

Live Bait from the Gulf of Mexico

(**Credit for the photos in the Baitfish Profiles goes to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission, Division of Marine Fisheries, and to the artist, Diane Rome Peebles.**)

There are many small fish that can be used as live bait in salt water

-- Sardines, herrings, several varieties of pinfish, killifish, mutton minnows, chubs and any other fish that fits the size of the bait that you want. Also, remember this: if you try a new bait alive and nothing seems to want to eat it, you can sometimes be very successful by filleting it and using it as a cut chunk or strip bait.

Baitfishes are seasonal; therefore I'll often cast net baits like mullet and menhaden when they're abundant then freeze them for use during the winter. Most of the baitfish are gone then, and your fresh-frozen bait will be of better quality than most of the frozen stuff you buy in the tackle stores.

To maintain the quality of your soon-to-be frozen bait,: Soak it overnight in a brine solution of two pounds of salt to a five gallon bucket of sea water, well iced down. Freeze it the next day in Ziploc bags (2-3 pounds of bait per bag), to make it easy to use on future trips. If you don't care to go to this much trouble, and then freeze the bait immediately - it will still be superior to most store-bought frozen bait. Most of the pre-rigged frozen baits are very costly for what you're getting.

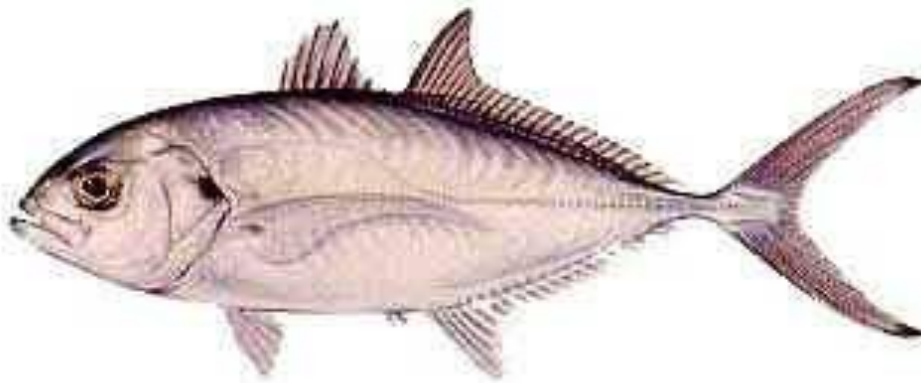
Remember, take only as much as you need and plan to use. Let the rest go alive, and leave some for tomorrow.

Captain Charlie



Ballyhoo

Ballyhoo or balao, can you tell the difference? There are supposed to be three species in the Gulf of Mexico, but I'm not going to bore you with the differences. Some mistakenly call them needlefish, but you can easily tell these two apart: the ballyhoo has a shorter upper jaw and the tip of its lower jaw is orange-red. You can occasionally find them in our part of the Gulf in the summertime but they are not extremely abundant this far north (Tampa Bay). You can buy them frozen in most tackle stores and they are excellent bait for trolling. You can find them pre-rigged in most stores that carry them. There are several ways to rig them for trolling, but probably the easiest is a plastic attachment that you can buy called a "hoo nose". There may be other brands available so call or write if you have a better one (and send me a sample of it, please.) They are an excellent bait for all species of fish that we troll for in this area, and if handled and rigged properly can be trolled faster than a live bait. This trait allows you to cover a larger area and maximize your fishing time.



Blue Runner

Blue runner, hard tail jack, yellow jack, yellow mackerel and runner are all *Caranx crysos*. Whatever name you attach, they're great bait for larger fish. They are very hardy in the baitwell and can swim surprisingly fast for long distances on the hook. They commonly grow to 12-14 inches but are said to reach 20 inches. The only way to catch them is with hook and line. The most common rig used to catch them is the multiple gold hook set-up offered by several manufacturers that are attached to your line with a weight at the bottom. Slowly jig these around a wreck, on the edge of hard bottom, or around marker buoys. Blue runners are also frequently found over sand

bottom and in the surf line along the beaches. For the best results, use the rigs in a #8 to a #18 size (these are the larger hooks, and sometimes hard to find). The smaller #6s will work, but I find them easier to land using the larger sizes. For trolling, hook the blue runner through the cartilage in the nose. If you're using a larger 'runner, add a "stinger" hook back towards the tail just pinned under the skin. These are very fast swimming fish, so be sure and watch your lines carefully. If you are trolling too slowly, you may find them crossing each other. If you are drifting or fishing from an anchored position, you will have to be working on them constantly to keep them from tangling each other. However you fish the blue runner, hang on tight, because they are a great "big fish" bait.



Cigar Minnow

Cigar minnows, cigarfish, or hard tails are all "Round Scad", *Decapterus punctatus*. They grow commonly to 6 inches but can be as large as 12 inches. As the name belies, they are cigar shaped and have a line of enlarged scaled running the length of the body on the sides and a tiny finlet behind the dorsal fin and behind the anal fin. You can catch them in a cast net or with gold hook rigs in the same areas that you find sardines or threadfin. They are in the same size range as sardines so if you are using a Sabiki rig to catch them a # 8 is a good size to use. They are also sold frozen and are an excellent cut or whole bait for almost everything. For live bait fishing, hook them in the cartilage in the nose and troll away. They are a hardy fish in the well and on the hook, and like the blue runner, can out swim the boat if you are not careful.



