Photo – Pictured from left are Ernesto, Max and father Andres Cofre with a nice winter sheepshead.

Photo – Sheepshead are notorious for feeding close to dock pilings, rocks, wrecks or anywhere barnacles or crustaceans are growing. Outfitted with a set of awesome teeth, sheepshead are able to eat and digest just about any type of crustacean!

Photo – Some of the best sheepshead fishing arrives during the colder months of winter. Pictured with an awesome catch of sheepshead are from left Vernon Long, Jeremiah McDonald and Brian McFadden.

“Winter Sheepshead Bite”

The cooler water temperatures of Northeast Florida winter finds excellent eating and fighting sheepshead finds large adult sheepshead bunching up at offshore structures. Particularly where there are plenty of crustaceans growing on wrecks, broken concrete and similar bottom structures. The annual winter spawn is typically triggered by the moon and also water temperature too. Like many species of both fresh and saltwater game fish, sheepshead typically will spawn just before and right on a full moon. With this in mind during the months of January through March N.E. Florida sheepshead will be laying their eggs when the moon is full and more importantly when there are stable weather conditions.

Sheepshead fishing is amazingly popular with fishermen that have tested their skills in hooking these sneaky feeders, once you are hooked on sheepshead fishing, you are simply hooked!

However fishermen that have never enjoyed sheepshead fishing tend to cast their lures and baits for other species of game fish. Obviously sheepshead fishing requires a lot of work including climbing way out on slippery jetty rocks, or tying up to a barnacle clad piling where your expensive fishing boat is subjected to scratches and damage.

Several fishing seasons ago it was not uncommon to see several fishermen targeting sheepshead from the St. Mary’s jetty rocks. They would walk out on the rocks with their fishing gear and gunny sack to place their fish in during a mid out-going tide, and then return to land when the in-coming tide began to flood the rocks. Fishermen would also back their small fishing boat right up to the very edge of the jetty rocks while giving scope to a bow anchor, once they were dangerously close to the jetty rocks they would toss a brick tied with a rope into the rocks as a transom anchor. Once they had caught their limit of sheepshead, they would break the small rope off leaving the brick in the rocks.

Obviously dealing with jetty rocks that are notorious for having rogue waves break over them and tying your boat up to pilings that act like a garbage disposal to your expensive fishing boat is not very attractive to many fishermen. Unless you wish to eat one of the tastiest fish in the ocean!

Sheepshead are by far one of the best eating fish that are found in our Northeast Florida waters and more importantly easy to catch when you have figured out their uncommon feeding habits!

Fishing tackle is key when catching toothy sheepshead, which at times, can be very tricky in their feeding habits.

Terminal fishing gear includes twenty pound spinning or level wind tackle, both should be spooled with twenty pound hi-viz braided fishing line that will offer the sensitivity that you will need to detect that sneaky sheepshead bite. A one to four-ounce egg sinker is threaded on to the braided line, using just enough weight to keep the bait down next to the piling, or structure. A twenty pound barrel swivel is then tied to the tag end of the braided fishing line. Next, a twelve-inch section of twenty-pound fluorocarbon shock leader is tied to the remaining side of the barrel swivel. Finally a size four Kahle hook is tied to the business end of the shock leader.

Sheepshead strikes are often very difficult to detect while a foraging sheepshead will often swim up with your barbed bait eat it and spit it out without the slightest hint of a strike. Keeping a tight fishing line, while raising and lowering the rod tip, is a good tip for detecting a sneaky sheepshead strike. Best baits for sheepshead include fiddler crabs, small pieces of fresh shrimp or squid.

Some of the better locations for catching winter sheepshead include near shore wrecks, artificial reefs, jetty rocks, bridge and dock pilings. As stated earlier in the article some of the larger adult sheepshead are located offshore during the winter fishing season where they find plenty of crustaceans and perfect conditions for spawning. A favorite offshore sheepshead location includes “KBY artificial reef where broken concrete is scattered over a wide area of the bottom.

KBY—stands for Kings Bay, which is an artificial reef project located some six miles northeast of the St. Mary’s Inlet, latitude 30-46.65’N, longitude 81-17.32’W. The KBY reef was constructed of materials from the old Kings Bay wharf, and consists of broken concrete and pilings. The reef system encompasses some one and a half square miles of bottom.

The current Florida regulations on sheepshead allow fishermen to keep fifteen per day measuring at least 12-inches. For more Florida fishing regulations visit [www.myfwc.com](http://www.myfwc.com).

The “Jacksonville Offshore Fishing Club” will hold its “Annual El Cheap-O” sheepshead tournament on March 3rd. the largest sheepshead will be worth a $75,000.00 Carolina Skiff boat, Suzuki outboard and Magic Tilt trailer. For more information please visit www. Elcheapo.com.