FALL 2025

FISH & BOAT FLORIDA

The REEL Florida Experience™

FLORIDA SPORTS™ FOUNDATION

FLORIDA

"The Fishing Capital of the World"

Welcome to FISH & BOAT FLORIDA — The REEL Florida Experience™ — where the water is always calling, and adventure is just a cast or cruise away. Whether you are an experienced angler, a casual weekend cruiser, or someone who simply loves the freedom of open water, Florida is the destination of which you have been dreaming. This newly designed resource will highlight key wregions within the Sunshine State, identify great fishing destinations, and provide you with everything you need for the perfect day on the water.

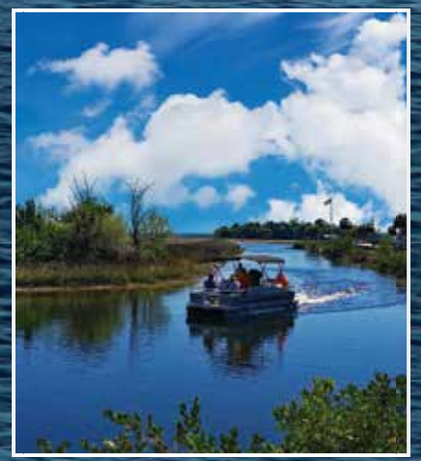
From Pensacola to Naples, from Fernandina to Key West, and St. Petersburg/Clearwater to Daytona Beach, Florida is comprised of more than 7,700 lakes, contains 10,550 miles of rivers and 2,276 miles of tidal shoreline. Florida's freshwater fisheries comprise 3 million acres of lakes, ponds, and reservoirs, and 10,550 miles of rivers, streams, and canals. With more than 700 world-record fish catches and Florida's documentation as the country's number one recreational fishing destination, it is no wonder Florida leads the nation in registered recreational boats and fishing licenses. Here, time slows down, worries fade with the tide, and memories are made with every wave.

For those who love to fish, Florida delivers world-class opportunities year-round. Saltwater anglers can chase trophy tarpon off the coast of Boca Grande, battle sailfish in the deep waters off Stuart, or cast for snook and redfish in the backwaters of the Ten Thousand Islands. Prefer freshwater? Lake Okeechobee, the Harris Chain of Lakes, and the St. Johns River are legendary bass fishing grounds.

Boating in Florida is more than a pastime, it is a way of life. Picture yourself cruising through the mangroves, tying up to a dockside restaurant, or anchoring at a quiet sandbar for a day of swimming and sun. From sailing in Biscayne Bay to pontooning in the lakes of Central Florida, the options are endless. Even if you do not own a boat, rental services and boat clubs across the state make it easy to get on the water.

At the same time, Florida is committed to preserving its marine resources. Through sustainable fishing practices, habitat conservation, and education, the state works to ensure that future generations will enjoy the same waters we love today.

If you are visiting on vacation or if you are a resident looking for a new and different place to explore and enjoy, bring your family, your friends, or just your sense of adventure. Whether you are casting at sunrise or cruising at sunset, Florida's waters are waiting.



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The REEL Florida Experience™

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FALL 2025

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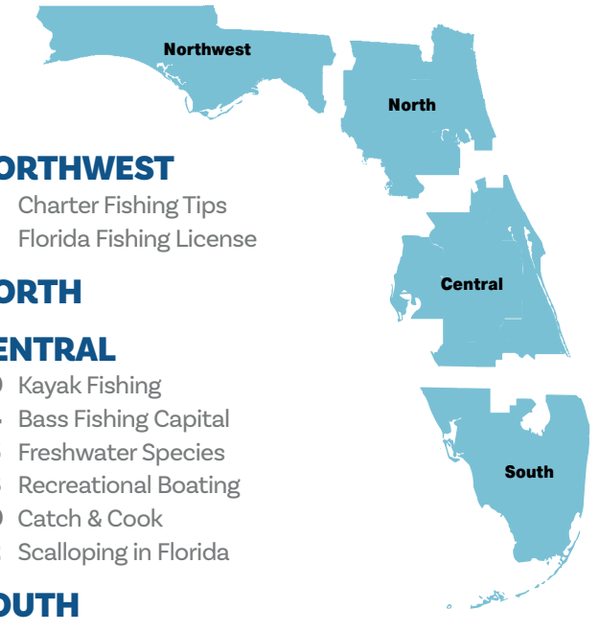

NORTHWEST

COUNTIES: Escambia, Santa Rosa, Okaloosa, Walton, Holmes, Washington, Bay, Jackson, Calhoun, Gulf, Liberty, Franklin, Gadsen, Leon, Wakulla, Jefferson, Madison, Taylor

5 TIPS

FOR CHOOSING THE RIGHT FISHING CHARTER

BY LENNY RUDOW

It's the stuff angling dreams are made of: Your vacation has been great — and it's about to get even better, thanks to a charter fishing trip, which you hope helps you check some exotic species off your bucket list. But this dream can quickly turn into a nightmare if you've chosen the wrong charter. In fact, if you end up on a boat that's wrong for you and your needs, you could end up regretting the entire fiasco. Here are five common scenarios — along with tips — that will help you have a day of awesome angling instead of a charter catastrophe.

1. COMMUNICATION BREAKDOWN

What type of fishing do you want? If you don't let a charter boat captain know ahead of time, you may end up stuck with a style you don't enjoy. For example, it's common for certain boats in certain places to do nothing but troll with heavy tackle during certain seasons. If you're a die-hard light-tackle angler who gets bored by trolling, you're likely to do little more than yawn all day long. Same goes for whether you want to keep and kill the catch or take a quick picture and then release the fish. On some boats, the fish get gaffed before you can even raise an objection; on some others, catch-and-release is considered a must.

Pro tip: In advance of booking a trip, talk to the captain to let him or her know what styles of fishing you enjoy and what you plan on doing with the catch. Different captains will be more or less willing to accommodate your preferences but be aware that some will put the goal of filling the fishbox ahead of their client's personal satisfaction. So, if you feel strongly about the ways you fish, be sure to raise these topics ahead of time.

2. PERSONALITY CONFLICT

Some people are easier to get along with than others, and we all know that some people's personalities simply don't mesh well with our own. Getting stuck on a boat all day with someone you can't stand isn't likely to be a fulfilling experience. And while a captain's character counts, don't forget about the mate, too. Often, you'll spend more time interacting with the mate than with the captain — so their disposition is just as or even more important to consider.

Pro tip: To make sure you end up happy with your choice, swing by the marina one afternoon prior to your trip and meet the captain and mate in person. They'll usually be there for at least an hour or so after a trip to clean the boat and rig the lines and should be more than happy to spend a few minutes shooting the breeze. After that, you can form an opinion as to how well you'll all get along.

3. OVERKILL

Some inexperienced anglers, or people who are used to fishing only in very different types of waterways, may discover that uncontrollable variables, like seasickness or physical demands, can make for a day of misery. And on some charter boats, especially those with make-up parties (different couples or groups put together on one charter to share the cost), the option of turning around and heading for home early will be off the table.

Pro tip: If you're trying a completely new kind of fishing or venturing into territory you don't have experience with, consider booking a half-day trip. Virtually all boats offer them, and that way if physical issues become problematic, at least it won't last for hours on end.

4. LIMP LINES

The reason you book a charter in the first place is to catch fish, so if the lines stay slack all day long and you never feel so much as a tug, it'll be more than a little bit disappointing. And while it's true that the captain and crew can't control the fish — even the best of 'em get skunked from time to time — some are simply better at catching fish than others.

Pro tip: While we note that it's impossible to ever guarantee action on any fishing boat, you can ensure the best chances of success by doing your homework. Ask a captain for references or walk the docks and talk to other anglers in the marina to get an idea of how good a boat is or isn›t at finding and catching the fish. And in this day and age, most people simply peruse online for ratings and comments. But remember to take everything you find online with a grain of salt: There are always a few people who are impossible to satisfy, and others may have personal reasons for singing unearned praises. Rather than basing any decisions on specific reviews, look for prevailing attitudes.

5. SHOPPING FOR A BARGAIN

Choosing a fishing charter by price is a huge mistake and can put you on a sub-par boat with sub-par gear and a sub-par captain. Sure, charter boats can be expensive. But in any given area you'll find that most boats charge within a prevailing range of rates. Some boats charge more, some less. Yes, there's a reason why those cheap boats go for so little — if they could justify charging the prevailing rates, they certainly would.

Pro tip: To stay out of pricing pitfalls, it's important to first identify the prevailing range. This varies from county to county, and even port to port, but with a little internet browsing, the prevailing range should be easy to find. Some boats have good reasons for charging less, like the size or age of the boat, which won't necessarily be disqualifying factors to you, personally. When all else appears to be equal and a charter is offering rates that seem rock-bottom, buyer beware.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Use this advice, do some homework, and you'll greatly improve your odds of finding the ideal charter for you and a great day of fishing. As you plan your next trip, take these five tips into account, and you'll be checking those boxes off your species bucket list before you know it!

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Who needs a recreational fishing license or permit?

Florida residents and visitors are required to possess a Florida freshwater fishing or saltwater fishing license when engaged in fishing activities.

• A license is required to attempt to take fish. If you cast a line or catch and release, you need a fishing license.

• A saltwater fishing license is required to attempt to take any native or nonnative marine organisms, such as crabs, lobsters, and marine plants.

• Licenses and permits are required to help or assist in the take. Someone who is passively participating (baiting hooks), whether actively fishing or or not, must have a license and appropriate permits.

• Persons who are listed on the National Saltwater Angler Registry are required to have a Florida recreational fishing license unless exempt as listed below.

• Need help choosing the right license and permits? Visit our Frequently Asked Questions and Answers for help!

