



Buggin' Out

with Peter Miller

How to clean Florida Lobster

- With gloves, hold the carapace with one hand and the tail in the other and twist to separate
- Break off one of the antennae
- Put the wide end of the antennae into the anal cavity at the bottom of the tail and push inward
- Pull the antennae out. The small spines on the antennae act as barbs and will remove the waste track (similar to deveining a shrimp)
- Rinse thoroughly

Keep in mind, it is illegal to keep an egg-bearing, or “berried” female lobster.

Lobstering is a downright obsession in South Florida and the Florida Keys. Between the months of August and March, it's estimated that 30,000 people travel to Monroe County (FL Keys) for the sole purpose of lobstering.

Measured in dollars, the spiny lobster fishery is the largest commercial fishery in Florida; with 6 million pounds harvested per season and an average of \$20 million in annual earnings. With these figures, it's no shocker “bugs” have a cult-like following.

There are 12 species of lobster found in our state. The species we refer to as the Florida lobster is also called the

“LOBSTERS ARE CALLED BUGS BECAUSE THEY ARE FROM THE SAME PHYLUM AS THEIR ON-SHORE INSECT COUSINS”

they hatch, the larvae resemble plankton. These larvae are then carried for thousands of miles into seagrass and algae beds in shallow waters.

A spiny lobster takes about two years to grow to the legal harvesting size with a 3-inch carapace. When lobsters mature, they move from near-shore estuaries and grass beds, to offshore reefs and deeper waters. Lobsters are primarily nocturnal. At night, they forage the shallows

for food. Their diet consists of urchins, clams, snails, and crabs. During the day, lobsters spend their time tucked away under rocks and coral in order to avoid predators.

Most bug hunters search for lobsters during the day with snorkel gear. Besides a good mask, snorkel and fins, you'll need some tools if you decide to target Florida lobster. First, you'll need a Florida saltwater fishing license and lobster permit. Most tackle stores sell these, or you can call the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission at 888-486-8356 to obtain one. Next, for safety reasons, you'll need a dive flag. This is vital, especially during mini-season and the opening days of regular season. During these times, there will be plenty of boaters on the water with the same intentions as you... get to the lobster spots and collect the prize as quickly as possible.

If you shop online or visit a dive shop, you'll be sure to find a basic lobstering kit. Lobster kits include a tickle stick, short-handled lobster net, gloves, and a lobster gauge. The tickle stick is a thin, fiberglass or metal rod about two feet in length, meant to coax lobsters from their dens. Lobsters are deceptively fast. You'll need to use the short-handled net once you coax them out of their hole. Next, you'll need gloves to protect yourself from spines. The lobster gauge is a small plastic device with a 3-inch cut out gap, so you can quickly measure your catch's carapace (body) for the minimum size limit of 3 inches.

Accessibility is part of the reason lobster diving is so popular. You don't need a big boat and there are many areas you can swim from shore to productive lobster spots. Most lobster diving is done in 8 to 15 feet of water. The key is to locate the structure. Try to cover as much ground as possible. By boat, idle around with a spotter in the bow donning a good set of polarized glasses looking for coral heads or rocks. If you're swim-

Caribbean spiny lobster (*panulirus argus*).

This is the type recreationally and commercially harvested.

Lobsters are called bugs because they are from the same phylum as their on-shore insect cousins: arthropoda. Spiny lobsters spawn from March through August and the females carry bright orange roe on their undersides until they hatch. Keep in mind, it is illegal to keep an egg-bearing, or “berried” female lobster. After

ming from shore you're essentially doing the same. Swim around and look for crevasses, cracks, overhangs... any feature that looks like a lobster might be hiding underneath.

Once you find the structure, dive down and take a look around. The idea is to think like a lobster. Use your tickle stick to force the lobster to leave its hole and move into the open. Lobsters propel themselves backwards - quickly! Place your net over the lobster and remember to hold tight once they shoot into your net. A panicked lobster will do just about anything to free itself... including breaking off an antennae. Sounds easy, but this whole process happens very quickly.

Now, here is the good part: cooking your catch. Unlike their cousins from Maine, spiny lobsters lack claws for hunting and defense. Their meat is firmer than maine lobster, making spiny lobster tail perfectly suited for grilling and baking. Lobster tails are low in fat, sweet tasting and delectable. A little-known fact is that spiny lobsters have more meat in their bodies than Maine lobsters, including a nice chunk of meat in the base of their antennae. Furthermore, you can use the bodies for delicious stock.

Given lobster's migratory patterns, hot spots change from year to year. However, South Florida and the Florida Keys continue to produce. Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach Counties aren't crowded and it's legal to dive at night when lobsters are most active. Furthermore, there are plenty of great spots accessible from the beach.

The Middle Keys from Islamorada to Marathon hold the most bugs found anywhere. A great place to stay is Hawk's Cay Resort (www.hawkscayresort.com). Hawk's Cay has their own diving charter fleet at the resort. For more information on booking your bug hunting trip, visit www.fla-keys.com. Good luck and happy bug hunting! 🦞



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