

## TO PREPARE FOR COOKING

The flounder's reputation as table fare is unsurpassed in Texas. Remember that the quality of any seafood largely is dependent on how it is handled between capture and preparation. Remove the viscera and gills from the flounder, and place the fish on ice as soon as possible. Cleaning beyond this point depends on how the fish will be cooked.

Flounder can be prepared in a number of ways. Broiling the fish with butter, lemon juice and favorite seasoning is popular. They also may be baked or fried. Gourmands like their flounder stuffed with crabmeat.

Recipes for preparation of flounder and other Texas seafoods are available by writing:

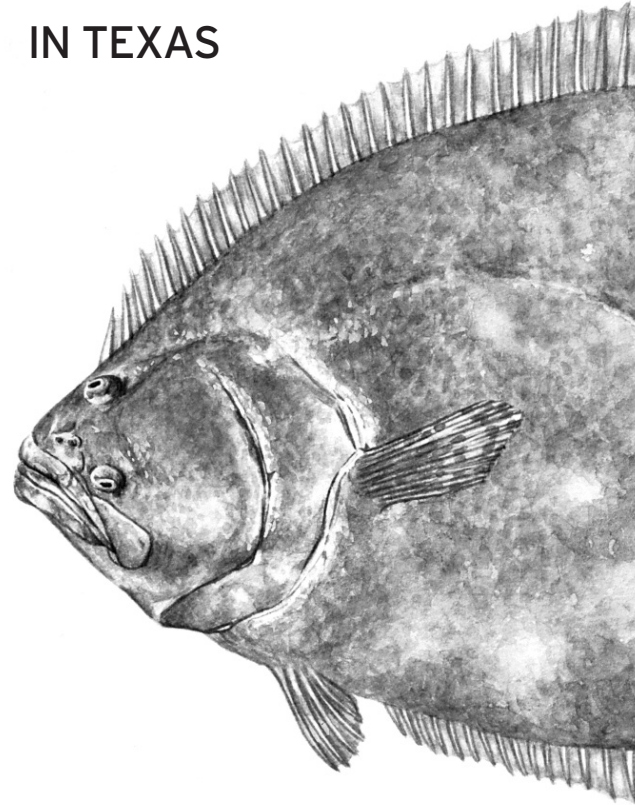
**Texas Sea Grant College Program**  
**2700 Earl Rudder Freeway S., Suite 1800**  
**College Station, Texas 77845**

Additional recipes can be found at local bookstores, seafood markets and grocery stores, as well as on-line.

## COASTAL FISHERIES

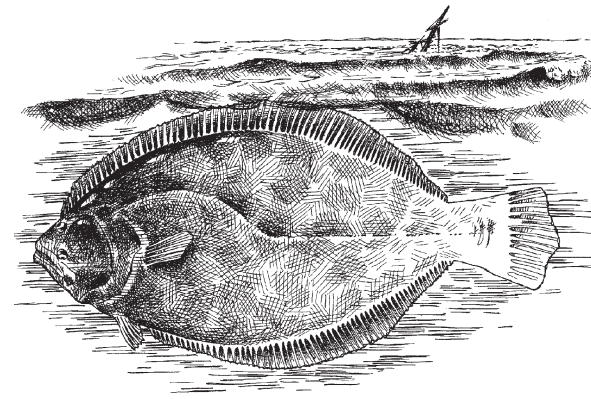
# Southern Flounder

## IN TEXAS



The southern flounder (*Paralichthys lethostigma*) is the largest of more than 25 species of flatfish found in Texas coastal waters. It is highly prized as both a food and game fish and accounts for over 95 percent of the flounder harvest in the state. Southern flounder occur from North Carolina to the mouth of the Rio Grande and southward into Mexico. They are most numerous west of the Mississippi River.

Many fish spend most of their lives swimming along the sea floor. Most of these fish, however, are flattened top to bottom while all flatfish, including the southern flounder, are flattened side to side. Although they are flattened side to side, southern flounder actually swim with one side facing the bottom. In the case of southern flounder, the left side is always the "up" side; in other species, the opposite is true. The pigmentation of the upper side of the body can be varied to match the surrounding environment.



## LIFE HISTORY

Adult southern flounder leave the bays during the fall for spawning in the Gulf of Mexico at depths of 50 to 100 feet. They spawn for the first time when two years old. The eggs are buoyant.

After hatching, the larval fish swim in an upright position and the eyes are located on opposite sides of the head. As the young fish grows, the right eye begins to "migrate" to the left side of the head. When body length of about one-half inch has been attained, the eye migration is complete and the fish assumes its left-side-up position for life.

The young fish enter the bays during late winter and early spring. At this time they are about one-half inch in length and seek shallow grassy areas near the Gulf passes. With increasing growth, some will move farther into bays. Some will enter coastal rivers and bayous.

Small flounder grow rapidly and may reach 12 inches in length by the end of their first year. Males seldom exceed 12 inches, but females grow larger than males and often reach a length of 25 inches. Most flounder taken by anglers are females weighing from 1 to 1.5 pounds. These fish are in their second year of life. The record southern flounder in Texas, 13 pounds, was taken in February 1976 from Sabine Lake.