The following individuals are EXEMPT from recreational freshwater fishing or saltwater fishing licenses as well as Florida snook, spiny lobster, and management area permit requirements:

• Youth under 16 years of age

• Florida Resident seniors age 65 or older with proof of age or residency (such as a valid Florida Driver's License or ID Card) or possessing an optional Resident 65+ Hunt/Fish Certificate (available at no-cost online at GoOutdoorsFlorida.com or at county tax collectors' offices)

• Those freshwater fishing in your county of residence on your homestead (or the homestead of your spouse or minor child), or if you are a minor child freshwater fishing on the homestead of your parent.

• Florida residents certified as totally and permanently disabled who possess a Florida Resident Disabled Person's Hunting and Fishing License.

• Florida residents who are members of the Armed Forces of the United States, who are not stationed in this state and home on leave for 30 days or less, upon submission of orders.

• Individuals who are observing or filming someone else who is fishing and who are not assisting (baiting hooks, reeling, etc.) in the take in any way.

• Disabled veterans or active or reserve duty military service members and their immediate family members and assistants, who are participating in a permitted outdoor recreational event, for which the Commission has issued a Military/Disabled Veteran Event License Exemption Permit to the event organizer.

In addition, the following are exempt from a freshwater fishing license:

• Florida residents accepted as a client for developmental disabilities services by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. The agency must furnish proof to such clients.

• Those fishing in a fishpond of 20 acres or less which is located entirely within the private property of its owner. A fishpond is a man-made pond constructed for the primary purpose of fishing, entirely within the property lines of the owner and with no surface water connection to public waters.

• Individuals fishing in a fish pond of 20 acres or more, whose owner has purchased a fish pond license at a fee of $3 per surface acre.

• Individuals who possess a Resident Freshwater Commercial Fishing License.

• Those fishing in the St. Mary's River or Lake Seminole (but not including tributary creeks in Florida) and have a valid Georgia fishing license.

• Those freshwater fishing during free freshwater fishing days.

• Florida residents fishing with live or natural bait, using poles or lines that are not equipped with a fishing-line-retrieval mechanism, and fishing for noncommercial purposes in their home county (does not include fish management areas within the home county).

In addition, the following are exempt from a saltwater fishing license and snook or spiny lobster permits:

• Florida residents accepted as a client for developmental disabilities services by the Agency for Persons with Disabilities. The agency must furnish proof to such clients.

• Individuals saltwater fishing from a for-hire vessel (guide, charter, party boat) that has a valid charter license.

• Those saltwater fishing from a vessel whose operator has a valid recreational saltwater vessel license issued in the name of the operator of the vessel.

• Those saltwater fishing during a free saltwater fishing day.

• Individuals saltwater fishing from a pier with a valid saltwater pier license.

• Individuals who hold a valid saltwater products license or FWC charter captain license (does not apply to charter boat license or U.S. Coast Guard license or to the crew operating under any charter license or Vessel or Individual Crew SPL).

• Florida residents who are fishing for mullet in fresh water who hold valid Florida resident freshwater fishing license.

• Florida residents saltwater fishing from land or a structure fixed to land who have been determined eligible for the food stamp, temporary cash assistance, or Medicaid Program by the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Proof of identification and a benefit issuance or program identification card issued by DCF or the Agency for Health Care Administration must be in possession when fishing. A license **is required** when fishing from a vessel or when swimming or diving, and this exemption **does not** apply to freshwater fishing.

• Florida residents saltwater fishing with live or natural bait, using poles or lines that are not equipped with a fishing-line-retrieval mechanism, for noncommercial purposes in their home county (does not include fish management areas within the home county).

License-Free Fishing Days

License-free fishing days provide an excellent opportunity for those who don't yet have a fishing license to experience fishing, take youth fishing, or for avid anglers to introduce a friend to fishing without having to purchase a license. On these days, the fishing license requirement is waived for all recreational anglers, including both residents and non-residents. All other rules such as seasons, bag and size limits apply.

License-free freshwater days

- First consecutive Saturday and Sunday in April
- Second consecutive Saturday and Sunday in June

License-free saltwater days

- First consecutive Saturday and Sunday in June
- First Saturday in September
- Saturday following Thanksgiving

The saltwater waiver applies to any recreational harvest requiring a saltwater fishing license (e.g., crabbing, lobstering, scalloping, etc.) as well as fishing from shore or a boat. A snook or spiny lobster permit are also not required on these days.

For complete information on purchasing a Fishing License, visit **MyFWC.com**

NORTH

COUNTIES: Hamilton, Columbia, Suwannee, Lafayette, Dixie, Gilchrist, Alachua, Union, Bradford, Levy, Marion, Citrus, Sumter, Baker, Nassau, Duval, Clay, St. Johns, Flagler, Putnam

THE WATERWAYS
OF PUTNAM COUNTY FLORIDA

The waterways of Putnam County, Florida, weave a story that is as rich and vibrant as the landscapes they traverse. Central to this tale is the St. Johns River, a unique river flowing northward, unlike most rivers in the United States. This waterway is the lifeline of Putnam County, shaping its history, economy, and ecology in profound ways.

Historically, the St. Johns River was a vital resource for the indigenous peoples who originally inhabited the region. Its broad, slow-moving waters provided food, transportation, and a means to connect with other communities. When European settlers arrived, they quickly recognized the river's value for commerce and travel. By the 1800s, the arrival of steamboats transformed the river into a bustling thoroughfare, bringing tourists from northern states to the charming riverfront city of Palatka and other communities along its banks. This era marked the beginning of a thriving tourism industry centered around the river, a legacy that continues to be a key economic driver for Putnam County today.

The St. Johns River is a remarkable ecological system. Its slow current and gentle gradient create a long retention time for the water, allowing diverse plant and animal life to flourish. The river supports populations of manatees, bald eagles, and countless species of fish, including the prized largemouth bass, making it a haven for wildlife enthusiasts and anglers alike. Its waters are influenced by the Atlantic Ocean's tides, producing a fascinating phenomenon known as "reverse flow," which can extend as far south as Lake George, impacting the river's hydrology and surrounding habitats.

Beyond the St. Johns, other waterways in Putnam County add layers of interest and utility. Crescent Lake, straddling the border between Putnam and Flagler counties, offers a pristine environment that draws fishermen and bird watchers. Connected to the St. Johns River by Dunns Creek, Crescent Lake is well-known for its clean waters and excellent bass fishing opportunities. The nearby city of Crescent City serves as a gateway for boaters eager to explore this scenic lake.

Further enriching the county's aquatic landscape is the Rodman Reservoir. Born from the ambitious but never completed Cross Florida Barge Canal project, Rodman Reservoir spans approximately 9,500 acres. This man-made lake has become known among anglers as one of the top bass fishing destinations in Florida according to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. It also supports a diverse ecosystem that includes fish, birds, and manatees. The reservoir is impounded by the Kirkpatrick Dam, which provides public access to the Ocklawaha River, a significant tributary playing its own vital role in the region's environment.

The Ocklawaha River offers a quieter, more secluded waterway experience compared to the broad expanse of the St. Johns. It meanders through dense forests and wetlands, presenting opportunities for paddlers and nature lovers to observe wildlife in an undisturbed riverine setting. As the largest tributary of the St. Johns, the Ocklawaha River is integral to the health of the entire watershed.

The St. Johns River's wide, navigable waters make it a favored location for pleasure boating, sailing, and fishing. The smaller lakes and tributaries offer more intimate encounters with nature, perfect for canoeing and kayaking adventures.

Fishing, especially for largemouth bass, is a cornerstone of outdoor activity and local pride. Crescent Lake and Rodman Reservoir attract anglers from all over, especially those seeking trophy catches. Other species such as crappie, sunfish, and catfish also populate these waters, enriching the fishing experience. Public boat ramps and parks, such as Palatka Riverfront Park, provide essential access points for boaters and fishermen, helping sustain a vibrant community around these activities.

All of these elements—the historical significance, ecological richness and recreational allure —combine to make the waterways of Putnam County a true treasure. They continue to shape the county's identity, draw visitors from far and wide, and provide natural beauty and enjoyment to those fortunate enough to experience them firsthand. These waters are not just bodies of liquid but living stories of the past, present, and future of Putnam County's community and environment.

For more information, visit VisitPutnamCountyFL.com

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FLORIDA

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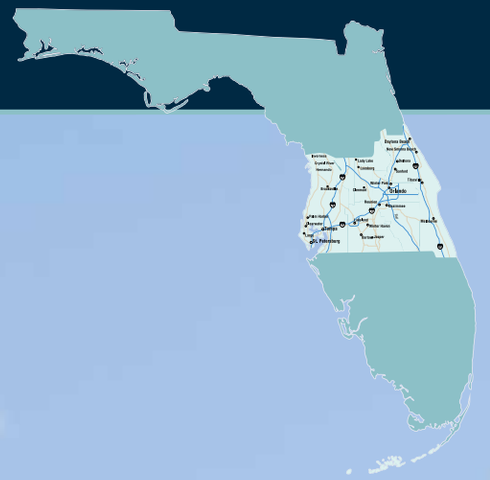
TRADEMARK COLLECTION BY WYNDHAM

