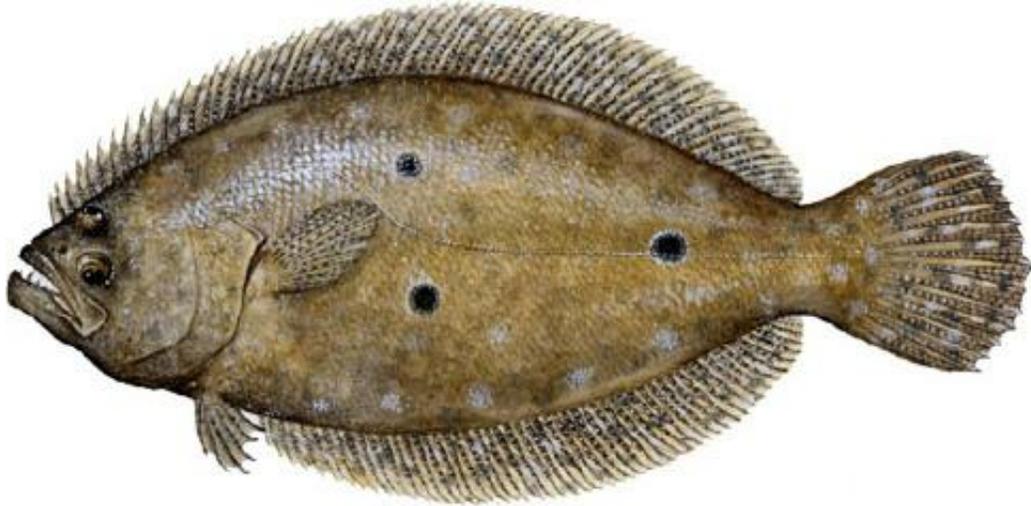


**DECEMBER'S BEST BET
SEBASTIAN INLET STATE PARK**



FLOUNDER

(Paralichthys albigutta\Paralichthys lethostigma)

DESCRIPTION: Belonging to the order of "flatfishes," all of Florida's flounders are lefteye flounders in the family Bothidae. During the pelagic larval stage of these fish, the right eye of the fish migrates to the left side of the body. The right side, or "blind side," of the fish rests on the surface of the sand or mud bottom. Most flounders can change their color and pattern rapidly to match that of the bottom substrate. They cover themselves with sand and lie in wait for their prey, which they catch with a sudden rush. The eyed side of the fish is generally olive colored with spots and or blotches, and the blind side of the fish is generally white in coloration. Of the two species commonly caught in the inlet, the gulf flounder bears three distinct "ocelli", or ringed spots that form a triangular pattern on the fish's colored side, the southern flounder lacks this distinction. Irregularities in flounder are not uncommon, with some fish being reversed (lefthanded to righthanded), and others being colored abnormally, usually resulting in piebald individuals. I know of one flounder caught at Sebastian Inlet that was completely colored on both sides of the fish! Between the two species, the gulf flounder is the smaller, seldom reaching lengths of over 16 inches. It is the first to show up in numbers in the inlet area in the fall, preceding the appearance of the larger southern flounder later in November and December. Most of Florida's flounders are found over mud and sand bottoms in estuaries and coastal waters to depths of 70 fathoms. Both the gulf and the southern flounder are found from North Carolina to Texas, however the southern is absent from south Florida. Flounder in excess of about 6 pounds are often called "doormats" by local fishermen, a comparison derived by the unusual shape of these fishes accompanied with an exceptional size. A once world record gulf flounder was taken at Sebastian Inlet in December of 1993, it weighed 5lbs. The all tackle record for southern flounder currently rests at 20lbs. 9oz, this fish being taken in Nassau Sound, Florida in December of 1983.

HEIGHT OF SEASON: Occurs in November and December here at Sebastian Inlet when roe laden females move out of the Indian River Lagoon, through the inlet, in order to spawn somewhere offshore in the Atlantic Ocean, probably at depths from 40 to 100 feet. Flounder can be taken "year around" at Sebastian Inlet and other peak months of activity generally occur in March and April (spawned out females are returning inshore) and again in August and September.

RULES AND REGULATIONS: Flounder must measure a minimum of 12 inches overall length in order to be kept and no person shall harvest more than a total of 10 flounder per day, nor possess while in or on state waters more than 10 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: Most flounder seem to be caught during daylight hours at Sebastian Inlet, occasionally they are taken during dark hours. At times slack tides in the inlet produce some of the hottest flounder fishing. Incoming and outgoing tides seem to both consistently produce fish throughout a season - one tide may be better fishing one week, then the other tide on the following week.

BAITS: Small live baits, especially mullets, pilchards, and mojarras work best for inlet flounder. Live shrimp will work, also. Flounder are occasionally caught on dead baits and artificials.

TACKLE: Almost exclusively fished with a "sliding sinker rig"—an egg sinker (½ to 1 ½ oz.) Fished above a mono leader (20 lb test) about 12 inches in length, tied to a single 1/0 or 2/0 hook.

METHOD: Flounder in the inlet seem to concentrate in areas where a rock bottom is mixed with sandy patches. Good spots include the rocks along the south shore of the inlet, the L-Dock by the campground, the cove area on the north side of the park, and occasionally the surf off the south jetty. Flounder are generally a "sit and ambush" type of predator—slowly move baits along bottom and cover area with your bait to more consistently catch flounder.

PREPARATION: Take care of what mother nature has given you - keep fish iced down or in a moist, cool sack. Never leave fish in the sun for long. Flounder is a great eating fish no matter how it is prepared—try small cut pieces deep fried in a light coating of equal parts fine corn meal and flour, or perhaps larger fillets stuffed with a shrimp or crabmeat stuffing! Keep only what you can use and return any unwanted fish carefully back to the water.

ALSO THIS MONTH: Look for sheepshead fishing to still be good to excellent for those using sandfleas and fiddler crabs around inlet structures like bridge pilings and jetty reinforcements. Pompano fishing should start to pick up this month for those fishing just north and south of the inlet on the beach, use sandfleas and fresh cut clam for best results. Large black drum are also a possibility off the north jetty this month, again use fresh clams or cut crabs to entice these bottom feeders.

Catch a doormat!
Happy Holidays, see you next month,
Ranger Ed Perry