

# THE MULLET MARATHON

by Peter Miller

As our balmy South Florida days become shorter, the cooling northeast winds bring a welcomed visitor to our surf and shoreline: mullet. Fall signals the annual "mullet run," a time of year that provides a wealth of opportunity for both predatory fish and anglers alike. Various species capitalize on the massive schools of bait traveling down the coast. To understand why mullet make their long migration southwards, let's take a look at the species.

We have a few different types of mullet in Florida. The most common include the white or silver mullet, the black or striped mullet, and the fantail mullet. Finger mullet refers to the juvenile mullet of any species that we frequently see schooling along our beaches. The "mullet run" refers to the mullet's annual migration from northern tributaries and estuaries, to southern feeding areas and then to offshore breeding grounds.

Mullet feed primarily on zooplankton and plant matter, including algae and aquatic weeds. Instinctively, mullet follow the same migration patterns, year after year. As the plant life dies with the cooling temperatures, and at the first sign of northeast winds, the mullet schools race south like snowbirds, seeking warmer waters and aquatic vegetation. As they reach their southernmost destination, the mature mullet head offshore to breed. The gulfstream then carries the eggs north, and the cycle begins all over again.

The mullet's migration from northern tributaries and estuaries is not an easy task. Predators can often be seen ferociously crashing mullet schools in the surf and offshore. Sharks, snook, tarpon, cobia, king mackerel, jack crevalle, redfish, bluefish, and barracuda all take advantage of this newfound abundance.

Finding the mullet schools should not be a difficult process. Of course, it helps to have a pair of polarized glasses, but oftentimes the schools are highly visible because they look like dark clouds moving through the surf. In the thickest of the mullet run, you can seemingly walk across the water on top of acres of fish that are slapping along the surface.

For anglers, the most productive scenario is the feeding frenzy. In this case, diving birds and feeding predators harass the mullet schools. Mullet can be seen jumping along the surface, frantically trying to escape the blitz. In the fall, this is a common sight along our South Florida beaches. Easterly winds present the best conditions, as the breeze drives bait closer to shore, providing a perfect opportunity for fishermen to take advantage.

When it comes to fishing the mullet run, obviously a live mullet will be the most effective. Throwing a cast net, whether from the surf, or by boat, is the tactic of choice for harvesting bait. Find a net you feel most comfortable with and make sure it is fast sinking, as mullet can be frustratingly elusive.

When cast-netting giant mullet schools, the key is to not overdo it. Overcrowding your bait-well will only result in beat up, ineffective live-baits. As a general rule of thumb you should keep 1 mullet per gallon of water. That means if your bait-well holds 50 gallons, 50 mullet should be your maximum occupancy. This is to keep your bait's stress levels down. A telltale sign of an over-



Striped Mullet



Fantail Mullet



White Mullet





crowded well is bait with busted, red noses and chafed tails. There isn't a need to load-up on live mullet because this time of year they're easy to find.

It's not only inshore species that will strike a live mullet. Offshore, marlin, sailfish, and other pelagics will also readily inhale this offering. A bite on a lively mullet is an exciting and spectacular sight! Whereas other baitfish will try and dive down, mullet can be seen leaping from the water or cutting high speed V-shapes on the surface as they're being chased. Whether slow trolled or fished from a kite, a hit on a live mullet usually provides an epic visual!

There are a few different ways to fish with mullet. As for leader material, 60-pound fluorocarbon works perfectly for when the bite is fast and furious. If game fish are leader shy, move down to 30-pound fluorocarbon in order to entice a strike. You'll want to match your hook size to the size of the bait. For slow trolling, place your hook through the inside roof of the mouth and then out the nostril, so that the mullet swims properly. Another method is to hook your mullet underneath the chin, just behind the gills; this will ensure your mullet will dive down into the feeding zone. A hook positioned adja-

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cent to the mullet's anal fin, allows for the furthest cast. This will also cause the mullet to swim downward toward hungry sport fish.

Circle hooks are perfect for live mullet use, but remember: less is more. When you feel a strike, keep your line taught. Your rod will load up, then quickly, but steadily, crank the slack out of your line. Have faith that your hook will find its place, and then it's game on!

If you're not handy with a cast net for live bait, there is an array of topwater plugs, soft plastic jerk baits and swim baits that imitate struggling mullet. The goal is to match the size of the mullet in your area. A lure worked on the outside of a school will mimic a straggler or injured fish and this is a surefire bet for an opportunistic game fish.

Fresh, dead mullet can be used with great success. Trolling a rigged mullet will trigger a strike from a variety of species including, but not limited to, marlin, sailfish, and dolphin. Dead mullet are also effective baits for an assortment of bottom fish including snapper and grouper. Lastly, chunked mullet will attract even the most wary prey.

To keep your dead bait in perfect condition and your catch fresh, there is no better option than Yeti Cooler's Tundra line. They come in all sizes, and now in new colors, to suit your needs. Yeti's will hold ice longer, thus preserving your bait for many days. For current Yeti Tundra owners, Yeti has developed dividers to separate your bait and catch, food items, or beverages inside your cooler. Stackable bait trays will keep your rigged baits fresh and unscathed. Constructed from aluminum, the trays transfer cold temperatures to each other, keeping your bait in prime condition.

It helps to have a knowledgeable guide to put you on the fish. My friend, Captain Jeff Maggio lives and breathes for the commencement of the “Mullet Run.” He is located in Ft. Lauderdale, and specializes in charters targeting tarpon and snook during the mullet run. You can find out a lot more about the mullet run on his website, at; [www.lunkerdog.com](http://www.lunkerdog.com) or on his YouTube channel, appropriately named “The Mullet Run.”

Peter prepares a mullet for slow trolling by placing the hook through the inside roof of the mouth and out the nostril, so the mullet swims properly.