The Acute Angler

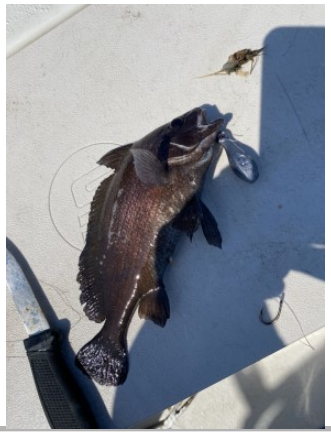
April, 2023
Volume 56, Number 4

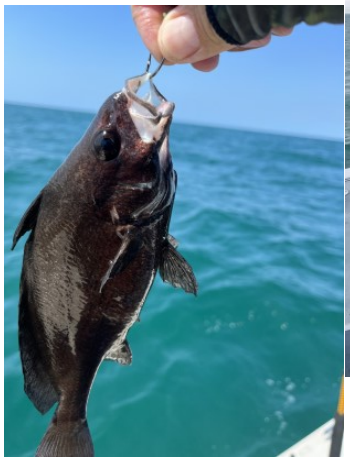
The monthly newsletter of the Gainesville Offshore Fishing Club

April Hot Shot

Why we fish: Firsts

You never really know what that bait or lure will bring up. That is part of the fun and excitement of just going out there and trying a new spot, bait, or technique. Tom J seen here holding his first ever Bluefish. The odd fish next to it was caught by your editor on a trip with Chic H, never seen it before and had to ask around unit Ken K told us it was a Cubbyu! Heck it was a big one too, might have been a club record! Then Chic caught a better one so my moment of glory faded. Never know what might come up over the rail unless you drop something down...





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President's Corner

Things are heating up!

April and May will be busy months for GOFC!

We have the upcoming Cobiathon/ MackAttack tournament on April 22nd in Cedar Key. Prizes will be awarded for the three largest Spanish Mackerel, King Mackerel, and Cobia. That's nine different prizes in all, so it's a great opportunity to get out there and catch a winner!

Two weeks after that, on Saturday, May 6, John Patrick will be leading a "Learnament" on fishing the Spoil Banks near Crystal River. Since our annual Spring Tournament will be held in Crystal River later in the month, this will be a great opportunity to learn the area from someone that knows it like the back of their hand. John will give tips on navigating the area safely and local tactics for targeting the big ten species.

On Saturday, May 20th GOFC will hold its annual spring Tournament in Crystal River. This is one of the biggest tournaments of the year with lots of prizes being awarded for both inshore and offshore species. More information on the Spring Tournament will be available soon.

Information on all GOFC events is posted on the website's events calendar and sent out to everyone who subscribes to the GOFC mailing list. If you have not been receiving the announcement emails, please send a message to president@gofc.us and let me know so I can make sure you get added.
I look forward to seeing everyone at the upcoming events!

Your 2023 GOFC President,

Ryan Kremser

From the Editor

As noted by Ryan we have a busy next couple of months here at the GOFC. We would like to first welcome a new sponsor to the newsletter, David and Katie Darens from the new boat and RV storage location in Archer, The Canopy! Thanks for your support David and Katie!

Last month we had a great presentation by local freediving and spearfishing expect (and new GOFC member!) Perry McDonald. Perry educated and entertained us with underwater videos of local hotspots and destinations farther away. He covered the basics of how to get into this exciting sport and brought gear he uses for display. Thanks Perry, we all felt it was a tremendous presentation and learned a lot from you!

This months meeting on the 25th will feature Al Clements. Al has been an avid fisherman all of his life. He even hosted a long running fishing show on Ted Turner's Channel 17 back in the 80's and 90's. These days he can typically be found prowling the Nature Coast for monster redfish in his tricked out kayak. Al will speak about kayak fishing and targeting inshore species along the Nature Coast. He will be bringing his tricked out “Kayak” to the meeting and be available for show and tell afterwards.

As usual, the meeting will be held in the Auditorium of the Veterinary Academic Building at University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine. There will be free pizza and drinks for purchase before the meeting. There's plenty of free parking right outside the auditorium. Raffle tickets for door prizes and we will have our new window decals (see next page) available. Meeting starts at 7:30 with fellowship at 7:00.

Two things we need: Pictures!! We are always looking for great photos of trips, friends, boat shots, fish, etc. from your outings and welcome them in the newsletter and on the website. Remember the photo contest too!

Second; articles! Love to hear of your adventures and fish stories, shoot me a line with the idea and we can run with it. Maybe we have a future outdoor writer waiting to break loose!

Look for two great recipes from Chef CC on one of my favorite species, Blue Crab! On that note, we have new regulations for Blue Crab traps and you will need to install a Bycatch Release Device. See my article for more details. Lastly Ryan has a interesting article about the recent Sea Urchin bloom seen in Kenton Beach this winter.

John Ebbs

2023 Newsletter Editor

New GOFC Window Decals are here!

Been a while since we have offered these and back by popular demand we had some made up for us with the current logo. These peal off stickers are 4”x6” in size and look great on your boat or vehicle! We are asking for a small donation to cover our costs, 1 for $2 or 3 for $5. Stickers will be available at the general meeting this month!! See Chic or John (me) if you want some.

