

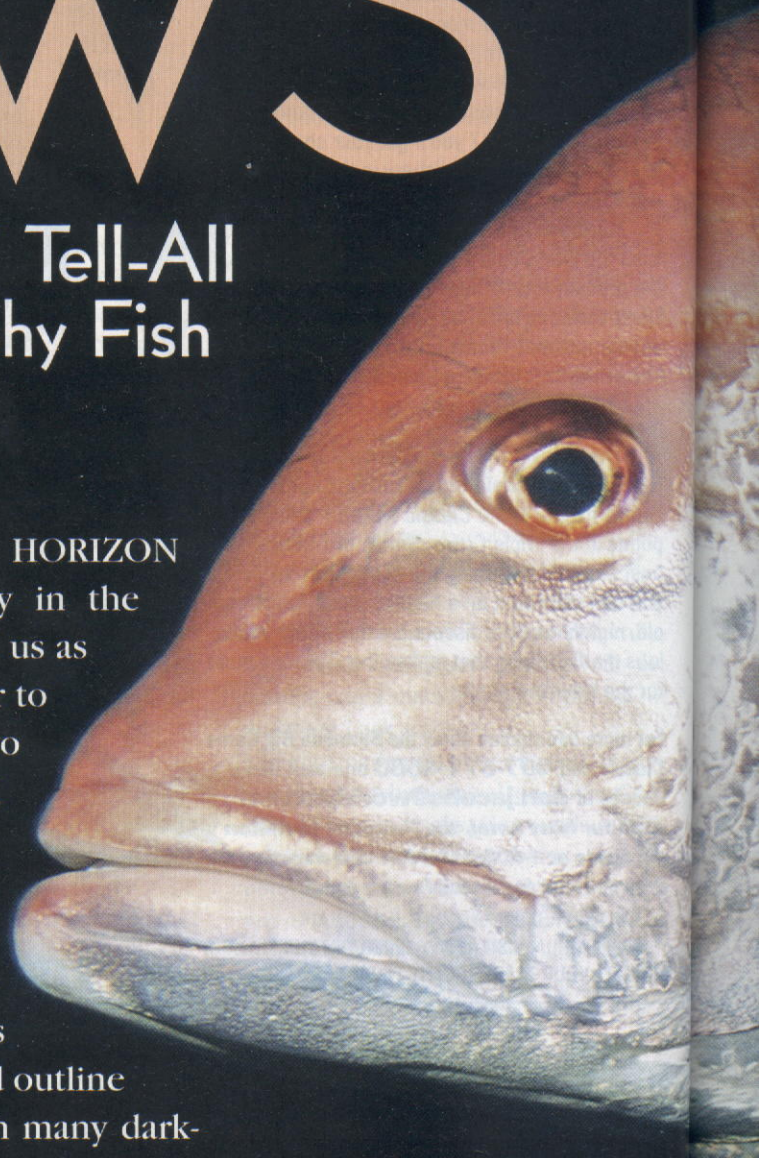
SLEUTHING FOR SOWS

Texas Snapper Addicts' Tell-All
Tricks for Hooking Trophy Fish

BY TED CARYL

THE DISTANT OIL RIGS ON THE HORIZON appeared to rise and fall slightly in the waves, and a warm breeze greeted us as I slowed my 24-foot Boston Whaler to trolling speed. We quickly forgot the two hours of running in a slightly choppy Gulf, eagerly anticipating the moment at hand.

Rik Jacobsen and I gazed into the depth recorder and watched the LCD picture scroll by. The first few telltale red dots appeared and coalesced into a huge mass that took up most of the screen. The dark-red outline of the structure showed at the bottom with many dark-red clusters above it. We glanced at each other, sporting stupid grins. We were about to experience the best red snapper fishing the upper Texas Gulf Coast has to offer — and nobody else was around. Just the way we like it!



We'd spent weeks preparing. For true snapper addicts like us, the game isn't just about catching as many fish as we can load into the boat. The holy grail in our quest is the tantalizingly elusive sow red snapper, big red specimens that weigh 18 to 35 pounds. Catching this prey involves modern electronics, but first you must find the numbers to plug into the GPS. Good old-fashioned detective work is a prerequisite.

