

## Something About Sheepshead

There is something appealing about sheepshead. They are abundant, can be caught in lots of places without the need of a boat, offer a real angling challenge, put up an excellent fight, and make fine table fare, yet don't get the credit they deserve. They lack the popularity of red drum, or the glamour of billfish and tarpon. Nevertheless, for the diehard sheepshead angler the pursuit can border on obsession.

Fishing for sheepshead, as often described by freshwater enthusiasts, is "a lot like fishing for brim". However, the vertical presentation and subtlety required in detecting bites seems more akin to drop shotting, a finesse technique employed by freshwater bass fishermen.

Just about anybody can learn to catch sheepshead. Fish around pilings or rocks that are encrusted with barnacles, using fiddler crabs, and with a little practice you are likely to be successful. These fish are typically small, in the one to two pound range. Consistently catching six to eight pound fish can be more challenging, and herein lays the true appeal. Big sheepshead, like any other large, mature, fish adapt differently to their environment and take fewer chances than smaller fish. Fooling these larger fish requires more thought and patience.

Understanding the diet of sheepshead is the key to catching the larger fish. Consider first, their teeth, which at first glance, closely resemble those of humans. These incisor-like teeth, located on both sides of the front of the jaw, are designed for crushing the shells of clams, oysters, and mussels. Because the teeth of juvenile fish are not as well developed, their diet tends to consist more of small crabs and fish. Fiddler crabs are the most widely used bait for catching sheepshead, but ask any angler who consistently catches big sheepshead and they will tell you the most effective baits are clams, mussels and oysters. Here is where patience comes into play. You are going to get fewer bites as compared to fishing with fiddler crabs, but the bites are usually from quality fish.

The coastal waters of South Carolina support a healthy sheepshead population and thanks to proactive management the productive fishery should continue, and even improve. In 2012 sheepshead were removed from the Federal Snapper-Grouper complex, leaving management of the species to the discretion of the State. The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources opted for a 14-inch total length size limit and a 10 fish per person bag limit not to exceed 30 fish per boat per day.

December is one of the best months to catch sheepshead in South Carolina. If you are one of those anglers who may have packed up their gear for the season or even taken to the woods to pursue other quarry, consider giving sheepshead fishing a shot. It's a great way to extend your fishing season and diversify your angling experiences.