

NSFA “Table Talk” on **GIGGING FLOUNDER**

FLOUNDER

SPECIES

I'll give an overview of their life history below, but I won't cover detailed information about flounder species here, since you can find excellent information online at the links listed.

<http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/saltwater/southern-flounder/>

This is a description with pics of the Southern Flounder, *Paralichthys lethostigma*

<http://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/saltwater/gulf-flounder/>

This is the FWC summary for Gulf Flounder, *Paralichthys albigutta*

The Florida Saltwater Fishing regulations apply to *Paralichthys albigutta* (Gulf flounder), *P. lethostigma* (Southern flounder), *P. dentatus* (summer flounder), and *Etropus crossotus* (fringed flounder). <http://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/recreational/flounder/>

GENERAL LIFE HISTORY

For southern flounder, the lifespan of males is up to 3+ years, and a length of ~ 14 inches. The lifespan for females is 7+ years, and a length of ~ 28 inches. The maximum is ~ 20 pounds, and ~ 36 inches. Large flounder are unlikely to be males. All of the 572 flounder my partner and I giggered in the last four years have been females. While cleaning them, I found one fish that had an intestinal roundworm (nematode), and I preserved that and sent it to the Parasitology Department in Gainesville. Parasites are uncommon in flounder; they are much more common in drum. They are not harmful to humans (if you cook them well). For more information, go to the link below, scroll down on that page to “Sea Stats”, then click on “Worms in Fish” and you can download the 3-page report.

<http://myfwc.com/research/publications/brochuresvideos/>

Heaviest feeding by flounder occurs around 61-77 degrees water temp; highest commercial net catches also occur at higher temps. Flounder can eat up to 4 to 8% of their body weight per day when feeding actively (at higher water temps). Prime feeding (and fishing) often occurs 3 days following the first-quarter moon; and 3 days before the new moon. Between mid-October and mid-November, flounder move offshore to spawn; they may move 200 to 400+ miles on their spawning travels, and can move 3 to 6+ miles/day. Flounder may be sparked to sudden migration with a cold front, or when water temperature falls below 60 degrees. Spawning occurs ~ November through January at 65 to 200 ft (alt ref: 100 to 600 ft) depths. An alternative source notes that they spawn between December and March. Roughly 50% of males mature at 10 to 11 inches; all at or before 13 inches. Roughly 20% of females mature at 12 inches; 50% at 14 inches; all at or before 16 inches. From February to April, they generally move back inshore. The South Carolina inshore net catch index: J/F 0.1; M 0.5; Apr 1; May 2; June/July 2-2.5; Aug 3.5; Sept 2.5; Oct 1.8; Nov 0.8. **On Amelia, you can start giggering Apr/May, but the fish are on the skinny side. Wait until the bait shows up (or water above mid-70's); with warm water and abundant inshore bait, the flounder will be more actively feeding and putting on weight.**

<http://aquaticcommons.org/4728/> Perlmutter, Alfred (1947) *The blackback flounder and its fishery in New England and New York*. Bulletin of the Bingham Oceanographic Collection, 11(2), pp. 1-92. This is a free download of an interesting old report on New England flounder.

<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/species/southernflounder.html> SC report on southern flounder.

<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/species/assets/SpeciesProfileSouthernGulfSummerFlounder.pdf>
<http://www.dnr.sc.gov/fish/flounder/index.html> SC has an ongoing study to assess their gig fishery.
<http://saltwaterfishing.sc.gov/pdf/fishingforflounder.pdf> A very nice SC publication on flounder !!!

HOW TO FILET A FLOUNDER

Several State fisheries departments claim that roughly 1/3 of the total flounder weight is prime filet for eating. Unfortunately, many people virtually butcher their flounder and probably waste a good deal of meat. With careful technique, I believe that 40% or even more of the total fish weight should end up on your plate. And especially with flounder over 16 inches or so, be sure to also cut out the “cheeks” and throw them in the pot. When a flounder is properly fileted, the carcass should look like a bony stained glass window when you hold it up to the light.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CWW8VwDb2M> Here is one video of cleaning a flounder. He shows how to run your filet knife up the backbone from the tail, which is what I recommend. But I would not make the cuts he does near the head. His technique wastes a lot of meat on the belly as well as on the top of the head (on both sides), as well as missing the tasty cheeks. Unfortunately, I haven't found a YouTube video that shows how I would do it. Practice!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMSg9MjGryg> This is one example of how to clean a flounder if you want to cook "Stuffed Flounder". I would bet that anybody trying this with bare hands gets a mess of bones in their fingers. Work out your own methods to improve it.

GIGGING

WHAT IS GIGGING?

Everyone knows that fishing is not the same as catching. Same with gigging, where you hope things work out and you can later say "I gigged some nice fish". But there are always times when the cooler remains empty. When gigging, instead of using a rod & reel, you try to spear your fish. To succeed, you have to use appropriate equipment; proper technique; in appropriate location(s) and time(s) of day and year; when other conditions are also in your favor. I will try to cover that information below, so you will later be able to say "I really gigged some nice fish!" You also need to be able to identify what you are gigging before you spear it. In this case, we are targeting flounder. In addition to being able to recognize what a flounder looks like laying on the dock or in a cooler, you need to be able to see and identify a flounder in its natural habitat, and also be able to estimate its size (to only take legal, 12+ inch flounder). When in doubt, let it go; there is no "catch and release" with gigging, and no excuses for killing undersized fish.

What do you see in the photo below? How many?



Note: the photo above was borrowed from:
<http://saltwaterfishing.sc.gov/pdf/fishingforflounder.pdf>

WALKING OR WADING

Walking is actually a really nice way to gig. No messing with boats, fuel, trailer lights, wasting time launching and trailering your boat. Very often, the flounder will be laying very close to shore, and inaccessible to a boat. The largest flounder I ever gilled was in the back of a shallow bay in Pamlico Sound, in water that didn't even cover my tennis shoes. And gigging on foot is perfect for a single person, since you don't need anyone to run the boat. Since I am usually in less than one foot of water, and virtually never go above my knees, it is more appropriate to call it walking, rather than wading. Whatever – it is a convenient way to get around, check conditions at multiple spots, and grab your light and spear if it looks worth trying.

DIVING

I'm not a diver, but you can find plenty of YouTube and other videos of using spears and spear guns for flounder. The main difference from gigging is that you would most likely be doing this during daylight, and would not need a gigging light. Seasonally, when the fish pile up around inlets and start heading out to the ocean to spawn, I am sure this could be a lot of very productive fun. If you are doing it in season (late November through February), depth and visibility would probably be the main limiting conditions, since you have to see the fish on the bottom (which is harder than seeing a fish swimming above or in front of you). Considering the abundance of sharks around here, my main concern would be how to get rid of a bloody flounder carcass before they show up. I just don't think I would enjoy being a diver holding a limit of flounder ...