Crabs

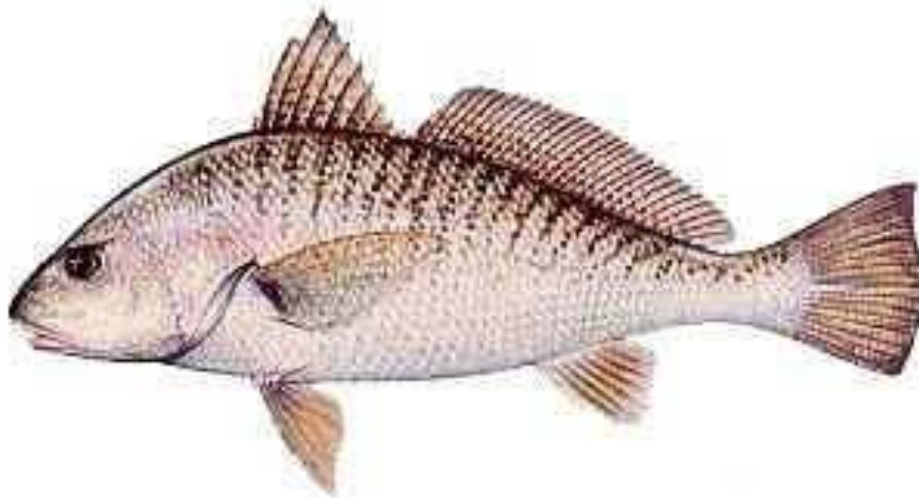
Crabs are great bait for many species in Florida waters. We have Blue Crabs, Calico Crabs(that many people call Pass Crabs), Fiddler Crabs, and Sand Fleas(I think they are crabs, if not, they should be). Of course, there are many more varieties of crabs in Florida(I've had a lot of old crabs on the boat) but these are the most commonly used for bait.

Blue crabs are used inshore primarily for drum and permit either whole or broken in half. Offshore they are used for almost anything. Just about every species in the Gulf will eat a crab but I use them primarily for cobia, hog snapper, grouper, tarpon, and if I'm out of other bait, whatever bites is definitely what I was fishing for. To hook a live Blue Crab, most frequently the hook is run up through the bottom and out the top shell at the point of the shell on either side or in one of the back leg openings and out the top of the shell. This allows the crab to move more or less naturally and stay alive for a while on the hook. If you are fishing on the bottom, you need to remember to move your line frequently because the crab, while alive, will try to hide under anything on the bottom in order not to be seen by predators. You can also cut a large crab in half if you think you need a smaller bait and hook it in the same place. You can also do the same with frozen crabs if that is all you can get.

Pass Crabs are almost identical to Blue Crabs in shape, but they only grow to approximately four to five inches in width. You can catch Pass Crabs in south Florida during the outgoing tide on the surface, usually floating along with grass as it flows toward the Gulf. You simply take a long handled net and dip them out of the water. There are a few bait shops in south Florida that sell them, but they are few and far between. The primary use for pass crabs is for tarpon in the Boca Grande area, but they are just as good , maybe better, than blue crabs for a variety of fish. Hook them in the same way as blue crabs, through the back leg hole and out the top shell.

Fiddler crabs are much smaller than Blues or Pass crabs and are primarily used inshore for pompano, permit, sheepshead and a few other crab eaters. You can catch your own fiddlers or buy them at many bait stores throughout Florida. Again, like the other crabs, hook them through the back leg hole for the best results.

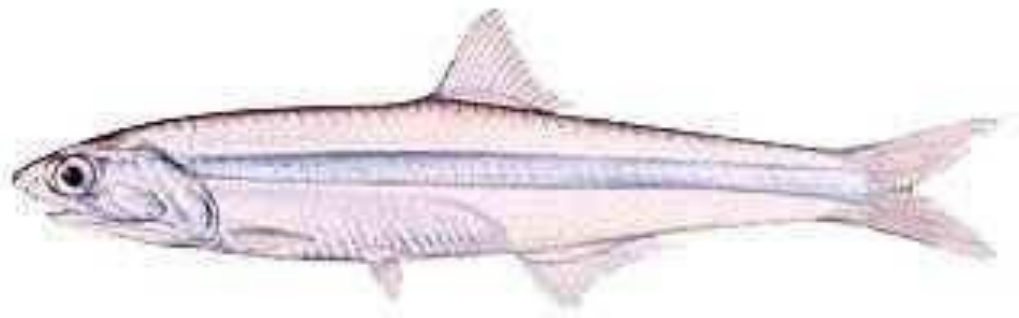
Sand Fleas are about the smallest of the four crabs, usually not larger than a quarter. You can find them live in some bait stores and frozen in many of the stores. They are very simple to catch yourself, if you know where to look. You will need a Sand Flea rake, and the tackle store where you buy the rake can generally give you some information on where to start looking for them. If they can't help you, then you probably should look for another store to spend your money in. They are found on the beach, at the surf line, digging like crazy to disappear before the wave recedes and leaves them high and dry. If you see one or two, then you should dig there, because there are usually many hundreds together in one area. To hook the Sand Flea, come up from the bottom and out the top shell near the back. They don't live very long on the hook, but that doesn't seem to bother most of the fish you are after - they will be eaten very quickly in most cases.



Atlantic Croaker

The Atlantic croaker (*Micropogonias undulatus*) is very similar in appearance to a small black drum. The easiest way to tell them apart is that the barbels (whiskers) on the drum's chin are pronounced, while on the croaker's they are very tiny. They are also called chut, grunter, corvina, crocus and rocodina. They are great bait for grouper and many other fish when they are fished from a still boat - they don't troll well at all. You will find that most baits that live primarily on the bottom will not be suitable for trolling, but will be good for bottom fishing or even mid-water fishing if the boat is at anchor or drifting slowly. Croakers usually reach about a pound in size, but we generally see

them from three to eight inches in our area of the state. We catch them in cast nets at certain times of the year, most frequently fall and winter. I have read that they are an important commercial species, with high quality flesh, and mostly exported out of the country (of course) - but in my book they are only high quality grouper bait.



Glass Minnow

Glass minnows and silversides are anchovies. Yes, the same anchovy that you eat on pizza or in Caesar dressing. The bay anchovy is *Anchoa mitchilli* for those of you that hope to catch me in my identification mistakes. They range from Maine through the Gulf of Mexico in great abundance. They are easily recognized by the fact that they are transparent with a broad silver stripe down the side and are seldom over three inches long. There are a half dozen species according to Dr. Bob Shipp and he says no one but a fishery scientist would care to describe the differences in them. When you are looking for bait and suddenly your fish finder shows a giant school under the boat, you throw the net perfectly, it sinks quickly, and comes back empty, you throw again and again as the fish finder tells you to, and continue this game until you are exhausted - then you are throwing on glass minnows. Some of us play this game for many years, even though we know better. Eventually you will get older and either find a younger person to throw the net, or after one or two empty throws, move on to another area to hunt bait.