CENTRAL

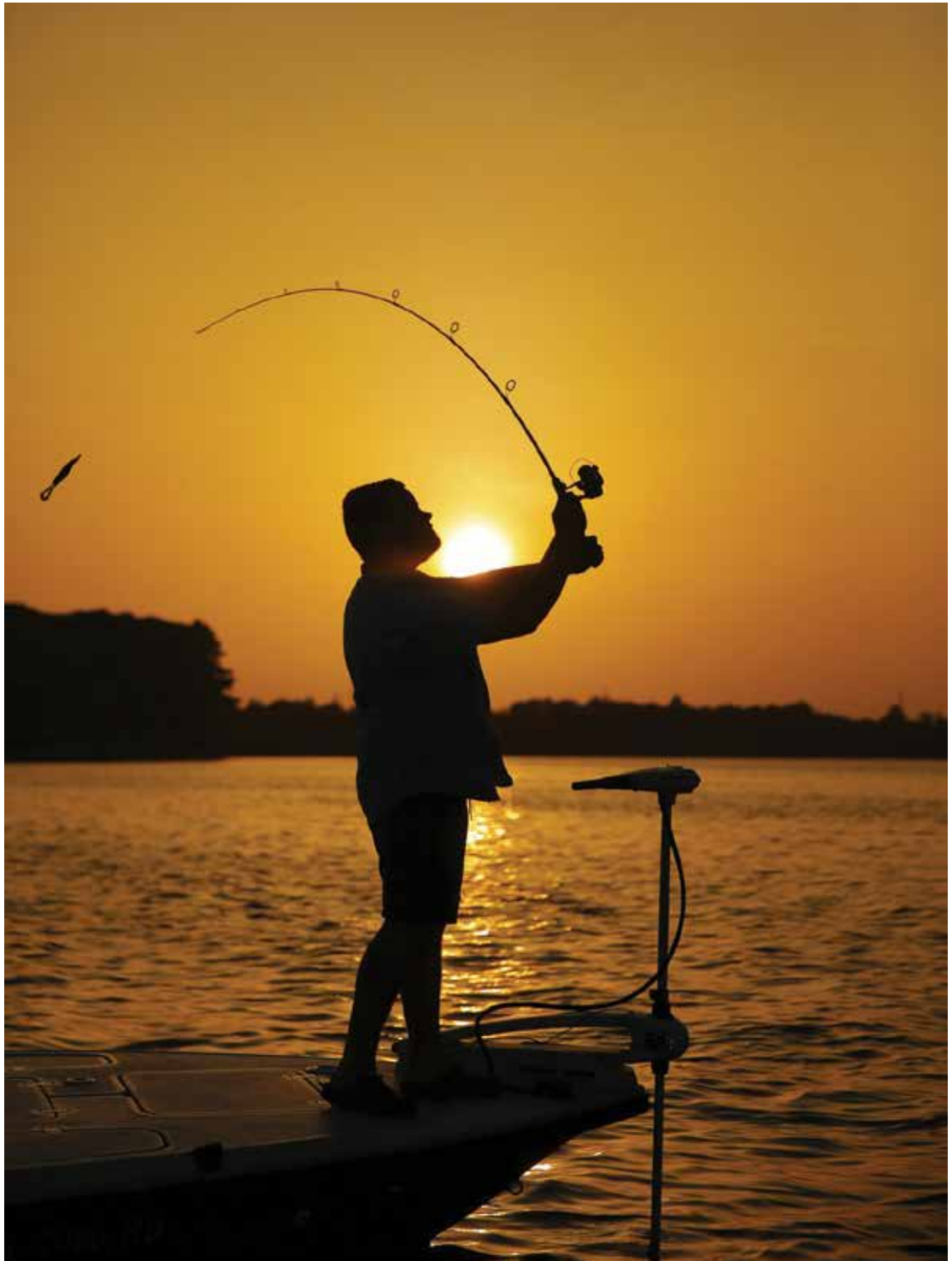
COUNTIES: Hernando, Pasco, Pinellas, Hillsborough, Lake, Seminole, Orange, Osceola, Highlands, Polk, Brevard, Indian River, St. Lucie, Volusia



LAKE COUNTY

Featuring 1,400 named lakes and seven of the top 11 lakes for number and size of bass fish in Florida, Lake County is the place to catch trophy fish. Anglers regard Lake County's lakes as some of the most diverse and abundant for fishing in the entire state. As a premier destination for trophy largemouth bass, popular tournaments like the Bass Pro Shops Big Bass Tour, Bassmaster Elite Series, Bassmaster Opens, Major League Fishing and TrophyCatch events are held here. Lake County's very own pro angler, Tim Frederick, has spent his entire life discovering the best spots to fish in the area. The most popular to fish is the Harris Chain of Lakes which includes Lake Harris, Lake Eustis, Lake Dora and more. Johns Lake, on the Clermont Chain of Lakes, is another great spot for the big catch. Lake County is a one-stop-shop for fishing enthusiasts with many lakeside dining, shopping and nearby lodging options. Learn more about fishing in Lake County, things to do and places to stay at **www.VisitLake.com.**

LAKE COUNTY, FL
REAL FLORIDA • REAL CLOSE



KAYAK FISHING IN FLORIDA:

ADVENTURE AT WATER LEVEL

Kayak fishing in Florida offers a unique, up-close, and deeply immersive experience that's drawing anglers away from traditional boats and into the state's sprawling network of coastal shallows, mangroves, freshwater lakes, and winding rivers. Whether you're gliding through crystal-clear flats in the Keys or exploring hidden creeks in the Panhandle, kayak fishing puts you in direct contact with Florida's diverse aquatic ecosystems – and the fish that thrive in them.

What sets kayak fishing apart is the stealth and freedom it provides. Unlike motorboats, kayaks allow anglers to quietly access remote waters where fish are less pressured and more plentiful. You can navigate tight mangrove tunnels, drift across silent marshes, or park next to oyster bars and grass flats—all without the noise or wake of a motor.

Florida's geography is ideal for kayak anglers. Along the coast, inshore species like redfish, snook, spotted seatrout, and tarpon are prime targets in shallow estuaries and tidal creeks. On the Gulf side, places like Tampa Bay, Charlotte Harbor, and the Nature Coast offer rich opportunities. On the Atlantic side, Mosquito Lagoon and the Indian River Lagoon are world-famous for their kayak-friendly waters and incredible redfish action.

For freshwater lovers, Florida's thousands of lakes and rivers are teeming with largemouth bass, panfish, and even exotic species like peacock bass (especially in South Florida). Lakes like Tohopekaliga, Rodman Reservoir, and the Kissimmee Chain offer quiet backwaters that are perfect for a morning paddle and a few solid hookups.

One of the key appeals of kayak fishing is its accessibility. All you need is a roof rack or truck bed and a nearby launch spot – which Florida has in abundance. Many state parks, wildlife management areas, and local boat ramps offer easy kayak access to pristine fishing spots.

Safety and preparation are essential. Always wear a personal flotation device (PFD), know your tides and weather forecast, and bring plenty of water, sun protection, and a communication device. It's also wise to practice paddling and kayak handling before venturing into unfamiliar waters or strong currents.

Kayak fishing in Florida is more than a method – it's a way of connecting with nature. Every cast is part of a quiet rhythm, every strike is a thrill just inches above the waterline, and every trip offers something new. For those seeking adventure, solitude, and world-class fishing in one package, there may be no better way to experience Florida's wild side than from the seat of a kayak.

A Fish for Every Season

Many say that Florida is the "Fishing Capital of the World," thanks to our miles of coastline and pristine ocean waters.

But here in Central Florida's Polk County, we'll hold on to the title of "Largemouth Bass Capital." Thanks to more than 550 lakes occupying more than 135 square miles, our abundant sunshine — we are the Sunshine State for a reason — and overall pleasant temperatures, fishing in Polk County is possible any time of the year.

But availability isn't the only reason fishing is one of Central Florida's most popular pastimes. We're blessed with a diversity of freshwater habitats and a variety of fish species rarely found elsewhere. Our waters often find themselves ranked among the Top 10 fisheries in the world.

LARGEMOUTH BASS CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

Of course, it doesn't hurt that Florida's state freshwater fish is also the world's most popular game fish. Some may call it a lunker or a bucketmouth, but here in Central Florida, we call the largemouth black bass the king of Polk County waters. Thanks to our temperate climate, nutrient-rich waters and abundant plant life, we are not only blessed to have an abundance of largemouth bass, but often the largest specimens you've ever seen. Polk County is home to the state's certified record Florida Largemouth Bass, weighing in at 17.27 pounds. Our numerous fisheries, such as the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, are some of the top freshwater fishing destinations in the world. It should be noted that Teneroc Fish Management Area, Mosaic Fish Management Area and the Winter Haven Chain of Lakes regularly produce catches of bass in excess of 10 pounds. The Kissimmee Chain of Lakes produced two Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.) all-time records: Dean Rojas' record five bass at the limit weight of 45 pounds, 2 ounces (which still stands today) and the then-record four-day catch of 108 pounds and 12 ounces. While the lakes listed above generally receive the most recognition, other Polk County lakes such as Crooked Lake, Clinch Lake and Lake Weohyakapka (also known as Lake Walk-in-the-Water) are not as widely known, but local anglers know them for producing equally high quality largemouth bass.

ACCESS TO QUALITY FISHING & TACKLE SHOPS

Residents and visitors alike will find Polk County's waters easily accessible. With more than 115 boat ramps – nearly a fifth of all the public ramps in the state – and 14 fishing piers, direct access is plentiful. For those on vacation, hiring a local guide service usually results in an exciting morning on the water. And for those who haul their boats down, hiring a guide for a morning can greatly flatten the learning curve to enjoy the remainder of your time in Polk County. There are numerous locally owned bait and tackle shops with a wide variety of gear and equipment. Some of the county's finest are Bridgemaster Fishing Products in Lake Wales, Lakeland Fishing Outfitters in Lakeland, and Andy Thornal Co. in Winter Haven, for our flyfishing enthusiasts.