GIGGING FROM A BOAT

Since I don't have a boat, it's easy for me to say that walking is better. Ha ! But in many ways, you can't beat a boat, and I often wish I had one. For one thing, take a look at local shorelines on Google Earth, and it's obvious that there are countless promising gigging sites that you just can't "walk" to. Even if the locations you choose to try are too shallow to gig from your boat, you can at least use the boat to reach those sites, then get out and walk! or use an airboat !!

My main point of advice if you decide to gig from a boat is that you still **MUST** rig your gigging lights underwater. Above-water lights will spook the fish. The one boat I went on that used above-water lights had to keep moving at a ridiculous speed, and we were nearly past the spooking fish by the time we could poke the spear. If you properly use underwater lights on a dark night, the flounder will virtually freeze, whether you are walking or in a boat. In clear water, I might spot a flounder twenty feet ahead of me, walk calmly up to it, and if necessary even spread my palm inches above it to measure its length – as it just lays there. Whether any above-water light is from your headlamp or just a sliver of moon, the light will make the fish spook before you reach them. It is very easy to rig LED gigging lights on a boat, so you can raise them out of the water while you are under way, and lower them back under water when you slow (to trolling speed or less) to gig. Here is a link for commercial lights for your kayak: <https://loomisled.com/shop/high-power-underwater-led-kayak-fishing-lights/> Try it !

FANTASTIC AESTHETICS

Fortunately, the critical conditions for successful gigging (addressed below) are also wonderful conditions for a very enjoyable walk in the surf. It usually is still great weather for t-shirts and shorts, with low or no wind, no rain or lightening, adequate visibility in the water, beautiful sky, and best of all you are out sometime between sunset and sunrise when you rarely see another person. The next best thing to seeing a flounder when you go gigging is to see "flounder

footprints". These depressions in the sand are the perfect outline of a flounder that has recently moved on. If the perimeter of the footprint is sharp, the flounder may have moved very recently, and you can track the fish. If the tide is incoming, often the flounder will keep moving closer to shore. Usually when a flounder moves, it swims in the direction the footprint is pointing, and I often find the same fish laying just (20 to 80) feet ahead. So don't ignore the tracks!

In addition to hopefully spotting some flounder, frequent highlights of your walk will likely include baby flounder, loads of mullet (that jump out of the water like popcorn when you raise your light), sharks, rays, sea turtles, needlefish, silversides, moon snails, whelks, blue crabs, ghost crabs, horseshoe crabs, occasional drum and sheepshead, birds !,comets and stars, channel marker lights, the unanticipated wake from a passing boat, and onshore watching eyes of deer, raccoons, opossums, and armadillos. And you don't need to worry about using sunscreen.

SALTWATER FISHING REGULATIONS

The Florida Saltwater Fishing Regulations are available in booklet form at tackle shops (or WalMart). You need a saltwater fishing license for gigging (unless you're an old fart like me). Regulations are also available online, at: <http://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/recreational/> Gigging or spearing red drum, sharks, crabs, trout, pompano, or snook (+ others) is prohibited. While gigging flounder, you may also have a chance to gig some sheepshead or big mullet.

The specific flounder regulations are available at:
<http://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/recreational/flounder/> Know the regulations !
<http://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/recreational/spearing/>

Florida saltwater gear requirements for flounder include:

Legal Gear: spears, gigs, hook and line, seine, cast net

Illegal Gear: harvest prohibited by or with the use of any multiple hook in conjunction with live or dead natural bait; snatching prohibited

LINKS TO SOME GIGGING VIDEOS

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ce4sZ6O4w0M> (from a boat in NC)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqaovoFEoBM> Texas gigging

There are many others

GIGGING EQUIPMENT

FOOTWEAR (IF YOU WADE)

Common sense says "Don't ever go barefoot"! You could easily encounter sharp shells, glass, stingrays, discarded hooks, etc. For many years I wore tennis shoes; they worked fine (but then they were not good for anything else). One year I wore sandals, and walking for miles on an uneven bottom with sand and shells poking me; I ended up with plantar fasciitis. I gave up the sandals and started wearing wading shoes, and my feet were fine. Now I usually wear either wading boots or tight rubber slip-ons over a pair of neoprene booties. Protect your feet.

SAFETY = COMMON SENSE

Don't go out if there are any electrical storms forecast for the area, whether you hear thunder or not. Don't mess with Mother Nature (sharks or rays or lightening or dangerous waters). If you are gigging alone, be sure to leave word with a reliable contact as to where you are going and when you should return. Bring bug dope; at times you will get pestered by insects that are attracted to the light.

SPEARS, SPEARGUNS, BOWS: Paraphrasing Robert Ruark: “Use Enough Spear!”

“Enough Spear” doesn’t necessarily mean bigger or heavier. For ~ 30 years, I used a 3 to 4-ft length of ¼-inch stainless steel rod, with a stringer line and a float on one end. If not using the stringer, I could wrap the line around the rod as a handgrip. I filed a sharp point on the spear end (no barb!). Believe it or not, while wading shallows, this is more than enough spear. On the other hand, a straight rod would not be suitable from a boat! It is very easy to drive the rod through the center of a flounder head and pin it to the bottom. Wait until the fish is done fighting back, then slip your hand or foot under the flounder, and lift it up on the rod, as you grab the rod point and raise the fish. Then you can either slide the fish down onto the stringer, or off the rod into a cooler or bucket.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-QkWvwa2OY> Many options for making your own spears

On Amelia, I no longer had square miles of shallows to wander about in. The shorelines I waded often dropped off deeper very rapidly, so I switched to extendable 12-ft spear(s) with three to five barbed points. In 2012, I was gigging a steep shoreline near the Fort Clinch pier about 2:00 AM when I saw a huge flounder (I wish I knew how big!). With the spear extended, I hit the fish hard. I had spear in one hand, gigging light in my other hand, earlier-gigged flounder on a stringer looped to my light pole, and a plastic pack on my back with a 25-pound deep cycle battery. The huge flounder flopped and splashed, and started swimming away – while I lost my footing, and the fish pulled me over. The flounder got away, and left me with bloody knees from shell scrapes. That was my worst-ever encounter with a flounder. **Lesson:** the prongs on that huge spear were not long enough to go all the way through the big flounder and pin it to the bottom! Also, I hit it at too much of an angle. If I had gigged that fish straight down I might have been able to hold it until it quieted down. Bottom line: a single stainless steel rod should always be adequate (if you raise the fish properly while holding the rod on both sides of the fish!). A big, scary spear is not always better. Can you imagine going halibut gigging for a 250-pounder ?

LIGHTING OPTIONS

In “the old days”, we used 50-watt DC bulbs hooked up to a 12V deep cycle battery that we floated in a big block of Styrofoam and pulled behind us with a rope. We walked on and on, like we were slaves dragging blocks of granite to the pyramids. You start gigging right after sunset, and by 1 or 2AM you’re somewhere out in Pamlico Sound looking at the distant lights of Hatteras or Ocracoke, and now your battery is dead! And the beer is gone. Yeh, ... fun. At least you probably had a load of fish ... now if you could just find where you parked your truck.

