

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



**SPANISH MACKEREL**  
(*Scomberomorus maculatus*)

**DESCRIPTION:** Spanish mackerel have a greenish grey to black back that shades to silver on the sides. Many golden yellow irregular spots occur on the sides above and below the lateral line that makes a gentle curve to the base of the tail. The Spanish mackerel shares Florida's waters with the kingfish (*S. cavalla*), or king mackerel, and the cero (*S. regalis*), or cero mackerel. Ceros occur mainly in south Florida, however the "Spanish" and "kings" occur statewide. Spanish mackerel differ from both cero and king mackerel by lacking scales on the pectoral fins, and Spanish mackerel can be distinguished from young kings by their differing lateral lines. Kingfish have a lateral line that makes a drastic drop behind the second dorsal fin. Spanish mackerel are a schooling species that migrate northward in the springtime and return to southerly waters when water temperatures drop below about 70 degrees. Spanish mackerel are common along the western Atlantic north to Cape Cod, and south around Florida and into the Gulf of Mexico to the Yucatan. They can range as far south as Brazil. Spanish mackerel are an inshore and nearshore species, often frequenting coastal estuaries and bays, inlets and nearshore reefs. The all tackle world record listing for this species by the I.G.F.A. weighed 13 lbs. and was caught in Ocracoke Inlet, North Carolina in 1987.

**HEIGHT OF SEASON:** Spanish mackerel can be found in the Sebastian Inlet area at just about any month of the year, however peak months for activity of this species normally occur in the summer and the fall months at the inlet, with June usually being one of the best times to catch them. Roe-laden females are more commonly caught in the summer months when they are present in the inlet feeding on vast schools of pilchards, herrings, and anchovies, whereas the fish that are seen later in the fall probably represent that of a winter migration into more southerly waters.

**RULES AND REGULATIONS:** Spanish mackerel are a restricted species that must possess a minimum length of 12 inches from the tip of the nose from the rear center edge of the tail (fork) in order to be kept. Spanish mackerel must remain in whole condition until landed ashore. There is a daily recreational bag limit of 15 fish per angler. Keep up to date on changing rules and regulations. You will need a saltwater fishing license.

**TIMES AND TIDES:** Spanish mackerel are mainly caught during daylight hours at Sebastian Inlet. Fishing may be good at anytime through the day but more active feeding times tend to focus on morning and afternoon periods. Good fishing can occur on both incoming or outgoing tides, high or low, with the best fishing for Spanish mackerel being associated more with the cleaner and higher saline waters and the times and weather associated with these periods. Some of the best fishing can occur as a cold front is passing over, or has just passed over and winds pushing out of the north chop up the surf zone and push clean ocean water around the north jetty.

**BAITS:** Spanish mackerel are known for the frustration they cause anglers at times, forcing them to go through every lure in their tackle box, while failing to draw a strike on any of them. Spanish mackerel are naturally live bait feeders that prey on a variety of small fish baits, shrimp, and even squid. Small jigs are often successful as artificial baits, as well as small spoons and feathers. If these fail to draw strikes from the mackerel it is often the method of presentation and not the artificial itself that is at fault. Castnetting the natural baits the mackerel may be seen feeding on and presenting them correctly (see “method”) will often bring success.

**METHOD:** The best areas to fish for Spanish mackerel are the ocean sides of the two jetties, especially the north jetty. When artificials are used to catch mackerel they should be small enough to draw the interest of the fish by simulating a natural prey item and they should move in a manner that entices the fish to strike at it. Often when there are multitudes of bait around the inlet and the Spanish mackerel are present, these fish are naturally well fed. Under these conditions it may take an injured bait, or perhaps one that appears “off guard” or lost from the main school to get a mackerel excited enough to strike it. These are the behaviors that the angler should try to simulate. Present artificial baits beyond or along the edges of naturally occurring baits. Move them so they appear crippled, especially by periodically jerking them in an up-down and /or side to side fashion. There are some “home made” artificials that consist of a weighted float followed by small length of wire, and ended with a long shank hook that is skirted by a two inch length of drinking straw that are extremely productive mackerel rigs. When these jigs are jerked across the top of the water their noisy slicing effect at the surface mimics mackerel feeding activity which hopefully draws the attention of hungry mackerel in the area which might mistake the trailing straw as an unfortunate glass minnow! Live bait fishing for Spanish mackerel is also very productive. Freshly castnetted local baits are a must for this type of presentation. A popular method at the inlet consists simply of a float followed by about 2-3 feet of line tied to a #1 or 1/0 long shank hook. I prefer to use “Mustad” #1 carlisle bronze panfish hooks for this rig. Try to match the size and weight of the hook to the live bait you are using, don’t weight down a good live bait too much so it can’t do its work! It should move as freely as possible. The long shank of the hook acts as a “wire leader” protecting your monofilament from the razor sharp teeth of the mackerel—most of the time! Sometimes a hook may be cut off but the simplicity of this rig produces far more strikes than a rig laden with wire, swivels, and beads. Keep rigs simple when fishing for Spanish mackerel, especially in clean water conditions. Heavy and unnecessary tackle will often make Spanish mackerel turn up their noses at otherwise taste-tempting baits! Swivels and other tackle can sometimes be mistaken as darting glass minnows by the feeding mackerel, especially when using artificial baits, and they will occasionally draw strikes to other areas of the rig than the hook!

**PREPARATION:** I prefer to skin and then fillet my Spanish mackerel, then removing the feather and rib cage bones from the fillet. Skinning of the mackerel is best done by first “outlining” both sides of the fish’s fleshy area with a sharp knife. After this is done a clean pair of pliers will pull the skin off easily by starting just behind the head region of the fish and pulling the skin down to the tail of the fish. After this is done, the meat is easily filleted from the backbone of the fish. I believe Spanish mackerel is best broiled, but it is almost as equally tasty deep-fried. You may have your own favorite recipe. Keep your catch cool and or iced down. Only take what you can use.

**ALSO THIS MONTH:** Look for mangrove snapper fishing to pick up along with some blue runners, leatherjackets, and lookdowns to be showing up around the jetties. The presence of crabs floating out on the inlet’s outgoing tides may produce some action with redfish off the tips of the jetties. Snook season will be closed this month through the end of August.

Good luck fishing,

Ranger Ed Perry!