Still time to renew your GOFC Membership!

It’s now easier than ever!

Just go to the “Join now!” tab on the GOFC website.

(http://www.gofc.us/wp/join-now/)

Then fill out the form online and pay using PayPal.

Upcoming Events

Cobia-Mack Attack:

Saturday, April 22, 2023 at Cedar Key, FL

Cash prices are 1st $100, 2nd $75, 3rd $50 For largest fish in each category, including King mackerel **by weight only**.

Weigh in is at 4 to 5pm at Robinson's Seafood (6991 State road 24 in Cedar Key. Members are encouraged to have dinner at Robinson's if possible since they are hosting us for the weigh in.

April 25th, 2023—Monthly Meeting UF Vet Med VAB Auditorium. Featured speaker is Al Clements, Al has been an avid fisherman all of his life. He even hosted a long running fishing show on Ted Turner's Channel 17 back in the 80's and 90's. These days he can typically be found prowling the Nature Coast for monster redfish in his tricked out kayak. Al will speak about kayak fishing and targeting inshore species along the Nature Coast. He will be bringing his Kayak to the meeting and be available for show and tell afterwards.

Crystal River Spoil Banks Learnament:

Saturday, May 6, 2023 from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Dinner at Seafood Seller's at 4:00 p.m. in the West Marine Shopping Center. Call Dale or John Patrick to enter; no limit on number of boats. Non-boat members are welcome.

Spring Tournament at Crystal River:

Saturday, May 20, 2023. Weigh-in at Fort Island Trail. First through third cash prizes for all 10 species.

Shrimp-A-Thon out of Suwanee Marina:

Tentative in June or July, depending on the shrimp's arrival.

Fall Tournament at Cedar Key: All 10 species

Trout-Redfish Tournament out of Steinhatchee:

1st, 2nd and 3rd place prizes for heaviest redfish and 1st, 2nd and 3rd prizes for 3 trout aggregate.

First prize for redfish most spots. May add flounder or remove trout; depending on next tournament meeting.

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Captain's Log

By Joe Richard

Fresh Water Abounds

It's hard to prepare for everything on these trips to the Coastal Bend. For instance, when offshore water becomes unfishable, are you prepared to switch to inshore on the same day?

Last week John Byatt and I were "loaded for bear," with 10 rods in his boat, most of them rigged for every possibility off Steinhatchee. We had a trolling rod with Rapala, and big spin outfits with rubber eels for the year's first cobia. Offshore rods with wire leaders for the year's first kingfish. Bait-casters with 2-ounce jigs. Even frisky live bait, after stopping on the way out and using pinfish rods rigged with tiny hooks. A mile out the water was dark, but we managed a dozen "pinnies" that seemed destined to have a short lease on life.

We banged our way 10 miles offshore across black water that never changed color, which was worrisome. Reaching an area with a big patch of live bottom that was great years ago, we found only…sand. The bottom machine and side-scan sonar marked almost nothing. The place was gone, even after double-checking our GPS number. This under gloomy skies, threatening rain and seas topping three feet. Not even a grunt or seabass down there…after an hour it was evident we were beating the proverbial dead mule with a stick, so we sprinted back inshore; confident that the tide was flooding in.

No problem: we had sufficient inshore tackle, four spin outfits ideal for trout and redfish. First stop was a favorite redfish spot. John hooked a big ladyfish that promptely jumped in the boat, and where it was carved up. I had bags of finger mullet frozen in water that looked infinitely better than the brown, salted variety found at Walmart; mine looked like they'd been caught in yesterday's castnet. We also had our live pinfish, by now getting rather bored in the livewell. We slung out four of these fine baits and waited. And waited some more, with nary a redfish. It was strictly saltwater catfish at four prime redfish spots.

It was going to be one of those days. We then began drifting for trout across Steinhatchee's bounteous grass flats. I hit a nap-time low and was content to drag two popcorks with live pinfish, dragging them upwind like the tourists do. John, who has the energy of a kayaker, fired his favorite jig out there many times like he was in a tournament. Caught a few trout, too. My pair of wiggling pinfish drifted a half mile with nary a bite in that strange-looking dark water. Then John reared back into something that pulled drag and took him around the motor, a nice mackerel that evaded the net several times before I scooped it up. At a little over three pounds, it was dinner for four and another Top-10 species for John. It was a long day, though a better boat ride than I'm used to. We never saw bottom and couldn't tell if the boat was over sterile sand or productive grass. Our doomed pinfish got a new lease on life when they were dumped overboard.

I don't know where all that black water came from, because it hadn't rained in two weeks. Except back at the boat ramp while we were fishing. A salinity meter on the boat would have helped, but fishing in dark water, from what I've seen, means lowering your expectations except when river fishing on the Suwannee. Days later on the Internet, I couldn't find any NOAA salinity monitoring stations from Steinhatchee to Homosassa.

