

How to Catch Pompano

"Do you think of Pompano as a well-kept secret?", Frank Sargeant asked about Tampa Bay Pompano fishing in his landmark book *Secret Spots in Tampa Bay*. Although locals were somewhat peeved at the many honey holes that Frank revealed, to our knowledge, the chapter about catching pompano around the area's bridges went unnoticed. Still, there are plenty of locals who consistently target and catch these highly-prized, silvery cousins of the oft-maligned Jack Crevalle.



We're often asked about pompano; where to catch them, how to catch them, and when to fish for them. The where and when are easy; it's the how part of the equation that's a little tricky. While no article can replace a few trips with an experienced local guide, we'll do our best to get you started on this challenging, productive, and extremely enjoyable aspect of fishing in Tampa Bay. I learned these techniques from Captain Mike Plastic. Plastic says that he learned how to catch pompano from Captain James Wisner. In the first step, Captain James selects the perfect crab for pompano. And, since they're like snowflakes -- with no two alike -- there's no way we can tell you what Wisner was looking for (but we're sure it was something special, since he outfishes everybody).

According to Mike, Wisner used to provide live pompano to local restaurants using a specially designed tank on the back of his truck. For those of you that know Captain James, you'll know that he's a true innovator and incredibly well-steeped in local knowledge. I extend my personal thanks for passing down such a great fishing tip.

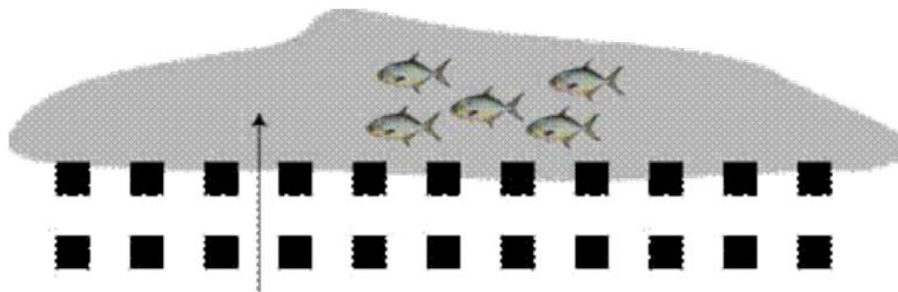
Permit? Pompano? Which is it?

First of all, if you target pompano according to the tips we're going to provide, you're likely to catch permit at the same time. When they're young (as they are in Tampa Bay), Pompano and Permit are the same size, look the same, taste the same, and think the same. We've heard that you can count the spines near the tail and tell the difference between the two, but we're not convinced. What we *do* know is that pompano stay small usually under 5 lbs or so while 25 lb and 30 lb permit are not uncommon on offshore wrecks in the summertime and on flats in the keys, the Caribbean, the Bahamas, and other tropical paradises.

You won't catch these knuckle-busting, reel-smoking beasts fishing in the Bay, though, so there's no need to worry about it. You will, however, hook up with the occasional 50 lb or 60 lb black drum, 20 lb snook, or breeder redfish. They'll all quickly break you off if you're not fishing with 20 lb (or heavier) gear, so you don't have to worry about them, either.

Fishing where the fish are

We hate to belabour the point, but if you want to consistently catch fish regardless of the species the first rule is to fish where the fish are. You can have the best tackle, fresh bait, the perfect lures, the most subtle and artistic presentation, a \$60,000 state-of-the-art boat, and incredible luck but if you're fishing in a place where there aren't any fish, enjoy the weather and the company; just plan on stopping at Publix for dinner on your way home.



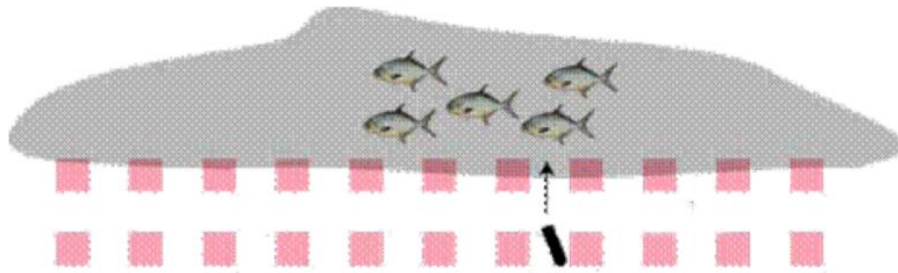
The fish are on the outside of the tide. If it's coming in, they sit on the North. If it is coming in, they sit on the south -- so bait washes past their mouths.

