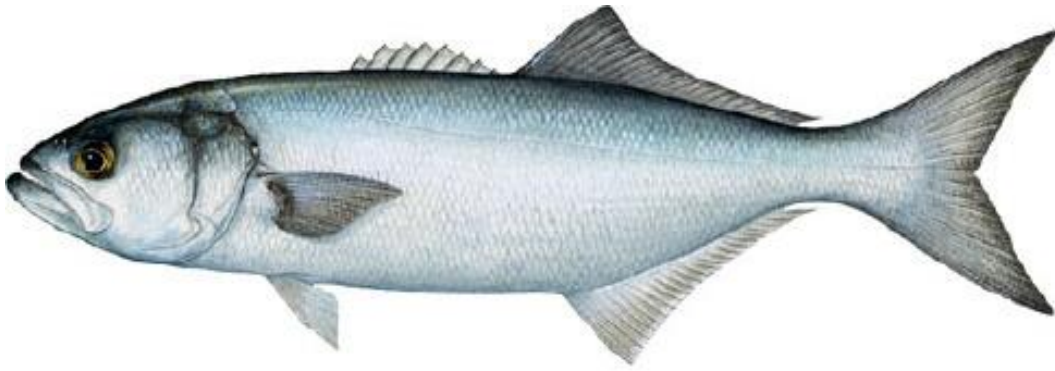


**FEBRUARY'S BEST BET
SEBASTIAN INLET STATE PARK**



BLUEFISH
(Pomatomus saltatrix)

DESCRIPTION: Bluefish are most recognizable by their silvery blue to greenish blue coloring and prominent, sharp teeth. Most bluefish caught at Sebastian Inlet are young schooling fish that weigh from 1-1/2 to 4 pounds. Members of a given school tend to all be about the same size. Spawning occurs offshore in the spring and summer. Sometimes large migrating fish appear in the inlet in the springtime, scaling up to 16 pounds. However, these fish are seldom as palatable as the smaller winter run bluefish because they are thin for their size after spawning. Fish like this are obvious to the angler when the head area is bigger around than the stomach area, and are best released to fatten up again. Bluefish range from Bermuda to Argentina but are rare or absent between south Florida and northern South America. Bluefish are widely but irregularly distributed elsewhere in Atlantic and Indian Oceans. The Florida record bluefish stands at 22 lbs. 3 oz, and fish have been unofficially reported up to 50 lbs. worldwide.

HEIGHT OF SEASON: Seasons vary geographically, but the height of bluefishing occurs at Sebastian Inlet usually in February and March, with fishing being fair through late spring. Good action for bluefish briefly occurs in the fall months of September and October when the fish are following migrating schools of finger mullet along the coast.

RULES AND REGULATIONS: Bluefish must remain in whole condition until landed ashore. Bluefish must be a minimum length of 12 inches to the fork of the tail to be kept. There is a daily recreational bag limit of 10 fish per person. Bluefish are now designated as a restricted species. There is no closed season for bluefish at this time, however, keep up to date on fishing rules—something is almost always changing. You will need a saltwater fishing license.

TIMES AND TIDES: Best conditions for catching bluefish at Sebastian Inlet are outgoing tides (river water is moving out the inlet into the Atlantic) that fall near/during or just after dusk. Water flushed from the river out through the inlet generally holds more feeding opportunities for the schools of bluefish (especially during shrimp runs) and these tides draw the schools in closer to an angler's range.

BAITS: Bluefish are known for their eagerness to take just about any saltwater bait at times, natural or artificial. Best natural baits include live mullets, pilchards, mojarras, and shrimp, but "fresh dead" is almost as productive. When schooling bluefish are voraciously feeding nearly all artificials are productive with anglers favoring the swimming plugs and heavy spoons that make casting an ease. When fish are scattered, stick with natural baits. When they are schooling, enjoy using artificials.

TACKLE: Tackle for bluefishing varies greatly with angler preference. It is standard to use a wire leader when fishing with natural baits to prevent cutoff from fish that engulf hooks. I still prefer mono leaders tied to a long shank style 1/0 or 2/0 hook—the shank of the hook acts as a wire "leader" to prevent cutoff. This technique fished "sliding sinker rig" style seems to increase strikes when bluefish are scattered or slow to bite. When artificials are used, heavy mono leaders are adequate but again, most prefer to use wire. Seldom will a strike cut off an artificial lure (perhaps so if it is a very small lure). A medium action 7 - 8 foot rod and spinning reel loaded with 12 - 15 lb. test is adequate for most bluefishing at Sebastian Inlet.

METHOD: Throw off of the ends of the jetties into the inlet channel during outgoing tides. Fish congregate where the river water meets the ocean water, tossing around hapless bait. Diving birds are often indicative of feeding bluefish—DO NOT throw into feeding birds, and if one is caught, do your best to retrieve the bird and lure—DON'T CUT THE LINE! Treat these birds with the care and respect they deserve, it is their fish before it is ours. When it seems slow in the inlet, surf fishing for blues just north or south of the inlet can be productive, use cut finger mullet. Another productive method is to drift swimming plugs from the catwalks during strong times of the tides. This is an easy way to fish for blues because the swimming plug and the current do all the work for the angler. Tie rods down to the catwalk railing if not being held in hand. Again, be careful of pelicans and other flying birds—don't drift lines out too far.

PREPARATION: Many anglers prefer to "bleed" bluefish by cutting the throat just under the gills. This is supposed to make the meat less "strong" flavored. Bluefish are best filleted and skinned. I go one step further and cut out the bloodline that lies in the center of each fillet, turning a whole fish into 4 long strips when I'm done. Bluefish flesh is an oily, good textured meat that generally lightens after being cooked. It is said to be one of the most "healthy" fishes for eating. Cook only what you'll eat in one sitting, it gets strong "leftover". Freeze fillets in cold water with all the air removed. Freezer ziplocs work great for this. Caught fish should be iced down or placed in the shade in a cool, moist sack. To me, bluefish taste best deep fried or broiled.

ALSO THIS MONTH: Look for decent action with pompano, some black drum and sheepshead still off the jetties, some seatrout mostly at night along with increased shrimp action.

Remember to take only what you need, and good luck!

Ranger Ed Perry