However, the BNKF1 monitoring station in Keaton Beach showed 33 parts per million of salt, which is getting close to ocean water. Historically, Keaton always seems to have the clearest water on the coastal bend, and often the saltiest, because they're pretty far from any river discharge. (If you want scallops in reliably clear water, often with 30 or more feet of underwater visibility, boat within sight of Keaton.) There *is* a very useful NOAA monitoring station on the public pier at Cedar Key, but for some reason it doesn't measure salinity. Seems like that would be important, especially for local clam farmers.

The National Data Buoy Center says they are updating their monitoring website on April 19 to make it more mobile-friendly, which sounds like cell phones. But in most areas we still have to judge coastal water the old fashion way, by color and clarity.

One of my sons is visiting later this month during some prime tides, and this time we will be seeking greener pastures off Cedar Key. With our usual variety of tackle, because you never know what the day will bring.

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Charlie's Kitchen

She Crab Soup, a Low Country Favorite

By Charlie Courtney

She crab soup is a traditional low country dish that originated in Charleston, South Carolina and is the signature dish of that city. It is said to have been invented in 1909 (or possibly 1911) at a dinner cooked at the home of the Charleston mayor, R. Goodwyn Rhett for William Howard Taft (the U.S. President and later Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court — the only man ever to have held both offices). Knowing that Taft enjoyed turtle soup, William Deas, the mayor's cook and butler, reportedly developed the original recipe, using crab roe to "dress up" the soup. Alternatively, another Charleston legend has it that the soup was first created in the late 19th century by a local chef who ran short of crabmeat and decided to use the roe of female crabs to thicken the soup.

The soup is made with a creamy base of heavy cream and crabmeat, seasoned with a variety of spices and sometimes sherry. The name "she crab" refers to the female blue crab, which is the main ingredient in the soup. (Unfortunately it is illegal to harvest egg bearing crabs in Florida, so crab roe is not available to us.) Today, she crab soup remains a popular dish in the region and can be found in many restaurants and homes, but the soup is most strongly associated with the cuisine of Charleston. Many variants exist for this soup, with each restaurant and many homemakers having developed unique versions. Here are two very different recipes for She Crab Soup you can try out . . .

Carolina She Crab Soup

Recipe by Kardea Brown
Posted on Food Network:
Carolina She-Crab Soup Recipe | Kardea Brown | Food Network

Yield: 4 to 6 servings

Ingredients

1 stick (8 tablespoons) unsalted butter
1 medium onion, diced
1 stalk celery, diced
1/3 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon seafood seasoning
1/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg
1 bay leaf
Freshly cracked black pepper
1/3 cup dry sherry
1/3 cup clam juice
3 cups seafood stock
1/2 cup crab roe, plus a little more for garnish, optional
2 cups heavy cream, at room temperature
1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce
Kosher salt
1 pound lump blue crabmeat

Directions

In a large pot or Dutch oven, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the onion and celery and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is soft and translucent, about 10 minutes.

Reduce the heat to medium low, whisk in the flour and continue to cook, stirring constantly. You are essentially making a roux without browning it. Stir in the seafood seasoning, nutmeg, bay leaf and pepper, then whisk in the sherry and clam juice. Increase the heat to medium and bring to a simmer. Cook, stirring frequently, until very thick, about 10 minutes. Stir in the seafood stock and crab roe, if using, bring to a simmer and cook for 15 minutes.

Add the heavy cream and Worcestershire, return to a simmer and cook until thickened and reduced slightly, another 15 minutes. Remove the bay leaf, then puree the soup with an immersion blender until smooth (or use a regular blender; let cool slightly first, and use caution when blending hot liquids). Season with salt. Stir in the crabmeat and garnish with crab roe if desired. When blending hot liquid, first let it cool for five minutes or so, then transfer it to a blender, filling only halfway. Put the lid on, leaving one corner open. Cover the lid with a kitchen towel to catch splatters, and pulse until smooth. Serve and enjoy.

Charlie's Kitchen

Bonus Recipe !

Charleston She-Crab Soup

This interesting recipe was synthesized by the artificial intelligence, ChatGPT, from multiple recipes found on the Internet. It may actually be more authentic since it uses rice, instead of flour, as the thickening agent, and the Low Country of South Carolina was once a major rice producing region.

Yield: 8-10 servings

Ingredients:

1 cup cooked long-grain white rice, plus ½ cup more if needed
2 cups whole milk, plus ½ cup more if needed
2 cups half-and-half
½ tsp. ground mace
1 ½ tsp. Nature's Seasons seasoning blend
Salt, to taste
¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter
1 cup diced celery
2 lbs. crab meat
½ cup sherry, for serving (optional)
Scallions, thinly sliced, for garnish (optional)

Directions:

Place the cooked rice, 1 cup of the milk and 1 cup of the half-and-half in a blender. Blend until it becomes a thick, smooth mixture.

Bring 2 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Place a large steel mixing bowl over the pot of boiling water. Do not let the bottom of the mixing bowl touch the boiling water (you may use a double boiler if you have one). Reduce the heat to medium. In the steel bowl or double boiler, combine the rice mixture and the remaining one cup each of whole milk and half-and-half. Add the mace, Nature's Seasons and salt. Stir the mixture, taste and add more seasoning if needed. The mixture should be thick, like a bisque. If it's not thick enough, blend about ½ cup additional cooked rice and ½ cup additional milk together and add it to the mixture.

