

# PINT-SIZED PERFECTION

BY PETER MILLER

A hidden gem lies beneath the emerald waters all along the coast of Florida. Snapper come in a variety of shapes and sizes, but none are more universal, or as widespread as the grey snapper, a.k.a. mangrove snapper. Grey snapper inhabit almost every inch of salt water in the state and anglers can find them anywhere from the most remote backcountry bays to the deepest reaches offshore. Shore-bound and boating anglers can take advantage of one of the most willing and readily available fish in the state of Florida.

The methods for catching mangrove snapper depend heavily on the depth of water in which they're targeted. Shore bound or pier anglers, or even those fishing from private docks can catch mangrove snapper year round on a variety of live, cut or frozen bait—even artificial lures. Offshore, mangrove snapper are located on the tiniest of patch reefs to the largest artificial reefs. Suffice it to say, mangrove snapper are all about structure. With their widespread distribution, it's easy to think snapper are not much of a challenge. But these crafty fish are blessed with arguably the best eyesight in the piscatorial world. Monster "mangs" are often considered absolute trophies by anglers due to their wariness and reluctance to be fooled.



But the best way to fool a snapper—to get past his ocular defense—is through his nose.

The one enduring trick anglers use to consistently catch snapper is the use of chum. Use frozen block chum and even cut frozen shrimp to make mangrove snapper drop their guard. Charter boat captains throughout the Keys rely heavily on homemade concoctions whose recipes are as closely guarded as those of a five-star chef's most beloved dishes.

Snapper tackle is usually medium to medium-heavy spinning or baitcasting rods, spooled with 15- to 30-pound braided line. It may seem like overkill, but truly large mangrove snapper are incredible fighters and will charge to the nearest line-cutting structure as soon as they feel the sting of the hook. Terminal tackle should be of heavy-gauge wire hooks, but in very small sizes that can be hidden in the bait. Fluorocarbon leaders need to be dangerously light to accomplish the trick of hoodwinking this rewarding catch.

Fool snapper also by using small bucktail jigs sweetened with a piece of shrimp or even brightly colored jigging spoons popped along the bottom near structure. One proven method of targeting trophy-sized snapper is under the light of the moon, as they will tend to spawn throughout the state in spring and summer.

The tasty mangrove snapper is a welcome addition to any dinner plate. Serve it alone broiled or sautéed in a shallow pan, or for the more adventurous cook, in a snapper cake. Simply blend cooked snapper with egg, panko bread crumbs and your favorite spices, mold into patties and sauté until crispy. Snapper cakes are the perfect platform for a delicious homemade sauce of equal parts Dijon mustard and sour cream. A dousing of fresh flat leaf parsley—also known as Italian parsley—is the perfect garnish.

Over the years, mangrove snapper numbers have remained fantastic throughout Florida, making them the perfect mascot for the saying: "Big things come in small packages." 



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