I still see some folks occasionally using a flashlight or a camping lantern held by hand as they walk and look for fish. If they are lucky, they might see some fish spook and swim away before they get close enough to do any harm. Bottom line: don’t waste your time using any lighting above the water!

Intent on moving up from dim DC bulbs, I bought a generator, and started pulling my canoe behind me. The canoe had plenty of room for the generator, and a cooler for fish and refreshments, and spare gas, and a gallon of mosquito dope. Best of all, we could run a pair of 200-watt AC bulbs underwater, simply sealed with Vaseline. Just had to be careful not to lift them out of the water, or they would heat up too fast, and then shatter if they touched the water again. When the generator ran down, we would have a cold one before refilling the gas tank. Standing there in the dark, we often encountered bioluminescent waters that would light up with a bright green glow as we walked or splashed around. Fantastic!

Modern LED lights soon displaced my dangerous gas-fueled generator and questionable voltage for use in saltwater. The LED light I currently use is a FlounderPro 2000 from: <http://www.fishinglightsetc.com/FlounderLight.html> They sell newer models now. Mine is an old version that they don't carry anymore. My first light from them cracked and shorted out some of the LED's, but the company replaced it free (only charged me for shipping). Excellent service! Although the damage was probably my problem, they admitted that their epoxy layer was originally too thin. I now keep my light strapped inside a 2-ft section of closed-cell foam to protect it whenever it's not being used. You can also make your own lights pretty easily, but I'd still recommend a foam wrap for protection while transporting them.

You can search Amazon for DIY underwater LED lights. For gigging, I would recommend a minimum of 1500 lumens, that doesn't draw more than 2 amps or so (especially if you are carrying the battery). A 12 to 18 amp-hour battery should be OK for any night gigging, and should weigh under 10 pounds. Larger batteries are just too heavy to carry. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9cV5cZ0YL0Y> Here's a commercial light – a bit pricey.

Battery info: <http://www.batteryspec.com/> LOTS of info here! This is where I bought my first gigging battery and a charger in 2012.

TD35-12	12v 35ah TD35-12 Tempest Deep Cycle AGM, Valve Regulated, Maintenance Free, Sealed Lead Acid Rechargeable Battery \$79.00 (weighs about 25 pounds)	\$79.00	1	\$79.00
BC-12-5000F-19	12v 5amp BC-12-5000F-19 Tempest Smart Battery Charger \$35.00	\$35.00	1	\$35.00

The battery above was bigger than I needed for only a couple hours of gigging, so I switched to using a smaller one. My flounder light only draws 2 A, so a 12 Ah battery is plenty. **The little one I carry now is Interstate Batteries # BSL 1104. 12V 12Ah (PC12120F2) Sealed AGM.** This weighs just ~ nine pounds.

MAKING YOUR OWN GEAR

I looked at several YouTube videos on how to make your own gigging lights and shrimping lights, and ordered what I needed from Amazon, and have made five rigs so far. If you enjoy doing that kind of tinkering, you can get by for probably under \$40 in materials per light. Or you can pay several hundred dollars to much more for commercial equipment.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8idZ-UgJFtk&list=PL8FNAU-0H5EE5jpohQweSu3BWmTjr7iNW&index=2> This is sort of the approach I took with lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bAgyGLDCAnI> DIY with more expensive LED lights
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPt5EJZXOSQ> DIY gigging lights rigged for a kayak
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ou9bakRLYOk> **Really Cheap** LED flashlight tied to a pole

I made two white and three green LED light tubes using 2-ft polycarbonate tubes, PVC end caps (Dremeled to fit), 25 to 50ft sections of old extension cord, and copper alligator clips. Sealed it with Marine Goop &/or silicon. Added screw eyes to top & bottom PVC caps for adding weights to bottom if necessary & at top for retrieval (alternative to just pulling on the extension cord). The light strips I got were about \$8 each; brighter ones cost \$10-\$15, but these seem OK. I wound the adhesive LED strips around a 2-ft long, 1-inch diameter aluminum tube that fit

inside the clear polycarbonate. I glued pegs in the PVC caps to center it on each end. These lights can be used for fishing or shrimping, or just to help you see when you're night fishing. They are waterproof and submersible, and can also be used to attract baitfish. If you want to use them for gigging, you need to rig them to the end of a pole that you can carry, and always keep your gigging lights underwater.

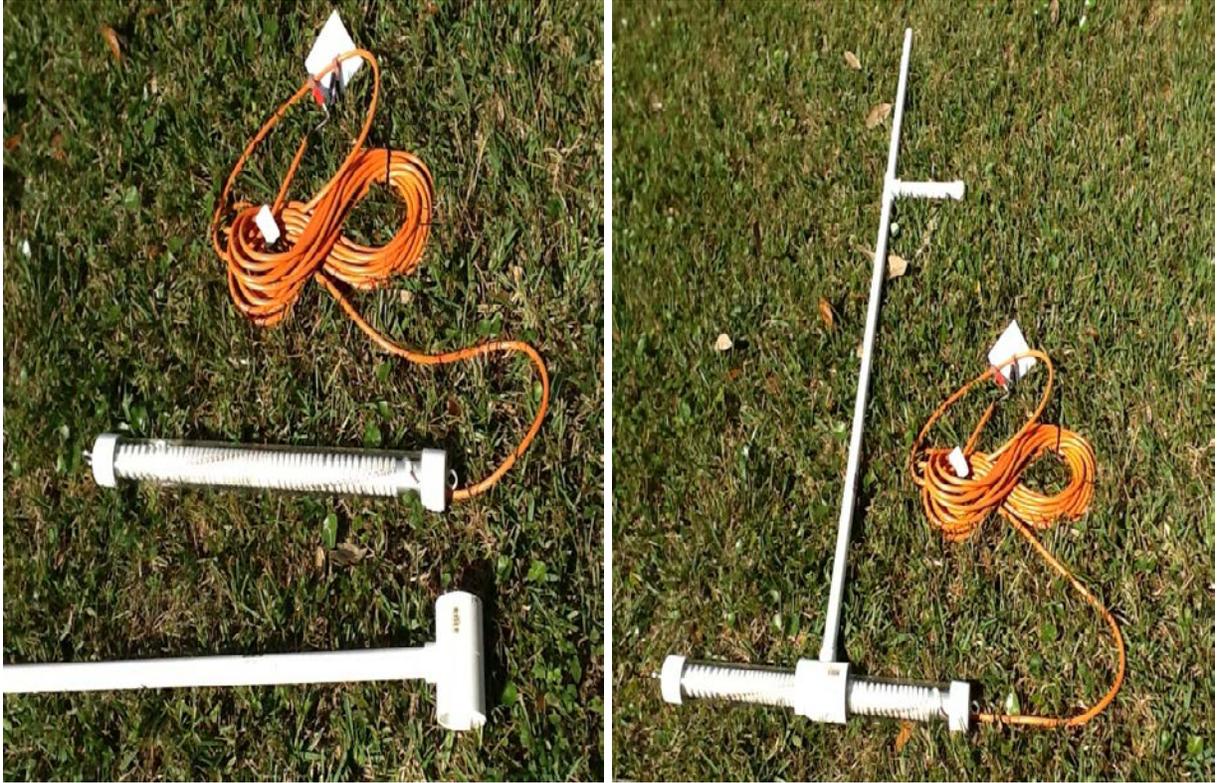
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwsHDp23VSI> Fishing with underwater lights