In a medium skillet, melt the butter. Sauté the celery for three minutes over medium heat, making sure it retains its green color. Add the celery to the soup. Taste the soup, and add seasoning as needed.

Fold the crabmeat into the soup. Do not stir, because that will break up the crabmeat. Three or four folding movements should do the trick.

Transfer the soup to a separate large pot and cook over low heat for seven to ten minutes. Serve and enjoy!"

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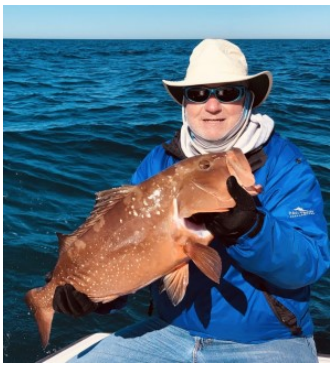
Marine Medicine Pearls

PEARL: On the Water Fishhook Removal

By Mark Rustemier M.D.



If you fish long enough, it is inevitable that you or one of your fishing buddies will get "hooked". Knowing how to safely remove a fish hook can salvage a trip. There are three common ways to get impaled; self-inflicted (i.e., no one else to blame), another fisherman (i.e., "you got in the way of my cast") or fish pay back (i.e., that big hooked grouper sandwich flopping on the deck). With just a little knowledge you can; relieve pain and suffering in your fellow fisherman, avoid an expensive trip to the emergency room, make a friend for life, and just as importantly get BACK to fishing!

Of course, prevention is always the first goal. Here are just a few suggestions. When fishing with young children, use single hooks and consider crimping the barbs down. This may allow you to remove the hook more easily from YOUR leg as well as theirs. Also, most fishermen promote circle hooks as being less traumatic to fish, but I suspect they are also less traumatic to fishermen (i.e., less human hookups). Think about it. You may want to have those sleep deprived teenagers tie on circle hooks. Furthermore, as fuel prices go up and boats fill up with more people to help defray costs, give the LESS skilled anglers MORE room.
When all your best preventative efforts have failed, then we get down to the business of hook removal.

First you need to decide if this is a removal you want to attempt yourself or is it better off handled in the emergency room. If the hook is embedded in the skin, or the soft tissue below the skin, and away from sensitive structures, you can do the removal yourself. However, injuries involving areas around the eyes, ears, mouth, and groin; or have deep penetration into bone, joint, or nerves should be punted to the professionals. Fortunately, the majority of these "hook ups" are uncomplicated, and can be handled on the water.
There are two methods I would recommend; with the choice depending on if the hook barb is buried in the skin, or has penetrated completely through the skin, with the barb sticking out. When the barb is buried in the skin use the "string-yank method" and when the barb has been pushed through and is exposed use the "hook cutting" method. Most of the time the string-yank method is what will be indicated.

Photo by Brian Kiel; Thumb supplied by GOFC member

For the string-yank method the materials needed consist of a 2-foot section of 20-80 lb. line, with heavier lines for larger hooks (although smaller line may be doubled). In preparation for removal, position the "victim" by sitting or laying them down, stabilizing the involved area on a flat surface (i.e., rest arm/hand/finger on a table/gunwale). Then separate the hook from the line (or separate from the lure when possible). Often a treble hook cannot be cut off or removed from a plug due limited access and pain. In this case, cut the line from the plug, and remove any other uninvolved hooks if possible. When unable to remove other hooks, these may be completely covered with tape, as well as any uninvolved treble hook points. This is to prevent injury from the other hook points when the hook/plug is removed. The technique for removal requires tying the ends of the 2 ft line together (doubling if less than 20lb test), forming a loop, and then placing the loop around the bend of the hook. An alternative is to tie one end directly to the bend of the hook. Hold the loop firmly around the wrist or in the hand. With the other hand, bring the shaft of the hook down parallel to the skin, then press the eye of the hook against the skin and towards the bend of the hook, releasing the barb. While pressing the eye of the hook into the skin, firmly and quickly, jerk the line directly away from the shank, following through while popping the hook out. One tactic is to tell the victim you will pull on "three", then actually pull on "two", which avoids flinching. Keep bystanders out of the flight path of the hook/plug, or you may have another hook removal to do. REMEMBER, YOU CAN NOT PULL TOO QUICKLY ON THE LINE.

On the Water Hook Removal-Continued

1. Push the eye down and towards the bend of the hook.
2. Pull directly away from the shank, QUICKLY!

However, if in the initial assessment, the hook point/barb has come completely through the skin, then the “hook cutting” method should be used. Some prefer this method, and if the hook is CLOSE to coming back out through the skin, they will bite the bullet and push it through (of course in the emergency room you get some local anesthesia for this!). The only materials needed are a good pair of pliers with cutters, or for the larger diameter hooks, some wire/small bolt cutters. Positioning of the “victim” is the same, and you do not have to worry about the other hooks. Cut the barb off at the skin level, covering the tip with a rag to prevent getting hit with the flying point. The hook can then be backed out and removed. The challenge can come with larger diameter hooks, when the cutters on your pliers may not be up to the job. Keeping heavier duty wire cutters or small bolt cutters on board can be worth every penny in this situation.