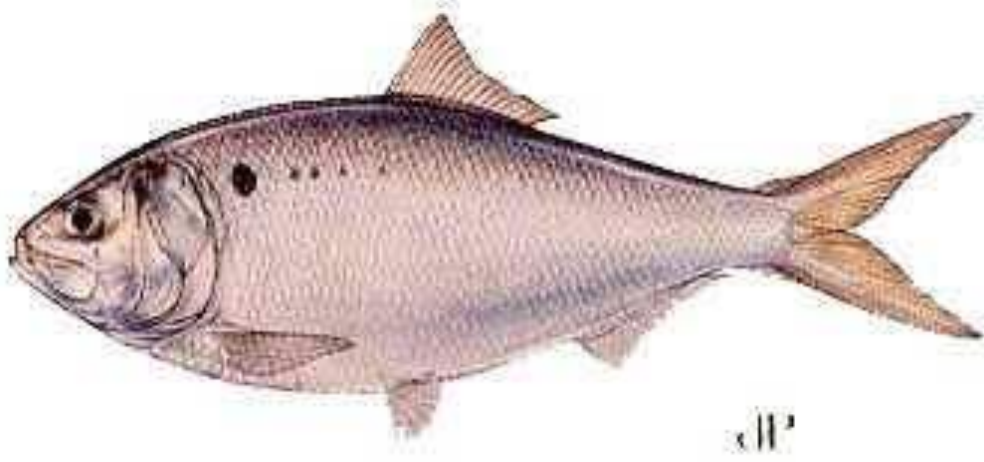
There are ways to acquire glass minnows, because they are great chum material. The simplest is to buy them in frozen blocks at the tackle store, but you can buy a small mesh cast net and catch them yourself if you are a purist, (or bored silly). The net will be nylon usually and has a mesh size no bigger than 1/4 inch. They really aren't that expensive to buy and you will be using them dead anyway. I have never seen a baitwell that would function properly to keep a batch of bait that small alive without clogging up constantly. The best way to use them is as chum. Cut them into small pieces with a pair of stainless scissors and drop a steady stream of the pieces overboard into the current. You can do this while you are slow trolling but I think it is more effective to chum from an anchored position into the current behind the boat.

You can use the same pieces for bottom chum simply by dropping them overboard in your chum basket and letting it sink to the bottom to disperse it where you are fishing. You can also just place the frozen block of glass minnows in a mesh bag hanging over the side of the boat and let them thaw and drift in the current. This is effective, but you use a lot more minnows than you do by cutting them. Don't forget, you want to attract the fish, not feed them. When they are full, it's hard to get them to take a bait with a hook in it.



Ladyfish

Elops saurus - known as ladyfish, skipjacks, cuban tarpon, banana fish, ten-pounder, Macabi and lots of other names. Ladyfish are great big fish bait. As live bait for kingfish or barracuda they can't be beat. They can be caught easily with hook and line either trolling small spoons or anchored and chumming with small baits out on the hooks. You will often catch them when mackerel fishing in the summer, since they frequent the same areas and eat the same food. They are also great sport on light tackle, hence the name ten pounder. They are usually under 3 or 4 pounds, but they put up a leaping, acrobatic fight worthy of a fish twice their size. By all means: if you can find ladyfish, use them for bait! Of course if you just want to have light tackle fun, catch and release.