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzKzpjgtJi4> DIY green LED lights for fishing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ee7v4P8h4xk> Underwater green light - attract bait/squid



Below are some pics of my PVC shrimping-to gigging light adapter - for a total cost of under \$4.00. I used 3/4 inch PVC for the light pole (about 5 ft total length) and an 8-inch handle. Glued caps on the top of pole and on the end of the handle. Adding the handle perpendicular to the pole required a 3/4 to 3/4 inch "T". The only other part was a 3/4 to 2 3/4 inch (OD) "T". The two "T"'s cost me a little over \$2; the 3/4 inch pipe was free. The large "T" at the bottom is big enough for me to slip my shrimp or gigging light through (even over the 2-inch end caps). I also cut out a slice of the bottom adapter, mainly to allow light to pass. I also added a couple strips of aluminum tape to the inside of the adapter to reflect from the upper LED's. Before I glued the bottom adapter onto the 3/4 inch pole, I glued a coin inside the 3/4 inch neck to completely seal the PVC, so it will be air tight and should float. That's it! You can band or ty-rap the light onto the rig to use it for gigging, or you can remove the light from the rig to use it without the pole.



FISH TRANSPORT OPTIONS

There are probably countless options; what you do depends in part on whether you are on foot or in a boat; what the conditions are; ease of access; and distance to be covered. For many years I used a 3-foot spear with a point on one end and a loop on the other, with a light rope tied on to serve as a wading stringer (with a removable float on the end to retain the fish). It is a lot easier to drag fish behind you instead of carrying them (unless there might be sharks around). I have also waded with a canoe carrying a cooler for fish (and refreshments) and generator. On Amelia, I would not recommend dragging your fish in the water behind you. In recent years I have been using a hard-sided backpack to carry fish in. They can get heavy, but you won't be out long enough to require ice, and the plastic pack is easy to hose down and clean.

WHERE AND WHEN TO GIG

WHERE? KNOW THE AREA BEFOREHAND

Whether you are gigging from shore (wading) or from a boat, I would certainly recommend that you take a look at Google Earth to plan where you should focus your efforts, or to identify promising new areas to gig. You can use a chart book or a topo map to mark up or highlight reaches of shoreline with accessible flounder habitat, and make notes about what wind direction &/or strength are appropriate to target that area. One afternoon on your pc and you can develop a play book for a variety of locations and conditions.

There are very limited areas on the north end of Amelia (especially since I do not have a boat, and require foot access everywhere). There are some areas acceptable for gigging starting at the north end boat ramp and walking north into the State Park; covering the small inlets between the jetty rocks; and covering the St Mary's River from the Fort out to the big jetty.

The beach (surf) is usually (but not always) too rough. The fish are there at night and they are in close. And there is gigging room for all. Sometimes a light west wind will give you quiet water (especially ~ 2 AM to sunrise) – it's an exceptional condition that can't be missed. If conditions aren't great for gigging on the shoreline, try fishing that zone, from shoreline to ~ 10-15 feet out as you walk the beach. Use a long (12-14 ft) rod and slowly drag your bait as you keep walking.

On the south end, I walk the north and south sides of Nassau Sound, on both sides (east and west) of the Crady Bridge. Some stretches of beach don't offer much area for wading, and some bottoms are mucky. But the beach slope is often different over different reaches and at different tide levels – so try it at high and low tides to zero in on your own favorite locations.

On the south end of Little Talbot, you can park in the small lot on the east side and gig there, or you can cross the bridge and park at the boat ramp and gig north or south. Sand deposits and channels have changed significantly since Hurricane Matthew, so check it out, and Good Luck!

WHEN? WATCH SEASONAL PATTERNS

Annual migrations and flyway patterns for waterfowl have been well known for hundreds of years; still, I wouldn't bet against stepping on goose shit locally during any month. Same with flounder: Some folks can probably catch a local-resident flounder or two inshore during any month. Personally, I wouldn't waste any time targeting flounder inshore from December through March (or even April). If you want to catch flounder during those months, get in your boat and fish the ocean. Late Spring through Fall is for inshore floundering, and my advice on **the PEAK season for INSHORE flounder is the ~ 2-month period from mid-August through mid-October**. If you want to gig flounder, that is the period to focus on. If you are a serious fisherman, you should never pass up any opportunity during that period when conditions (see below) are acceptable. Below is a Table of my flounder gigging by month for the past four years. Please note: this is definitely somewhat biased (in 2014, I messed up my knee and could barely walk from June into August), but the overall seasonal trend is valid.

EXAMPLE OF SEASONAL GIGGING SUCCESS

Number of flounder:	May	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov
2013	0	0	20	54	36	51	1
2014	0	0	13	4	17	48	6
2015	2	15	12	39	62	61	13
2016	4	0	1	30	67	16	0
2017							
2018							
Totals by Month:	6	15	46	127	182	176	20

The State of Florida maintains records of commercial catches, and you can go to:

<https://publictemp.myfwc.com/FWRI/PFDM/>

Then search for whatever species you want (e.g., flounder), and pick the range of years and data categories you would like to see. Looking at statewide flounder catches by month for 2015 and 2016, the peak months appear to be May, June, and November (and maybe April), with roughly 20 to 30,000 pounds. You can also sort catches by coast and by county.

For more information on seasonal movements, take a look at:

<http://aquaticcommons.org/14503/> Free download here of an interesting study of the behavior and movements of 45 tagged Summer Flounder. Seasonal movements and return to locales.

CRITICAL CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

These conditions are really the KEY if you want to actually bring some flounder home, rather than just getting away from the wife for a while.

Moon phase: Any significant moon light and the fish will be more likely to spook. I can start gigging at sunset a day or two after a full moon (for an hour or two), and for longer periods or later at night with the move toward a new moon. With a new moon, you can gig anytime between sunset and sunrise. Background light (from moon or anywhere) will spook the fish! If the sky is heavily overcast, you don't have to worry about the moon. **You need a DARK night!**

Use underwater lights: - for the same reason as moon phase. Above-water lights are much more likely to spook the fish. Same with gigging from a boat: I went on one boat with lights mounted above water, and the guy had to run almost too fast for anybody to spear, or the fish would spook. With an underwater light on a dark night, the fish usually "freeze" like shining deer, and you can easily measure them to be sure they're legal. I still use a 2000 lumen LED light I bought online, but I also made several, and that's the cheapest bet. Bringing along a battery-operated headlamp or flashlight comes in handy, but be sure to keep it OFF while you gig.

