimeter of the structure but not necessarily directly over it. As a rule, plugs should be inspected and fine-tuned before deploying to ensure they swim straight and true. Several leading manufactures including Mann's, Rapala, Yo-Zuri and MirROLure, all produce plugs designed specifically for this application. Some of the latest mid-size fish-fakes claim to dive as much as 15 feet below the surface without the aid of wire line or a downrigger. One final tip when trolling is to leave the boat in gear until the fish has been coerced away from the unforgiving structure.

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Personally, I prefer to chum and fish with live bait, especially when hitting familiar areas. This approach is deadly and provides a very effective means of enticing quality fish in heavily fished waters. This means that prior to grouper digging in Biscayne Bay; you'll need pilchards - lots of pilchards.

Spanish sardines or small threadfin herring can also be used when available. An adequate bait supply can either be obtained by catching it yourself or purchasing it, but that is a whole other story.

With broad shoulders and powerful broom-like tails, grouper of any size will give you a real run for your money on almost any size gear, but to make the most of this relatively shallow water fishery, whip out the 10 lb. to 15 lb. spinning outfits. Because you are typically fishing water less than nine feet deep, the medium action spinning outfits are perfectly suitable for the task.





Know The Law:

Now that you are armed with powerful fish-catching knowledge, it is even more important to fish responsibly. The National Marine Fisheries has established many laws protecting grouper. These minimum size and bag limits help maintain a healthy stock for all of us, as well as future generations. Brushing up on new regulations is just as important as keeping up to date on new techniques. Releasing undersize or unwanted fish is also extremely important in order to keep this fishery on the upswing. Biscayne Bay is a beautiful part of South Florida's natural environment and is susceptible to over-fishing as well as pollution. Hopefully, we will continue to see catches of these challenging and tasty fish continue to flourish in our very own backyard.

Fly-fishing tip: Fly fishing aficionados, you haven't been forgotten. Keep your fly rods handy because Biscayne Bay grouper have been known to snatch a fly or two. The key is to get them fired up with the live chum before presenting the fly. Silver and white streamer and baitfish patterns do the trick!

Virtually any name brand seven foot rod matched with a quality reel capable of holding plenty of line will get the job done. The drag, however, must perform flawlessly under the extreme pressure and stress exerted by powerful fish. Anglers do, however, have several choices to make concerning terminal tackle. Leaders make up an important piece of the puzzle which is why I prefer fluorocarbon ranging from 20 lb through 60 lb. Having different strength leader material available at my fingertips allows me to use the heaviest leader that conditions allow. As we know, ultra-clear water usually demands that you scale everything down, including hooks.

Speaking of which, hook selection can range from today's popular circles to traditional J-hooks that have been in-use for centuries. My preference is the Eagle Claw L194 light wire hook, although a word of caution; light wire hooks in combination with line testing greater than 20 lb. can cause hook straightening under extreme loads.

The drill when chumming with live bait is to locate a promising patch of structure and anchor or power drift in order to maintain your position. Stealth can be important, so try not to get too close to the structure or the natives may get a bit suspicious. Once you are content with your position, toss out a net full of baitfish toward your target area. Squeezing the bait or skipping the livies off the transom or engine covers will cause them to swim erratically, quickly drawing the attention of local residents. Once the chumming ritual is underway, it is time to fire off the hook baits.

Baitfish can be hooked through the nose, in front of the dorsal fin or right behind the pectoral fins. The latter is especially helpful in deep water because pilchards or herring hooked in this fashion tend to swim down toward the bottom without the aid of a lead weight. Remember that some of these areas get hit hard by many anglers, so only the finest baits will get snatched. Allow the bait plenty of opportunity to attract attention before retrieving it for another cast. The advantage with live bait is obvious – it is always moving and thus, always working!

Be sure to fish potential hangouts thoroughly before moving on. Also, make it a point to notate tidal phases when you do hit the jackpot. Fish congregating in certain areas may feed much more aggressively during a particular tide. Besides grouper, expect to run into a myriad of other fish willing to pull drag. The variety, coupled with steady fishing, can make Biscayne Bay's grouper fishery ideal for beginners and children still developing their patience. So next time NOAA calls for a Small Craft Advisory, keep in mind that a very exciting option exists. Simply head to Biscayne Bay and get in on one of the best kept secrets in South Florida.