Once you know where the fish are, positioning your boat is relatively simple. On an incoming tide, you need to be south of the fish; on an

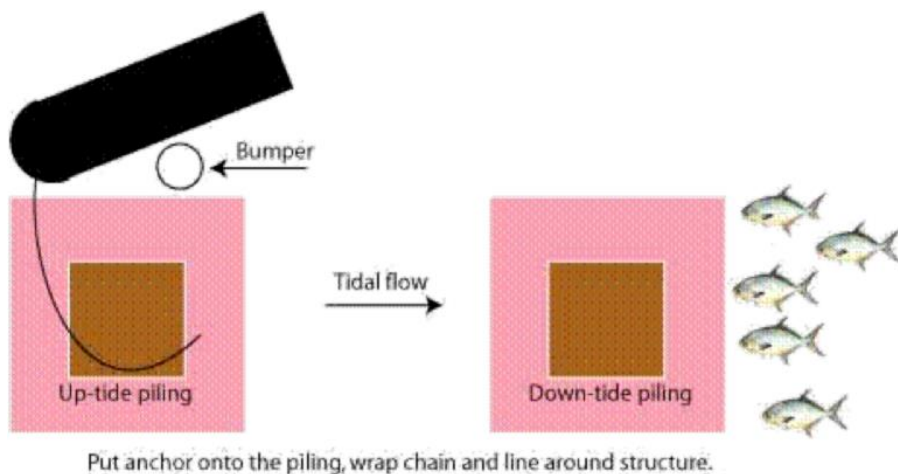
outgoing tide, you need to be north of the fish. This tip alone is a major part of learning how to catch pompano

Traditional wisdom has one putting out 100 or more of anchor line, and sufficient rode (chain) to get a good grip and then letting out enough line to position the boat directly alongside the pilings. Tradition is fine, but there's a far better way of getting into the right spot

Get your boat right against the piling; have a friend step (carefully!) onto the base, carrying the anchor, and enough line to wrap around to the other side. Hook the anchor on the opposite side of the structure, and place a bumper between your boat and the cement.



With a little practice, you'll be able to sit comfortably against the bridge, with the stern of the craft pointing back towards where the fish are. If it's too windy, or if (as often happens) the wind and tide are moving against each other, you might have to improvise with a second line or extra bumpers. The key is getting your boat against the up-tide piling.



That's where you want to chum from, since the fish are against the outside of the down-tide piling just waiting for those crunchy morsels to break away and flow with the tide.

Crabby Fisherman Catch More Pompano

As some of Mel's listeners know, Captain Mike Plastic and myself are hardly purists when it comes to live vs. artificials. We like bait (this, despite a recent trip with Mel where we boated and released more than 60 gorgeous trout, all caught on plastic things of one sort or another). And for pompano, there's nothing better. People tell us that they slay-em on Doc's Goofy Jigs, but we'd have to see that to believe it.

We use crabs. Fiddler crabs. You can find fiddlers by the jillions on many shorelines all over the bay area. We usually get our rations at the mouth of A-Cut on the north side of Tampa Bay, between Rocky Creek and Double Branch cause that's where I live, and we go past Crab City on our way out.

To catch crabs, get a small bucket, and put a little water in the bottom. Then drop in an old rag so the crabs have something to climb on to get out of the water. If you don't put the rag in, they'll drown fairly quickly. With a rag in there, and an occasional meal of dried bread, they'll live for days in a shady spot.

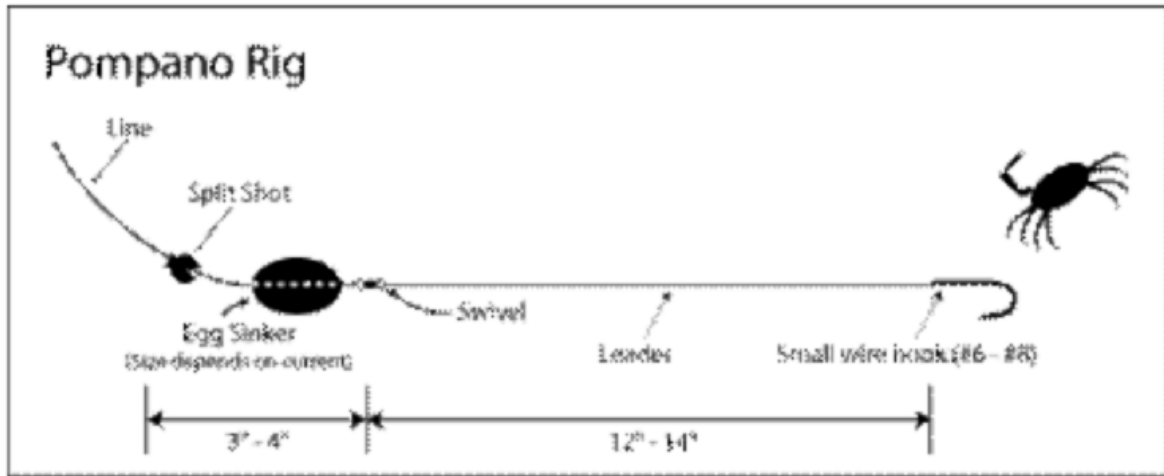
Walk up to the crabs. They'll all scatter in every direction, including down their little hobbit-hole homes. Not to worry get in between them and the water, reach down, and grab them. They will bite you. Hard. Don't be a girl. Collect at least 50 baits for every person going on the trip.