Always keep your light under the surface (unless you have a school of mullet around you; then if you raise the light above water, the fish all start jumping, and it is fun to be in the middle of it).

Wind: You want to avoid anything over 5 mph coming at you or at the shoreline you're walking. Any chop can really affect visibility and turbidity. If the wind is NW to ENE, I'll look for a south-facing shore. If the wind is ESE to WSW, a shoreline facing north is best. In peak months (Aug-Oct) wind often dies down at sunset, and usually early mornings are dead calm before sunrise.

Water color: The St Mary's drains Okefenokee, and after a lot of rain the river can be very dark with tannins, and that makes it much harder to see fish (even if turbidity is low).

Suspended solids: (or turbidity) **This is probably the biggest limiting factor for gigging around here.** Whether it is silts and clays stirred up by rough water, or a high algae density, very often all other conditions seem perfect, yet when I hit the water with my LED light I can't see 2 inches. Or maybe I can only see the bottom when the waves recede. It is even more maddening when you know the flounder are there, and some nights I have marched on in hopes of clear water, and ended up stepping on more flounder than I saw. But sometimes it is worth persevering to check things out, as eddies often form along the shoreline, and the bed slope changes, and you may move repeatedly between conditions of zero - to poor - to fair visibility. **You need to have clear water, or you won't see anything.** No Visibility = No Gigging.

Spear length: It doesn't have to be heavy, but it should be at least 8-10 feet long. I almost never wade over knee-deep, but I use an aluminum spear with a 6-ft base that extends to 12-feet, and locks in at 1-ft intervals. It really helps to be able to "reach out" and nail a flounder if it starts swimming away from you. In Pamlico, the flounder almost never swam off or spooked, and all I needed was a 4-ft section of 1/4-inch stainless steel rod for a spear. I bent an "eye" for a handhold and ran my stringer line through the eye; there was no barb to hold the fish, so after I speared a flounder by running the stainless rod through it, I would lift the fish (with my foot) up the rod, then grab both ends of the rod, and let the flounder slide off onto the stringer line. Or just slide the fish off the spear into my cooler or a bucket in my canoe (which I pulled behind me, with a few brews, and with gas and generator to run 200-watt AC bulbs underwater - sealed the fixtures with Vaseline). Nowadays you can't beat LED's.

Time of night: **The flounder don't care,** and I've gigged successfully at all times from sunset to sunrise. Depending on where I'm heading, I'd probably prefer to be set up at sunset, mainly to ensure that if other giggers show up we don't overlap or repeat routes. If I show up as some other folks are leaving, I'd move on to a different spot. While many people can rod-fish in a small area, even "elbow to elbow", that doesn't work with gigging (by foot). In most spots, you're following a very limited, 5-10 foot wide underwater path along the shoreline, and seeing even one other person is a bummer. Competition usually means "Miller Time". I often take a friend along, but no more than one, because conditions around here won't handle it. For contrast -

when gigging in Pamlico Sound we would often have large groups and multiple parties, with countless square miles of gigging territory, and no shortage of flounder. If anyone wants to work on a gigging trip for a week to Ocracoke sometime (Aug-Nov ?), drop me a note.

Tide: depends on where you are. In a river shoreline setting (for me), I prefer an hour or two on either side of high or low tides, as current velocity is lower and less likely to interfere with visibility. If you're in a boat or cruising flats, tide (i.e., depth) mainly affects your access to areas you expect to see flatties, and with deeper water you are less likely to have decent visibility.

Rain: I'd pass, since I carry a small deep cycle battery, and I'm often a couple miles from my vehicle. Stay away from storms.

Bottom Line: You don't get any flounder sitting in front of your TV. One critical condition for success is to turn off the TV and Go Gig!

HOW TO HOLD THE SPEAR, AND WHERE TO SPEAR THE FLOUNDER'S BODY

There is nothing worse than spotting a big flounder 10-20 feet in front of you, and as soon as you are within spear-reach you take a jab and either miss it (your aim was off due to refraction), or you hit it on the margin, and the fish tears free and escapes. Look again at the picture of the fileted flounder carcasses (above), and note that dorsal and ventral fins cover more than 1/4 of the total visible width of the fish. Nothing but the spine would keep a spear from tearing through the rest of the fleshy/bony body by a strong and determined flounder. If you hit the perimeter or even the rear of the fish – you might lose! This is also the part of the flounder where your next meal is coming from; you do not need to be poking holes in the meat or packing in sand.

The target area for your spear should be the "Center of Mass" of the front 1/3 of the fish (not including the mouth!). This area includes the entire gill plate back to the stomach. If you use a spear with two or more prongs, try to get at least one prong on each side of the spine "centerline". Spearing a flounder in this area should lock the spear barbs in the fish, and will often entirely immobilize the fish.

A second "How To" point to remember is that your underwater light should "freeze" the fish to give you the opportunity to get close enough to measure it and to spear vertically down through the fish. You want your spear going down into the fish at a 90-degree angle to the bottom. Ideally, you want the spear point going completely through the fish, and pinning it to the bottom. Then you can drag (don't lift) the fish back to shore. If you poke your spear at an insecure (e.g., 30 or 45 degree) angle to the bottom, the spear is less likely to go through the fish, and may not pin it to the bottom, and it gives the flounder leverage to swim out from under your spear.

Remember: Spear Straight Down!

WHAT DO YOU LOOK FOR?

If you are lucky, you can sometimes see the entire flounder clearly lying flat on the bottom. Sometimes they are almost entirely buried, and maybe only an eye is visible! Other times you may see part of the fish, with a rise in the sand elevation outlining the body. After walking for several hours, the sand bedforms can appear to be nearly anything you could imagine. When in doubt, stick it as hard as if you knew it weighed 10 pounds! Yes, I have stepped on lots of flounder (unintentionally), and even the small ones can spook you. Regardless of how many fish I get, there are always nearly invisible fish lying buried out there. Sometimes I only see an eye. When I see an eye or just part of a head, it is amazing to look for the body and know that it is perfectly covered by sand bed formations that are indistinguishable from the surrounding bottom. There are also several other fish that burrow in the sand nearshore, kind of like wrasses, although I never caught any, and most seem to be under 5-6 inches.

I see lots of small rays, but never had any trouble with them. Years ago a friend and I gigged a

100+ lb ray in Pamlico, just to see what they tasted like. It filled the canoe, and the wings hung over both sides. The back meat was like fatback: uniform, nondescript, white and fatty, like whale blubber. The wing meat was a different muscle type, like a bunch of fingers laying side by side, and that was also very fatty. A 2X6 inch filet would fry up like a shriveled 1X3-inch piece of bacon fat. Not much of any flavor, but I'm sure that if you like eel or other very fatty fish, stingray could be seasoned to keep you alive in a pinch. (I hope I never get pinched that hard).