After removing the hook, while everyone breathes a sigh of relief, clean the wound and apply topical antibiotic ointment with an adhesive bandage to keep out the salt water and other contaminants. If the wound is otherwise clean, just observe it a few days for persistent pain, swelling or redness, and seek medical care if this occurs. A tetanus booster is also recommended within 72 hours, if it has been over 10 years.

I have used these techniques numerous times on the water, and even had the string-yank method used on MYSELF to remove a jig from my thumb (that was also the last time I grabbed the leader on a ladyfish that was being lifted out of the water)! There is always some anxiety on either side of a hook removal, but you BOTH can do it. Just take your time, practice on a fish already in the box if needed, then go ahead and save the day!

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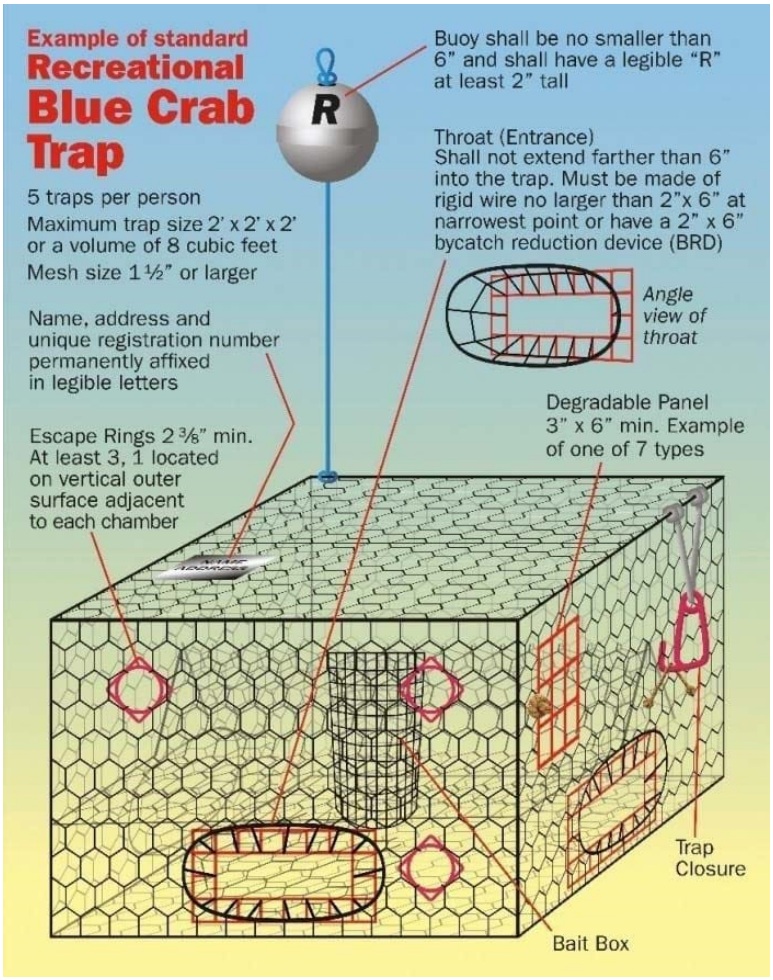
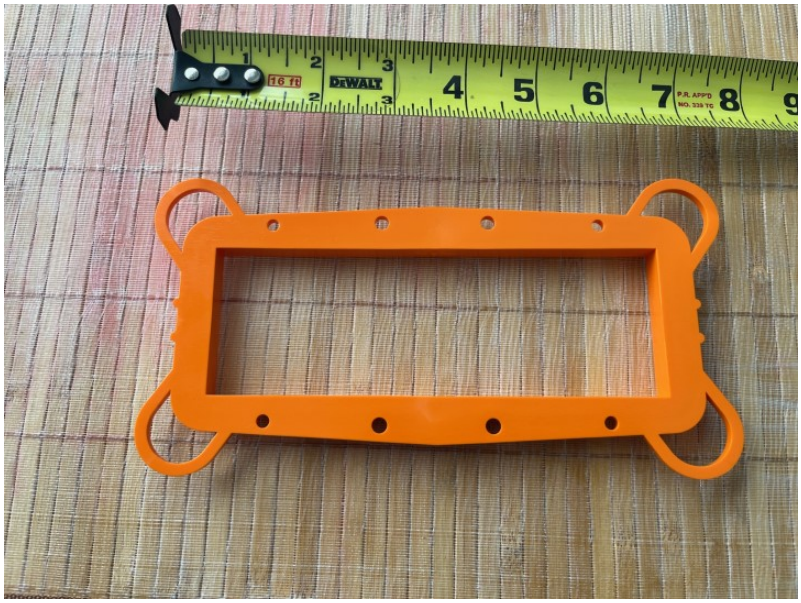
- Maximum trap size is 2 feet by 2 feet by 2 feet or a volume of 8 cubic feet
- Mesh size must be 1 1/2 inches or larger
- The throat or entrance cannot extend farther than 6 inches into the inside of any trap
- Must have at least three escape rings, one of each located on a vertical outer surface adjacent to each chamber
- Escape rings must be larger than 2 3/8 inches
- The trap must have a degradable panel larger than 3 inches by 6 inches
- Types of degradable panels include: untreated jute twine, non-coated steel wire measuring 24 gauge or thinner, untreated pine dowel no larger than 2 inches in length by 3/8 inch in diameter or untreated pine slats no thicker than 3/8 inch
- Harvester name and address must be permanently affixed to the trap and legible
- FWC-issued unique trap registration number must also be permanently affixed to the trap and legible
- The buoy must be no smaller than 6 inches and must be marked with a legible “R” that is at least 2 inches tall



