Florida Fish Busters’ Bulletin
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**Bream destinations great for kids; license-free fishing weekend, photo contest coming soon**

**By: Bob Wattendorf**

I bet you didn’t know that common bream are deep-bodied, somewhat flattened fish related to carp, found throughout England and very popular with anglers. OK, so that’s not the bream that we typically talk about here in the states, but it may have been the origin of the common name for deep-bodied sunfishes that are found throughout the southeastern United States.

As we know them, bream in Florida typically include bluegill, redear sunfish, redbreast sunfish and spotted sunfish. With more than 7,700 named lakes and ponds and over 12,000 miles of streams and rivers, all brimming with bream, the Sunshine State provides great opportunities for bream fishing, especially in March and April.

These sporty little fish often introduce kids to a lifetime of fishing fun because they can be found in so many easy-to-reach places. They provide great opportunities for shoreline fishing using simple cane poles or spinning rods.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) scheduled the first of four license-free recreational fishing days on the first full weekend in April each year (April 5-6 this year) because it coincides with a productive freshwater fishing period, when the weather is usually pleasant. Many of Florida’s recreational sport fishes, such as black bass, bluegill and redear sunfish, move into the shallows to spawn during spring, making them more available for anglers to catch.

License-free freshwater fishing weekends are a great time to introduce kids to fishing and see if they and you would like to take up the sport. Besides enjoying the fun of reeling in a fish, many people find recreational fishing to be a good motivator to enjoy the great outdoors and living a more active, healthy and natural lifestyle. Children don’t need a fishing license until they are 16, but may buy one at any time and it won’t expire until they are 17. This helps FWC attain additional revenue from the Federal Aid in Sportfish Restoration program and gives the child pride in belonging to the fishing community.

Fishing is a low-cost, wholesome form of entertainment that often pays for itself with healthy food for the table. An annual license ([license.myfwc.com](http://license.myfwc.com/); 1-888-347-4356) is only $17.50 for residents, which averages out to only 25 cents per hour for the typical angler. During license-free freshwater fishing weekends (the first weekend in April and the second weekend in June) no recreational fishing license is required; however, all other bag limit, season, gear and size restrictions apply on these dates for recreational fishing. FWC invites you to take this opportunity to take your family, friends and colleagues fishing.

To further encourage recreational fishing, FWC will conduct a special contest during April to collect photos of anglers. All you have to do is post a photo of your family fishing in Florida’s fresh waters on Twitter or Instagram with #FWC-FamilyFishing. In return for your efforts, the FWC will enter you into a drawing for one of six surprise packages, each including a $50 gift card from Bass Pro Shops, and another $50 worth of assorted fishing lures, hooks, line and goodies to make your next trip even more productive.

Submitted photos must be your own, unedited pictures, and the photo must not include inappropriate content. Photos should be taken during April while freshwater fishing in Florida and include multiple anglers enjoying their day together on the water. The FWC may subsequently use the photos for outreach purposes.

In addition, freshwater anglers are encouraged to participate in the Big Catch angler recognition program. All you need to do is catch one of 33 species of freshwater fish that exceed a specific length or weight, go to [BigCatchFlorida.com](http://www.BigCatchFlorida.com), fill out some information and post a photo. In addition to getting to share your catch on the Internet, you’ll also receive via email a custom certificate to print, and a discount for [SportsmanOnCanvas.com](http://www.SportsmanOnCanvas.com).

Big Catch encourages anglers to try different species and locations, by offering Master Angler (five different qualifying Big Catch species), Elite Angler (10 different qualifying Big Catch species) or Specialist (five qualifying fish of the same species). It is fun and challenging for the entire family.