UNLIKELY DUO

Nobody conducts a better search than my buddy Rik Jacobsen, of Houston, one of the best snapper captains on the upper Texas Coast. Jacobsen looms large but has a twinkle in his eye like Santa Claus. His tastes remain simple, and he cares nothing about appearance — his fishing shirts are full of holes, and his tennis shoes look like they came out of the surf. His hands could pass for the paws of a grizzly. He routinely uses those hands to control the numerous Atlantic sharpnose and blacktip sharks we encounter in the Gulf. He simply grabs them behind the head and dislodges the jig with his free hand. He releases the sharks, no worse for wear, into the crystal-blue depths.

Jacobsen has made the Gulf his home for 48 years; he was raised on loran-A, nearly the equivalent of the maps Columbus used. He has run loran lines for over 30 years. When the time comes to search for big sow snapper, he is the man.

Many have said we're an unlikely pair. My type-A competitive nature and Jacobsen's seemingly nonchalant attitude make us appear to be opposites.



SUSAN GROES / REEL LOUISIANA ADVENTURES

Tackle up at drops where you expect to catch big fish. Heftier snapper tend to be more aggressive and may be the first to bite at a new drop.

We met about 15 years ago at a boat ramp. I was entering a secret number into my loran unit, and he approached me. We discussed bottom structure, and he told me where he would be fishing that day.

I took my crew to my secret spot, and then went to where Jacobsen was fishing, about 6 miles away. Our catch was better than theirs that day. I found out later that Jacobsen was unconcerned because he had discreetly stolen my secret location by looking over my

shoulder at the boat ramp. This game of finding unknown structure on which to locate our elusive grail can be a complex and intriguing hobby.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Jacobsen and I fish primarily out of Matagorda, Texas, about halfway between Galveston to the north and Corpus Christi to the south. Because of the gradual slope of the Gulf bottom off Texas, we usually head 30 miles or more offshore, into federal waters.

The federal red snapper season runs April 21 to October 31 each year. Texas waters, inside 9 miles, remain open all year, but legal snapper can be tough to find in the shallower depths.

Anglers can readily find Gulf GPS numbers in printed form. Jacobsen published his own book in 2004, with more than 300 locations, called *Advanced Red Snapper Fishing Master 5th Edition* (www.redsnapperfishing.com).

Carl Christoph, of Friendswood, another well-known captain on the upper Texas coast, published a book

Drifting the edges of structure often produces sows like these two massive red beauties.



SUSAN GROES / REEL LOUISIANA ADVENTURES

THE RED SNAPPER STORY

Lutjanus campechanus congregate over structure of any type. Rocks, shipwrecks, wellheads and scattered debris all attract these reef-dwellers. Typical spots hold concentrations of fish that vary in size from barely keepers to sows over 20 pounds.

Because many of these artificial reefs lie in depths greater than 100 feet, snapper reeled to the surface experience pressure changes that often result in injury and higher release-mortality rates. Natural predators such as bottlenose dolphins have learned to lurk near fishing boats, waiting for an easy snapper meal.

Red snapper also top the menu for humans, so state and federal governments have spent big money to research and regulate the species. Currently, the recreational season in federal waters (beyond 9 miles in the Gulf) opens April 21 and lasts until October 31. The daily bag limit is four fish per person, with a 16-inch minimum size. Commercial fishermen can target red snapper during the first 10 days of every month until the quota is met; last year that took 10 months.

Sows reach sexual maturity as early as age two, when they average 1 1/4 pounds and measure 13 inches long, according to Stu Kennedy, a fisheries biologist with the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council, which regulates snapper in federal waters. They can lay batches of 250,000 eggs about four times a year, usually between late spring and late summer.

At age eight, females average 13 pounds and can lay as many as 1 million eggs about three times a year. However, just like humans, snapper vary in size at each age.

Some studies also infer that larger snapper actually become senescent, or unable to reproduce at a certain age. Kennedy said that at least one documented case shows that snapper can live as long as 85 years.

While evidence seems to suggest that the species does not depend on the largest fish to reproduce, Kennedy said no such conclusion can really be drawn from current studies. Fish managers continue to debate regulations, trying to rebuild stocks. Kennedy recommends managing the species on both ends of the measuring tape, rather than just with a minimum-size limit. That would mean potentially outlawing possession of more than one fish larger than 30 inches (about 15 pounds.)