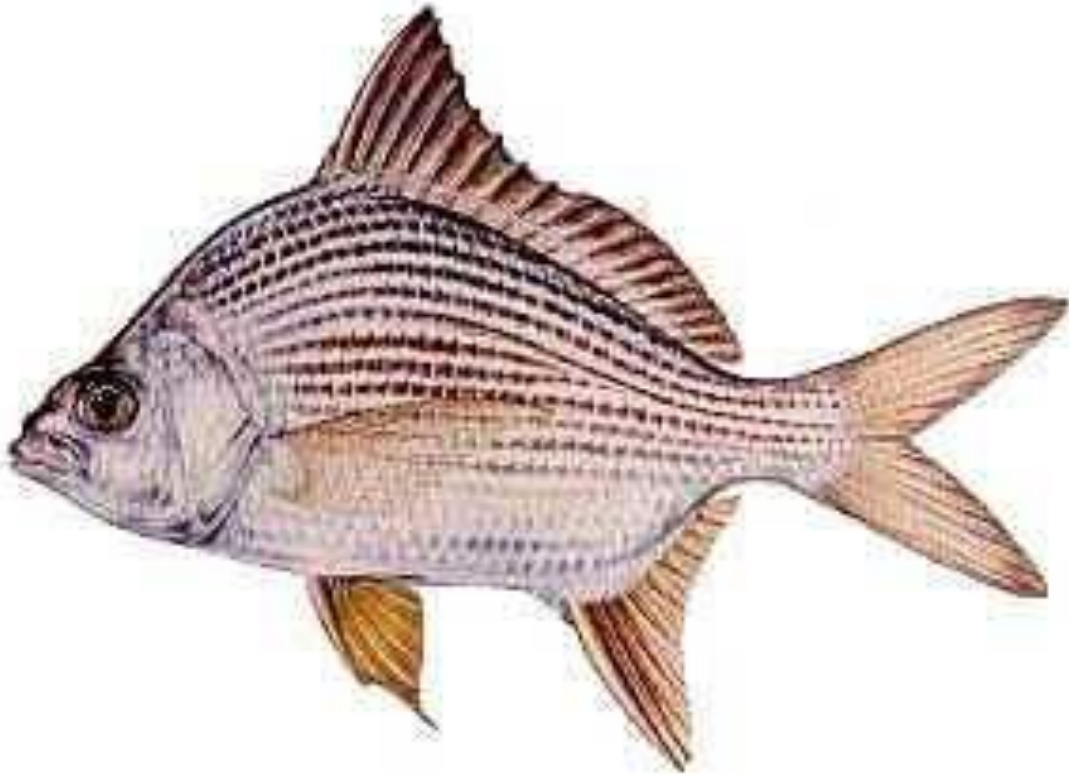


Menhaden

Shad, bunker, shiner, pogeys, and no telling how many other names, are all describing the menhaden (*Brevoortia patronus*). There are two in the gulf in my area: the gulf menhaden, with one large spot behind the gill cover with several smaller spots behind it, and the finescale menhaden with only one spot behind the gill cover. They grow to approximately one foot and are very similar in appearance to the freshwater shad, but are not the same fish. Menhaden are extremely oily, which is why they have been commercially netted for so many years for the oil and meal that can be produced from them. They are many people's "secret" bait for almost all species, using them alive, dead, or cut. They should be hooked just like all the other baits that I have written about so far -- For trolling, hook them through the nose; for bottom fishing, through the nose or over the anal fin; and as cut bait, they should be cut diagonally and hooked over the top of the cut surface.

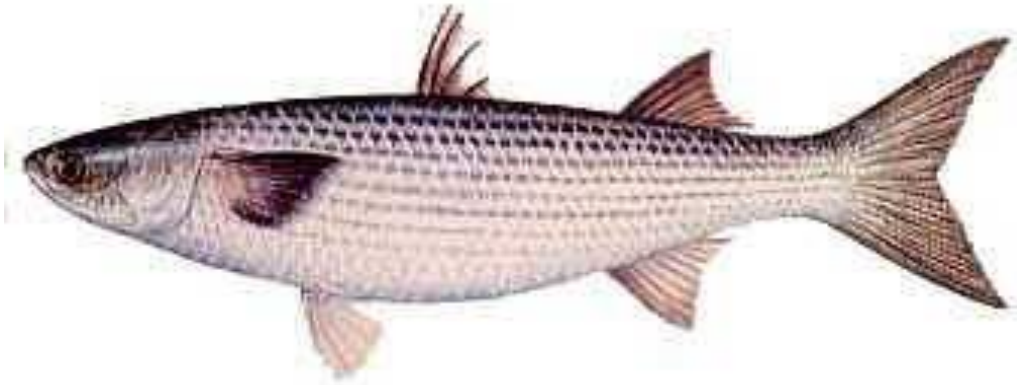
Menhaden are plankton filter feeders and can only be caught with a cast net since they won't bite a hook. Sometimes when you see bait "striking" or rolling on the surface, it is a school of menhaden making surface slurps of minute surface food items. We used to be able to spot menhaden inside Tampa Bay in the summer time by the oil slick that will form over a large school. They also have a very distinctive smell if you are downwind of them. They are a very fast moving fish, and usually by the time you see them on your fish finder, they have moved far enough away from the boat so that you cannot net them. We try blind throws of the cast net in the area where we can see them flipping on the surface; this usually will produce bait. Menhaden are also very intolerant of low dissolved oxygen and will die quickly in a poorly aerated live well. Still, they are five star on my list of baits.

Just as a note, if you have never seen live menhaden, many of them have a small critter that comes crawling out of their mouths when they die. This is quite a surprise the first time you see it. It appears to be some sort of shrimp or crab that looks like a mantis shrimp and must live inside the mouth or gill area without hurting the menhaden. I don't remember seeing this written about in any of the fish books, but surely some biologist somewhere has seen this.



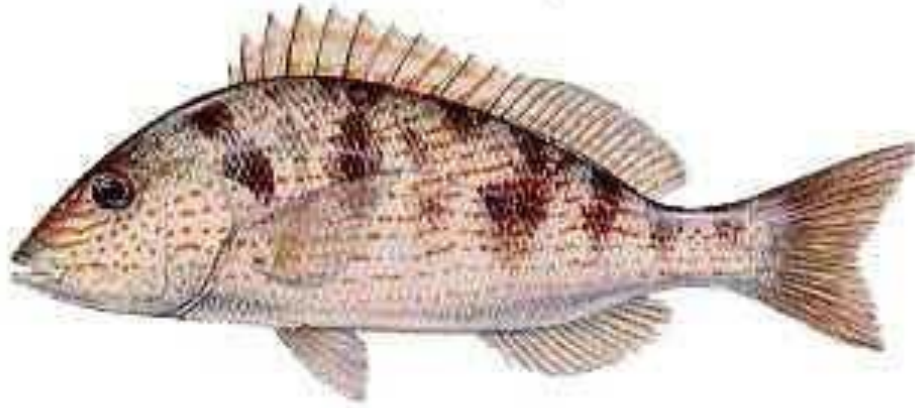
Striped Mojarra

Striped mojarra, sand perch, goat, sand brim make very good bait for almost everything. *Diapterus plumiere* does have soft flesh and will not take too much abuse in the baitwell or on the hook but grouper, snook, tarpon and snapper, to name a few - all love them. They have a cousin, the silver jenny, that is more populous in our area and is also great bait. They can be caught in a cast net, usually over sand bottom frequently in the surf line or just offshore. I can't tell you how to consistently find them, but if you look regularly, then you will see a pattern in the areas that they frequent. This is true of almost all bait fish. They seem to have areas that they favor over others, for whatever the reason.