Editors note: So the long and short of this is we need to add the Bycatch Release Device (shown to the right) to our crab pots . Fortunately these right now are free, and I picked up my 5 at the Sea Grant Office on UF Campus at 2306 Mowry Road, Bldg. 164. The office is generally open from 9 am – 5 pm but it is a good idea to arrange a time with Admin Specialist, Cassie Sexton at cjlema@ufl.edu.

You can also get these from a local Sea Grant or FWC office. https://www.flseagrant.org/our-communities/#FindLocalFSG.



Understanding the Ellett Contest

With credit to Brian Kiel

Understanding the John Ellett Contest

The John Ellett contest is a club contest that runs one year long and pits club members against each other in a friendly fishing contest encompassing three categories: Men's, Women's and Elite. A simplified formula awards points on a relative basis based on the heaviest fish of each species, with the exception of amberjack and kingfish which are based on length. Each species category has a maximum of 25 points and points are totaled to give an overall Ellett standing. For example, if the heaviest trout entered was a 6 lb. trout, this trout would receive the maximum 25 points, while a trout weighing half of that weight (3 lb.) would receive half of the 25 points (12.5 pts.). A 1.5 lb. trout would receive 6.25 pts. Current Ellett standings are printed in the club's Acute Angler newsletter, magazine, and on the GOFC website (Ellett standings).

It's easy to participate in the contest. All that's required is that you submit a weigh slip of any or all of the ten species the club fishes for: spotted seatrout, redfish, flounder, sheepshead, cobia, kingfish, Spanish mackerel, greater amberjack, bluefish, and grouper. Any scale can be used to estimate the fish weight, however, when a fish exceeds the maximum weight for a particular species (see bottom of weigh slip under Heavy Catches), that fish must be weighed on a State certified scale like those found in commercial establishments that use a scale to determine the value of an item sold to the public. A fish house like Northwest Seafood in Gainesville will usually weigh fish, if asked nicely. The weight should be noted on a receipt or store weigh slip, signed by the individual weighing the fish, and attached to the GOFC weigh slip to be turned into the club. The club Weighmaster keeps a certified club scale at home for members to use (contact the GOFC Weighmaster/Record Keeper, weighslip@gofc.us).

To win the contest you don't have to catch the largest fish, just catch as many of the 10 species as you can (hopefully a couple will be heavy fish). Participation in club events also helps as points are awarded for participation in club Tournaments (2 pts.) and Funaments (1 pt.). Writing an article for the Acute Angler is worth 3 points.

Awards are given to three places with the top male & female angler receiving a coveted inscribed pewter plate from the Ellett family, who happen to have sponsored this contest since its inception. The Ellett contest dates run from January 1st to December 31st with awards given out during the March Awards Banquet.

In addition to the Ellett awards, the club also gives awards and recognition for the heaviest three fish of each species. The club also maintains a list of GOFC Record Catches that include 109 species, so keep any species that is either not noted or exceeds the record. You can also submit a weigh slip for one of the "Other Two" species (dolphin and tripletail) to be computed for a

GOFC will host a Spoil Banks "Learnament" in Crystal River on Saturday, May 6, 2023 in preparation for the upcoming Spring Tournament which will be held in the same location.

What is it?

This May the annual GOFC Spring Tournament will return to Crystal River. In order to help make sure that everyone is well acquainted with the area, we will hold a “learnament” on 5/6. Lead by GOFC board member John Patrick (who is a former commercial fisherman in that area). Boats will depart from the boat ramp at Fort Island Trail Park at 9am (this is the ramp halfway down Fort Island Trail, not the one on the very end). John will talk about safely navigating the waters around Crystal River and local tactics for targeting the big ten species.

Most of the day will focus on the chain of islands and shoals created when deep water channels were dredged out for the power plant. These “spoil Banks” are a hot spot for nearly all of the clubs big ten target species.

No limit is being set for the number of boats that can participate and you don’t need to have a boat to sign up! John will be working to make sure that everyone makes it out on the water.

Afterwards, everyone is invited to meet up for dinner and drinks around 4pm at Cajun Jimmy’s Seafood Seller and Café on US19 in Crystal River (the same plaza as West Marine) If you like authentic Louisiana Cajun food, this is it!

When and Where?

The boat ramp's address is: **11978 W Blue Bayou Ct, Crystal River, FL**

Go/No-Go announcement will be no later than 7pm the night before the Learnament

To sign up contact John Patrick at 352-464-0825

What to bring:

1. Inshore gear including your favorite lures and baits (or speak to your assigned captain if you sign up to fish with someone else)
2. Sunscreen, drinks, lunch, and cash to chip in for gas, ice, bait, etc.