SCOTT SOMMERLATE

it's more a matter of luck at those places whether one is caught. To target hefty fish at the usual haunts or near bigger structure, we prefer to begin a little up-current and drift rather than anchor. We make as many drops as possible until we no longer catch fish.

Each time we drift, the boat stops in a slightly different place and drifts a little differently. One very effective method for catching larger fish involves drifting away from the reef before motoring back. Many times the larger fish stay on the periphery of the structure like lions circling a herd of gazelles.

Moving to a higher level of sleuthing, anglers can search out sows at hard spots on the ocean bottom. These areas appear on the depth recorder as a thickening of the dark-red bottom picture and may be no larger than a Volkswagen Beetle.

The Gulf is a large expanse of mud with little structure, but these large sow snappers somehow find this hard bottom and park there. Anglers hoping to locate these spots need a 200-kHz depth recorder with at least 300 Watts per channel and preferably 600. A recorder that will read accurately at speed is also a big plus.

The factory default settings must be adjusted for the machine to be more effective. Jacobsen often hires out his services to anglers who want help finding fish and in tweaking their electronics. He suggests three integral changes that need to be made to recorders:

1. The chart speed or advance feature must be on one of the slowest settings.
2. The internal gain must be increased substantially.

15- to 22-inch range will provide a few fish for the table, but you won't find the sows. Use trout rods and 1- to 3-ounce jig heads, tipped with cut cigar minnows, and everyone will have a big time.

Some spots will produce fish from 20 inches to 20 pounds, making a trip extremely successful. If you mark big fish or have caught them at a similar spot before, make your first drops with heavier tackle — the largest fish in the group may be the first ones to bite because they tend to be more aggressive.

That pattern has repeated itself for us. We'll typically catch a limit of fish that weigh 5 to 18 pounds, with the 18-pounders eating first.

The true sow locations — those that all Gulf skippers search for — occur in relatively pristine areas that have not been targeted. These spots might yield hundreds of fish that range from 12- to 20-plus pounds. But once a skipper begins to show up at the cleaning table regularly with a boatload of these big fish, everyone begins to gun for him. Unfortunately that can lead to the practice of absolutely pillaging a spot before anyone else can find it.

BETWEEN ROCKS AND HARD SPOTS

Sows — those that weigh over 14 pounds — have definite preferences when it comes to living conditions. They're typically found on the edges of large structures or on "hard spots" in 100 to 250 feet of water.

All the regular reefs can hold sows, but

GPS CONVERSION SECRETS

The U.S. Coast Guard publishes "Local Notice to Mariners", a weekly compilation of all changes that take place on the waterways and oceans of the United States. This publication (www.navcen.uscg.gov/lnm/default.htm) reports submerged wrecks, drilling-rig locations established or removed, and other fishing structure announcements.

(Note: The Coast Guard records its locations in degrees, minutes and seconds. Most GPS units report locations in degrees, minutes and thousandths. Seconds can be converted into thousandths by dividing that last number in the Coast Guard coordinate by 60, ignoring the decimal point.)

EXAMPLE

Coast Guard location:
28-05-097
95-41-190

Conversion:
28-05-161
95-41-316

To convert Ioran to GPS on various charts and in older books, check out Andren conversion software at www.andren.com or call 321-725-4115.

TEXAS SNAPPER GUIDES

Capt. Carl Christoph

Friendswood, Texas
713-816-5004

Carlchristoph2002@yahoo.com

Capt. Tom Hilton

Arcola, Texas
281-431-0925

www.hiltonfishingcharters.com

Capt. Rik Jacobsen

Houston, Texas
281-545-2463

www.redsnapperfishing.com

Capt. Johnny Walker

Galveston, Texas
713-910-9388

www.snapperfishinggalveston.com

3. The zoom feature should be turned on.

The bottom line is that the recorder should be used at the highest gain level possible with the slowest chart speed.

The key to finding the best spots lies in learning to see the dark-red image of the seafloor as it becomes more pronounced. Those willing to put in the effort will be rewarded over time. Practice by running over a known spot at speed and take note of the changes on the screen.

Hard spots seem to appear in specific areas in clusters. We usually dedicate an hour on every trip to wander aimlessly, staring at the picture on the sounder. We usually troll for other species at the same time.