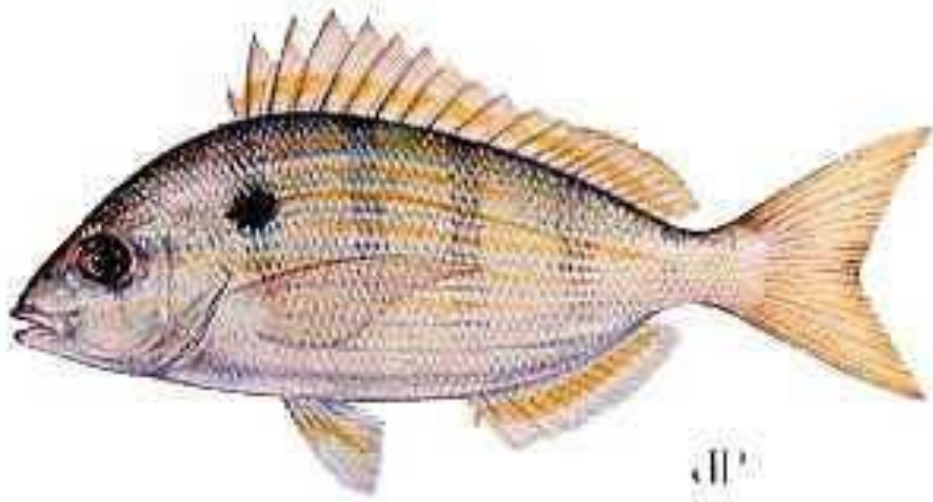
Striped Mullet

Striped mullet (*Mugil cephalus*), black mullet, and fatback: We love it fried or broiled and even the gizzards are delicious when cleaned properly and fried. Oops, I guess I got carried away. Alive or as cut bait, mullet are great for kings, barracuda, amberjack, you name it, everything (including me) - loves to eat mullet. It is a vegetarian, if you didn't notice my reference to the gizzard, and won't bite a hook. I have heard of people catching them with green peas or bread balls and that they're great sport, but I haven't tried it myself. They are fairly easily caught in a castnet if you know where to look. They used to be among the most populous species in Florida's waters, but their eggs have been sold to the Orient for so long and in such great numbers that it will be a few years before the massive schools are seen everywhere you look again. Don't forget that black mullet are great bait in any size, even the biggest ones at 14 to 20 inches. There is also a cousin, the white mullet, that is a little smaller and also makes great bait. It is very popular among billfish anglers, probably because of the size. We also use a lot of what we call "silver mullet"- juvenile fish that are, of course, also great bait.



Pigfish

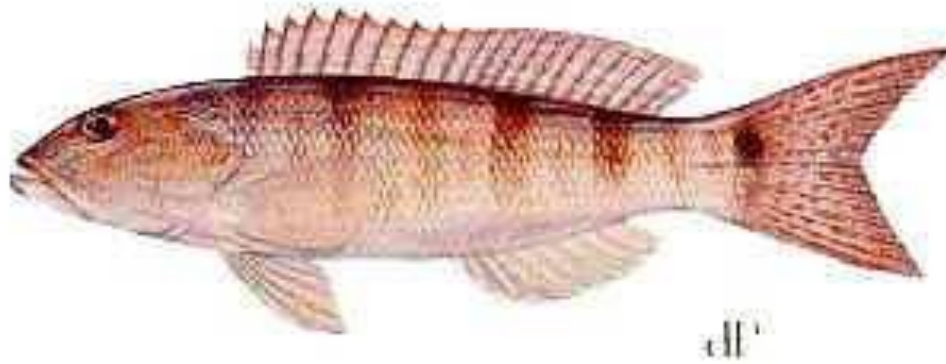
Pigfish (*Orthopristis chrysoptera*) are in the grunt family and are another good bait for most bottom fish. Tarpon are also particularly fond of them. I have read that they are a fair-flavored panfish, but I think it's time to tell you that I am not in the habit of eating my bait - and pigfish are bait on my boat. I have a credo that I share with "Ziggy" in the funny papers; "I consider it a successful fishing day if my catch outweighs the bait." So don't forget: pigfish are bait. They do grow to about a foot in length and are best used from a still or very slowly drifting boat. They will not troll well, but most fish do like to eat them. Usually we catch pigfish when we are gold-hooking for other baits so we don't expect to get a well full, just a few at a time. Those of you who don't own boats, please remember: when I write about a still or slowly drifting boat, the same can be applied to pier or bridge fishing.



Pinfish

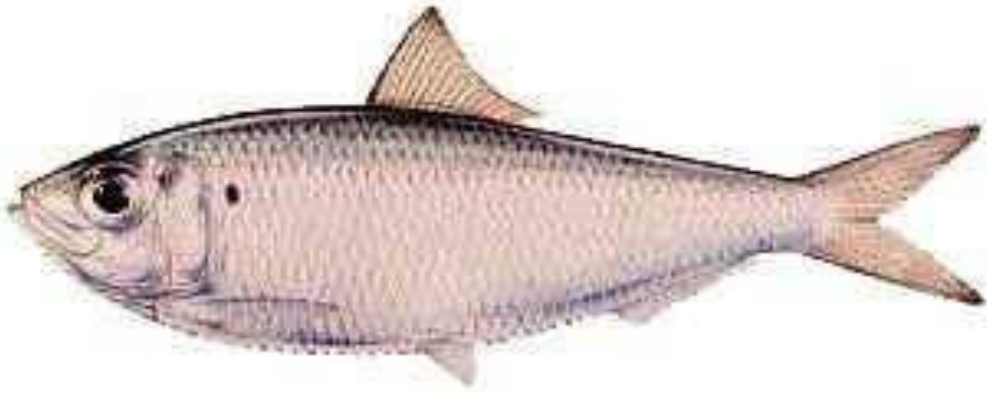
Pinfish are great bait for a wide variety of species; they are easy to catch and are found all over the shallow waters of the Suncoast. Put a little bit of bait (squid works very well) on about a #2 or #4 hook and toss it over some grassy bottom - it won't be long before the well is full of 'pins. You can also chum them up with catfood and bread and throw a cast net over the whole lot - 'pins are fast though, and often can run faster than the net can sink. Sabiki rigs work well for catching pins, but sometimes you need to add a tiny bit of squid to each hook to make it more effective.

Pinfish are very hardy as baitfish go, often outliving everything else in your baitwell. When handling them, watch out for the very sharp dorsal spines - they can really stick you good (that's how they get their name). Hook them just under this fin and fish them with little or no weight inshore. Offshore, a live pinfish will often get grouper to bite when nothing else will. This is a great baitfish that will also give beginning fishermen a very nice tussle on super-light tackle (nice way to entertain the kids on a windy day).