One unique way to experience all of the best fishing Polk County has to offer is to stay at a local "fish camp." Camp Mack, an Old Florida Marina, Lodge & RV Resort owned by Guy Harvey, is a truly storied fishing lodge and RV resort that sits in the heart of the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, offering access to over 21,000 acres of world-class bass fishing grounds, all surrounded by some of Florida's most spellbinding great outdoors. Whether you are an aspiring professional angler looking for that trophy largemouth bass or just looking to hook up with family and friends in an authentic "Old Florida" lakefront setting, Camp Mack is for you! Several other fish camps are located in Polk County including Cherry Pocket, Camp Lester, Bannon's Fish Camp and Jennings Resort which allow for you to stay in cabins/rooms right on the shores of your favorite lake. Imagine you are just steps from your boat tied to the camp's dock, or arrange for a professional guide service, with the convenience of being on the water just minutes after stepping outside your room.

A FISH FOR EVERY SEASON

While the largemouth bass may be the most popular species of fish that anglers are looking to land, they are not the only fish that inhabit the lakes of Central Florida. Area lakes are teeming with bluegill, crappie, bream, sunshine bass, catfish, gar, tilapia and chain pickerel. In their rankings of the top fisheries, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) include a high percentage of Polk County lakes. The FWC lists six Polk County lakes in their top 13 lakes for crappie, and four Polk County lakes are listed in the FWC's top 14 bream lakes. Many of the top largemouth bass lakes also rank highly in producing quality crappie and bream including, Lake Weohyakapka, Teneroc Fish Management Area, Mosaic Fish Management Area, the Winter Haven Chain of Lakes and the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes. Of course, different species are active during different times of the year, so plan on trying an array of different fishing tackle and a variety of techniques until you find a pattern that works.

In Central Florida's Polk County, fishing is more than a pastime, it is the lifeblood of our community. We take pride in the variety of ways we can ensure that you, your family, and friends enjoy a relaxing day in one of the top freshwater fishing destinations in the world – our home.

WHERE TO BEGIN

To begin planning your next vacation in Polk County visit www.VisitCentralFlorida.org for hotels & restaurants, and Capt. Scott at www.TMCGuideService.com for all of your Central Florida bass fishing adventures.

More Information:
VisitCentralFlorida.com

Bass Fishing in Florida:

A FRESHWATER ANGLER'S PARADISE

Florida is often called the "Fishing Capital of the World," and while its saltwater opportunities draw plenty of attention, the state's freshwater bass fishing is just as legendary. Thanks to its warm climate, abundant lakes, and carefully managed fisheries, Florida has earned a global reputation as one of the best places to catch trophy largemouth bass.

The star of the show is the Florida-strain largemouth bass—a subspecies known for its rapid growth and impressive size. Unlike northern bass, these giants can surpass 10 pounds regularly, with some record catches weighing well over 15 pounds. The state's mild winters allow them to feed and grow year-round, making trophy fishing possible in every season.

WORLD-CLASS WATERS

Florida is dotted with prime bass habitats, from hidden ponds to massive lakes. Lake Okeechobee, often called "The Big O," is one of the most famous bass lakes on the planet, offering miles of grass flats, canals, and reed beds where big bass thrive. The Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, stretching across Central Florida, is another hotspot, producing both numbers and size. Farther north, the St. Johns River and Rodman Reservoir consistently deliver double-digit catches. Even urban areas like Orlando have countless neighborhood lakes and retention ponds teeming with bass.

TECHNIQUES AND SEASONS

While Florida bass can be caught year-round, the peak season is during the spawn, typically from late December through April, depending on location. During this time, bass move into shallow areas to nest, making them more visible and easier to target. Popular techniques include flipping soft plastic creature baits into heavy vegetation, slow-rolling spinnerbaits along weed edges, and topwater lures at dawn and dusk for explosive strikes.

Live bait, particularly wild shiners, is a tried-and-true method for landing trophy bass in Florida. Many guides recommend it for first-time visitors because it consistently produces big fish, even for beginners.

WHY IT'S SPECIAL

Bass fishing in Florida isn't just about the fish—it's about the experience. Picture casting under a pink sunrise as ospreys dive for their breakfast, or easing through a lily pad field with alligators sunning nearby. Whether you're after a once-in-a-lifetime trophy or simply enjoying a day on the water, Florida's bass fishing offers the perfect mix of excitement, relaxation, and natural beauty.

For anglers, Florida isn't just another fishing destination—it's a bucket-list adventure that keeps you coming back for "just one more cast."

FRESHWATER SPECIES

Note: "Big Catch" refers to a free angler recognition program. Copies of the application form and rules are available in the printed Regulations and online at MyFWC.com/fishing. The sizes listed are adult qualifying weights; youth qualify with slightly smaller catches, and "Specialist," "Master" and "Elite Angler" classifications are available. A frame-able certificate and window sticker are sent to qualifying anglers.

LARGEMOUTH BASS

Appearance: The largemouth bass is the best known and most popular game fish in North America. It is distinguished from other black bass because the upper jaw extends beyond the rear edge of the eye, and the first and second dorsal (back) fins are separated by an obvious deep dip.

State Record: 17.27 lbs. (Note several larger fish have been documented but not certified.)

Big Catch: 24 inches or 8.0 lbs.

Habitat: The Florida largemouth bass is the state freshwater fish. Found statewide in lakes and rivers, they are commonly found along vegetation, or underwater structure, but schooling bass are also found in the middle of lakes.

TIP: The best live bait is a golden shiner, fished under a float or free-lined. Typically, the shiner is hooked through the lips or back with a large hook, 2/0 to 5/0. A medium to medium-heavy rod with 14- to 20-pound test line is preferred, particularly when fishing in areas with thick vegetation or cover.

SPOTTED BASS

Appearance: Spotted bass are similar to largemouth bass, but unlike the largemouth, the spotted bass has scales on the base portion of the second dorsal fin; their first and second dorsal fins are clearly connected, and its upper jaw does not extend past the eye.

State Record: 3.75 lbs.

Big Catch: 16 inches or 2 lbs.

Habitat: They prefer small to medium streams and rivers with clear, slow-moving water, and gravel or rock bottoms. Seldom found in natural lakes, and they do not enter brackish water.

BLACK CRAPPIE OR SPECKLED PERCH/SPECKS

Appearance: A deep body with nearly symmetrical dorsal and anal fins and a speckled pattern on the body and fins identify the black crappie.

State Record: 3.83 lbs.

Big Catch: 14 inches or 2.0 lbs.

Habitat: Unlike most other panfish, crappie spend much of their time offshore feeding on small fish in lakes or in large slow-moving clear water rivers.

BLUEGILL

Appearance: Bluegill have the deep-bodied look of "bream," with a long dorsal fin and slightly forked tail. A dark ear covering and a blotch at the dorsal fin's back bottom edge set them apart.

State Record: 2.95 lbs.

Big Catch: 11 inches or 1.25 lbs.

Habitat: Bluegill are common throughout Florida but are best known in lakes and ponds.

TIP: Live worms or crickets are the best bait, either fished on the bottom or suspended below a float. Crickets, grubs, sand maggots or grass shrimp will also catch bedding bluegill.

REDEAR SUNFISH OR SHELLCRACKER

Appearance: A bright red mark on the back edge of the gill cover is very distinctive.

State Record: 4.86 lbs.

Big Catch: 12 inches or 2.25 lbs.

Habitat: Redear prefer hard bottoms, congregating in deeper water than bluegill.

REDBREAST SUNFISH

Appearance: A very long black ear flap distinguishes this fish from other Florida bream.

State Record: 2.08 lbs.

Big Catch: 10 inches total length or 0.75 lbs.

Habitat: Also known as river bream and redbellies, these are the flowing water cousins of bluegill. Redbellies often can be found in backwater areas with less flow, especially where there are sandy bottoms. Common in rivers of north Florida, but absent from south Florida.

SPOTTED SUNFISH OR STUMPKNOCKER

Appearance: Spotted sunfish are olive-green to brown in color, with black or reddish spots on the base of each scale forming rows of dots on its sides.

State Record: 0.83 lbs.

Big Catch: 8 inches or 0.50 lbs.

Habitat: The preferred habitat is slow-moving, heavily vegetated streams and rivers with limestone, sand, or gravel substrates.

WARMOUTH

Appearance: It has a stout, deep body similar to other panfish. A red eye and large mouth are conspicuous field marks. Three or four dark stripes radiating back from the eye across the cheek and gill cover like war paint confirm the identity.

State Record: 2.44 lbs.

Big Catch: 10 inches or 0.75 lbs.

Habitat: Warmouths inhabit swamps, marshes, shallow lakes, slow-moving streams and canals with soft, muddy bottoms. They stay around aquatic vegetation, stumps and snags and under the banks of streams and ponds. They have more tolerance for muddy water than most species.

WHITE BASS

Appearance: White bass look like short stripers. They are silvery-white with five to eight dusky black stripes on the sides. Stripes below the lateral line are faint and may be uneven. Whites are stockier than stripers, with a smaller head, and dorsal fins are set closer together.

State Record: 4.69 lbs.

Big Catch: 15 inches or 2.5 lbs.

Habitat: White bass are found mostly in the Apalachicola and Ochlockonee river systems.

SUNSHINE BASS

Appearance: Sunshine bass were first produced in Florida by state hatcheries, and all sunshines are still produced and stocked. This is because they are a hybrid of a female white bass and male striped bass that does not occur naturally. Sunshines often have broken stripes on the front half and straight lines on the rear half of the body.

State Record: 16.31 lbs.

Big Catch: 24 inches or 7.0 lbs.

Habitat: Sunshines occur where they are stocked by the FWC—typically in community lakes or waters with an abundance of shad.

PEACOCK BASS

Appearance: Color is very vivid—generally golden with three black vertical bars that fade with age. A black spot with a yellow halo on the tail fin is distinctive.

State Record: 9.08 lbs.

Big Catch: 18 inches or 3.75 lbs.

Habitat: Butterfly peacock bass were stocked, after research showed temperature would limit their range. Biologists sought to control exotic fishes and to provide a high quality sport fishery. Many miles of canals in Miami-Dade and Broward counties now have self-sustaining peacock fisheries worth millions of dollars locally.

