

How to catch Sheepshead...

The fact that Sheepshead wear convict stripes is for a good reason - you will begin to refer to them as the Striped Bandit! Sheepshead are not hard to catch but their behavior of constant nibbling at, and stealing, your bait can be frustrating. Using the correct tackle and an understanding of how they eat will enable you to catch Sheepshead more frequently.

Anyone who has tried to remove a hook from a Sheepshead's mouth has seen their unique teeth. These fish eat mollusks and crustaceans and use those teeth to crush their food with lightening fast strikes. It is the combination of their eating habits and the construction of their mouth that make them so hard to hook. There is a relatively small soft area around their lips and that is about the only place a razor sharp hook can penetrate to give you a solid hook-up.

Sometimes, the fish will peck at the bait - a few light taps - then rush in to take the bait - biting down on the hook with its hard mouth parts. You will think they are hooked and begin to retrieve when they just open their mouths and let go of your hook. Sheepshead are real bait thief pros! Quite often, you will haul in your bait to find that all you have left is the exoskeleton of a shrimp - all the meat is gone!

Most successful Sheepshead fisherman prefer to use braided line to increase the ability to feel the Sheepshead nibbling that signals a potential hook-up. The braid also improves the resistance to abrasion that is so common to monofilament line in the environment where the Sheepshead live. It can be really bothersome to actually hook a Sheepshead and then lose it on the barnacles on the structure surrounding them.

For the new angler, fishing for Sheepshead can be a good place to start. The tackle requirements are minimal and you don't even need a boat to catch these fish. You can fish from docks, bridges, piers, jetties, rip-rap piles or your own seawall. One way to get the Sheepshead in a feeding mood is to scrape barnacles from the structure at low tide and fish the natural chum as the tide flows in.

The best time to fish for Sheepshead is during the incoming and outgoing tides - preferably both so you want to target a day when high tide is near midday. High tides cover the structure with water and the tidal flows move tasty crustaceans within reach of the hungry Sheepshead. The months of February and March also coincide with spawning season and the fish are more ravenous.

The best tackle to use is a simple dropper loop consisting of an egg sinker, swivel, a 24" - 36" section of leader (flurocarbon or monofilament) and a good quality 1/0 light circle hook. The hook must be extremely sharp - you may need to change it during the course of the day - or at least file a sharp point. They must not be too fat - or too cheap. This is not the place to try and save money on your tackle.

You want to drop your hook close to the structure - and using a dropper loop gives you the best chance to feel the action on your hook. Tie the hook with a perfection loop to give the bait better wiggle action. Maintain contact with the bottom - but do not let your line just lay on the bottom - just keep in touch with the bottom by slowly lifting up on your line until you feel the egg sinker hit bottom.

You can also use 1/8 oz jigs - yes... 1/8 oz. They will gently drift down in front of the Sheepshead, so be ready for a quick hit. Tip the jig with a piece of peeled shrimp. The best color? Red, White, Chartreuse all work - try different colors to see which one they like today.

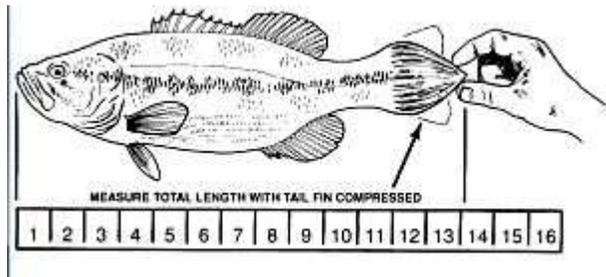
The best bait is live bait and fiddler crabs top the list... however, they are hard to find. Most club members prefer to use live shrimp - but live and freshly shucked clam and oysters are a good bet. Less effective would be frozen shrimp or sand fleas... they are readily available at most marinas and some hardware stores on island.

Remember you need to be alert - Sheepshead fishing is not the stare around, lost in thought type of fishing... if you doze off - or lose focus - you will spend a lot of time baiting your hook!

Sheepshead are a restricted species - which means they have both a legal size limit and a bag limit.

Sheepshead must be larger than 12" - measured from the tip of the mouth to the end of a squeezed tail.

Squeezed tail means just that - you squeeze or pinch the tail ends toward the middle of the tail - the end of the edges is where you measure



There is also a bag limit of 15 fish per angler. You can catch and release as many as you like, but you can only keep 15. A fish that you have out of the water for release, or to measure, does not count as part of your bag limit as long as you safely return the fish to the water. From club member experience, keeping just legal sized fish will provide you with very little to eat when the fish is filleted. Most members shoot for at least 15" length fish to put in the fish box. Sheepshead are more difficult to clean and render a minimal amount of edible meat compared to the size of the fish. You must have a very sharp knife - and will likely need to re-sharpen it during the filleting process.

Filleting of a Sheepshead should be done with caution. I recommend using a filleting glove - one that has chain mail built in to prevent the knife tip from poking your hand as it slips on the thick scales - or the spiky fins of this fish. These filleting gloves can be obtained at local hardware stores, boating stores or Walmart. As with any fish filleting, always cut "away from the hands". Done properly, you will end up with two nice fillets. Flip the skin side down and scrape the meat off the skin. Be careful not to forget to cut a small "V" section out of the center of each fillet, removing a line of tiny bones. You may hear these called "the V bones" by the experienced anglers.