

Florida Fish Busters
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Bluegill, Bream, Panfish—whatever. Top sites for 2007

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Whether you call them bluegill, bream, panfish or whatever, we're talking about a variety of deep-bodied panfish belonging to the sunfish family that have kept families fed and anglers entertained for centuries. The most common of these fish are bluegill, redear sunfish (shellcracker), redbreast sunfish (red bellies), spotted sunfish (stumpknocker) and warmouth (goggle-eye). Almost any water body in the Sunshine State, regardless of size or locale, will be brimming with some form of bream, especially the popular bluegill and, to a lesser extent, redear sunfish.

Along with catfish, bream probably are the first fish that many young anglers catch and will always remain a popular fish with freshwater anglers because of their variety, accessibility and palatability. What a wonderful way to spend an afternoon talking with a child and teaching him to fish -- creating memories for a lifetime and getting to really know them. Bream often are taken from the shore or a short fishing pier using nothing but a cane pole and some garden-variety worms, so getting started is super-simple. The next step is spinning tackle, which adds to the challenge and your ability to reach out a bit farther with a nice cast. Aficionados find joy in the delights of using fly-fishing tackle and working on the ballet-like beauty of a well executed roll cast.



A nice stringer of bluegill, photo by Phil Chapman, FWC.

Florida has a generous bag limit for bream, allowing an angler to take up to 50 of these tasty fish home daily, without having to distinguish between the different species. In other words, you can have 50 bluegill, or 50 redear, or 25 bluegill and 25 redear, or any other combination so long as the total doesn't exceed 50. One good fishing trip will cover the inexpensive annual resident fishing license based just on the recreational enjoyment, but with the bonus groceries thrown in, there probably isn't a better deal to be found. Remember your entire license fee goes to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to ensure quality, safe and sustainable fishing throughout Florida. Licenses are easily obtained online at MyFWC.com, by calling 1-888-FISH FLORIDA, or at most locations that sell fishing tackle.

The current drought has a tendency to concentrate bream, making them more accessible. More important for the long run, though, is that by exposing more bottom area, the drought will allow some of the accumulated muck to dry out and native plants to germinate when the water levels go back up. That dynamic cycle of flood and drought is a part of the environment to which our native plants and fishes adapted and helps keep lakes clean, generating bumper year classes of fish.

In South Florida, redear spawned as early as March. In Central Florida, they went onto spawning beds during the April full moon, and began congregating to spawn in the Panhandle of Florida in mid-May. Bluegill will begin spawning about a month after shellcracker in each region. Shellcracker will bed well into August, while bluegill will spawn periodically throughout the summer months and, sometimes, even as late as November in south Florida. Water depths for bedding bream may range anywhere from 3 to 10 feet. The clearer the water the deeper bream will spawn. Bluegills seem to opt for slightly shallower waters than redear, but it's not unusual to see shellcracker and bluegill intermingle, using the same bedding areas at the same time.

Due to their abundance and availability, bluegill are easily the most popular bream in Florida, although the equally tasty shellcracker may appeal to other anglers, since they are often larger than their bluegill cousins. Found in lakes, streams, rivers, ponds and canals, bluegill are caught on a wide variety of live offerings including earthworms, crickets and grass shrimp.

Anglers who use spinning gear won't go wrong when tossing or trolling tiny spinnerbaits. Fly rod buffs particularly enjoy this little scrapper because of its eagerness to clobber both popping bugs and sinking flies.

Ounce-for-ounce, the prolific bluegill is a strong battler when not over-tackled. Those caught will range from just a couple of ounces to an average of 6 to 8 ounces. Heavier fish in the 8- to 12-ounce range frequently occur during bedding activities where an occasional 1-pounder is not uncommon. Florida's record bluegill scaled 2.95 pounds. To qualify for the FWC's "Big Catch" angler recognition certificate, you need to land a bluegill that is at least 11 inches long or weighs 1.25 pounds (see Florida Freshwater Sportfishing Regulations, or visit MyFWC.com/Fishing for applications and details, including youth and specialist categories).