TACKLE UP

Tackle choices to battle behemoth snapper start with 5- to 6-foot heavy-action stand-up rods and Shimano TLD 30 two-speed reels with at least 50-pound mono (although some fishermen prefer braid.) Christoph, who runs out of the Houston/Galveston area, rigs with 80-pound line because he has been manhandled too many times using smaller equipment.

On wrecks, rocks and reefs, we work 2- to 8-ounce arrowhead jigs tipped with whole cigar minnows or live bait. But our standard rig to fish the hard spots includes a 3- to 4-foot double-dropper-loop leader of 100- to 150-pound-test fluorocarbon. We use 8/0 live-bait J-hooks

and the lightest weight possible to get to the bottom — typically 8 ounces to 2 pounds. With this setup, we'll fish livies such as hardtails (blue runners) or anything caught around sargassum or dead baits such as whole cigar minnows or chunk mackerel.


We like to use large chunks of Pacific mackerel obtained from the local fish wholesaler. I buy these fish in 50-pound boxes and cut them into 4- to 8-ounce chunks. We bury the hooks in the chunks so the fish will eat the meat before feeling the hook.

Drop the bait quickly to the bottom and keep tension on the line. Be patient; large sows sometimes mouth the bait for a while. When you feel tension on the line, reel tight and then set the hook. These fish immediately surprise the unwary with their strength and determination. If an angler can withstand the first major run, his chances of landing a sow improve.

These big fish make several runs. Maintain the tension and keep reeling. Once the fish comes halfway to the surface, you've got it made — if the hook placement is good.

