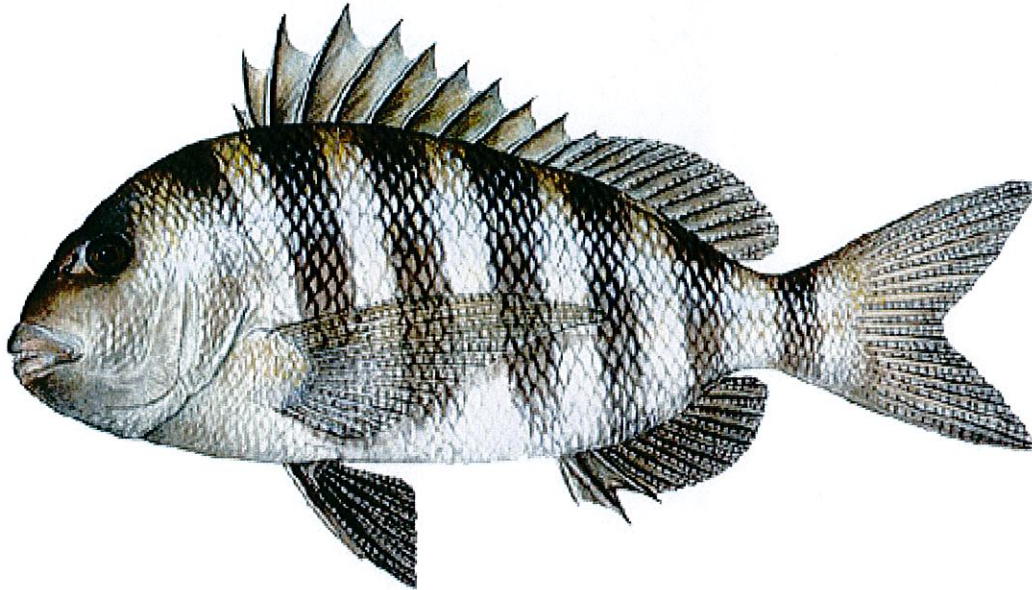


**NOVEMBER'S BEST BET
SEBASTIAN INLET STATE PARK**



SHEEPSHEAD
(*Archosargus probatocephalus*)

DESCRIPTION: Sheepshead are members of the porgy family which also includes locally known residents as the pinfish and the spottail pinfish. Sheepshead are easily recognized from other species by a prominent, broad black bar across the nape of the head followed by 5-6 slightly diagonal black bands running vertically down the length of the silvery to yellowish body. This coloration has sometimes earned the sheepshead the nickname of "convict fish". Sheepshead are sometimes confused with the black drum (*P. cromis*) and the Atlantic spadefish (*C. faber*) which share a similar black barring pattern but otherwise look nothing like a sheepshead. Sheepshead range from Nova Scotia to Brazil, including the Gulf of Mexico, but are absent from the Caribbean. The sheepshead gets its namesake from its large incisor teeth which may protrude a little beyond the lips. These teeth are used to pick mollusks and crabs and to scrape barnacles off pilings and rocks. Divers have reported that sheepshead can be quite noisy underwater while feeding in this manner. Sheepshead are mainly an inshore species found near oyster bars, seawalls, pilings, and tidal creeks—especially in estuaries. They are known to move nearshore in late winter and early spring for spawning purposes, and larger specimens can sometimes be observed offshore. The all tackle world record listed by the I.G.F.A. for sheepshead weighed 21 lbs., 4 oz and was taken in Bayou St. John, New Orleans, LA in 1982.

HEIGHT OF SEASON: Sheepshead can be taken just about year around in the Sebastian Inlet area, but prime fishing for them occurs in November and December when the spawning migration of fish from the Indian River Lagoon is moving out through the inlet into coastal waters.

RULES AND REGULATIONS: Sheepshead must measure a minimum of 12 inches fork length in order to be kept and no person shall harvest more than a total of 15 sheepshead per day, nor possess while in or on state waters more than 15 such fish. The use of any multiple hook in conjunction with live or dead natural bait or the landing of such fish so harvested, is prohibited. Keep up to date on rules and regulations, something is almost always changing. You will need a saltwater fishing license.

TIMES AND TIDES: Sheepshead can be caught in the inlet area on both incoming and outgoing tides, daytime or nighttime. The most preferable fishing times seem to be about 1 hour before to 1 hour after a slack tide (tide change), especially when fishing from the bridge area or close to the pilings on the north jetty. This is the time when the water is moving at its slowest and baits can easily be presented very close to the structures where the sheepshead are naturally feeding.

BAITS: Sheepshead are fished for almost entirely with fresh, natural baits. Artificial baits are seldom noticed by sheepshead, probably because few simulate their natural prey. The best baits to use in the inlet for sheepshead include sandfleas (mole crabs), fiddler crabs, and other species of small oyster and mud crabs. DO NOT use stone crabs for bait (any size!)! This crab species is protected by law. If these baits are unattainable, fresh cut live shrimp or fresh frozen shrimp will work as well, along with fresh cut clams. Baits that die and spoil in the sun will most likely be turned up by sheepshead. Keep your baits alive, cool or iced down.

METHOD: As mentioned, sheepshead are crustacean feeders that can be found near structured areas in the water. Fishing methods should try to "keep this in mind" for productive results. Baits are best presented on small, strong, short shanked hooks. The strong teeth and jaws of sheepshead can, and will, bite through the gauge of a thinner hook. Hook size and bait size should both be matched, and never be too large (more than about 1 inch). Baits do not necessarily have to be presented on the bottom to catch sheepshead, and when fishing alongside pilings, they should not. Suspend baits perhaps mid-water along structure and try to keep the bait dangling as close to the piling or structure as possible. Standard sliding sinker rigs work best for sheepshead in the inlet, I believe, and they give the angler a better chance at landing some of the heavyweights that can be found here in the winter months. Leader in the range of 25-30 lb. test is sufficient, in lengths of about 12-14 inches, with a strong swivel at one end and a small, but strong hook at the other end. Weight size should vary with current speed and be "just enough" to hold your bait down or mid-water without being pulled up by the current. Sheepshead can be very "light" biters and are reminisced about for their bait stealing antics. Some fishermen say you have to "set the hook just before you feel a hit", but I believe with a little practice, a well rigged angler can easily feel the resistance of a sheepshead bite and catch these wily but tasty fish!

PREPARATION: Sheepshead possess a very flaky, white flesh which I've heard to be compared somewhat to that of crabmeat. Larger fish 2 lbs. and bigger yield some nice fillets and fish smaller than this can be headed, gutted, and scaled to produce some mouth watering panfish style meals. Keep your catch fresh in a cool, shaded sack, or iced down in a cooler. Keep only what you can use and try these delicious fish the way that you like fish best, they are difficult to ruin!

ALSO THIS MONTH: Look for the flounder migration to pick up near the end of the month, usually by Thanksgiving every season we start to see some of the true "heavyweights" being taken. Rough, "northeaster" days out on the north jetty should bring some decent Spanish mackerel fishing, especially for those live baiting with cork float rigs, and black drum should start to become active for those using clams. Happy Thanksgiving to all of you and stay warm on those cold, blustery days!

Ranger Ed Perry