Images courtesy of Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Art by Duane Raver, Jr.

CHANNEL CATFISH

Appearance: Catfish are easy to distinguish by their whisker-like sensory barbels and a forked tail. Channel catfish have a rounded anal fin and scattered black spots along their back and sides. Males become especially dark during spawning season and develop a thickened pad on their head.

State Record: 44.50 lbs.

Big Catch: 31 inches or 15.0 lbs.

Habitat: Channel catfish are found throughout Florida, and spawn in holes and crevices

BEHAVIOR: Primarily bottom feeders, channels also feed higher up. Major foods are aquatic insects, crayfish, mollusks, crustaceans and fish—not detritus or decaying material.

FLATHEAD CATFISH

Appearance: A flat head, tiny eyes, squarish tail and protruding lower jaw distinguish flathead from other. They are yellow-brown, usually mottled above, with a creamy colored belly.

State Record: 48.4 lbs.

Big Catch: 36 inches or 25 lbs.

Habitat: Flathead are found in the Apalachicola and Escambia rivers, where they recently arrived from Georgia and Alabama. Flatheads prefer long, slow-flowing, moderately-turbid rivers.

WHITE CATFISH

Appearance: Sides are blue-gray to blue-black and may be mottled. The tail is moderately forked, and the anal fin is shorter and rounder than that of channel or blue catfish.

State Record: 18.8 lbs.

Big Catch: 22 inches or 5 lbs.

Habitat: found statewide in rivers and streams and in slightly brackish coastal waters.

OSCAR

Appearance: Adults are olive blue-green with mustard colors, and a bright red eyespot on the tail fin.

Habitat: Oscars are illegally/ accidentally established nonnative fish. They are abundant in Water Conservation Area canals and occur throughout south Florida. Native to South America.

CHAIN PICKEREL

Appearance: Chain pickerel are deep olive-green on the back, shading to a creamy yellow on the belly, with the back and anal fin about the same size and located far back on an elongated body. A distinct black chain-like or interwoven marking on the sides give them their name.

State Record: 5.75 lbs.

Big Catch: 27 inches or 4 lbs.

Habitat: Found statewide, normally in vegetated lakes, swamps and backwaters of small to large rivers.

FLORIDA GAR

Appearance: Prehistoric fish with ganoid (bony) scales that have peg-and-socket joints forming a hard armor. Irregular round, spots occur on top of the head, all over the body and fins.

State Record: 9.44 lbs.

Big Catch: 28 inches or 5 lbs.

Habitat: They are found in the Ochlockonee River and waters east and south in peninsular Florida where they inhabit streams, canals and lakes with mud or sand bottoms near underwater vegetation.

AMERICAN SHAD

Appearance: Green or greenish blue with metallic luster on back and silvery sides. The chest and abdomen have bony scutes. They typically have several spots along their side.

State Record: 5.19 lbs.

Big Catch: 18 inches or 4 lbs.

Habitat: In Florida, it occurs only in the northeast, mostly in the St. Johns River and Nassau River when it returns from the ocean to spawn, typically between late December and early April.

Recreational Boating in Florida

A WAY OF LIFE ON THE WATER

With over 8,400 miles of coastline, 30,000 lakes, and countless winding rivers and canals, Florida is a boater's paradise. Recreational boating is not just a popular pastime in the Sunshine State, it's a deeply ingrained part of its culture and lifestyle.

For visitors without their own boat, Florida has a vast charter and rental network. You can book a guided fishing trip with an experienced captain, rent a pontoon for a family day on the water, or join a sailing excursion. Kayaks and paddleboards are also widely available for exploring quieter waters and getting up close to nature. Renting a boat while vacationing in Florida opens up an entirely new way to experience the Sunshine State. Whether you are exploring the calm waters of the Intracoastal Waterway, casting a line in world-class fishing spots, or taking a pontoon boat out with the family, a boat rental gives you freedom and flexibility. Families can enjoy island hopping, shelling, or spotting dolphins, while anglers chase trophy fish offshore and in our many lakes. It's the perfect way to see Florida from the water, where the real magic happens.

One of the biggest draws of recreational boating in Florida is its incredible diversity. In coastal areas, luxury yachts and sportfishing boats dominate the waterways. Inland, pontoon boats and bass boats are common on freshwater lakes and rivers. In the Panhandle, rustic bay boats ply the emerald waters, while in Miami and Tampa Bay, sleek speedboats and catamarans are weekend staples.

Boaters in Florida enjoy access to a robust network of marinas, boat ramps, waterfront restaurants, and marine services. The Intracoastal Waterway runs the length of the state's east coast, providing a scenic, protected route for longer cruises. Many towns and cities host boat shows and regattas, while events like the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show and Miami International Boat Show draw boating enthusiasts from around the world.

Water sports like stand-up paddleboarding, wakeboarding, tubing, and jet skiing are also wildly popular, especially among families and younger boaters.

Whether you're an experienced sailor or a weekend cruiser, boating in Florida is an unmatched way to experience the state's natural beauty and vibrant coastal culture. With so much water to explore and so many ways to enjoy it, life really is better on a boat.

Catch & Cook

A TRUE FLORIDA FISHING EXPERIENCE

Few experiences capture the spirit of Florida's coastal lifestyle like a good old-fashioned "catch and cook." Whether you're reeling in a snook off the mangroves, hauling in grouper from offshore reefs, or netting snapper on a backcountry charter, Florida offers one of the most rewarding ways to enjoy fishing: catch your meal and savor it the same day.

The idea is simple—go out, catch a fish, and have it prepared and served fresh, often within hours. This practice has become a favorite among visitors and locals alike, turning an exciting day on the water into a memorable culinary experience.

FROM BOAT TO TABLE

Florida's coastal towns and islands are filled with restaurants that offer "You Hook It, We Cook It" services. After a morning of fishing, you can bring your cleaned catch to a participating restaurant where chefs will prepare it grilled, fried, blackened, or any way you like—often served with sides like coleslaw, fries, and key lime pie. It's as fresh as seafood gets.

Popular locations for catch-and-cook experiences include Destin, Islamorada, Naples, and Clearwater Beach. Many restaurants are conveniently located near marinas and boat ramps, making the transition from fishing to feasting quick and easy.

KNOW THE RULES

Before heading out, it's essential to know Florida's fishing regulations. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) sets species-specific rules on seasons, size limits, and bag limits. For example, while snapper and grouper are often abundant, snook and redfish have tighter restrictions to help protect populations. Always check the latest guidelines or fish with a licensed charter captain who knows the rules.

Additionally, most restaurants will only prepare legally caught and properly cleaned fish. Some may offer cleaning services or partner with nearby fillet stations. It's a good idea to bring your fish in a cooler with ice and arrive early—many spots require advance notice or reservations, especially during busy seasons.

BEST FISH FOR CATCH AND COOK

Florida's waters are teeming with edible species that are both fun to catch and delicious to eat. Some of the most popular catch-and-cook fish include:

Snapper (especially mangrove and yellowtail): Mild, flaky, and excellent grilled or fried.

Grouper: A Florida favorite with firm texture and rich flavor.

Mahi-Mahi: Colorful, fast, and delicious—perfect for blackening or tacos.

Snook (when in season): Known for its unique flavor and sporting fight.

Pompano: Highly prized for its buttery texture and sweet taste.

MORE THAN A MEAL

What makes catch and cook so special is that it connects people to the source of their food in a way that's both satisfying and unforgettable. You're not just dining—you're telling a story about the fish you caught, the fight it put up, and the thrill of the day.

Whether you're a seasoned angler or trying fishing for the first time, Florida's catch-and-cook tradition is one of the best ways to immerse yourself in the state's coastal culture. So grab a rod, hit the water, and get ready to taste your own adventure.

SCALLOPING IN FLORIDA:

A SUMMERTIME GULF COAST TRADITION

Every summer, Florida's Gulf Coast comes alive with a beloved tradition that blends outdoor adventure, family bonding, and the freshest seafood imaginable-scalloping. From the clear, shallow waters of Crystal River to the pristine seagrass beds of Steinhatchee and Homosassa, Floridians and visitors alike flock to the coast for a unique underwater treasure hunt: harvesting bay scallops.

Bay scalloping season typically runs from late June through early September, depending on the region, and is regulated by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). The rules-like limits on the number of scallops per person and boat-are designed to ensure sustainability of the species, which play a vital role in Florida's marine ecosystems. These bi-valves live in seagrass beds in shallow coastal waters and serve as both filter feeders and prey for various marine species.

Scalloping isn't just about the catch; it's about the experience. Most scallopers take to the water in small boats and snorkel over seagrass flats in 3 to 8 feet of water. Equipped with a mesh bag, snorkel gear, and a keen eye, they scan the sea floor for the distinct blue "eyes" along the edge of a scallop's shell. It's a fun and beginner-friendly activity, ideal for families with children and anyone who enjoys time in the water.

Popular scalloping destinations like Crystal River, Homosassa, and Steinhatchee offer abundant marine life, clear waters, and local charm. Many coastal towns fully embrace the scallop season, with local marinas, guides, and outfitters ready to help first-timers gear up. Charter captains can take you directly to prime scalloping spots and even clean your catch afterward-perfect for those looking for a hassle-free day on the water.

The culinary reward is certainly worth the effort. Bay scallops are smaller and sweeter than their deep-sea cousins, and can be prepared in countless ways-grilled, sautéed in butter, tossed into pasta, or eaten fresh with a squeeze of lemon.

Safety is always a priority. Scallopers should display a dive flag, be aware of tides and weather, and watch for boat traffic. Sun protection and hydration are musts, as you'll likely spend several hours out in the open water.