CAUTIONS

Below is a photo-lesson on why you need to be careful if you drag your flounder behind you on a stringer. The first photo, fortunately, was from a small shark, and I didn't even know it chewed up two of my flounder until I took them out of the cooler the next morning! The next pair of photos shows what was left on my stringer after maybe an 8-second encounter a couple feet behind me; that's all I had left when I pulled in the stringer. Several years ago I also had a 7-foot shark (that I saw coming) move in about three feet from my two flounder (while I was OUT of the water), then I poked it and it moved off. This is why I don't use a stringer anymore. The fish might be heavy to carry, but that's the way I want them to stay!





HOW TO MEASURE SUCCESS

Certainly, if you get at least one legal fish, you have been successful. But if it took you five hours, and the fish was only 12.5 inches long, maybe you should change your game. One good measure of success is whether or not you get a limit of ten fish. A limit is certainly nice, but it is not common; in four recent years, I usually did not get my limit:

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESS IN LIMITING OUT ON GIGGING FLOUNDER

2013: got limit of ten fish on 12 of 29 trips (41.4%)

2014: got limit of ten fish on 2 of 16 trips (12.5%)

2015: got limit of ten fish on 9 of 43 trips (21%)

2016: got limit of ten fish on 8 of 19 trips (42.1%)

The numbers above also indicate that if you want to gig some flounder, you really do have to work at it. Not necessarily for a lot of hours at a time, but keep watching the water every day (in season) for the right conditions, and keep checking things out, even if just for 15 or 30 minutes. Going out only once or twice a year will not likely get you any records. Many times I scout out areas late afternoon; if conditions are not good, I don't bother trying to gig that night.

Also – be sure to take advantage of other opportunities that may pop up. Sometimes you will have beautiful clear, calm water during the peak season, but the flounder just aren't around. If you have room to bring along a cast net, you may be able to get a load of mullet for bait. If you can also pack a long-handled dip net, you may be able to scoop up some nice blue crabs for bait (just don't spear them!).



Another way of measuring success is by the size of flounder you get. On October 7, 2013 I went gigging from 4:30 to 6:00 AM in Nassau Sound. I only got one fish, but it was 24.2 inches, and I consider that a success! I would not have looked forward to walking back two miles with ten of those (65-70 lbs) along with weight of spear, gigging light, and deep cycle battery.

FWIW, the largest flounder I ever got was just over 26 inches, in Pamlico Sound (back side of Ocracoke Island); it was lying in water that didn't even cover my tennis shoes. I don't believe anybody "fishes" for flounder in locations like that. That's just one example of what you can learn from gigging and from observing the fish and their behavior in their natural habitat.

Catch per unit effort is another common measure of success. My best gigging trip on Amelia Island was in September of 2015 just after sunset, when I gigged a limit of ten flounder in just twenty-five minutes of wading, and the average length was 16.6 inches. My catch per unit effort was a nice flounder every 2 ½ minutes (including the walking and messing with the fish); I live for a night like that! Usually, if I wade for 1.5 to 2 hours and only have one fish (or none), I will hang it up. A catch per unit effort of two hours per fish is not really worth my time; best to pick another location, or just turn off the light and enjoy the walk.



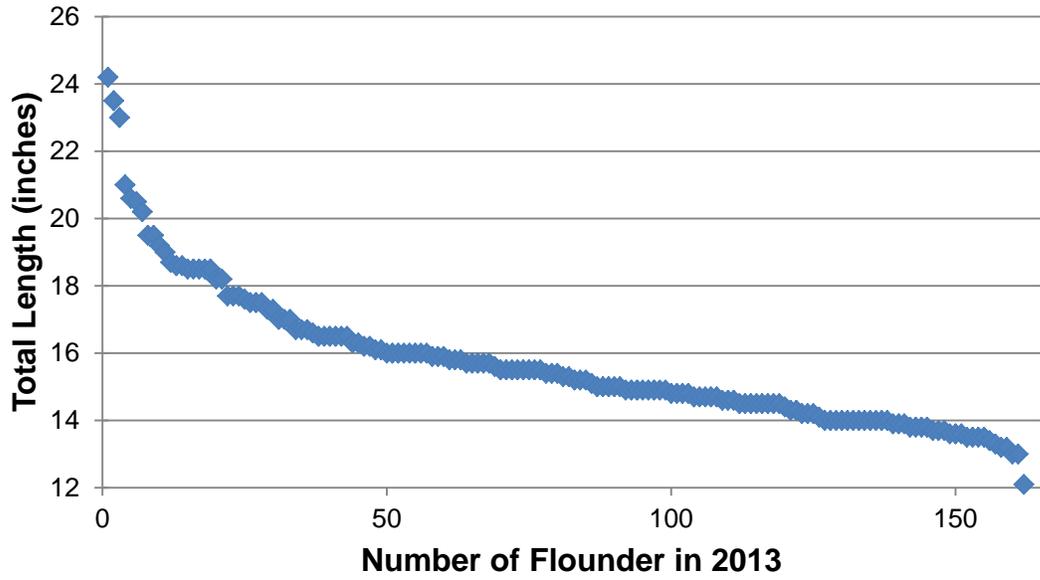
Finally, probably the best measure of success is if you had FUN – or saw a sea turtle or a big ray or a shark up close, or encountered any bioluminescent water, or just had a nice peaceful walk in the surf. Go Gigging, and you're almost guaranteed to be successful.

SIZE DISTRIBUTION OF GIGGED FLOUNDER

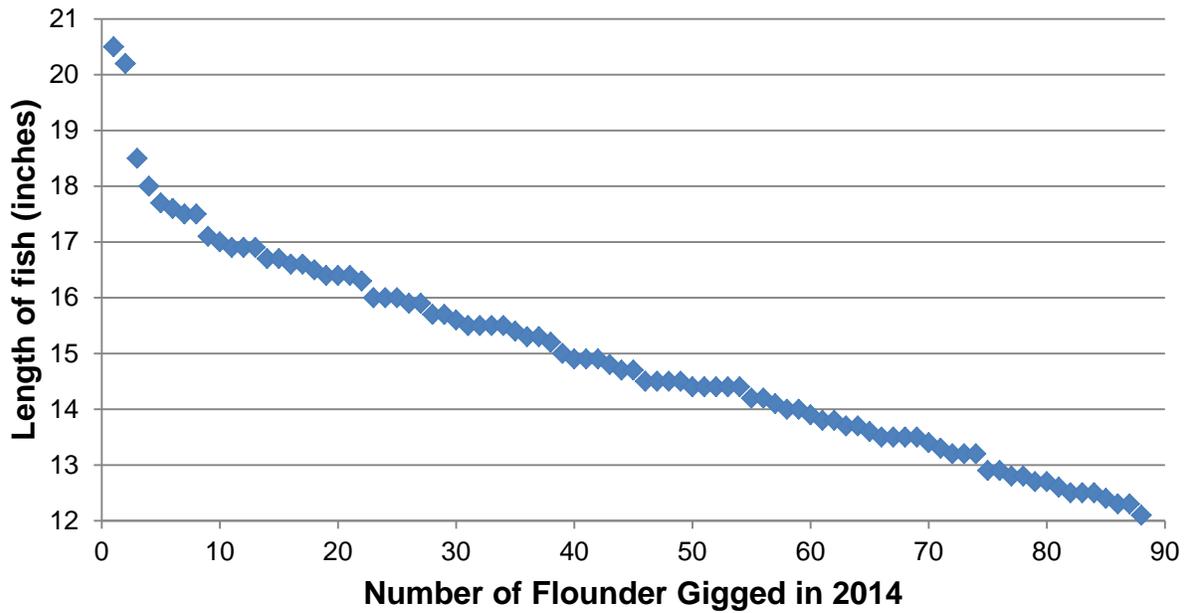
I always measure every flounder that I gig, and I keep up a spreadsheet for my own records. The charts below showing the size-distribution of flounder I gigged in past years should offer a decent picture of what to expect when you go gigging. One nice thing about gigging is that you can usually avoid harming any undersized fish. Unless the flounder is partially buried and not fully visible, I try not to take anything under 13 inches. By using a 24-inch horizontal LED light, I have the light marked in 2-inch increments from 12 to 22 inches, so I have a very good idea how big the fish is – before I gig it. The middle of my light (12 in) is the legal minimum.

