

Red Grouper

By Capt. Chuck Eichner

Water LIFE Inshore

A great fishing day is generally a combination of skill, perseverance and luck. In recent weeks a bit of luck has come my way offshore. My fishing partner Mickey Kieferle got this all started when we discussed what type of fishing we were going to do the following day. He suggested we go offshore and focus only on grouper. My first thought was that I was not prepared for a big offshore adventure, no tackle prep, no chart study or fresh reports.

But at 6:00 a.m. the following morning we were loading the boat and by 7:30 a.m. we had two dozen pinfish and hundreds of white bait in the well. For a bonus, we had a dozen ladyfish iced down from an unsuccessful tarpon trip days before.

Heading towards Boca Grande Mickey declared that we do not even stop the boat until we are in 80 feet of water, and then look for fish. So onward we traveled aimlessly in the westerly direction. After several miles I stopped the boat and declared we must pick a point on a chart as a place to stop. I looked into my logbook and pulled out an ancient waypoint that looked to be at the right water depth. This number was given to me from a fisherman from 25 years ago and was never checked out.

At 35mph it took over an hour to get to the waypoint. Viewing the sonar, the bottom was not impressive so we drove under plane, watching the sonar for a good bottom and fish. Baitfish began to appear in large pods over a hard bottom and the first line was dropped. Mickey had his lines rigged the night before and feathered a pinfish into the depths. As I dig for leader he yelps with a fish on! A gag grouper just undersize. Ordering him to put his rod down so that I could rig met with a big grin as he dropped a fat pilchard to the bottom. Game on again, this time a 6 pound red grouper!

The winds were out of the northwest at 5mph and a perfect drift persisted. With two lines overboard, the next 4 hours proved to be the best offshore fishing I had ever experienced, at least for grouper.

In an area of one square mile we managed to hook and release nearly 50 red grouper! Four fish made it into the box and releasing 6- to 13-pound fish became common.



This red grouper was caught 'smokin' a ladyfish!

This was not rocket-science fishing. A good looking bottom, baitfish located on the bottom and slow drifting pinfish, cut ladyfish, squirrel fish and pilchards convinced reckless red grouper that dinner was being served. The bite was nearly non-stop the entire trip. The rigs were simple- bottom rigs with sliding sinkers or a bucktail tipped with bait. I even fished a 7 inch bass assassin on the back of a bucktail and whacked plenty of fish. These fish were super fat and coughed up small minnows and shrimp at boat side.

The following week our enthusiasm for this new sport led us to plan another trip. A handful of other anglers joined us to offset costs and after catching bait we headed offshore. Excellent sea conditions allowed us to make good time to land in the same area as the week before.

I cautioned the anglers not to expect a repeat of the week prior but I was sure we would connect with some fish.

With our first drift under way I quickly realized that the wind and tide had us moving in a different direction than anticipated. As I shouted out that we missed our mark, Mike in front of the boat grunted with a nice fish on. Within seconds we each struck on a nice fish and four anglers began to work their fish off the bottom.



Mike's fish was only 6 pounds, but way above the legal 20-inch mark. I told him that he might end up releasing 12 pounders if he kept the small one, so back in the drink it went. As we continued on this drift pattern we caught fish all along a 1/3 of a mile stretch. For the next three hours we set the hook on many fish - all grouper! With 6 big ones in the cooler, Ken Ice had the big fish at an estimated 16 pounds. On the horizon, a storm cloud pattern had set up for as far as the eye could see to the east. Meanwhile, to the west, a less threatening, but equally large, storm grew. With the pressure on we began to catch sub-legal fish over and over. As the captain, I was challenged to make the decision to leave or hang on to get our limit. Meanwhile, I was constantly reminded about the legal fish we had been releasing...of course, all my fault.

So we fished on a little longer and had a sailfish show up at the back of the boat. A first for all of us and of course we did not have a free line rig ready to pitch to this beautiful pelagic. On this day we had live squid swim past the boat, had witnessed flying fish break from the water with big fish in pursuit and seen lots of activity on the end of the stick. With the throttle down and heading east bound we estimated we had boated 40 grouper and perhaps lost another 20 in about three hours of fishing. Without a doubt lady luck had been with us two weeks in a row. A small bit of skill, good bait and an area that apparently has everything a fish could want. Fertile waters, calm seas and gentle breezes are the time to go offshore and explore.

Capt. Chuck Eichner operates Action Flats Backcountry Charters and can be contacted for charters at 941-505-0003 or visit www.backcountry-charters.com

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