If you actually *are* a girl, wear gloves. If you're not, and wear gloves anyway, something happens to the crabs and they won't work and you won't catch any pompano.

Tackle

We feel that fish are human too, so why not make it fair? We use PowerPro exclusively, for most everything we ever target. Pompano are no different. We use light spinning gear with PP in the 10lb class. This wonderful line has no stretch, very small diameter (the equivalent of 2 lb test monofilament) and excellent feel. This last feature is critical for learning

how to catch pompano, which require that you set the hook just before they bite the bait. Since you can feel the fish swimming by PP, this helps you know when that's going to happen.

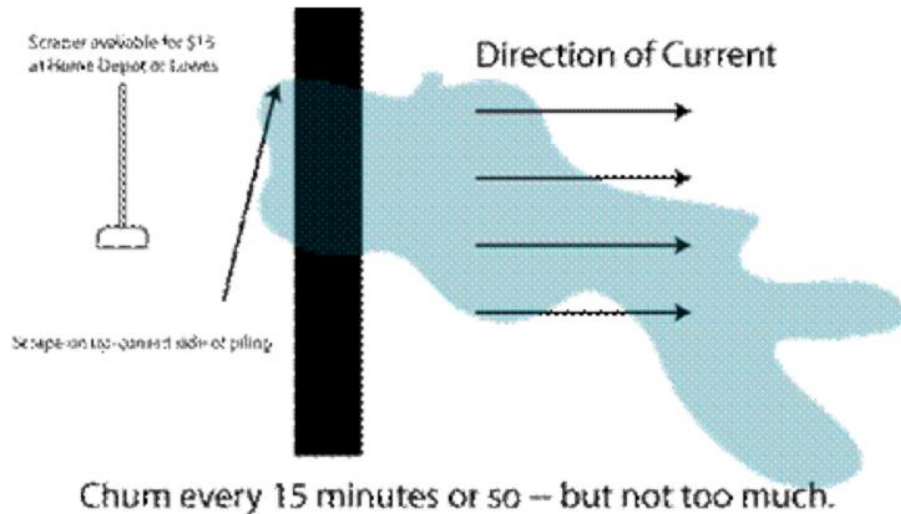


Before you put on your crab, break off their big claw. The females don't have one, so leave them alone. (Sorry for the low quality image here)

Since you're using small crabs for bait, it's important that you use very fine wire hooks usually #6 or #8 wire with short shanks. The bait is tiny, and so is the mouth of the pompano. We slip an egg sinker onto the PP, tie on a swivel, then attach a 12 inch piece of 17 lb to 20 lb fluorocarbon leader. Three or four inches above the egg sinker, we pinch a split shot onto the line. This gives the fish a small amount of play before they feel the weight, but not enough for them to move away with the crab before we sense the almost imperceptible tap-tap of the bite.

Presentation

Chumming is an important component of the successful Pompano trip. Fortunately, the chum is already there when you arrive. It comes in the form of barnacles, mussels, and other crustaceans that attach themselves to the pilings. Get a garden scraper from Lowes or Home Depot. Get up on the piling, on the side of the pilings furthest away from the down-tide side where the fish are. Scrape a line 12 inches wide by six or eight inches high, letting the goop flow down, around the piling, and to where you know the fish are.



We can almost taste the pure white flesh of the pompano as we speak. Hook on a crab, either stand on the piling or in the stern of your boat, and drop the line straight down alongside the bridge. The weight is critical it shouldn't be so heavy as to keep the bait from bouncing away from the bridge, nor should it be so light that it you can't feel it bouncing. Drop the weight, pick it up a few inches, and drop it down again. If you've selected the right size egg sinker (you need to have a wide range of weights with you), it will move slightly away from the piling before it hits the bottom again.

POOF. A tiny cloud of sand is kicked up. Raise your rod tip, drop the weight again, and it should move away a little bit more. Let out some line. Poof! The sand is disturbed again. Repeat. The crab should be moving steadily away from your location, towards where the fish are. It's the puff of sand that attracts them as much as the smell of the chum and the movement of your tiny crab. Without the correct bounce, you will not catch pompano. It is in this presentation that the secret lies; perfect it, and you will consistently catch pompano; don't do it right, and people right alongside of you will catch their limit while you watch. It's tense, non-relaxing fishing. But it's big, big fun.

You need to keep changing weights as the strength and flow of the tide changes. When the tide slacks and starts to turn around, reposition your boat and start all over fishing in the other direction.

We hope this helps. And, by the way, now that we've told you how to catch pompano, where they are, and what to use for bait, be fair and leave a few for us. After all you should respect your elders and fellow fisherpeople.