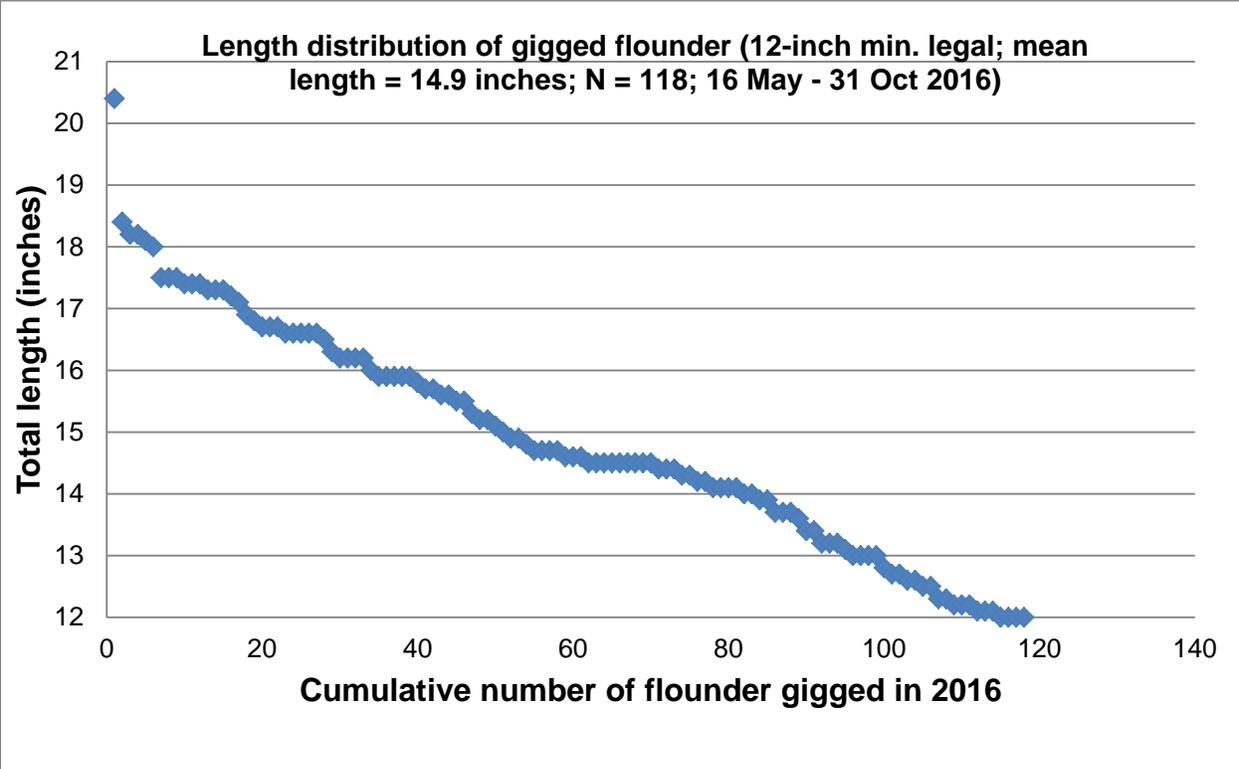
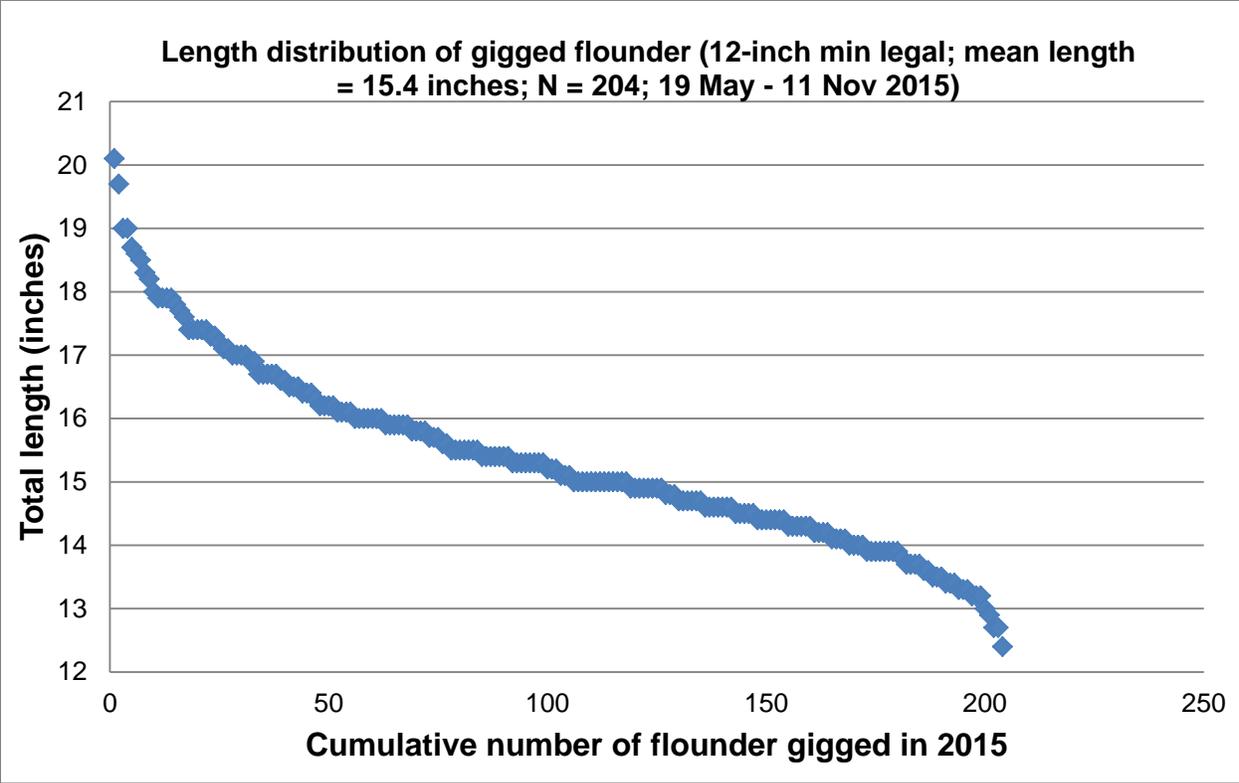
These charts do not in any way represent the abundance of flounder less than 13 inches (many nights I see dozens of “baby” flounder). What I do find interesting about these charts is that there is a pretty consistent distribution of sizes from 14 to 18 inches, and no apparent grouping of what might be considered “year classes” or cohorts by age. Another point is that fish over 20 inches are NOT very common, and you should consider yourself lucky to nail one.

