

Bass Fishing in Florida; A multi-million recreation

Bass fishing represents one of the most popular fishing sports practiced today. Its popularity has yielded a multi-billion dollar industry unto itself, aside from the business of other modes of sport fishing. There are boats on the market designed specifically for bass fishing. Clothes and gears are also very popular.

Freshwater sport fishing in Florida provided recreational opportunities for over 1.32 million people, over age 16, and generated an economic output of \$2.0 billion in 2001. Aside from that, Florida freshwater recreational fishing generated 19,519 jobs with earnings of \$484 million in 2001. Florida freshwater fishing provided 20.8 million angler days of recreation (92% resident) based on 14.5 million trips. (A trip is from the time someone leaves home until they return and may include many days; a day is defined by an activity on a specific day.)

Bass habitats include a variety of environments, from rivers, lakes, streams, and even ponds. Rivers provide one of the healthiest habitats, due to the highly oxygenated waters from the rapid current. In order to fish bass from rivers, it is best to seek out breaks in the current, perhaps from a fallen tree, a stump, or rocks. The fish that bass feed upon will normally school below a dam, thereby making these spots ideal for bass fishing.

There are at least 32 species of fish commonly caught in the numerous lakes, ponds, canals and rivers throughout Southwest Florida. The anglers pursuing the most popular of these freshwater game fish are locally referred to as either bass fisherman, "perch jerkers", pan fisherman or catfishermen, depending upon the object of their pursuit.

The most common and popular of these are Largemouth Bass, Catfish, Panfish, Chain pickerel and Crappie.

Largemouth Bass without a doubt is the most sought after game fish in Florida. It is the main target of the majority of anglers. Many of these lure busting monsters in the 10 to 12 pound range are taken every year in local waters.

The yellow and brown bullhead, followed by the channel catfish, is the most abundant in the area. They are favored by sportsman for the delicious table fare that they provide. Also harvested commercially, mainly on Lake Okeechobee, and their tasty fillets are served as an "all you can eat" favorite in most area restaurants. But it is still the bass fish that promises the challenge of the sport.

Every freshwater river, canal, lake and pond in South West Florida is abundant with what is locally referred to as "panfish" for the thick tasty fillets they provide. The term actually covers a wide variety of pan sized fish in the sunfish family. These include, but are not limited to, the following: bluegill, bream, warmouth, and the most sought after, redeared sunfish, locally referred to as a "shellcracker" for its diet of aquatic snails. Another favorite is the exotic oscar, which has flourished in the hundreds of miles of canals in the area.

An angler needs only to arm themselves with a cane pole and a can of worms or crickets for guaranteed success in catching supper. However, most anglers opt for the ultra-light spinning outfits with tiny spinners and spoons, or the fly rod with popping bugs. Catches of fifty or more a day are common.

While not particularly sought after, the pickerel must still be considered a game fish for its savage attacks on the lures most commonly thrown by bass fisherman. They are fast, tackle busting acrobatic fighters. While edible, they are usually released due the many pesky little bones in their fillets.

Also locally called speckled perch or "specks" and considered as the favorite of the "perch jerkers" or crappie fisherman that pursue them. These quick striking fish fall for a variety of lures. They congregate in large schools and once located, provide the angler with plenty of action and a great fish fry.

There are innumerable techniques and types of tackle available to practice the sport of bass fishing. For a beginner, it is advised to gather some more basic tools to get started. Some suggestions point towards acquiring a 10-pound line, suitable for the average sizes and weights of this species. Also, it is suggested to start with artificial bait until the angler has a better understanding of the unique characteristics of the bass fish. The Spinnerbait is common artificial bait used by both amateur and seasoned anglers.

The catch and release method was first introduced in the 1950s. It was designed to reduce the rising costs of restocking hatchery-raised fish, and was normally used for fish not meant for consumption. Popular consensus does not consider bass as a food fish, and thus this technique is widely used.