Redear are the largest of the bream and distinguished by the red border on their 'ear flaps.' Photo by Phil Chapman, FWC.

Redear sunfish are identified easily by the red margin at the edge of their gill flaps. The average size for these sunfish is about 10 to 12 ounces, but 1-pound fish are caught frequently on spawning beds. Florida's record is 4.86 pounds, while the world record for this species is a whopping 5 pounds, 3 ounces. The FWC's "Big Catch" program recognizes catches of redear sunfish (shellcracker) that exceed 2.25 pounds or 12 inches. Favored live baits include earthworms, crickets, grass shrimp, snails and mussels. Redear are seldom caught on artificial lures, but fly-rodgers can occasionally connect with this hard

fighter by casting popping bugs with a small sinking, scud-type fly tied to an 18-inch light monofilament trailer. Shellcracker usually hang around areas with hard, sandy bottoms or shell beds, but may also be targeted near grass patches, pads, reeds or snags.

If panfishing is your passion, don't overlook Florida's many streams and rivers for more opportunities. These gems are teeming with redbreast sunfish, spotted sunfish (stumpknocker) and warmouth. Although none of these fish grow to the proportions of their bluegill and redear cousins, they are worthy fighters for their size – and tasty too. Spotted sunfish and warmouth will typically be found near woody structure, while redbreast sunfish favor vegetation, such as lily pads or eelgrass. Earthworms are the best live bait for this trio, but small spinners and popping bugs also work well.



Redbelly sunfish have very long ear flaps and are generally found in flowing waters. Photo by Phil Chapman, FWC.

Not satisfied with knowing bream are everywhere in Florida's fresh waters. The FWC has compiled the following list, based on fishery surveys and local expertise, of spots they think should be included as top panfish locales (in no particular order) for 2007:

LAKE MONROE (near Sanford): Lake Monroe should remain good for bluegill anglers in 2007, particularly if water levels do not drop too low. Biologists observed good numbers of shellcracker and bluegill during recent samples. Additionally, anglers working bulrush patches during high water periods typically have done very well. Try the bulrush areas, particularly on the lake's east end and west end, and then work the lily pads.

LAKE KISSIMMEE (east of the City of Lake Wales): This 35,000-acre lake, in the heart of Osceola County, remains one of the best bluegill and shellcracker fisheries in the state. The 24 miles of improved shoreline, plus its enhanced open areas, give boaters and waders a super shot at spectacular catches. Anglers often anchor in open water or on grassy edges of the islands and shorelines and use weighted crickets to lure bluegill off their beds. Open areas off the boat trail also produce good numbers of fish. Historically, bream fishing is best June through August.

WEST LAKE TOHOPEKALIGA (LAKE TOHO; south of the City of Kissimmee): Aside from being one of the best bass fisheries in the country, Lake Toho near Kissimmee also supports one of the best bluegill/redear fisheries in the state. Almost 80 percent of the shoreline was scraped and enhanced following the extreme drawdown and muck removal project in 2004. These enhanced areas have provided miles of freshly vegetated littoral areas, and have exposed shell beds that provide excellent spawning habitat for panfish. Surveys indicate an abundance of large, adult bluegill (up to 10 inches) use FWC fish attractors year-round. Local fishing hot spots include grass-line or open-water areas at Brown's Point, the mouth of Goblit's Cove and South Steer Beach. Lake Toho's bluegill and shellcracker can be taken on a variety of baits including earthworms, crickets, beetle spins, minnows and dough balls.