March of the Sea Urchins

By Ryan Kremser

I'm a bit late in writing this article, but it's a fascinating story and one that could impact our local fishery, so I decided that late was better than never.

While preparing to write this article I corresponded with biologists from the University of Florida and several other state agencies who were familiar with the situation in Keaton Beach. Since much of the information came directly from researchers without passing through their organizations' official communication channels, I'm being a bit vague about my sources. It's not that any of this information is confidential or controversial, I just don't want to risk having anyone be hassled about following protocol especially after they were so gracious in giving detailed and thoughtful responses to my questions.

An Alarming Sight

I've only launched from Keaton Beach a handful of times and typically it has been to go scalloping. The clear water around Keaton is beautiful, but I'm usually anxious to get on the water by the time I get to Steinhatchee, and that extra bit of drive time to Keaton is just too much. Most of the time, I launch from Steinhatchee, but on a calm, sunny Saturday in early January of this year, I kept driving because I knew that a few guys from the fishing club would be launching from Keaton that morning and I was looking forward to meeting up with them on the water.

My buddy John and I launched the boat from the excellent county boat ramp in Keaton Beach and made our way out into the Gulf. John had never been to Keaton Beach so I was excited to show him the crystal clear water and the seemingly endless grass flats that the area is known for. We ran out to the end of the channel and rounded the last marker heading northward along the coast. The bottom was clearly visible in the clear water as we glided over the flat, but something wasn't right. Where I had expected to find a dense carpet of marine grass, we only found acre after acre of mud with grass stubble sticking up here and there. Strange… but then again, I hadn't been to Keaton and in a while, and maybe my memories of a grass flats to the north of the channel were wrong.

After a few minutes I spun the boat around and headed south ward along the coast crossing the channel and continuing for about half a mile, still no grass, just mud and stubble. I had slowed the boat down and was idling along trying to figure out why I was having such a hard time finding the grass flats when I started to see a few sea urchins mixed in with the stubble. Then density of urchins rapidly increased until we were suddenly on top of what I can only describe as a mound of sea urchins piled on top of each. The

mound of urchins rose more than a foot off the bottom and formed a curving line more than 20' wide that stretched off in either direction as far as we could see. On one side of the curving line, the beautiful, healthy grass flat that I had expected to find, on the other side of the line, destruction. I took a photo of the mound with my phone, then we sped off in search of fish.

Talking to the Experts

Concerned by what I had seen, I emailed the photo to the Nature Coast Biological Station in Cedar Key and asked if they were tracking a boom in the sea urchin population near Keaton Beach. NCBS passed the information along to staff at the Big Bend Seagrass Aquatic Reserve and I was soon contacted by a researchers from FWC and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection who asked for more specifics on the location where the photo had been taken and said that

they would send a boat out to take a closer look.

A few weeks later I learned that a team of researchers had visited Keaton Beach and confirmed that a bloom in the sea urchin population was occurring. A program for monitoring the sea urchins was being developed and would be implemented right away.

Questions and Answers

I sent questions to several different people and here are some of the responses I received:

1. What species of sea urchin are part of the current population boom near Keaton Beach?

Lytechinus variegatus common name: variegated sea urchin.

2. Are these urchins native to the area?

Yes.

3. Are there any factors or conditions that are known to trigger or contribute to sea urchin population booms?

There are currently no known factors contributing to this. Sometimes the conditions are perfect, and a majority of larvae make it to adulthood. Scientists are unsure if there is a relationship between water quality or habitat conditions at this time, it is also unknown why they group up like this.

4. How long do the booms typically last and what causes them to end?

This is currently unknown as well, the only paper published on this topic specifically in Keaton Beach was in 1973.

Variegated urchins can live 3-5 years. The size of the urchins at this site currently indicate that they are mostly around 2-3 years old. Some hypotheses on what may end the booms include massive urchin die-offs due to old age or lack of grass, or urchin dispersal over time moving from a front line to spread throughout the area. At this time we know that booms in some regions have only lasted a few months while in others they've been recorded lasting for years,

5. How often do urchin population booms occur?

Though the last recorded case in Keaton Beach was in 1973, there have been occasional booms in this area and Steinhatchee. The average is unknown at this time, we will need to continue to record booms moving forward to determine this. In areas like St. Joe Bay, urchin booms have become a more frequent and longer lasting occurrence.

6. What kind of impact can they have on the sea grass beds and how long does it typically take for the sea grass beds to recover?

The variegated urchin will eat the seagrass, but they are mostly aiming for the epiphytes growing on the grass. In most recorded cases they won't eat the rhizomes (root structure of seagrass) which can allow for regrowth of the grass. It will depend on how many rhizomes are left after the grazing, water quality, stress, and the height of the remaining shoots following the grazing. We remain hopeful that we will see recovery of the seagrasses. The seagrass growing season starts in late April to early May, so we expect to see some slow regrowth at that time.

