



SAIL ON!

BY PETER MILLER

There is no more recognizable or universal billfish in the State of Florida than the sailfish. Found in both the Atlantic and the Gulf, sailfish have been tempting Florida anglers since the days of Ernest Hemingway. Sailfish are often thought of as a big-boat, big-money fish, but for South Florida anglers, sailfish can be only a short ride from many inlets. Sailfish are a vital sport-fishing resource to South Florida's economy, due to the many tournaments and visiting anglers who come to pursue this regal battler.

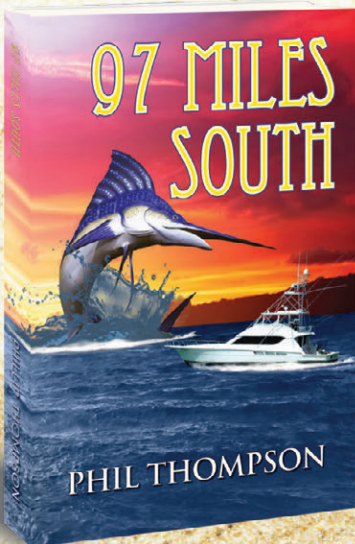
Sailfish begin their migration through Florida as the waters cool in winter. Following massive schools of baitfish, sailfish will migrate along the edges of the Gulf Stream. In South Florida, the Gulf Stream can at times be very close to shore making sailfish accessible to trailer boaters and smaller boats not normally thought of as billfish boats. The world-renowned sailfish alley, which traverses from Miami to Palm Beach, is known for record-setting sailfish catch-

es. My team and I caught and released 36 sailfish in a single day during a billfish tournament in Palm Beach, Florida. Needless to say, the billfish population has increased dramatically, due to catch and release.

Trailer boaters without fancy rigging can get in on the sailfish action by slow trolling live baits near bait schools and surface feeding activity. Tournament sailfish anglers employ highly specialized tackle and gear for these scrappy billfish. Top captains will employ kites as well as downriggers to present more baits to migrating sailfish. The one negative caveat to sailfishing is the best fishing usually occurs in the worst weather. While stellar catches are reported on slick, calm days, generally speaking, a north wind pushing against a north-bound current are the best conditions. This is where you will find the sailfish tailing/surfing down the face of the waves. This allows for sight fishing, which is one of the most exciting ways to target sailfish.

Live bait definitely will result in the most hookups when targeting sailfish. If I had to rank the top three sailfish live baits, they would be: 1) Spanish sardines, 2) goggle eyes, 3) large threadfin or pilchards. Spanish sardines are the most sought-after bait for sails and can be the most difficult to obtain. Anglers usually catch goggle eyes after the sun sets using gold-hook Sabiki rigs. The easiest baitfish to catch, by far, is the threadfin or pilchard. These baits can be cast netted close to shore and can actually be used as live chum on the sailfish grounds.

Rigging up for sailfish starts with a 7' to 7'5" spinning or conventional rod. Light leaders down to 40-pound fluorocarbon, terminating with a 6/0 or 7/0 circle hook will be found on the most experienced sailfish angler's boats. Expect to catch most sailfish in the 30- to 40-pound range, but each year anglers also catch the occasional sailfish exceeding 80 pounds. **G**



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