

First Front Drum

What Bites When the Mercury Plummet?

By Max Branyon

As appeared in Shallow Water Angler Magazine – August/September 2005

Dressed for snow blowing, not Florida wade fishing, I found it hard to believe that we'd find frisky schools of hungry drum schooled up in painfully cold shallows. The wind was howling out of the north at 25 knots and the chill factor was in the 20s.

But we braved it because drums have a curious habit of schooling up in the shallows after a freeze, of all times.

"If I get stuck in the mud," I told pal Capt. Mark Benson, "you'll have to call a wrecker with a winch to get me out."

"I feel like an astronaut," Mark said, wobbling from the SUV with arms stretched out from his side because of the added girth. I was thinking more along the lines of the Pillsbury Doughboy.

We zipped down the Indian River in Benson's outboard powered canoe-like Gheenoe, flushing hundreds of cormorants, pelicans and seagulls hunkered down on nearby sandbars. When we arrived at the flat we planned to wade, ladyfish were lying atop the water on their sides, barely finning. It was that cold. Yet mullet, seemingly unscathed, zigzagged crazily just beneath the surface of the water like F-15 fighter jets. There was bait aplenty, but would drum really feed on a day like this?

Hell, yes. According to Dr. Grant Gilmore, the scientist who first recorded and created the taxonomic classifications for the 800-some fishes swimming in Treasure Coast, Florida waters, most members of the drum family (*Scianidae spp.*) can withstand radical drops in water temps.

Drum run a higher risk of over-heating in summer than freezing in winter.

"When we had the great freeze of 1977 and it snowed in Grand Bahama, one of our aquaculture ponds at Harbor Branch (Marine Lab) that was full of spotted sea trout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*) froze over with ice half an inch thick. The trout did just fine. Conversely, we could never keep fish caught in July for the hatchery alive, yet we had 100% survival on winter-caught fish."

Black drum (*Pogonias cromis*) have an especially impressive range. Anglers catch

them in both Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic waters, in habitats as diverse as the Chesapeake Bay, Texas hyper-saline flats, the Louisiana bayous, Low Country Marshes, and the Everglades.

Gilmore explains that trout, red drum and black drum are "warm temperate estuarine species," which means they have evolved a physiology that can take a wide temperature range, particularly on the cold side. They run a much higher risk of over-heating in summer than freezing in winter. In fact, in the heat most drums tend to be much more sluggish and reluctant feeders than during cold snaps.

The fish we found were anything but reluctant feeders. A redfish tailed just ahead, and while Mark made a beeline for it, I spied the tail tips of a pair of black drum on a shallow ridge in the distance. I kept one eye on that spot and the other on Mark.

He waded to within 30 feet of the red, and then dropped a soft-bodied artificial shrimp softly in its path. He twitched the bait, then leaned back and set the hook. The fish made several unusually long runs before giving up. And it bolted out of Mark's hand the moment he placed it gently into the water and started to revive it.

No one resembling the Pillsbury Doughboy was going to out fish me, so I stood stone still, using my peripheral vision and other senses to scan the water. The winter winds had clouded the water, and I needed a tail to show, or at least swirl. There was a swirl to my right, and then a wet fin tip flashed. The plastic shrimp landed a few feet from the spot,

In most Atlantic waters, red drum will outnumber their black cousins. But both species tend to congregate in the largest schools inshore during the coldest weather.

There are places – Savannah, Georgia marshes, the Mosquito Lagoon and Wilmington, North Carolina come to mind - where schools of both species school up and cover acres of shallow flats. Offshore aggregations usually mean spawning fish. And inshore schools packed into the shallows aren't up there to share body heat. The schools are there to eat. Again, these are cold-blooded animals that evolved to withstand, or even enjoy cold water. They're up shallow because the cold or some other variable drove large quantities of prey onto the flats. Usually they're feeding on shrimp hibernating in dark mud, or on mullet feeding or getting warm on muddy or algae-covered flats.

so not to spook the fish or any schoolmates nearby. I raised the rod slowly to swim the shrimp in a natural manner and felt a tap-tap. I reeled up slack, felt weight and set the hook. The drum – which I assumed from the soft bite was a black drum – made short bursts, and each time I got it close to me, it took off again.

Eventually, I worked it in, and released my first fish to fight again, and again and again in fact. After all, black drum can live 50 or more years. A drum that old can weigh somewhere between 100 and 150 pounds. The largest one on record weighed 146 pounds. The Florida record is 93 pounds, but Maryland's Chesapeake Bay once yielded a black drum that weighed 111 pounds. The largest recorded by a sport angler in Texas is 78 pounds. However, most that I've caught, or seen caught on a shallow flat weigh from four to 10 pounds. The average Florida female spawning black drum weighs just over 13 pounds.