For many, scalloping in Florida is more than just a seasonal hobby-it's a cherished summer ritual. It brings together locals and visitors for fun, food, and a deep appreciation of Florida's natural beauty. Whether you're a seasoned diver or a curious first-timer, scalloping offers an unforgettable way to connect with the Gulf's coastal waters—and maybe bring home dinner, too.

SOUTH

COUNTIES: Manatee, Sarasota, Charlotte, Lee, Glades, Hendry, Collier, DeSoto, Hardee, Martin, Palm Beach, Broward, Dade, Monroe, Okeechobee

SALTWATER SPECIES

BONEFISH

Appearance: Silvery, with torpedo-shaped body and conical snout.

State Record: 15.75 lbs.

Habitat: Bonefish primarily inhabit inshore shallows of the Florida Keys, often in water that is less than 1 foot deep.

TIP: Live shrimp or jigs tipped with fresh shrimp are the best baits for conventional fishermen. Fly fishermen patiently pole through shallow flats stalking these elusive fish. Bonefish are very seldom eaten and should be carefully released.

SNOOK

Appearance: Snook are identified by their black lateral line and protruding lower jaw.

State Record: 44.19 lbs.

Habitat: "Linesides" are found in coastal and brackish waters, along mangrove shorelines, and near seagrass beds, seawalls, jetties and bridges. Snook abound on both coasts of Florida from central Florida south, because they cannot tolerate water temperatures below 60˚F.

GAG GROUPER

Appearance: Grouper are bottom fish that range from several pounds to 700 or more pounds. They vary in color with massive under-slung jaws, chunky bodies, a tenacious attitude and large, broad, powerful tails.

State Record: 80.38 lbs.

Habitat: Adults inhabit rocky bottoms, reefs and drop-off walls in water over 60 feet deep; young occur inshore in waters around seagrass beds, mangrove forests and hard-bottom communities.

SPOTTED SEATROUT

Appearance: Spotted seatrout have a distinctive pair of canine teeth that protrude from the upper jaw.

State Record: 17.44 lbs.

Habitat: Seatrout abound in seagrass meadows, mangrove-fringed shorelines, deep holes and channels and above oyster bars.

REDFISH (RED DRUM)

Appearance: Redfish are easily recognized by the spot or spots at the base of their tails.

State Record: 52.31 lbs.

Habitat: In winter, redfish are found in seagrass, over muddy or sand bottoms, or near oyster bars or spring fed creeks.

TARPON

Appearance: Tarpon have a distinctive dorsal fin ray that extends into a long filament, a large upward pointing mouth and very large scales

State Record: 243.00 lbs.

Habitat: Primarily inshore fish, preferring shallow estuaries around mangrove forests, salt marshes or hard-bottom/seagrass communities of the Keys. They tolerate a wide salinity range, and as juveniles, enter fresh waters.

BEHAVIOR: Tarpon can gulp air and remove oxygen by means of lung-like tissue near their swim bladder. This "rolling" effect is one way to spot tarpon. Anglers catch tarpon that weigh 40 to 150 pounds on average. Tarpon do not mature until 7 to 13 years of age. They spawn offshore between May and September.

PERMIT

Appearance: Permit are deep-bodied fish with a very deeply forked tail that gives them the speed to catch crabs and other invertebrates in seagrass flats. Pompano are similar but not as deep bodied and rarely grow larger than 6 pounds.

State Record: 56.13 lbs.

Habitat: These coastal fish inhabit tropical grass and sand flats, near reefs and wrecks.

COBIA

Appearance: Cobia are long, slim fish with a broad depressed head. The lower jaw extends past the upper jaw, and they have a dark lateral stripe that extends through the tail. These fish are also known as ling, or lemonfish, and resemble remoras.

State Record: 130.06 lbs.

Habitat: Cobia are found in nearshore and inshore waters with inlets and bays. Cobia are frequently found around buoys, pilings and wrecks in these areas.

RED SNAPPER

Appearance: Most snapper are bottom fish with varied shapes, sizes and colors, a terminal mouth, and broad tail. Florida has 15 species of snapper, including mangrove (gray), lane, mutton, yellowtail and red.

State Record: 46.50 lbs. (red).

Habitat: Larger snapper are found further offshore. Lane snapper inhabit grassbeds and shallow reefs. Yellowtail snapper are common over grassbeds, reefs and sandy areas near reefs. Unlike most snapper, they are up in the water column and take chunks of fish for bait. Mutton snapper are common over grassbeds or mangroves with larger individuals occurring on reefs. Red snapper are most common on the continental shelf in northern Florida near structure. Mangrove snapper are common throughout Florida in many habitats.

DOLPHIN

Appearance: Dolphin, or Mahi-Mahi, are brightly colored fish, with a high forehead. The dorsal fin extends from just behind the head to just before the tail. Males have a nearly vertical head profile, and females have a more sloping head contour.

State Record: 77.75 lbs.

Habitat: Dolphin are open-ocean fish. The young live in floating sargassum weed.

SAILFISH

Appearance: The sailfish is Florida's state saltwater fish. Its name originates from the greatly enlarged first dorsal fin that runs almost the length of its back and is covered with spots.

State Record: 116.63 lbs.

Habitat: Sailfish are found throughout Florida; year-round in the Keys, during the summer in the Gulf and off the Atlantic during summer and fall.

BLUEFISH

Appearance: Bluefish are greenish blue on their back, with silvery sides and a large mouth filled with prominent, sharp teeth.

State Record: 22.18 lbs.

Habitat: Young usually are inshore during spring and summer and move offshore to join adults during fall and winter. Large numbers of bluefish migrate to Florida from northern stocks during winter. Anglers on the east coast catch larger bluefish than fishermen on the west coast.

BLACK SEA BASS

Appearance: These fish have a three-lobed tail fin with a dark body and a sharp spine on the gill cover.

State Record: 5.06 lbs.

Habitat: Sea bass are typically found along structure, associated with reefs and rubble offshore, although smaller specimens are found in inshore finger channels.

SHEEPSHEAD

Appearance: Sheepshead have 5-6 broad vertical dark gray bars, a forked tail and human-like teeth.

State Record: 15.13 lbs.

Habitat: Look for sheepshead inshore around oyster bars, bridges, pilings and artificial reefs.

KING MACKEREL

Appearance: Mackerel are long-bodied fish with a deeply forked tail and a series of finlets behind the dorsal fin. Kings are iridescent blue-green along the back; the lateral line starts high and drops sharply below the second dorsal fin. Spanish mackerel have golden yellow irregular spots above and below the lateral line. Cero have yellow spots forming lines above and below a bronze stripe from pectoral fin to base of the tail.

State Record: 15.5 lbs. (king).

Habitat: Found both nearshore and offshore, often around piers.

SWORDFISH

Appearance: A rather unique billfish, with a flattened bill formed from an elongated upper jaw. It has a single high dorsal fin and one keel on each side in front of the tail fin.

State Record: 612.75 lbs.

Habitat: Deep sea fish found from the surface down below 2,000 feet. They are heavily overfished internationally.

BEHAVIOR: Swordfish over 200 pounds are generally females and tend to migrate to the surface at night, when most drift fishing occurs.

WAHOO

Appearance: A member of the mackerel family, long and streamlined with about 30 dark wavy bars for camouflage.

State Record: 139 lbs.

Habitat: Found offshore; generally not in schools.

BLUE MARLIN

Appearance: A cobalt blue color shading to silvery white on bottom gives this large billfish its name. The dorsal, pectoral and anal fins are all pointed. (Note in white marlin they are rounded).

State Record: 1046 lbs. (blue)

Habitat: A deep-sea fish that makes major trans-Atlantic migrations.

TRIPLETAIL

Appearance: The rounded second dorsal and anal fins are similar in size and along with a rounded tail fin, give the fish its name. The bases of those fins have scales.

State Record: 40.8 lbs.

Habitat: Frequently associated with structure.

GULF FLOUNDER

Appearance: A flattened bottom fish. The eyes have migrated to one side of the body so that when laying flat both eyes can see upward. The Gulf flounder has a brown back and three eyespots in a triangular pattern; the southern flounder lacks those spots.

State Record: 20.6 lbs. (Gulf).

Habitat: Inshore or nearshore lying on sandy or mud bottoms.

BLACKTIP SHARK

Appearance: Blacktips have a dark bluish gray (young paler) back, with a distinctive whitish stripe on the flank; and the inside tip of the pectoral fin is conspicuously black, as are the dorsal and anal fin tips, and lower lobe of caudal in young blacktips. Numerous other shark species exist in Florida waters. All have multiple gill openings, and rough skin with embedded scales that make the skin feel like sandpaper.

State Record: 152 lbs. (blacktip).

Habitat: Most sharks are pelagic (offshore), but blacktips often come inshore in large schools, particularly in association with Spanish mackerel. Frequently the most common shark in clear-water cuts and along beaches in Florida and Bahamas.

Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach

Photography Courtesy Capt. Jay Withers

SEASIDE

Relax and reconnect on some of the prettiest and most peaceful beaches on the planet. Stroll Englewood Beach's soft sands, hunt for seashells and prehistoric shark teeth, and enjoy fresh coastal dining just steps away. At Gasparilla Island State Park, explore the historic Port Boca Grande Lighthouse, the only one open to the public on Florida's West Coast. There's so much seaside beauty to discover on your next trip.

HARBORSIDE

Charlotte Harbor has long been known as an amazing place for boating and sailing. Whether you want to rent a boat and explore on your own, or enjoy a relaxing sightseeing cruise, a romantic sunset sail, or a full-day adventure on the water, there's no shortage of ways to explore our scenic coastline and inland waterways. Head out on a harbor cruise to spot dolphins and other local wildlife, or a sunset cruise for a laid-back evening on the harbor with a drink in hand as the sun sets.