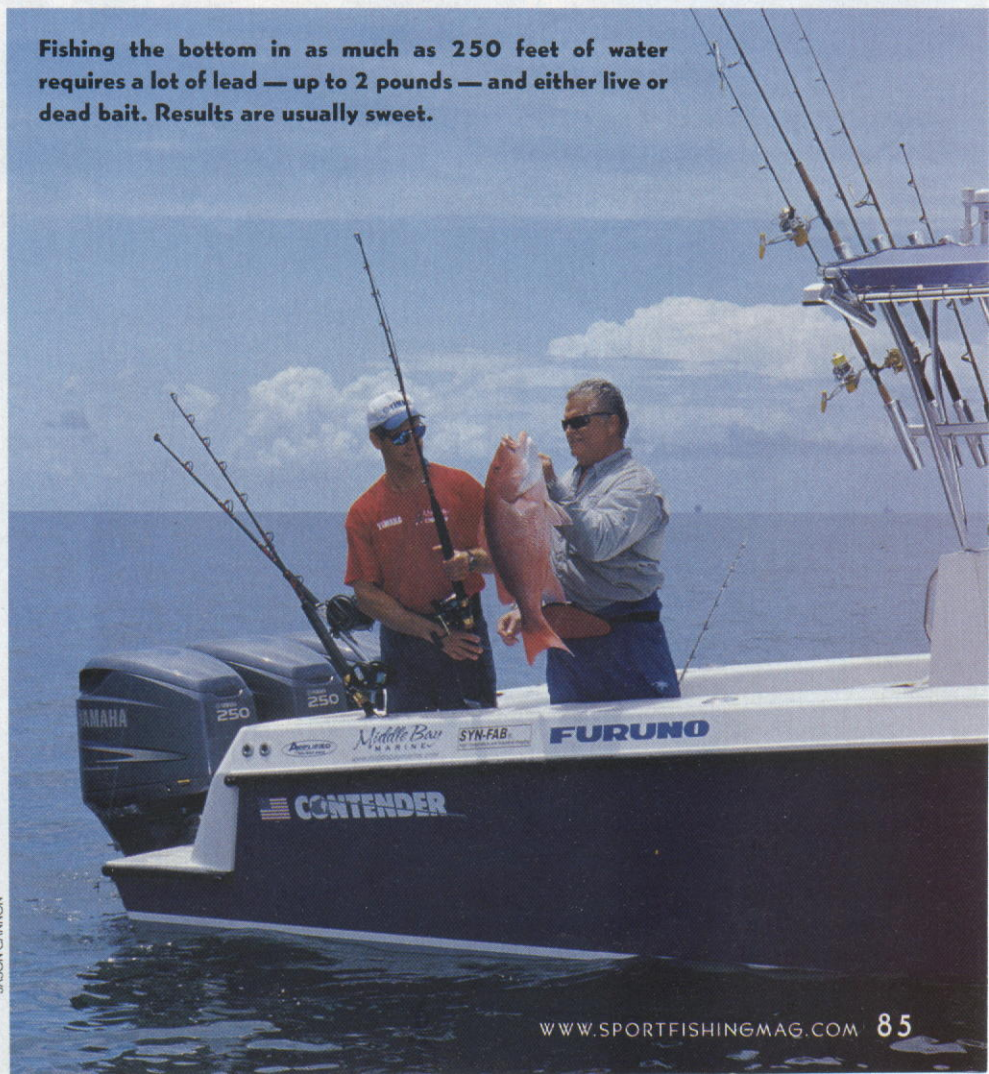
KEEP LOOKING

The commercial season for red snapper opens the first 10 days of every month until the seasonal quota is met, which makes for some intense fishing. Recreational anglers, using sophisticated electronics, hammer more locations at greater distances from shore.

As a result of combined effort, the red snapper population inside a 50-mile radius of port doesn't get much of a break. To find new locations and big fish, anglers have to pull out all the tricks in the book, think like Sherlock Holmes and put hours and miles on their engines. The result, however, is usually sweet and delicious. 

On land, Ted Caryl works as a vice president for Merrill Lynch in Houston, where he has lived for almost 30 years. He takes immense pleasure in fishing with his 11-year-old son and introducing others to the excitement of the Gulf of Mexico and particularly red snapper fishing. He has set seven IGFA line-class world records for red snapper and currently holds one.

Fishing the bottom in as much as 250 feet of water requires a lot of lead — up to 2 pounds — and either live or dead bait. Results are usually sweet.



JASON CANNON

with 1,000 GPS numbers (713-816-5004; carlchristoph2002@yahoo.com).

In addition to these locally popular texts, the weekly supplement "Local Notice to Mariners," generated by the U.S. Coast Guard, can be accessed on the Internet. The notices update the established list of wells, wrecks and fish havens and provide new GPS coordinates.

Texas A&M's hang book, published by the Texas A&M Sea Grant (979-862-3767; www.texas-sea-grant.tamu.edu), lists "hangs" — areas where shrimpers have tangled trawls on unknown submerged structures — for the Texas and Louisiana coasts. Coordinates are listed for loran-C, which makes this book especially valuable for hard-core fishermen willing to run loran lines.