7. Are there any restrictions on the recreational harvest of this species of urchin in Florida?

You are required to obtain a permit from FWC to collect any type of marine invertebrate, urchins specifically are limited to 5 per day. Sale of recreationally collected marine life is prohibited.

8. Have you ever tried eating one? How was it?

There was some research done on the viability of variegated sea urchin aquaculture historically, unfortunately it was discovered that they simply do not taste good. They're also much smaller than the urchins used for human consumption and thus significantly less cost-efficient. I have not tried to eat any, I am just taking the word of the scientists on that one.

9. My understanding is that both manual and mechanical removal of urchins have been attempted in other areas but haven't made significant impact on the urchin populations. Is there any hope for controlling urchins booms in the future? What sorts of methods are being investigated.

"Urchin roundups" have been and currently are being employed in areas like St. Joe Bay, they efficiency of this is has yet to be determined. According to the FWC over 40,000 urchins have been collected in the area since 2021, these urchins were then moved to deeper waters. Unfortunately, this doesn't exactly stop the problem, as the urchins are still able to return. Currently scientists are recommending that in the Keaton Beach area they just continue to monitor the boom rather than try any management practices.

10. What benefits do the urchins provide to the Marine habitat under normal circumstances?

Urchins play an important role in balancing ecosystems, they help to keep algae populations under control and also help control seagrass distribution and abundance. Herbivory is critical in any marine setting, this overgrazing event is just an example of an ecosystem that may be currently out of balance for reasons unknown at this time.

11. I read that urchin populations have sharply declined in Caribbean countries where urchins are commonly harvested for food. Do we know how the urchin populations are generally doing in Florida?

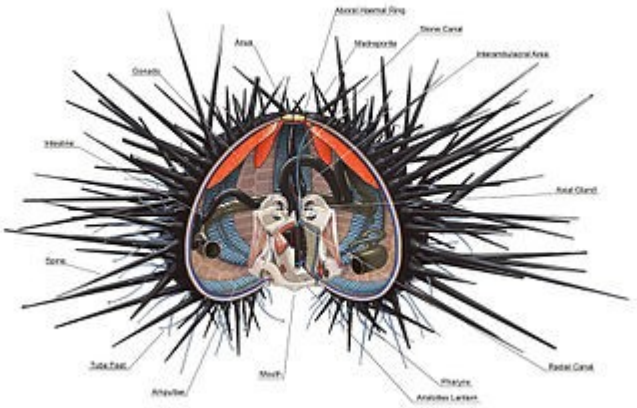
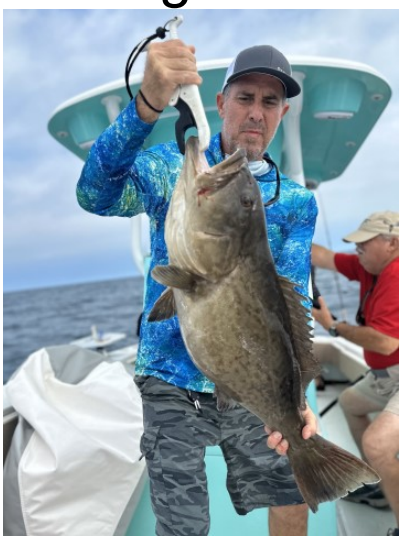
There was a massive urchin die off in the Caribbean and Florida Keys due to an urchin illness, but that was actually a different species of urchin, the *Diadema antillarum* (long-spine urchin). The long-spine urchin is critical for maintaining algal populations on coral reefs in the Caribbean waters. Massive urchin die-offs in the Caribbean during the 1980's led to huge overgrowths of algae which covered up many corals. There has been some recovery of the long-spine urchin, but there have also been continued outbreaks of die-offs throughout the Caribbean through present day. There are also some examples of overfishing of different urchin species in the Caribbean such as the white-spine urchin (sea-egg) that is collected for food. The *L. variegatus* subspecies we have in the Gulf Coast is different than the subspecies in the Caribbean, so it would not be something we would be able to transplant to the Caribbean.

12. How can GOFC members help FWC monitor and learn from urchin booms when they occur in the club's home waters (Homosassa up to Keaton Beach)?

When you notice an urchin bloom it is helpful to reach out to someone at the University of Florida or the managing Aquatic Preserve from the Department of Environmental Protection. Taking a GPS coordinate and noting any changes you may notice is incredibly helpful. Scientists and resource managers can't be out on the water every day, so they rely on people who use the resource the most to note any changes. Changes you notice may provide insight that would otherwise go unnoticed, if you see an urchin bloom at your favorite fishing spot and then notice the fish you usually catch are starting to change that can be important information. If you notice that an area you usually see grass is suddenly gone that's also an important thing to note. Scientists and resource managers will be trying to record the movement of the urchin front using GPS points over time, as well as other information such as numbers of urchins, sizes, density of seagrasses, etc. The best information we can gather from people who are in the area more often is changes they are seeing that deviate from what they normally see.

I haven't been in touch with the research team monitoring the boom in Keaton Beach since early March, but I will follow up with them and relay any new developments.

Most scallopers will be familiar with the variegated sea urchin as they are commonly found on grass while searching for scallops. The short spines don't pose much of a threat as long as they're handled carefully.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