



Peter with his 7-year-old daughter Emily Miller and her nice beach snook. She caught it sight casting live pilchards.

SNOOK ON THE BEACH

By Peter Miller

Of all the ways to catch snook in the state of Florida, fishing from the beach has always been one of my favorites. As summer ends and early fall begins, snook head to the outside beaches and passes in preparation for their yearly spawn. Anglers in boats or afoot and of all skill levels can take advantage of beach snook by following a few basic rules.

First and foremost, since the future of snook relies on the survival of large breeding females, take extreme, extra care when handling and releasing these fish.

When snook patrol beaches in hope of procreating, the water never seems to be shallow enough. One of my all-time fa-

vorite beach snooking hotspots has been the beaches of Sanibel Island on Florida's Gulf coast. Here, snook of all sizes can be seen cruising right at the surf's edge mere inches from dry sand. While they may appear easy targets, these snook can be among the most difficult to catch. Locating the best beaches for snook begins with a good understanding of a particular beach's topography.

Tides tend to be more of a factor in catching beach snook than time of day. However, the magic of sunrise always offers a less crowded option. Most coastal geography, especially on the Gulf coast, presents a deeper trough close to the beach in addition to a shallower sandbar farther out. Like a giant speed bump,

the outer bars provide the best action at lower tide stages. My personal preference for beach snooking is the last few hours of the incoming tide. Marry this with the low light of sunrise and you have a recipe for success.

Anglers should look for subtle geographical cues to point them in the right direction. Downed trees, pilings and breakwaters offer structure that cause the snook to congregate. You'd be amazed at how small a single piece of structure – a stick next to a depression – can attract so many snook. Areas where the beach turns in or out, or where the sand gets a little darker may also give clues to possible snook hangouts.

Tackle for beach snooking need not be super heavy. There is usually a lot less structure for savvy snook to break off your line. Casting distance becomes more important than power. Medium-light to medium 7-foot or 7-foot, 6-inch spinning rods, and 3,000- or 4,000-sized reels spooled with 10- to 15-pound braid

with a leader of fluorocarbon in the 10- to 30-pound range, is usually ideal. Depending on water clarity, I often lengthen my leaders by as much as 6 feet to avoid spooking line-shy snook. When using lighter fluorocarbon leaders, it is important to constantly check near your bait or lure for fraying, which results from the snook's 80-grit sandpaper mouth.

Many anglers choose to fish with artificials including small jigs, shallow diving lipped plugs, or small baitfish. Quick, erratic retrieves will get the most strikes. It's important not to give the snook much chance to identify your offering as fake. Natural baitfish colors and solid white are my go-to choices when it comes to colors for artificials.

Live bait anglers will certainly out fish all others. On the beaches of Sanibel, the pilchard is king. These baits can usually be cast-netted along the same stretches of beach that the snook inhabit. During hot summer months, pilchards may be on the small size, so a 1/4-inch or even a 3/16-inch mesh cast net is advisable. Nothing will bring a morning of snook fishing to a screeching halt like having to remove hundreds of gilled baitfish from a cast net. Small circle hooks to match the size of the bait in 1/0 or 2/0 are preferred and a very small split shot 2 feet above the hook may aid in casting distance.

For fly anglers, stalking the beaches of Sanibel sight casting to cruising snook has become almost cultish. Beach snook respond very well to delicately presented small baitfish imitating flies in sizes 2 to 6. You can certainly notice the more experienced fly anglers as they stalk the beach 20 feet from the water's edge with their eyes focused parallel to the beach looking for pods of cruising snook.

A perfect beach fly fishing set-up consists of a 7- to 9-weight, 9-foot rod with a quick-loading, short-tapered fly line and long (up to 12 feet) fluorocarbon leaders.

Regardless of your method, summer beach snooking can be rewarding, but there are many other species that may crash the party. They include bruiser-sized jacks, ladyfish and speckled sea trout. So find yourself a beach, start your stalk and put some snook on your line! **G**

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