

FLAT-OUT FUN!

Challenging the odd but tasty flounder

BY JOHN N. FELSHER

High tides flooded the marshes, but began falling, causing water to pour from the small ditch draining a shallow slough.

“Toss the plastic shrimp upstream as far as possible,” the experienced angler advised. “We’re using very light weights. Just let the bait bounce along with the tide. Only lift the rod as needed to keep the bait off the bottom and moving.”

The young angler did as instructed, making a great cast near where the small stream made a sharp turn. The bait flowed downstream naturally as if a shrimp washed out by the tide.

“It stopped, Grandpa!” the youth proclaimed. “I think I felt a little tug and then nothing. Now, it just feels like it’s caught on something.”

“Set the hook!”

The youngster yanked back, bowing the rod. Soon, a large, flat splotchy-brown fish appeared on the surface.

Few Alabama anglers intentionally fish for flounder. Most people probably catch them by accident while fishing for redfish or speckled trout, but these oddly shaped fish can add a welcome and delicious bonus to any catch.

“Flounder can be found in most coastal areas, but have a strong preference for muddier bottoms,” explained Dr. Bob Shipp, (bobshipp.com) a marine biologist from Mobile and author of Dr. Bob Shipp’s Guide to Fishes of the Gulf of Mexico. “They abound around channels, bay mouths and adjacent substrate. They may spread out through all reaches of an estuary. They are known to venture well upstream in rivers that empty into bays and sounds.”

Twice each year flounder migrate in and out of the Gulf of Mexico. In the fall, most flounder leave the estuaries for deeper water, although some remain inshore all year long. After spending the winter offshore, flatfish return to Mobile Bay and oth-



Elizabeth Eustis shows off a flounder she caught.



Another flounder comes to the boat after hitting a soft plastic jig. Flounder hit a variety of artificial and natural baits.

can also use live finger mullets. I rig mine through the lips on a Carolina rig. I use a small kahle hook and put a barrel sinker about 18 inches above the bait. I tie on a black swivel to keep the sinker from sliding down too far.”

For fishing shallow shorelines, a popping cork rig tipped with a live or fresh shrimp or live minnow also makes an excellent presentation and search bait. Rig the depth so that the bait suspends just above the bottom. Toss it upstream to let the wind or tide carry it along a grassy shoreline or around a point.

Although flounder generally prefer live bait, they do hit artificials. Anything that might tempt a speck or redfish could catch a flounder. Some hot baits include swimbaits, spinners, spoons, small crankbaits and flies.

Whether purposely fishing for them or catching some by accident, a mess of flounder can make any day memorable, but the best comes later. Slice a flounder down the back to butterfly two slabs of meat off the spine and fill that space with crabmeat. Then, bake or broil it for a real table treat.

er estuaries. By March, start look for them around sandy islands, grassy shorelines and stream mouths.

“Look for flounder at the mouths of rivers, like the Dog River and the Fowl River,” advised Mike Thompson, a Mobile fisherman. “Flounder normally run two to four pounds, but every now and then, someone catches a bigger one.”

Flounder typically face into the tide and bury themselves in the mud to ambush anything passing over them. When they spot something tempting, they explode from the muck to gulp it. They eat shrimp, minnows, small mullets, pogies and other morsels, sometimes in water only inches deep.

“A flounder rests its fat torso on the bottom, watching the water

column above, but it is a voracious predator,” Shipp commented. “It combines a lightning-like quickness with powerful, razor-sharp teeth to rapidly dispatch its prey. Flounder strike fast, but have no staying power.”

Most anglers tempt flounder with natural baits, such as live shrimp or baitfish. A live minnow or a fresh shrimp hooked on a jighead and dragged along the bottom can entice hungry flatties.

“A minnow is one of the best baits to use for flounder,” Thompson recommended. “If I wanted to catch a really big flounder, I’d use a live five- to six-inch croaker for bait. People can catch more flounder on three-inch croakers, but for those big doormats, use a big bait. People

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