Photography Courtesy Capt. Jay Withers

TRAILSIDE

Home to over 200 miles of Blueway trails, you'll find plenty of ways to spend the day whether it bee in a kayak or paddleboard, or hiking one of our over 70 parks and preserves. Maybe you and your camera prefer spending some time on one of the 7 Great Florida Birding trails? You'll find it all here.

WATERSIDE

We are a paradise for anglers, offering both saltwater and freshwater opportunities. Out on the Gulf and Charlotte Harbor, you'll find prized catches like snook, tarpon, and redfish, while inland lakes and rivers are home to largemouth bass, crappie, and bluegill. Whether you're casting a line from the shore, heading out on a charter, or exploring quiet backwaters, fishing here is as diverse as the landscape itself—making it a favorite pastime for locals and visitors alike.

TABLESIDE

If you love dining on vacay (and who doesn't?), you'll find scores of delightful restaurants as Punta Gorda was ranked #2 Small Town Food Scene in USA Today's 10Best. With a variety of cuisines, original restaurants, award winning chefs and inspiring waterside views, your dining experiences here are sure to be unforgettable.

BEDSIDE

Whether you're looking for a luxury resort, boutique hotel, or spacious vacation rental – the variety of places to stay is enviable – you can even choose to stay on one of the barrier islands.

FIND YOUR OUTSIDE

Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach has all the best of what you come to Florida for. Seaside, harborside or tableside, our best side is outside. And we invite you to come find your outside. Start planning your adventure at PureFlorida.com

For more information:
PureFlorida.com

Tarpon Fishing Capital of the World

– PUNTA GORDA/ENGLEWOOD BEACH

The tarpon, known as the "Silver King," is a prehistoric game fish known for its impressive acrobatics and size: they can reach up to 8 feet long and 280 pounds. The average weight of a mature tarpon is between 90 and 130 pounds, so even a "small" tarpon can present quite a challenge.

Each year from April to October—peaking in June—thousands of tarpon congregate in Charlotte Harbor and Boca Grande Pass as they migrate to and from their spawning grounds. Boca Grande Pass was named #1 on the list of The World's Best Tarpon Fishing Spots by Sport Fishing Magazine in 2019, and it's estimated that about 5,000 tarpon are landed each spring in the Pass alone. With plenty of professional fishing guides in the area, as well as a plethora of activities and tasty restaurants off the water, the Charlotte Harbor Gulf Island Coast is an ideal spot for a tarpon fishing vacation.

With a guide, not only is the fishing license handled, but compliance with the most current fishing regulations is ensured. Further, anglers are taken to tried-and-true locations, coached in the art of hooking a tarpon, don't need to bring their own equipment, and importantly: the tarpon caught are less likely to be harmed.

Though they're large and strong, tarpon are easily injured, especially after a long fight.

Tarpon is a catch-and-release-only species in Florida. The only exception involves the pursuit of an International Game Fish Association (IGFA) world record. In order to keep a tarpon and submit it for world record consideration, an angler must pre-purchase a tarpon tag before fishing. One tag per person/per year/per boat is issued.

When it comes to releasing, Florida law states that tarpon over 40" long (from the mouth to the fork of the tail) are not to be removed from the water. Fish under 40" may be taken from the water, as briefly as possible, and they should be lifted horizontally, with the head and belly supported. The tarpon's weight can be calculated with minimal stress: instead risking damage with a hook scale, measure from the mouth to the fork of the tail and then around the body and plug the numbers into the Bonefish & Tarpon Trust Weight Calculator. The catch should only be handled with wet, clean hands, and the gills should never be touched. Tarpon should never be targeted from bridges or piers.

A fishing guide will also be skilled in reviving a tarpon before release. Anglers fishing on their own should review and follow best practices, such as jump starting a tarpon's breathing by pushing the fish quickly forward through the water, and not releasing a fish that is rolled on its side or whose nose is pointing up or down, until it is balanced in the water.

Because of their size, strength, fight, and the skill involved in setting a hook and reeling one in, tarpon remain a dream catch for many anglers…a dream that has a good chance of coming true in Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach, the epicenter of the quest for a Silver King.

After the exhilarating challenge and adrenaline rush of any encounter with a tarpon and the pure joy of being out on the water, nothing feels better than the total relaxation and satisfaction of a cold drink and a hearty meal at one of the area's stellar independent restaurants. Beautiful views abound, whether it's a stunning sunset at a waterfront spot or local art, décor, and pure Old Florida architecture at an inland eatery.

Once revived by great meal, it's time to enjoy the area nightlife, which includes everything from live music and dancing to nationally-known standup comedians and community theatre to rocking local joints full of friendly people. Get ready for the next day's adventure in a clean and quiet hotel room, a cozy or spacious vacation rental, a secluded resort spot, or a nicely-appointed RV park.

For a truly well-rounded tarpon fishing vacation, Punta Gorda/Englewood Beach checks all the boxes.

Photo courtesy of Capt. Jay Withers

Catch a Florida Memory

SALTWATER ANGLER RECOGNITION PROGRAM
FLORIDA FISH & WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

Saltwater Life List
The Saltwater Fish Life List is a challenge to catch the following 70 different species of saltwater fish. Anglers receive a certificate of accomplishment and various prizes as they reach each Life List Fish Club. FWC encourages responsible angling. Remember proper catch-and-release techniques when fishing. Anglers do not have to harvest their fish to be eligible and are encouraged to release catches alive.

Saltwater Grand Slam
Grand Slams challenge anglers to catch three specified fish species in a 24-hour period. The FWC updated the program in 2014 by creating nine Grand Slams including a Small Fry Slam for children aged 15 and under. FWC encourages responsible angling. Remember proper catch-and-release techniques when fishing. Anglers do not have to harvest their fish to be eligible and are encouraged to release catches alive.

Saltwater Reel Big Fish
The Saltwater Reel Big Fish program recognizes anglers for extraordinarily sized catches of the 30 different saltwater species listed below. Fish must reach or exceed the qualifying length listed for adults (age 16 and older) and youth (age 15 and under). The catch must be photographed over a qualifying measuring device as well as in a photo with the angler who is applying for recognition. FWC encourages responsible angling. Remember proper catch-and-release techniques when fishing. Anglers do not have to harvest their fish to be eligible and are encouraged to release their catches alive.

For more information on Catch a Florida Memory, please visit MyFWC.com

More Than Rockets

Rockets aren't the only thing launching from Florida's Space Coast; from Titusville down to Sebastian Inlet, visitors with trailer boats, kayaks and canoes can utilize any number of the public ramps accessing the waterways across the county. With 72 miles of Atlantic Ocean coastline, the Intracoastal Waterway (Indian River) and additional waterways including Headwaters Lake, Lake Washington, Lake Poinsett, Lake Winder, Sawgrass Lake, the St. Johns River, the Banana River and canals everywhere on Florida's Space Coast the fishing options are endless. Saltwater and freshwater fishing provide a wide range of fishing experiences and expectations that no matter what season it is, something is biting somewhere. Local bait stores and charters will be more than happy to provide the basics for reeling in a nice catch, so there's no need to worry about having it all.

The Space Coast has more than 500 species of fish including some of the largest spotted seatrout, record-breaking Tripletail, and is the northernmost boundary on the East Coast for snook. Mosquito Lagoon in the North end of Brevard County is known as the redfish capital of the world, and to the South, Stick Marsh/Farm 13 is one of the top largemouth bass fisheries in the U.S. Head to Port Canaveral for pier and surf fishing at Jetty Park or try Cocoa Beach's Thousand Islands area for ladyfish, snook, and trout.

CHARTER OFFSHORE OR INSHORE

If you're looking for an exciting day where you can catch some of the bigger species of fish, like Mahi and Marlin, chartering offshore fishing is the perfect choice. You'll find several boat operators around the Space Coast offering guided deep-sea fishing trips year-round. There are all-day trips ideal for one-of-a-kind, bucket-list type of fishing excursions, where reeling in a huge trophy fish is a high possibility. Half-day trips are also available and are great for kids, grandparents, a full family outing, or a group of friends, regardless of any angler's skill level. Most Charters provide fishing essentials: rods and reels, bait, tackle, fish storage, and cleaning. Fishing licenses are required for offshore charters, but the charters provide that as well. Near shore trips are also available out of Sebastian Inlet for tarpon, cobia, kingfish, and much more.

In the calmer waters with inshore charter fishing, you can cruise through wetlands, waterways, and lush mangroves to see some of the Space Coast's most unique wildlife, right in their natural habitat. Some species you can expect are redfish, trout, tarpon, bluefish, Spanish Mackerel, sheepshead, drum, snook, snapper and flounder. Fishing licenses are required, and like the offshore charters, inshore charters typically include that in their pricing. In an effort for advocacy, education, and conservation, the CCA Florida STAR fishing competition runs 101 days from Memorial Day weekend to Labor Day weekend and gives opportunities for prizes and scholarships valued at over $100,000 in winnings. Consider visiting during the fall mullet run as these migrating baitfish naturally attract snook, tarpon and more to top fishing locations.

FRESHWATER FISHING

Freshwater fishing is both relaxed and exciting as you spend a calm day catching bass, bluegills, specks, and catfish in our freshwater lakes. Whether from shore or on land, freshwater fishing is ideal for beginners, or those who venture out on more of the chill side of excitement. With a simple tackle set up, it's practically grab-n-go; grab your pole and go to your favorite lake, river, stream, reservoir, or pond.

SURF FISHING

From sandy, shell-filled, or rocky beaches, fishing piers to rock jetties, stand on the shoreline or wade in the surf for your hand at surf fishing. Be a part of the sea of surf fishermen along the shore, waiting in anticipation, for a pompano, bluefish, or even snook. Surf fishing also requires a Florida fishing license.

TOP FISHING LOCATIONS

The Stick Marsh is highly regarded as one of the premier bass fishing locations in the United States. More than 6,500 acres of stump-filled shallows hold what may be the largest average weight large-mouth bass population available to anglers fishing.

