

How to Catch Speckled Trout

During the months of February and March, our Tampa Bay water temperature is still fairly cool. Flats fishing can be inconsistent with sporadic fronts, which can upset our sub-tropical fish. One fish that seems to be a little more reliable to target is the speckled trout. Things I look for when trout fishing are tides, weather and water temperatures. When planning a trip the first thing I look at are the tides and the moon phase. On those days that the tides for that month are the strongest, it moves the water and makes the baitfish follow. I like to fish three days before or after a moon phase with the exception of the full moon. Fish feed pretty hard on full-moon nights and are sometimes reluctant to eat a couple of days after.

Weather and Temperature

Weather is the next important thing to study. Depending upon wind direction, tides will sometimes not be able to reach their full potential if the winds fight against them. Lastly, water temperature is another key role that determines whether or not you will have a productive day on the water. For trout -- and most of the fish here in Tampa Bay -- I have found that temperatures between 65 to 75 degrees are optimal. If you plan around these three factors every time you go out your luck at fishing will increase ten- fold. Keep a log of good days and bad ones, and you can pattern the fish for future trips. So now that you have your plan you have to figure out your target fish and how it feeds.

Three Types of Fish

There are three different types of feeding fish: Terminal (ex: tuna, mackerel, kingfish) -- these fish are mostly pelagics. Streamlined and fast and always on the move, their mouth is symmetrical where upper and lower portions are the same. Next is the Superior feeder (ex: snook and tarpon), which are ambush feeders that usually hang around structure behind eddys in the current. The lower jaw is longer than the upper, and the eyes are generally a little higher on the head looking upwards for prey. Lastly are the Inferior feeders (ex: redfish and black drum), which are roaming fish on open flats or oyster bars. Their upper jaw is longer than their lower mouth facing downwards looking for prey on the bottom. I consider trout to be a mixture of all the feeding types, which makes them a fun fish to target. As trout are in same family as redfish -- "Sciaenidae" -- I target them like I would a redfish.

Tides, Baits and Setup

On lower tides I search for trout on the drop-off edges of flats that lead to a channel. As water becomes higher, I follow the tide inwards and look for schooling mullet and cast around mullet schools or shallow water potholes near a school of mullet. Live baits that I recommend for trout would be: pinfish, grass grunts, finger mullet, threadfin herring, shrimp and scaled sardines. My preferred bait is scaled sardines aka "White Bait." I consider this bait to be the fillet mignon of the baitfish. You can get these baits around any grass flats or bridge structure near a pass or an inlet. You can either sabiki or cast-net for these baits. For a sabiki size I like 4 or 6. For a cast-net, a 10-foot, 3/8" mesh net will do the trick. For hooking scaled sardines, I like to hook them either through the nose or through the belly. I like to hook the bait through the nose in high current areas or in a shallow grass environment. Most of the time, I belly hook my bait because it presents the most flash and a wounded look. Also belly-hooking works great in deeper water situations and forces the bait to move toward the bottom. For hooks I like to use circle hooks because it does less damage on the fish and is easier for beginners to use. I like a size 1/0 to 2/0 depending upon my bait size. Remember to use the appropriate hook to the size of the bait you're fishing. Which means don't use a 4/0 with a 3" scaled sardine -- the size of the hook will drown and kill your bait. There are two different types of hook points -- needle points and cutting points. For trout, needle point is by far the best because of the trout's soft mouth. Cutting-point hooks have sharp jagged edges and are good for hard-mouth fish like tarpon or sheepshead. If you have friends on the boat I always like to be fishing different parts of the water column. So I would have one bait on a bobber close to the surface, another free-lined and hooked through the nose, and another belly-hooked to see what the fish are keying on. Once I have figured out the presentation the fish are liking, then I will have everyone switch to that.

Rods, Lures and Lines

I like to use live bait for trout. For a rod, I use a 7' to 7'6" ML action, and between a 4-10 to a 6-12 pound class rod. This allows for a nice soft hook-set to not rip the trout's mouth and also to sling that live bait out there. For line, I use Ohero braided between 10-and-15 pound test, with a 15-lb. Ohero fluorocarbon leader. Artificial for trout can be wide-spread. For early morning you can't beat a top-water lure. There are a few types of top water lures (Prop baits, Poppers, and Walk the Dog). I prefer to use a popper or prop bait for trout. The commotion on the surface imitates another trout feeding, which excites the trout to inspect the lure. Though I would still have someone else on the boat throwing a Walk the Dog and see what lure is triggering more bites. If you are not keeping any of the trout, I would recommend to pinch down the barbs on your lures. With the soft mouths of trout, treble hooks can do a lot of damage to the fish. Also try to handle the fish as little as possible. Trout have a protective slime coat that protects them from disease and infection so bring a de-hooking device to properly handle the fish. One of my favorite lures for trout would have to be a Paddle Tail, which is a very effective search bait. It covers a lot of water and it's very easy to use. For

colors, I like to “Match the Hatch.” So if the water is really clean I throw lighter color lures. If the water is dirty I will throw darker color lures. The same goes for the suspending jerk baits like the MirrOlure I like to match the hatch with, but I will change my retrieve style with different cadences. The retrieve I use the most is “twitch-twitch-pause,” and the steady twitch retrieve. Also the Deadly Combo rigs are a good tool to get kids into fishing. It’s a very visual way of fishing and keeps the kids entertained by watching the bobber. Rods I like to use for artificials are a 7’ to 7 ½’ medium to medium heavy, depending on lures. Also 10-to-15-lb. Ohero braid line and a 15-lb. Ohero fluorocarbon leader.