Here are some tips to make your bream fishing more successful. During spring, sunfish congregate to spawn in water depths from 3 to 10 feet. Bluegill continue to spawn periodically throughout summer. Bluegill opt for slightly shallower areas than redear sunfish, but it’s not unusual to see them use the same bedding areas simultaneously. Bream may build 30 to 40 shallow beds in a colony. Crickets, grubs, sand maggots or grass shrimp will all catch bedding bluegill. Use a small hook, #6 or #8, with a split shot sinker about 6 inches up the line, and concentrate on water less than 6 feet deep. A small float helps identify strikes. For artificial baits, a 1/8-ounce “beetle spin” with a white or chartreuse body on ultralight tackle is an excellent choice. Your local bait and tackle shop can quickly help you find what you need. Big Catch sizes for bluegill are 10 inches or 1 pound for an adult; 8 inches or 0.75 pounds for a youth.

The redear sunfish, or shellcracker, is another popular panfish. Although they prefer snails and clams, redear sunfish are caught most often on earthworms around the full moon in March and April when spawning peaks. Redear prefer hard-bottom habitat and typically begin spawning about one month before bluegill. In south Florida, shellcracker spawn as early as late February and will likely begin bedding in the Panhandle around the end of May, depending on water temperatures. Shellcracker continue spawning into August. Big Catch sizes for shellcrackers are 11 inches or 1.25 pounds for an adult; 8 inches or 1 pound for a youth.

Redbreast sunfish, also known as river bream and redbellies, are the flowing water cousins of bluegill. Redbellies are more common in rivers than bluegill, and often can be found in backwater areas with less flow. The same baits that work for bluegill will catch redbreast sunfish. Big Catch sizes for redbreast are 9 inches or 0.5 lb for an adult; 7 inches or 0.4 lb for a youth.

The spotted sunfish, or stumpknocker, is an often overlooked stream panfish. Aptly named, stumpknockers can be found in the tangle of roots at the water’s edge. Although spotted sunfish rarely exceed 8 inches, these feisty species provide great sport on light tackle. Tiny (1/16-ounce) beetle spins pitched close to shore can be deadly, particularly tipped with freshwater clam meat. (Big Catch sizes for stumpknocers are 7 inches or 0.5 lb for an adult; 5 inches or 0.4 lb for a youth.)

Possibilities for taking advantage of the license-free freshwater fishing weekends are almost endless. With a fishing hole within 30-45 minutes of almost everyone in Florida, the hardest part might be picking your destination. Although your neighborhood pond or a local park may be your best bet, FWC biologists created a list of some major public water bodies they think should be great bream fisheries this year. For full descriptions of the sites, access to them and specific fishing tips for these locations, see [MyFWC.com/Fishing](http://myfwc.com/fishing/freshwater/sites-forecast/) and under “Freshwater Fishing” select “Sites/Forecasts”.

Top Bream Fisheries for 2014:

* Lake Kissimmee (east of Lake Wales)
* West Lake Tohopekaliga (south of Kissimmee)
* Lake Talquin (west of Tallahassee)
* Lake Marion (east of Haines City)
* Lake Istokpoga (near Sebring)
* Winter Haven South Chain of Lakes (Winter Haven)
* Lake Seminole (Pinellas County)
* Choctawatchee River (northwest of Panama City)
* Mosaic Fish Management Area (southwest of Bartow)
* Lake Okeechobee (Okeechobee, St. Lucie, Martin, Palm Beach, Hendry, and Glades counties)
* Everglades Water Conservation Areas 2 & 3 (west of Fort Lauderdale)

 *Instant licenses are available at* [*MyFWC.com/License*](http://www.MyFWC.com/License) *or by calling 888-FISH-FLORIDA (347-4356). Report violators by calling 888-404-3922, \*FWC or #FWC on your cell phone, or texting to Tip@MyFWC.com. Visit* [*MyFWC.com/Fishing*](http://www.myfwc.com/Fishing/) *and select “more news,” or* [*scr.bi/Fish-busters*](http://scr.bi/Fish-busters) *for more Fish Busters’ Bulletins. To subscribe to FWC columns or to receive news releases, visit* myfwc.com/Contact*.*

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