Three Forks Marsh man-made impoundment was originally designed to help with flood control similar to the Stick Marsh. It has since become an excellent source for bass fishing on the St. John's River.

C-54 Canal is 12-mile long canal way starts at the Stick Marsh and ends at the Sebastian Inlet. It has become a popular spot for kayak and boat fishing.

Ready to take your Space Coast fishing trip to the next level? Head to www.visitspacecoast.com/things-to-do/boating-fishing to find boat ramps, charter companies, insider tips and more.

For more information:
VisitSpaceCoast.com

Stone Crab 101

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT FLORIDA'S FAMED CRUSTACEAN

In Southwest Florida, there's a seafood delicacy that draws connoisseurs and fanatics from near and far: the delectable, savory stone crab. Florida's Paradise Coast, which includes Naples, Marco Island and the Everglades, is one of the largest producers of stone crab claws – second only to the Florida Keys. Everglades City, located south of Naples and Marco Island at the gateway to the western Everglades, is known as the Stone Crab Capital of the World and the birthplace of the stone crab industry.

One of Everglades City's more colorful characters, Loren "Totch" Brown, claims to have "invented" the stone crab industry. Florida stone crabs used to be a nuisance to commercial fishermen who tried to catch pompano and mullet in their nets but ended up with stone crabs instead. Brown saw a business opportunity.

FUN FACTS ABOUT STONE CRABS

- The stone crab's large claws can account for half its body weight.
- Only one claw of stone crabs is harvested. The crab is put back in the Gulf of Mexico alive, where it regenerates a new claw.
- Stone crabs use shells as a tool to burrow into the sand. When you come across a stone crab home, it is often covered by shells.
- Female stone crabs produce up to a million eggs at a time, and will produce from four to six egg sacs, called sponges, in a single spawning season.
- The average life span of a stone crab is not known but is estimated to be between seven and nine years in non-fished regions.

ABOUT FLORIDA STONE CRAB FISHING

Florida stone crab season is October 15 to May 1. The stone crab fishery is closed during the summer to protect spawning females. Crabs are caught in baited traps in the Gulf of Mexico and nearshore estuaries. Frozen pigs' feet is the choice crab bait when the water is warm, and mullet or sharks' heads when the water is cooler.

FROM GULF TO RESTAURANT: STONE CRAB HARVESTING

Known as Florida's renewable seafood resource, only claws of at least 2 3/4 inches are harvested. The crab is returned alive to the Gulf of Mexico, where it typically takes a year to generate a new claw, and up to three years for it to reach legal size. Research from the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission shows approximately 13% of the stone crab claws harvested are regenerated, indicating that stone crabs survive the declawing process.

Southwest Florida crabbers work hard to harvest the delectable stone crab claws during the annual season. Claws harvested locally find their way to local restaurants and are also shipped fresh overnight to other Florida and national locations. Stone crab claws must be steamed immediately upon being brought to the dock and then chilled. This prevents the meat from sticking to the shell.

HOW TO EAT STONE CRABS

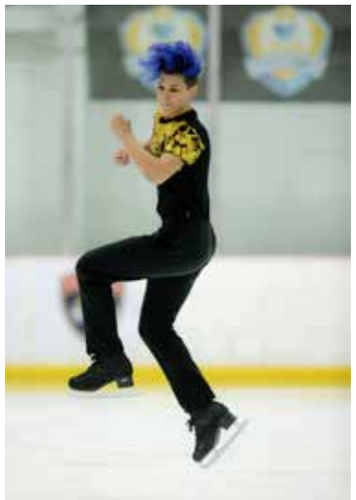
Stone crabs are not cheap; expect to pay anywhere from $25-$100 for a stone crab meal, depending on the previous year's harvest, amount purchased, and market prices. Claws are sold in fish markets based on size, and price per pound varies accordingly. Claws are traditionally served cold with a mustard dipping sauce or drawn butter. The taste is comparable to lobster.

SUNSHINE STATE GAMES

For more than 45 years, Florida's Sunshine State Games have provided amateur athletes of all ages in the Sunshine State an opportunity to engage in a sport on a statewide level. For some, their successes lead to national and international competitions. The most elite have advanced to the Olympic Games and professional sports.

Dating back to 1980, the Sunshine State Games continues to offer high quality sports opportunities in various locations around the state of Florida. On the calendar for 2026 is the ever popular Sunshine State Games Figure Skating Championships, in May, at AdventHealth Center Ice, in Wesley Chapel. Look for a full calendar of events in January, 2026, at www.sunshinestategames.com.

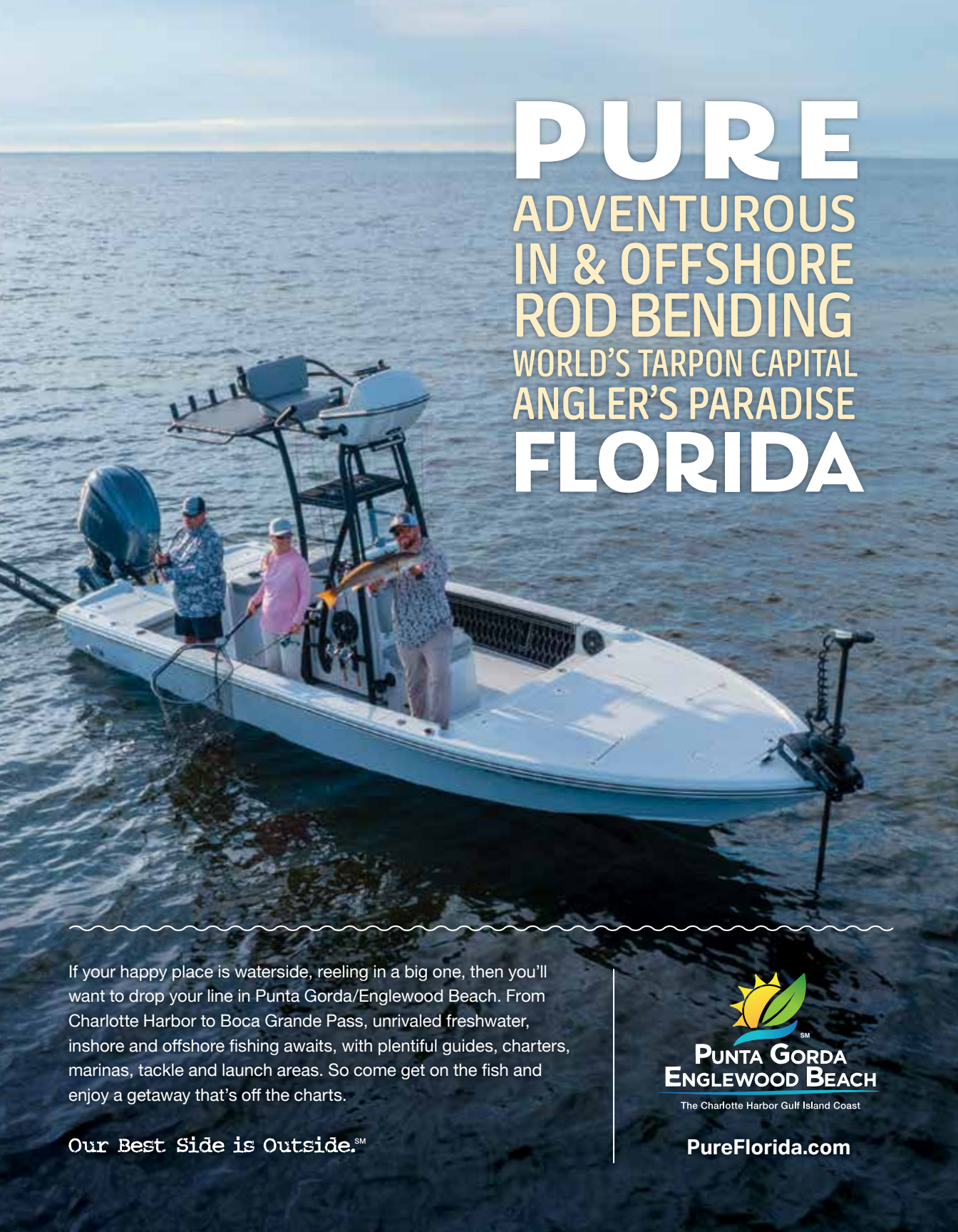
The Figure Skating Championships features over 300 athletes from figure skating clubs as far north as Jacksonville and stretching to Miami. Other popular competitions include Taekwondo, Swimming, Artistic Swimming, Archery, Table Tennis, Fencing and Water Polo, all sports to be featured in the 2028 Olympic Games in Los Angeles.



Four Florida athletes, who got their start in the Sunshine State Games competed in the 2024 Olympic Games, in Paris. Ashleigh Johnsson, the USA Water Polo team goalkeeper, began her water polo career with the Miami Riptides team. Cece Williams, who competed in cycling, was a member of the Area Tallahassee Aquatic Club Swim team. Angelica Delgado, a judoka, grew up in Miami and competed with the Ki-Itsu-Sai team. Finally, Kruz Schembri, a fencer from Haines City, was a member of the Virgin Islands Fencing team.

Other notable Olympians who competed in the Sunshine State Games in their youth include boxing champion, Roy Jones, Jr., from Pensacola, sprinter Justin Gatlin, also from Pensacola, swimmers Ryan Lochte, of Daytona Beach and Nancy Hogshead-Makar, from Jacksonville. Tallahassee's Brian Olson competed in four Olympic Games (1996-2008) in Judo and now serves on the USA Judo Board of Directors.

The Sunshine State Games provides a starting point, a goal-setting opportunity, a chance to meet and train with other talented athletes within a sport and an opportunity to advance onto national competitions. Visit www.sunshinestategames.com for more information.



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FLORIDA

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