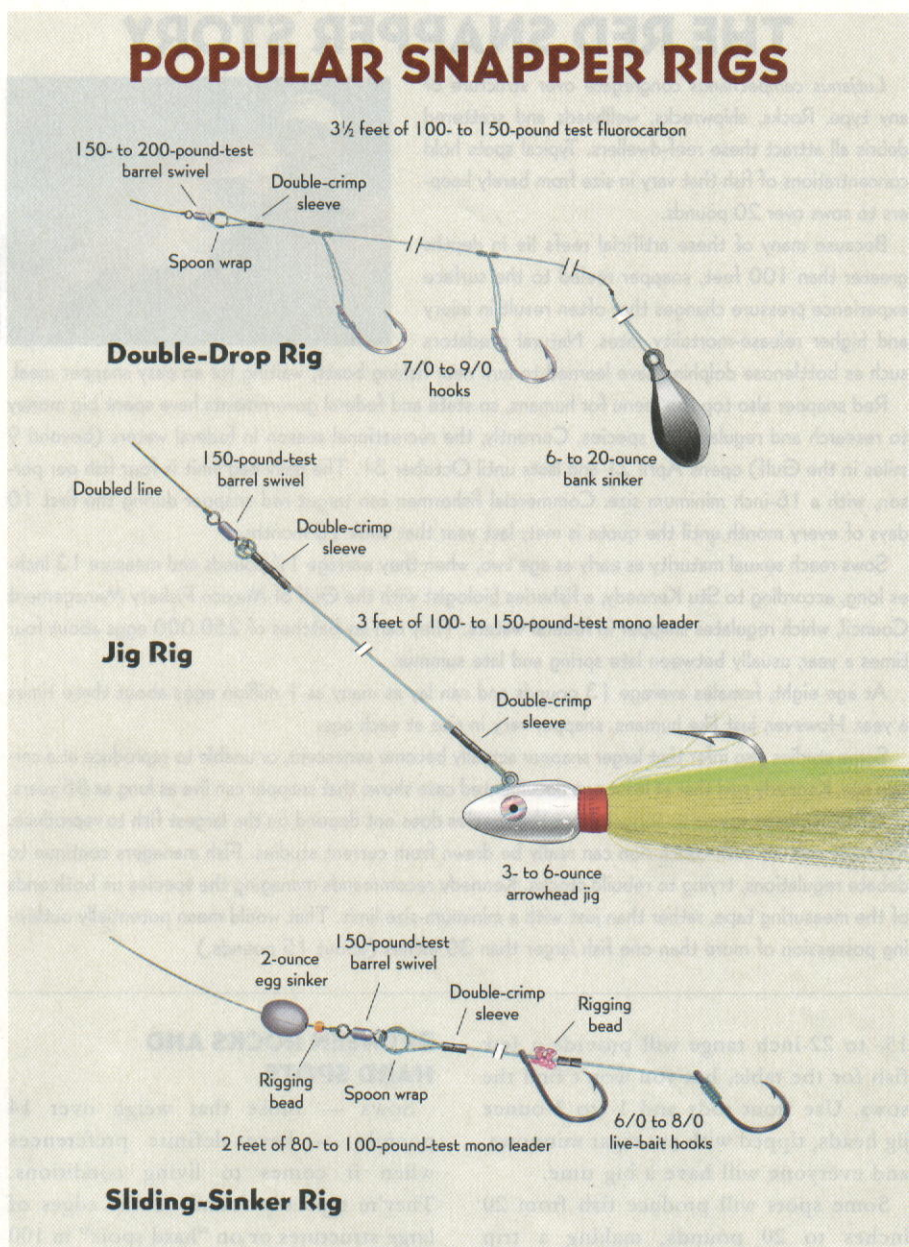
Many shrimpers, on their own, will divulge hangs, but they still deal in loran numbers. Loran can be converted to GPS lat/lon using a software program called Andren (www.andren.com).

One night after an offshore trip, I met a shrimp-boat captain in a little bar on Matagorda Island. After I bought him three beers and talked with him, he took me over to his boat and gave me several good hangs.

Another time, I pulled up to a boat about 50 miles offshore and asked to trade beer for loran numbers. The captain was a little shocked. Most recreational fishermen want to trade beer for shrimp. We made friends over time, and he sent me a book from his early days. We correlated those numbers with the Texas A&M hang book and found several old structures.

Texas Parks and Wildlife has contributed to the snapper population by teaming with offshore operators and other interested parties to sink oil rigs, concrete blocks, obsolete ships, bridges and other materials. Coordinates can be found at www.tpwd.state.tx.us. (Check other Gulf state sites for similar artificial-reef locations off those regions.)

In the past, skippers themselves built reefs with every type of material imaginable. However, dumping anything overboard is illegal. If skippers risk deploying their own reefs now, they face a fine of up to \$50,000 for each offense and up to five years in jail, according to Texas officials. Private entities may apply for a reef permit with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Texas is considering permitting an area



for private reefs, according to TPWD's Paul Hammerschmidt.

When anglers find good spots, they guard them so suspiciously that they won't fish those areas when any other boats can be seen on the horizon. This creates a stealth game, where on any given day some captains are hiding and others are seeking using radar and other sly tactics.

Jacobsen and I queried one guy at a cleaning table and commented on the good-sized fish he'd caught. The snapper exhibited a pale-red color, telling us he'd probably caught them in water shallower than 100 feet, where often a fish's pigmentation appears lighter.

Of course, this angler was proud of his catch and told us basically where he had been. We told him we had seen him at a

spot close in but had stayed away so we wouldn't bother him. He did confirm that he had caught his fish at that particular spot. We made note of the location of his vessel when we were offshore, and we looked for the spot on several occasions until we found it.

The lesson: Be on your toes every second, and be observant of other boats and captains.

WEEDING OUT THE CHAFF

While exploring offshore numbers, you should see patterns emerge. If the first drops result in undersize fish, then it's time to move. If you keep fishing, you'll kill more snapper through postrelease mortality, and the size of the fish will not likely increase.

Another drop that yields fish in the