

Florida Fish Busters' Bulletin
August 2009

Freshwater Fishes, Turtles, Frogs, Crayfish and Molluscs—expand your horizons

Bob Wattendorf

Florida requires anyone between the ages of 16 and 65 to purchase a recreational freshwater fishing license (unless you are legally exempt) to take or even attempt to take freshwater fish. There are other animals you can take from fresh water recreationally without a license for consumption or to use as bait, provided you know and follow the rules. They provide another way to appreciate the great outdoors and delve deeper into nature.

Freshwater fish is defined as any cold-blooded animal that lives most of its life in fresh water and typically has scales, gills and paired fins. In Florida's fresh waters, there are 20 species or hybrid fishes designated as game fish that have bag and size limits, and many other species of nongame fish, such as catfish and pickerel, that don't typically have bag or size limits. Obtaining a recreational freshwater fishing license is easy – just call 888-FISH FLORIDA, or visit MyFWC.com/License – and is a great value. An average angler fishes 17 times a year and spends about four hours per trip on the water, so that works out to a cost of a quarter per hour for healthy outdoor recreation—and perhaps a free meal.

But what about taking turtles, frogs, crustaceans, such as crayfish and grass shrimp, or mollusks, such as mussels and clams? To take these species

recreationally or for personal use, you do not need a fishing license. However, it is very important to understand that specific regulations apply, most of which focus on protecting imperiled species. A sale license, such as a commercial fishing license or Class III exhibition and sale license, is required to sell these species.

Freshwater turtles are shelled reptiles that lay eggs on land but primarily live and feed in fresh waters. Recent reports of large harvests of several species because of demand in Asian and other foreign markets caused the Florida



Softshell and other wild freshwater turtles may no longer be taken or sold commercially and are limited to one per person per day for personal use.

Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) to step in and prohibit all commercial take or sale of wild native freshwater turtles, of which there are 18 species in Florida. It is anticipated that aquaculture facilities will provide an alternative source for these animals without endangering natural public resources. Harvest of alligator snapping turtles and regular snapping turtles, Barbour's and Escambia map turtles, and cooters is prohibited. Other freshwater turtles (chiefly softshell turtles) are restricted to one per person per day for personal use. They are typically caught by hand, dip net, minnow seine or baited hook and used for human consumption. These flattened

looking turtles with leathery shells can inflict a painful bite and have sharp claws, so be careful if you choose to harvest one.

Red-eared sliders are a common nonnative freshwater turtle in Florida's waters, but they are a conditional species, meaning they may not be caught and kept as pets. While red-eared sliders can be taken and used for human consumption, once removed they cannot be released back into Florida's waters. Sale of nonnative turtles (such as painted turtles) not listed as conditional species requires a Class III exhibition and sale license; however, sale of red-eared sliders requires an additional permit and is only allowed to permitted recipients within the state or to out of state recipients.



Collecting frogs at night with a light is another fascinating way to experience nature. Photo courtesy of MDC.Mo.Gov

Among the most common frogs taken for consumption are pig frogs and bull frogs. There are no seasons, bag or size limits. Most are taken using gigs at night (some specific areas prohibit this, so check the local regulations). Sale of frogs or frog legs requires a commercial fishing license.

Mollusks include mussels and clams that are also known as bivalves because of the two hard shells that are joined together with a hinge. These animals are filter feeders and generally sedentary--living on or in the sand at

the bottom of rivers and lakes. Certain species of freshwater mussels may be collected for personal use. However, seven Florida mussel species that occur from the Suwannee River system north and west throughout the Panhandle are federally protected. Possessing or disturbing these protected species can result in substantial penalties, so be sure to do your research first. The daily bag limit for unprotected mussels, such as Florida spiney spike and paper pondshell, is 10 per person (or 20 half shells), and they can only be taken by hand-picking. Freshwater mussels may not be sold. Species of freshwater mussels from families other than Unionidae or Margaritferidae, such as the Asian clam, have no daily bag or possession limits and are often taken for bait. The tough body is removed from the shell and placed on a bait-holder style hook.



*People aren't the only ones that find crayfish fascinating.
Photo by Mike Spelman, FWC.*

crayfish in Florida and many are imperiled and may not be taken. However there are no seasons, gear, bag or size limits on the more abundant “crawdads.” These critters look like little lobsters and are sometimes taken with small traps or dipnets either for use as bait, or to be boiled or steamed

Crustaceans are arthropods, with exoskeletons rather than a spine and segmented bodies. In the aquatic environment, they include crayfish and shrimp. There are more than 50 species of freshwater

and used in various meals —especially Cajun style stews or Creole recipes. Red swamp and white river crayfish are the most common species used for these purposes and are found in ditches and vegetated areas with clear water and often around algae covered rocks. Traps are baited with abundant amounts of fresh or frozen fish parts, but the bait can't be spoiled. Leaving the trap overnight is normally important but remember to tag it with your name and address and be sure it is placed legally and safely. Red swamp and white river crayfish are listed as conditional species, so while they may be personally used for human consumption, they may not be kept alive or sold without special permits.

Getting outdoors and learning about nature is a great way to have fun, get exercise and get away from the stress of everyday life. Learning more about other aquatic species and ways to take them either for your own dinner or as baits for your next fishing trip can add to your enjoyment. To learn more and to check local rules visit MyFWC.com.

Instant licenses are available at MyFWC.com/License or by calling 888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356).

*Report violators by calling *FWC or #FWC on your cell phone, or 888-404-3922. Visit*

<http://www.myfwc.com/Fishing/> for more Fish Busters' columns.