LAKE PANASOFFKEE (west of Leesburg): This lake is back on the list after better-than-expected fishing seasons recently. Now in the process of undergoing one of the nation's most expansive lake renovation projects, shallow Lake Panasoffkee in Sumter County has long been famous for its shellcracker and bluegill production. Shellcracker are particularly cooperative during spring full-moon periods at Shell Point, Grassy Point and Tracy's Point. Also, try the shell beds at the mouth of the Outlet River and in the middle of the lake offshore of the Outlet. Sunfish may concentrate along the southeast shore that has been dredged, exposing shell beds. If water levels remain favorably high, check out Little Jones Creek for some outstanding warmouth action.

LAKE TALQUIN (west of Tallahassee): Anglers in the Tallahassee area are advised to break out their fly rods, limber bream poles or light spinning tackle, because shellcrackers began bedding by early May and bluegill weren't far behind. Both species will continue biting well throughout the summer months. Local biologists recommend working the upper end of the reservoir and in the back of various creeks in depths ranging from 3 to 7 feet.

TENOROC (northeast of Lakeland): Fishing for panfish on this 7,300-acre fish management area near Lakeland can be a rewarding experience. With lakes ranging in size from 7 to 227 acres, anglers will have plenty of areas to dunk a bobber with worms or crickets or cast their favorite spinner lure or jig. Fishing in submerged vegetation or tree tops should produce plenty of bites, especially around full moons during the summer. Bluegill also bite well in these lakes during September through November. Try Lost Lake West, Legs Lake, Lake C, Lake 3, Lake 2, Fish Hook Lake, Horseshoe Lake or Shop Pit for some of the best action. Call the Tenoroc office for more information or to make reservations, because these lakes are only open to fishing four days a week.

LAKE HARRIS CHAIN (between Leesburg and Mt Dora): If you're in the Leesburg area and have a hankering to tussle with some heavier-than-usual bluegill and shellcracker, both Big and Little Lake Harris will be to your liking. Some of the better locales include the grassy areas in 4 to 6 feet of water near Astatula and the Howey Bridge spanning Little Lake Harris, plus the lily pads and spatterdock patches near the Ninth Street Canal out from Leesburg. Bluegill also will be found in shallow waters tight to sawgrass shorelines. Just downstream from Lake Harris, Lake Eustis has some of the best quality sunfish populations sampled by FWC in the Harris Chain of Lakes. Try the new gravel fish attractors along the Eustis Lake Walk and the pier outside of the canal to the Eustis boat ramp. Also, fish the shell beds near the sailboat marina and along the east shore. The lily pads in Dead River also are very popular with panfish anglers. Lake Griffin has produced some outstanding shellcracker fishing in the past two years. Anglers can find these feisty fish in the mouth of Haines Creek, Yale Canal and along the wooded banks of the northern end near Pine Island. Recent surveys indicate an abundant population of shellcracker in Lake Beauclair. Live worms and grass shrimp are the best baits throughout the chain.

LAKE MARIAN (southeast Osceola County, east of Lake Kissimmee): Although this 5,740-acre "sleeper" lake in southern Osceola County, east of Lake Kissimmee, doesn't receive much notoriety, it's still one of the best panfishing localities. Shellcracker fishing is in full swing by late March or April and bluegill spawning activity isn't far behind. Panfishing success nearly

always peaks around the full and new moon periods and may continue throughout the summer. The usual baits - worms, crickets and grass shrimp are popular, while tossing tiny spinnerbaits on ultra light tackle can also be extremely productive.

LAKE ISTOKPOGA (near Sebring): Located a few miles southeast of Sebring, this large, relatively shallow lake is outstanding for bluegill. Panfish anglers can concentrate their efforts from April through June around the inshore and offshore cattail and bulrush areas. In other months, likely spots for bluegill and shellcracker include Big Island, Grassy Island, Bumble Bee Island, around various sandy bars and along the edges of eelgrass. Anglers prefer crickets for bluegill and live worms for shellcracker. Fly fishing anglers can experience great action with small popping bugs.