Sand Perch

Sand perch or squirrelfish (*Diplectrum formosum*), are excellent grouper bait. They also taste good, but their small size makes cleaning them too much trouble for me. They are a very pretty fish, with electric blue cheek lines and orange and blue sides. They also have a large mouth and very sharp gill plates - so be careful when handling them. They can be caught on almost any sandy bottom and frequently on rocky bottom as well. You can usually just stop your boat and drop baits overboard and be into squirrelfish - but if you haven't caught one in the first few minutes, move on to another spot. When bottom fishing squirrelfish for grouper, just hook them through the back in front of the dorsal fin and lower them to the bottom. Then hold on tight, because grouper love to eat them. Sand perch are also good bait when filleted or steaked and used as chunks.



Scaled Sardine

One of my favorite baits is the Scaled Sardine (*Harengula jaguana*). On the west coast of Florida, we call them whitebait. In other areas there could be many other names from pilchard to greenie. They are distinguished by their sharply pointed, keeled belly. Scaled sardines grow to an average of six inches and are great baits no matter what size you catch for almost all species of fish. You have to catch them yourself since they are not available in bait stores and the simplest way is with a cast net. You need a very good live well with a great turnover of fresh sea water in order to keep them alive, particularly in the summertime when the water warms up. I usually anchor up in an area where my fish finder is showing bait and begin to chum behind the boat with a mixture of canned sardines and whole wheat bread. When I can see the whitebait in the chum, I simply cover them with my net and put them in the live well. Sounds easy, huh? Sometimes it is, and sometimes not. If you cannot find them in water that is shallow enough for the cast net, then gold hook (Sabiki) rigs are called for. Simply drop your bait rigs to the depth that your fish finder indicates and gently jig it until you feel them hooked. Many times you can fill your well just as fast in this manner as with a cast net when the bait is hard to find.

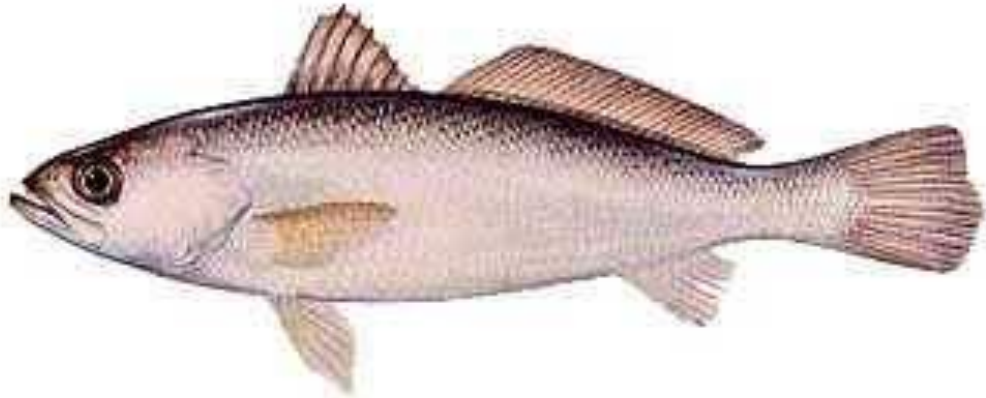
Whitebait is great for almost every fishing method. When trolling, hook them through the nose. Do not go through the eye socket, they will come off the hook. If you look closely, you will see a small "V" shaped area in front of the eyes - the hook should go through this area. If it is hard to insert the hook, then you know this is the right spot. Whitebait will stay alive for a long time when trolling and even longer if you are fishing at anchor on the surface. Be sure when trolling any bait that you go as slowly as you can make your boat run. On many inboards and larger outboards, you will have to actually bump in and out of gear to troll slowly enough. If your bait is spinning on the surface, you are going too fast. The bait should be able to swim on his own and will keep up with the boat for quite a long time if you troll slowly enough. If you check your bait and find he has a red eye, red nose or any thing else that is out of the ordinary, change to a fresh bait. If there is a lot of grass on the surface, you will have to reel in and check for grass on the hook frequently and you should check your bait at the same time.

When bottom fishing, you can hook the bait through the nose in the same place as trolling, particularly if there is a strong current running. If there is no current or it is light you can hook the white bait through the area where the pelvic fin is attached to the body. This makes the bait spin like mad on the bottom and will frequently trigger a feeding frenzy when dropped into lethargic fish that are not feeding well. Scaled sardines make fair frozen bait when cut diagonally and dropped to the bottom and they are great chum when cut into very small pieces and dropped overboard into the current or dropped to the bottom in a chum basket



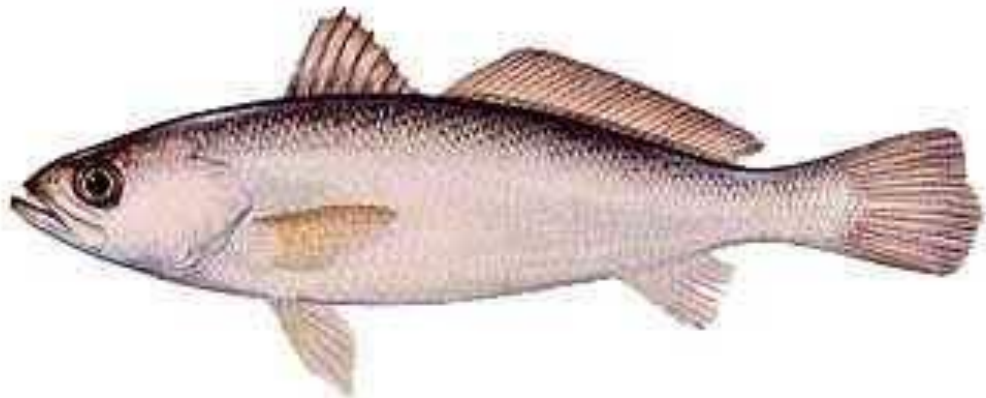
Silver Perch

The silver perch (*Bairdiella chrysura*) is a member of the drum family, croaker clan. It is a very silvery fish with a darker back. It only grows to about eight inches and favors mud bottoms. There are differing opinions about the popularity of it as a panfish, but it is a good bait fish. One author I read said " they are the joy of midwestern visitors to Florida, who catch them by the bucketful. Most often referred to as butterfish." Another author and biologist said they fail to have much of a following and are uncommon in large numbers. Well, If you happen to catch any, put them in the bait well because a big grouper or snapper will follow them right to the fish box