**Length distribution of giggered flounder (12-inch min. legal);
Mean Length = 15.7 inches; N=162; 29 July - 7 Nov 2013**



**Length distribution of Giggered Flounder (12-inch min. length)
2014 Mean length = 14.9 inches ; N = 88 fish**





The chart below is from a Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission report showing recreational and commercial flounder landings for 2009, and it is apparent that **the recreational catch of flounder is far higher than the commercial catch.**

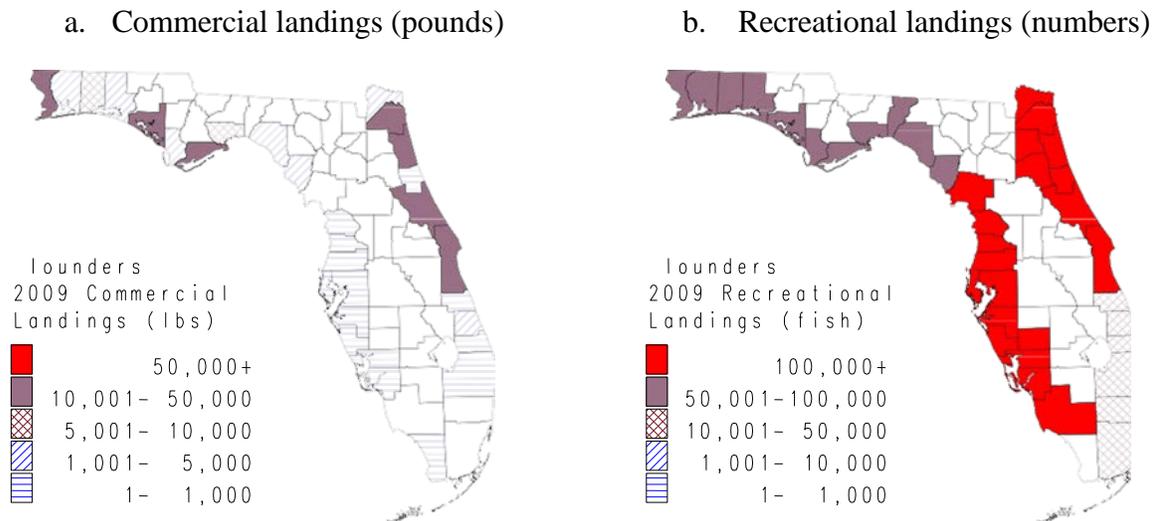


Figure 1 (a)-(b). Geographic distribution of flounders landed during 2009. (a) Commercial landings (pounds) by county; (b) Recreational landings (numbers of fish) by region.



WEIGHT DISTRIBUTIONS OF GIGGED FLOUNDER

At times, I have weighed my total catch and compared the average fish weight to the average fish length – not very useful. I have also at times weighed individual fish to work up my own length:weight relationship – but it would take too much time and would require thousands of measurements sorted seasonally to be accurate. Flounder weights vary not just with length, but also seasonally. In spring, the fish return from offshore and are on the skinny side. As baitfish move back inshore, and rising water temperatures increase the flounder metabolism, flounder can eat from 4% to 8% of their body weight per day when feeding actively (at higher water temperatures). So I no longer bother with using length to estimate weight.

If you still want to estimate weights of flounder by length, data from several state fisheries sites can be used to get a ballpark estimate:

SOUTH CAROLINA FLOUNDER LENGTH: WEIGHT DATA

SC Male			SC Female		
Age	length (in)	Wt (lbs)	Age	length (in)	Wt (lbs)
1	9.7	0.39	1	12.3	0.8
2	12	0.71	2	15.8	1.73
3	12.7	0.85	3	17.7	2.48
4	13.5	0.96	4	19.4	3.35
5	13.6	1.12	5	20.7	4
6			6	21.8	5.25
7			7	23.3	5.44

LENGTH AND WEIGHT DATA FOR SOUTH CAROLINA AND LOUISIANA FLOUNDER

Length (inches)	LA WL & Fish wt (lbs)	SC avg wt (lbs)
10	0.63	0.4
11	0.69	0.6
12	0.8	0.75
13	0.97	0.9
14	1.19	1.2
15	1.46	1.4
16	1.79	1.7
17	2.17	2.1
18	2.6	2.5
19	3.08	3
20	3.62	3.6
21	4.21	4.1

22	4.85	4.8
23	5.55	5.5
24	6.3	6.4
25	7.1	7.1
26	7.95	8.1
27	8.86	9.1
28	9.82	
29	10.83	
30	11.9	
31	13.02	
32	14.19	(← this is what Marvin catches)
33	15.41	
34	16.69	
35	18.02	
36	19.4	

ANY INTEREST IN A GIGGING EXCURSION?

I hope this has given you a decent overview of flounder gigging, and convinced you to give it a try. Amelia Island certainly holds the potential for successful gigging, but it all boils down to identifying and waiting for the appropriate season and critical optimum conditions (water clarity; wind strength and direction; moon phase and sky conditions; etc). Unfortunately, water clarity around inshore Amelia often is not conducive for gigging. But countless other options do exist in different locations to gig. Take your pick: the entire Atlantic coast of Florida; the entire Gulf Coast; Georgia; South Carolina; North Carolina; Virginia. Take a vacation break to fish and gig in a new location. I giggered in North Carolina for 30+ years, and Pamlico Sound is my favorite, with plenty of room and fish for anybody who wants to gig. There's nothing better than wading in Pamlico on the back side of Ocracoke Island or Portsmouth Island all night, and then surf fishing all day. In fall, the flounder move out of Pamlico Sound and the Core Sound to the ocean, and it's a gigging paradise when the flounder pile up on the inside of the barrier islands for their annual migration out the major inlets (Hatteras Inlet, Oregon Inlet, Ocracoke Inlet, Barden Inlet, Beaufort Inlet). Any interest in a trip, post your ideas on the NSFA web site.

Dave Braatz, 24 May 2017

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