CHOCTAWATCHEE RIVER (northwest of Panama City): For river and stream lovers in Florida's Panhandle, this river is ideal, particularly for shellcracker aficionados. Shellcracker usually bed in quieter waters during April and remain active through the early-fall months. If boating around in smaller creeks off the main channel and sloughs during the late spring and summer months, also be sure to try for some redbreast sunfish, stumpknocker and warmouth. Worms, crickets and grass shrimp are favorite baits.

SUWANNEE RIVER (flows south from north central Florida): Although bluegill and shellcracker can be caught readily in the Suwannee, this river is second to none for quality-sized spotted sunfish and redbreast sunfish. These scrappy fish provide good action in the middle river section and even better fishing in the lower portions. Try near tree banks on deep shores, the mouths of creeks and along water lilies. Use crickets, mealworms, beetle spins or flyfishing tackle with small popping bugs. Catalpa worms are a big favorite if they are available.

MOSAIC FISH MANAGEMENT AREA (southwest of Bartow): This 1,000-acre cooperative fish management area near Ft. Meade in Southern Polk County can have some excellent panfish opportunities during the summer. The dozen lakes on the area range in size from 10 to 200 acres and many have shorelines with an abundant supply of woody brush, tree tops and vegetation that are perfect for placing a well-hooked worm or cricket under a float. Casting a small spinner or jig into the deeper areas also can produce fish at times. Try Pine Lakes East, SP11 and SP12 North and SP12 South lakes for some of the better action. The area is only open to fishing four days a week, and it's first-come, first-served but don't worry, you'll always have a spot somewhere. Please call for more information.

LAKES ORANGE and LOCHLOOSA (near Gainesville): With the help of habitat enhancement efforts, and a lot of help from Mother Nature, the shoreline habitat is thriving in Orange Lake and Lake Lochloosa. As a result, bream populations rebounded to high numbers, and anglers are once again adding these lakes to their favorite hot-spots. From March to October, bream anglers should concentrate in the grasses and pads around the Lochloosa shoreline for bluegill, redear sunfish and warmouth. The area around Burnt Island and the west shoreline should be particularly productive. On Orange Lake, submersed vegetation has increased dramatically in the lake, especially in the west arm and south portions of the lake. The result has been regular catches of bluegill, redear sunfish and chunky warmouth. In August of 2006, one angler hauled in hefty bluegill just shy of 12 inches and weighing 2 pounds. Most anglers use

crickets and minnows as bait. If water levels can hang on to allow access to the lake, the forecast for bream fishing in 2007 will be excellent.

NOTE: Many of Florida's best bream fishing spots produce consistently year after year. Notably missing for 2007, however, is 450,000-acre Lake Okeechobee. Revered by anglers nationwide, the "Big O" currently is imperiled by environmental consequences following record setting Hurricane seasons in 2004 and 2005 when devastating storm winds repeatedly wreaked havoc on Okeechobee's aquatic plant communities. FWC biologists continue to assist the South Florida Water Management District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Florida Department of Environmental Protection and others in restoring the lake and its fishery to its glory days. Contact local marinas and tackle stores for current conditions.

For more information about these lakes, contact the following FWC biologists:

Lake Monroe - Jay Holder (386) 985-7827

Lake Kissimmee, Lake Marian and West Lake Toho - Kevin McDaniel (407) 846-5300

Lake Panasoffkee - Sam McKinney (352) 732-1225

Lake Talquin - Rich Cailteux (850) 627-9674

Tenoroc - Danon Moxley (863) 499-2421

Harris Chain - John Benton (352) 742-6438

Lake Istokpoga - Steve Gornak (863) 462-5190

Choctawhatchee River - Fred Cross (850) 819-3456

Suwannee River - Jerry Krummrich (386) 758-0525

Mosaic Fish Management Area - Eric Johnson (863)-499-2421

Lakes Orange and Lochloosa – Eric Nagid (352) 392-9617 ext. 240

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