Silver Trout

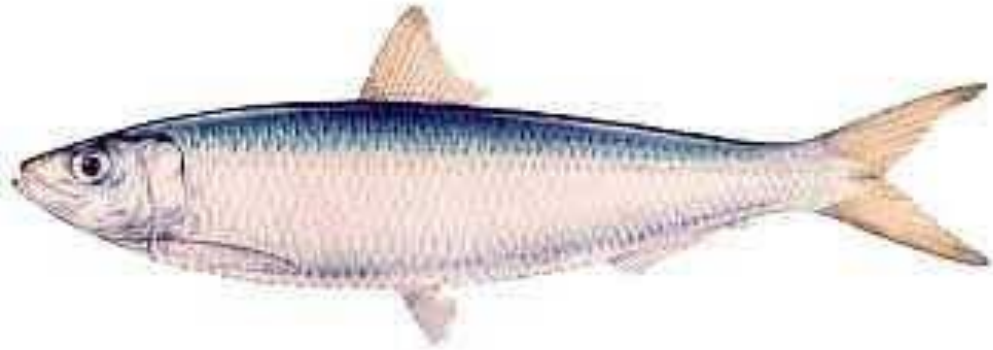
The silver trout (*Cynoscion nothus*) is a wonderful bait for most species of gamefish. I love to use them primarily for king mackerel and barracuda, but they are great bottom fish bait as well. Like most of the fish in this series, silver trout are at the lower end of the food chain and so make good bait for nearly anything in the Gulf of Mexico. Silvers are easy to catch on hook and line close to shore and are a popular food fish during winter. They are also caught frequently in the cast net - usually when you think you are casting on pinfish. They live in sandy or muddy bottom, but I frequently catch them close to rocky bottom. According to the biologists, silvers are a very close relative to the sand sea trout. They are apparently easy to tell apart if you look at the tongue or count the rays in the anal fin, but it doesn't matter to me - either one is great bait



Silver Trout

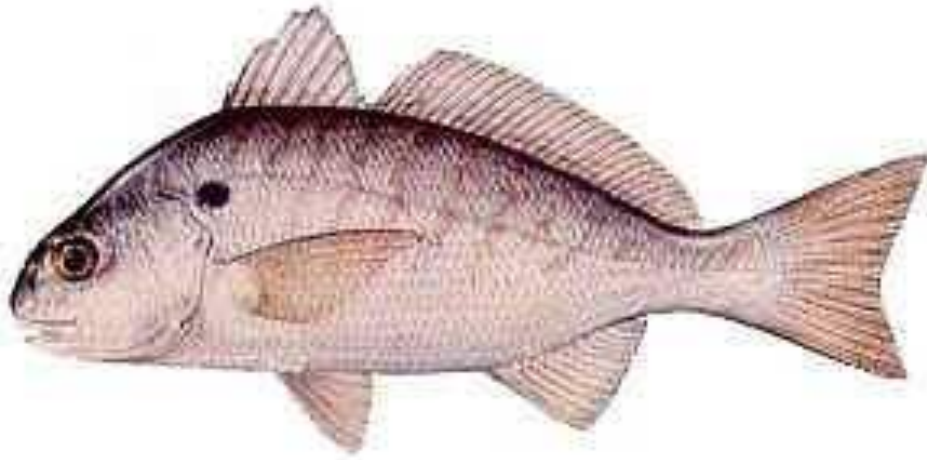
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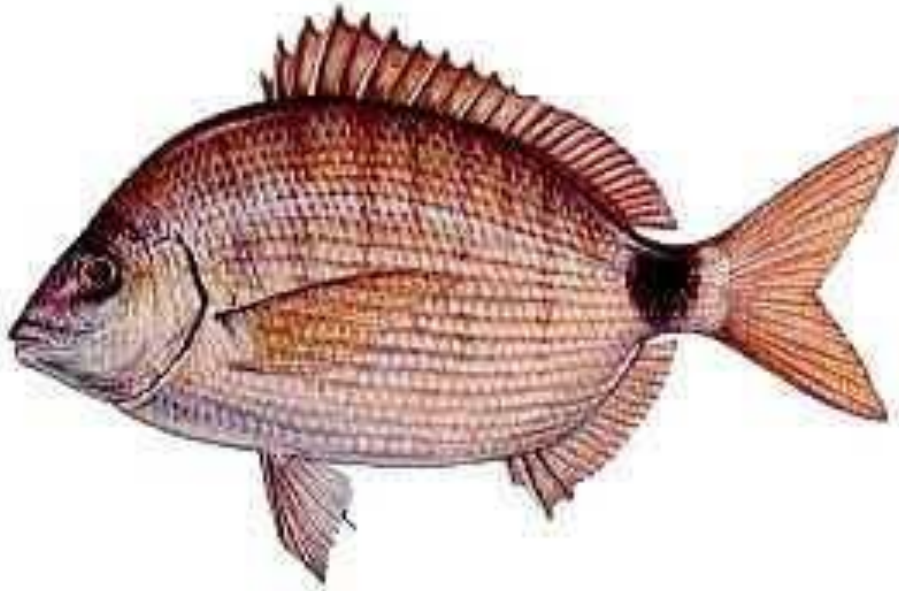
Spanish Sardine

Here's my all-time favorite bait for just about everything on the Gulf coast! Spanish sardines (*Sardinella aurita*) are members of the herring family and have a slender body, bluish or greenish back, white belly and very silver sides. They grow to about ten inches - and will fill your bait well with loose scales very quickly. You must have a good water flow to keep them healthy - especially during summer when water temperatures are high. Everything loves to eat sardines and they are great bait either alive or cut, trolled or fished on the bottom. They can be caught on gold hook rigs or with a cast net (3/8 inch mesh) in shallow waters. They are frequently found around piers and reefs. When you do catch them you should immediately hook one or two on your rods and begin fishing right where you caught them - at least for a little while - because generally there are some predators around feeding on them. Those predator species are generally the fish you're looking to catch. Note: Sardines can be fished out by the commercial netters, and have been in the past in California and the Tampa Bay area as well as other parts of the world. Watch your coastal area if you have lots of Spanish sardines around. If you see the purse seiners or trawlers starting to catch them, you had best get immediately involved with a strong conservation group if you want to see these valuable baitfish saved.



