

Florida Fish Busters

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## Florida's top bream spots makes for some lively fishing

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(special thanks to Steve Crawford and John Cimbaro, FWC)

Most anglers start fishing in fresh water, often from a bank or pier, and their first catch is usually a bream. The image of a boy and his dog, with a cane pole and a can of worms, brings to life a symbol of the American tradition of fishing and stresses the ideal of youth connecting with nature



*Fishin' with Papa—another first fish. Photo by: Joe Benedict, FWC*

and learning independence. Just think - it all began with that first bream.

Florida's 7,700 named lakes and ponds and 10,500 miles of streams and rivers, brim with bream. "Bream" is a local term used throughout the Southeast and includes various deep-bodied panfish from the sunfish family.



*Fishing is about as American a tradition as apple pie. Photo by: Bob Wattendorf, FWC*

The most common are bluegill, redear sunfish (shellcracker), redbreast sunfish, spotted sunfish (stumpknocker) and warmouth. Although black bass are in the sunfish family, they are not considered to be

bream. Almost any water body in the Sunshine State, regardless of size or locale, contains hungry bream.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) anticipates that good year classes of sunfish produced in 2004 and 2005 will maintain the fisheries in 2008 in southern and central peninsular Florida. In Central Florida, shellcracker often spawn during the third week of March or first week of April. They begin to concentrate in the Panhandle in mid- to late-May. Bluegill will spawn about a month after shellcracker in each region. Shellcracker will bed well into August, while bluegill will periodically spawn throughout the summer and, even as late as November, in South Florida. Water depths for bedding bream range from 3 to 10 feet.

Bluegills are easily the most popular “bream” in Florida because of their abundance and availability, although the equally tasty and somewhat larger shellcracker appeal to many anglers. 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 beetle spins. Fly rod buffs particularly enjoy this little scrapper because of its eagerness to clobber both popping bugs and sinking flies.

Ounce-for-ounce, the abundant bluegill is a strong battler when not overtackled. Those caught will range from an average of 6-8 ounces to an occasional 1-pounder. Florida's record bluegill scaled 2.95 pounds.

“Shellcracker” is the locally popular name for the redear sunfish, the Sunshine State's largest “bream,” which is easily identified by the red margin at the edge of

its gill flap. The average size for redear sunfish is about 10-12 ounces, but 1-pound fish are frequently caught on spawning beds. Florida's record is 4.86 pounds, Favored live baits include snails, mussels, earthworms, crickets and grass shrimp. Redear are seldom caught on artificial lures, but fly-rodders can occasionally connect with this hard fighter by casting popping bugs with a small sinking fly tied to an 18-inch light monofilament dropper. Shellcracker usually hang around areas with hard, sandy bottoms or shell beds, but may also be targeted near grass patches, pads, reeds, snags and stick-ups.

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 eel grass. Earthworms are the best live bait for this trio, but small spinners and popping bugs also work well.



*We start 'em young in the south—Ty's first fish at 27 months. Photo by: Alan Collins.*

Enough already? Want specifics?

OK. Based on fishery surveys and local expertise, here are predictions from FWC biologists on which spots deserve to be among our Top Panfish locales (in no particular order) for 2008:

- Lake Monroe, near Sanford, should remain good for bluegill anglers in 2008, 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 have typically done very well. Try the bulrush areas, particularly on the lake's east end and west end, or try working the lily pads.
- Lake Kissimmee, east of Lake Wales, is a 35,000-acre lake, located in the heart of Osceola County. It 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, south of Kissimmee, is most often called Lake Toho. 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. FWC scraped almost 80 percent of the shoreline to enhance fisheries habitat following an extreme drawdown as part of the 2004 restoration. Scraped areas provide healthily vegetated littoral areas and exposed shell beds that provide excellent spawning habitat for panfish. Adult bluegill - up to 10 inches - inhabit FWC fish attractors year-round. Local fishing hot spots include grassline or open-water areas at Brown's Point, the mouth of Goblet's Cove and South Steer Beach.

- Lake Panasoffkee, west of Leesburg, is back on the list after better-than-expected fishing recently. Now in the final stages of undergoing one of the nation's most extensive 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 return to favorable levels again, check out Little Jones Creek for some outstanding warmouth action.
- Lake Talquin, west of Tallahassee, provides some great opportunities for bream fishing. Anglers in the Tallahassee area are advised to break out their fly rods, limber bream poles or light spinning tackle this spring, because shellcrackers should be bedding by early May, and

bluegill won't be far behind. What's more, both species should 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, makes fishing for panfish on the 7,300-acre fish management area a rewarding experience. With lakes ranging from 7 to 227 acres, anglers have plenty of areas to dunk a bobber with worms or crickets or cast their favorite spinner. Fishing in submerged vegetation or tree tops should produce plenty of bites, especially around full moons during the summer. Bluegill continue to bite well through November. Try Legs Lake, Lake B, Lake 4 or Fish Hook Lake 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.
- Go to the Lake Harris Chain 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 give you satisfaction. Some of the better locales include grassy areas in 4 to 6 feet of water near Astatula and the Howey Bridge spanning Little Lake Harris, plus lily pads and spatterdock patches near the 9th Street Canal out from Leesburg. 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 are also 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.

- Lake Marian is located in southeast Osceola County, east of Lake Kissimmee. Although this 5,740-acre "sleeper" lake doesn't receive much recognition, 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.
- Lake Istokpoga, located a few miles southeast of Sebring, is a large, relatively shallow lake outstanding for its bluegill. Panfish anglers concentrate their efforts from April through June around cattail and bulrush. In other months, likely spots for bluegill and shellcracker include Big Island, Grassy Island, Bumble Bee Island, around various sand bars and near eelgrass.
- The Choctawatchee River, northwest of Panama City, provides a great experience for river and stream lovers. Located in Florida's Panhandle,

this river is ideal, particularly for shellcracker aficionados. Shellcracker usually bed in quieter waters during April and remain active through early fall. If boating around in smaller creeks off the main channel and sloughs during late spring and summer, be sure to also try for some redbreast sunfish, stumpknocker (spotted sunfish) and warmouth.

- The Suwannee River flows south from North Central Florida to the Gulf of Mexico. Although bluegill and shellcracker can be readily caught in the Suwannee, this river is second to none for quality-sized spotted sunfish (stumpknocker) 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.
- The Mosaic Fish Management Area, southwest of Bartow, a 1,000-acre fish management area in Southern Polk County, provides excellent panfish opportunities during summer. The dozen lakes range 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 can also produce fish at times. Try Pine Lakes East, LP2 West, SP11, 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-serve, but don't worry, you'll always have a spot somewhere. Please call 863-499-2421, ext. 104 for more information.

- Lakes Orange and Lochloosa, near Gainesville, need to be considered this year. As a result of the 2004 floods, with the help of FWC habitat enhancement efforts, the shoreline habitat is thriving in Orange Lake and Lake Lochloosa. As a result, bream populations rebounded to high densities, and anglers are again adding these lakes to their favorite hot-spots. From March to October, bream anglers should concentrate in 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, substantial submersed vegetation has covered 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. If water levels remain high enough to allow access, the forecast for bream fishing in 2008 will be excellent.

NOTE: Many of Florida's best bream fishing spots produce consistently year after year. Notably missing for 2008, however, is 450,000-acre Lake Okeechobee. Revered by anglers nationwide, the "Big O" is currently 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. In contrast, drought will likely limit access until summer 2008. 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.

Additional information can be found at [MyFWC.com/Fishing/Forecasts](http://MyFWC.com/Fishing/Forecasts), including details about access to these top bream sites and quarterly updates.

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