Like most scions of Scianidae, black drum can be skittish, but in cold weather they can get so engrossed in grubbing the bottom that they can swim right up to you. On another wading trip, Benson claims he looked down and saw a tail tip crease the surface. Believing it to be a mullet, he ignored it and continued casting. A few seconds later, he saw a flash as the "mullet" rolled over on its side. He reeled in his line, flipped a plastic shrimp to it and caught an 8-pound black drum.

Although redfish are arguably America's most popular temperate gamefish, nowadays anglers accept the added challenge of getting their scent- and vibration-feeding cousins to take an artificial. I state without confessing it

that I've had better results with fresh shrimp. However, since I cast artificial lures most of the time, with some flies mixed in, most of my flats drum are caught that way. Flies and lures with rattles, and bristling, vibrating materials such as bucktail work most effectively.

Though most black drum encountered on flats are well under 10 pounds, I witnessed Mark Benson take a 30 pound giant black with a fly

rod. Another friend, Wallace Slater of Oak Hill, Florida, was fishing along a narrow stretch of the Intracoastal Waterway near his home on a cold winter day and spotted a giant drum swim onto a sand bar. Wallace cast to the fish with a 12-pound spin rod, and the 64-1/2 pounder took a 1/4-ounce, Crazy Eyes jig. During the fight, Dick said that he had to wave at passing yachts to stay clear and give them fighting room.

Sight-fishing Tips for Winter Schools

When casting to a school of feeding drum, cast to the edges of the school to lessen the chance of spooking the whole lot. This approach is imperative when fly fishing, lest you line the entire aggregation and send them stampeding off the flat. Also, when a fish on the edge of the school grabs your lure, you stand a better chance of keeping it away from the school. I've often caught multiple fish from the same school this way.

Choose fluorocarbon leaders in 20- to 30-pound-test range to prevent the drum's rough scales from chaffing your line during long fights.

Contrary to popular opinion, black drum will readily take a fly. The most popular color is black, but any crab or shrimp imitation will work well, particularly if it is weighted and bounces along bottom. I prefer an 8-weight fly rod, but if you're targeting oversize blacks, choose a heavier stick. They fight doggedly, and you'll appreciate the leverage.

When using spinning or conventional tackle, use medium to medium-heavy tackle with 10- to 17-pound test line, and a 20- to 30-pound fluorocarbon leader. Top artificials include soft plastic baits such as the DOA Shrimp, Exude jerkbaits, or similar scent-injected plastic baits. Also, small jigs are very effective. Bonefish skimmer jigs in black, brown or tan are particularly good. Black drum will even strike spoons at times. For black drum that are not receptive to artificials, use live or fresh, dead shrimp. Small crabs, sand fleas and even cut mullet are also effective. With bait, circle hooks will prevent gut-hooking.

Stealth is very important when fishing for black drum in skinny water. Approach fish quietly, whether poling, using an electric motor or wading. When you locate a tailing fish, cast conservatively and avoid erratic retrieves, and as you would with any flats fish, try not to "charge" the fish with your lure. [SWA](#)

Top Shallows

BLACK DRUM inhabit Florida estuaries as juveniles and occasionally move into “near-shelf” waters as adults. Most drum are caught on Florida’s Atlantic coast from Volusia to Martin County. The Indian River’s sand bars, flats and spoil island drop-offs from Ft. Pierce to Stuart offer excellent drum fishing.

Sight fishing for true giants is best in the shallows just north of Cape Canaveral’s NASA Causeway in both deep and shallow water during spawning season. Also, check the flats all along the Intracoastal Waterway in that region. On Florida’s Gulf coast, I’ve caught lots of drum south of Cedar Key in both the Chassahowitzka and Homosassa rivers, especially around shallow oyster bars. If you don’t insist on catching drum by sight, fishing the Tampa Bay bridges hold some of the biggest black drum in the state. For smaller drum, try the flats around Tampa Bay.

TEXAS ANGLERS looking for a switch from trout and reds can look for spawning fish from February through April, though some spawning also occurs in June and July. Large drum gather in schools before spawning. The best drum fishing, according to Texas Parks and Wildlife, is from Corpus Christi to Brownsville on the lower Gulf coast, and summer months seem to be best for the extreme shallows. Tailers can be stalked on the shallow flats of Laguna Madre.

According to LOUISIANA FISHERIES biologists, black drum spawn in the evening from 7 to 10 p.m. when water temps are between 59 and 75 degrees. Full and new moon phases seem best. During pre-spawn, mature black drum form large schools in offshore waters. After spawning occurs, look for the fish to return to shallow coastal bays, rivers and creeks.

IN MISSISSIPPI WATERS, I’ve caught drum near Pascagoula, Pass Christian and Bay St. Louis. Other favorite drum-fishing sites include the Chandeleur Islands off Biloxi and some of the closer islands, including Cat Island and around the Louisiana Marsh several miles off Bay St. Louis. Live shrimp is still my favorite bait for Biloxi Bay and the Louisiana marsh. Around the islands, I catch them on jigs.
– M.B.