Spotfish

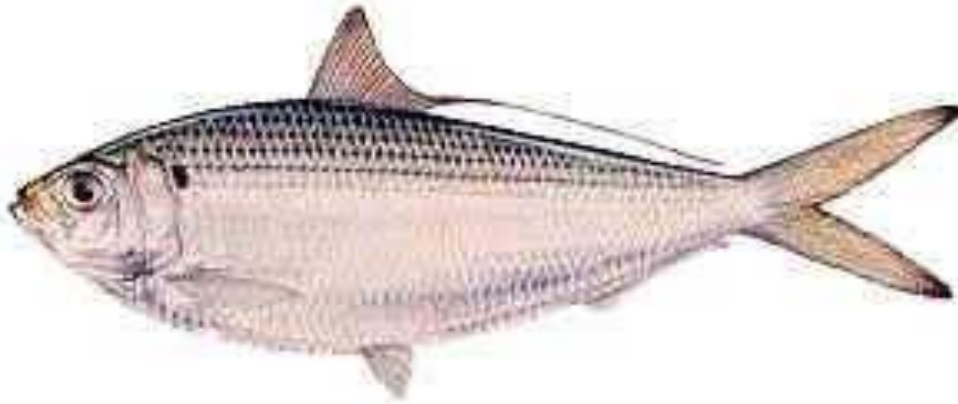
The spot (*Leiostomus xanthurus*) is similar to the croaker but with a spot just behind the gills. They're also called lafayette or flat croaker and are good bait for bottom fish. We don't frequently see them, but be sure and keep them if you do catch a few in your cast net because they are definitely grouper getters



Spot Tail Pinfish

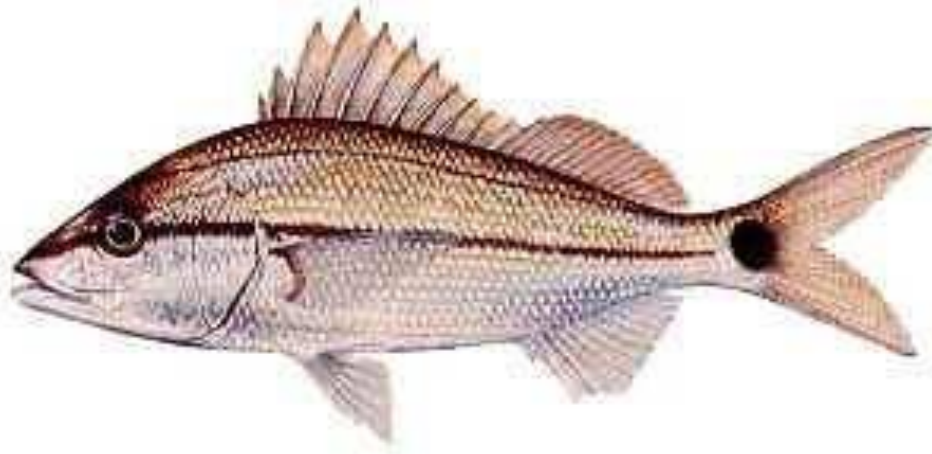
Spot tail pinfish (*Diplodus holbrooki*) - I wonder if *Diplodus* is any relation to Hal? - is also known as porgy, spot, spot-tail porgy, and sailor's choice. They are similar in appearance to the pinfish, but they have a large black spot in front of the base of the tail. According to the biologists, they hang around in shallow coastal waters and in lower areas of coastal bays and sounds. My experience is that they are most frequently caught in offshore waters around hard bottom and reefs, and they are good

baits, cut or alive. I have read that they are a fair pan-fish (maybe that's how they got the name "sailor's choice"?) I have not tried to eat one, even though we have caught some very large specimens. They are easily caught with gold hook rigs and even can be caught on larger hooks that you are fishing for snapper with. They grow to around ten inches and should definitely be kept for bait if you catch them.



Threadfin Herring

Another of my favorite baits is the Threadfin Herring (*Opisthonema oglinum*) or commonly known on my coast as the greenback. It has a very long thread-like fin at the back of its dorsal that accounts for its name. Again, like most baits, it has many regional names depending on where you live. It grows to 12" according to the books, but I have never seen them over 8". The greenback is usually found only when the water is fairly warm and is easily seen when on the surface. It has been my experience that they do not come to chum like whitebait, but you can occasionally net them in the same cast as whitebait and even on gold hook rigs. Usually to net greenbacks, you need a netter and a boat driver. The driver should maneuver the boat over the school and the netter should throw when the bait is seen on the fish finder. It takes a large, heavy net with a mesh size of 1 1/4 inches to 1 1/2 inches stretch mesh to catch full grown greenbacks. My net radius is 12' and I would not suggest one smaller than 10'. As with whitebait, you need a great turnover of fresh sea water in your well as greenbacks are very tender and will die quickly in and overcrowded well. You can hook them through the nose in the same place as whitebait and they make a very good cut bait when bottom fishing with dead bait.



Tomtate

Tomtate, Grunt, Spot tail, pain in the a--. The last name is usually what you call *Haemulon aurolineatum* when you start catching them. They look very similar to the white grunt that we all call "grey snapper" (it sounds better for the tourists than grunt), but they have a spot on the tail. Tomtates must line the bottom by the millions and when you do start catching them instead of the larger triggerfish or white grunts, you may as well move on. Any small piece of bait that you put down will probably be inhaled. Tomtates don't usually get larger than 8 inches and so they do make good bait. Usually I fillet them for cut bait, but they also work as live bait when hooked through the back and fished on the bottom for grouper or even mid-water for amberjack or barracuda. I don't recommend going after them for bait on purpose unless there is nothing else available, but if you need fresh bait then they can be caught on almost any bottom with small hooks baited with squid.