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A Beginner's Guide to Saltwater Fishing

What freshwater anglers need to know about saltwater fishing

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Saltwater fishing can offer scenic views, a large variety of game—and catches that fight back

Erin Brereton

Casting a line into a lake or stream can be a relaxing way to fish. If, however, you're looking for a less predictable experience that offers unique bounty ranging from snapper to swordfish, you may want to try your hand at saltwater fishing.

"Saltwater fishing is whatever you don't see in freshwater—bottle-nosed dolphins; turtles; sharks trying to eat your fish," says Patrick Neu, executive director of the National Professional Anglers Association. "It's just a great experience; I love it."

The types of fish saltwater anglers target—and the methods they use to catch them—vary depending on the region, according to George Poveromo, host of "George Poveromo's World of Saltwater Fishing," which has aired on ESPN2 and NBC Sports.

In Southeastern Florida, where deep water isn't far from shore, anglers troll for mahi-mahi in open water, running bait behind the boat. They can also fish most coastal areas from a boat or pier, George says, due to the Gulf of Mexico's gradual decline.

"Texas is a big fishing state; but mostly inshore for redfish, seatrout, and flounder," he says. "You might have to go 150 miles out to get to a place where you can troll for offshore fish like marlin. The coastline of the U.S. varies so dramatically."

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Deep-Sea Fishing Dynamics

Before hitting the water, research local regulations. Start by familiarizing yourself with what fish are in your area or the spot you're heading to, and what fish you hope to catch.

Due to catch and release practices implemented to keep the game fish supply at sustainable levels, it's illegal to remove certain kinds from the water, according to George—even just to measure their size or take a quick picture. These fish, such as sailfish and tarpon, should be measured and photographed in the water.

"It's regional, based on the fish," he says. "Fish could have internal damage because of the way they're handled."

George Poveromo shows off an impressive saltwater catch.

Many states publish a regulations booklet that can help you understand how to treat fish you catch, according to Amanda Nalley, Public Information Specialist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission.

Another helpful resource is using a guide or app, such as Pro Angler, to identify what's on your hook.

"It's expected any angler who goes out there [will] know what the rules are," Amanda says. "It doesn't matter if you know the regulation if you can't tell the difference between a spotted seatrout or weakfish. We always say, 'If you don't know, let it go.'"

In addition to helping you comply with regulations, determining what type of fish you want to catch will allow you to pinpoint feeding and other characteristics that'll improve your odds of having a successful day at sea.

Seasons, for instance, play a role in saltwater fishing. While it's generally a year-round activity in Southern Florida where George lives, some months can be better than others for snagging certain fish. "December through April is a really good period for sailfish," he says. "May through September and October, your shot at catching blue marlin goes up. Freshwater fishing has its challenges, too; but a lot of saltwater fish are migratory. Temperature and other things bring them to an area—so there's more homework you need to do to stay on top of catching them."

Similarly, the time of day can affect your catch.

"There are two key feeding periods for game fish: right as the sun is coming up and the last hour before the sun sets," George says. "Inshore fish sometimes feed really well around the tide change; a lot of anglers target certain areas based on the timing of the tides."

[tc] Preparing for a Safe Saltwater Fishing Experience

"The ocean is one of the most beautiful places in the entire world; but it can be one of the nastiest and most unforgiving," George says.

Being offshore has unique risks even the most experienced anglers may not be equipped to handle without extra research and preparation.

"You want to make sure you're not going to get caught in storms if you're going 30 miles or more offshore," George says. "There is much more danger involved in saltwater fishing; in the ocean, things could get really bad really fast."

He recommends saltwater anglers take certain precautions:

- Make sure your boat is in solid working condition
- Have properly maintained safety gear such as flares
- Check the weather forecast and prepare for inclement conditions
- Make sure your vessel has an emergency positioning indicating radio beacon (EPIRB). If you're in a distressed situation, it will send your vessel's location via satellite.

Anglers also have to be careful when handling what they catch on sea excursions, Patrick says.

"These saltwater fish aren't like freshwater fish; a lot of them have teeth that can cut you wide open," he says. "You want to have some sort of gripper to grab that fish's mouth. Don't assume you can grab any part of a fish—a lot have razor-sharp gill plates. I'd recommend either using a rag to wrap around the fish when you unhook it or a set of gloves."

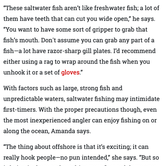
With factors such as large, strong fish and unpredictable waters, saltwater fishing may intimidate first-timers. With the proper precautions though, even the most inexperienced angler can enjoy fishing on or along the ocean, Amanda says.

"The thing about offshore is that it's exciting; it can really hook people—no pun intended," she says. "But so is being inshore and catching your first red drum ever. There are certain things to practice and learn, but the good thing is anybody can get out there and do this; you can be a kid or in retirement. It's a great sport to get into."

Want to learn more about saltwater fishing? The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's website is a great resource for instructional videos, tips for choosing fishing lines, fish identification, and more.

Erin Brereton has written about recreation, business, and other topics for more than 20 years.

Recommended Further Reading



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