Juvenile flounder feed mainly on crustaceans, but as they grow, fish become more important in their diet. Adult flounder enter shallow water at night where they lie in wait for their prey, often partially buried. Empty depressions where flounder have lain are called "beds."

Although most of the adults leave the bays and enter the Gulf for spawning during the winter, those in the Gulf reenter the bays in a gradual influx in the spring, as compared to the large concentrations that characterize the fall emigration.



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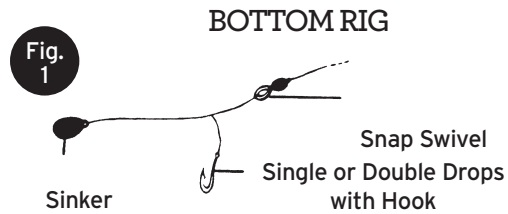
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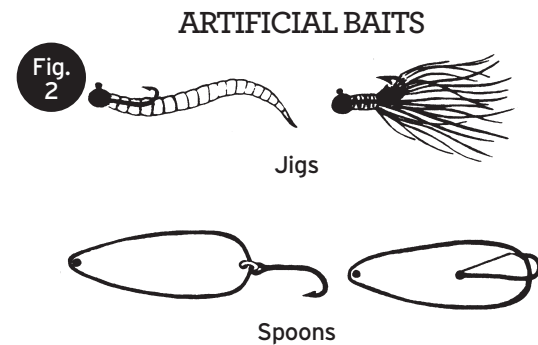
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## HOW TO CATCH FLOUNDER

Flounder are taken by rod and reel or by gig. When fishing with rod and reel, light tackle offers both the greatest sport and the best chance for catching flounder. Both artificial lures and natural baits can be used. Over barren bottoms, leaded plastic worms (worm jigs) often are very effective attached to a 1/8- to 1/4-ounce lead head hook. Jerk shad, shrimp, and swimming grub imitations are popular to fish in this setup as well. In heavily vegetated areas, shallow-running spoons are best.



Flounder prefer live bait over dead bait. Live shrimp retrieved slowly along the bottom often produce excellent results. Several species of killifish, referred to locally as mud minnows, fished in a similar fashion are good bait. Mullet also provide an excellent choice for flounder.



Live bait work well on a Carolina rig with a 1/8- to 1/2 oz. egg sinker and size 2 to 6 wide bend hook. These hooks tend to hold the bait better and fit the flounder's mouth with ease. Mud minnows can be hooked through the jaw bottom to top. The mullet work best crosswise through the eye sockets.



Cast out and let the bait sit for a moment. If nothing picks it up, begin a slow retrieve, raising the rod to the 12 o'clock position. Then reel down to the 10 o'clock position. This keeps the terminal tackle in contact with the bottom at all times. When the bait stops or a strike is felt, drop slack and wait at least 10 seconds for the flounder to take hold of the bait, and then set the hook hard.

Although many are taken by rod and reel, "floundering" or gigging offers the best challenge for this species. The flounder's habit of entering the shallows at night to feed makes it vulnerable to this technique. The skills of both the angler and the hunter are called for here.

Lanterns are used in searching for flounder and gigs range from single-pronged to modified hay forks used to spear the fish. The giggers wade quietly along the shallows looking for flounder. Once the flounder is within the light from the lantern, normally it will not move, affording a chance to "gig" the fish. Although this sounds like a sure-fire method, many fish are missed because they go undetected until they swim away or because of inaccurate gigging by an over-anxious angler.

The more sophisticated flounder gigger may mount a lantern (or battery-powered lamps) on the front of a flat-bottomed skiff. The skiff then is poled through the water in search of fish or pushed by a small air motor. Floundering from a boat is much easier than wading, allows the gigger to cover more area, and allows searching of bottoms too soft for wading.

## WHEN AND WHERE TO CATCH

Although flounder can be taken by rod and reel in almost any portion of the bay, often it is more productive to fish around jetties or oyster reefs that extend into the bay from shore. Other great places include rocky areas, old drain pipes, pilings, or even a point of marsh grass. Flounder do not swim continuously, and they tend to accumulate in such places in their search for food. During the fall, when flounder are moving to the Gulf for spawning, the best catches are made in the channels and passes leading to the Gulf. During the spring, wade fishermen work the edges of channels, such as the Intracoastal Waterway, as the fish are moving back into the bays.

Floundering is best during the Gulfward migration from October through December. Hundreds of lanterns often can be seen in and around the pass areas during this period, as the flounder anglers wade through the shallows in search of fish. Seasons and regulations should be checked before planning a trip.

During the spring and summer the best gig catches are made in the back bays. Areas with cord grass (*Spartina alterniflora*) along the shoreline are good producers, and a bottom that is slightly silty or muddy generally is better than a hard-sand bottom. The mouths of small bayous and sloughs often yield flounder.

Since water clarity is very important to the success of any floundering trip, floundering should be done on calm nights. If you do go on windy nights, try to work small protected bays and shorelines.

The best catches are made during incoming tides and on dark nights as opposed to moonlit nights. However, do not hesitate to flounder on an outgoing tide. During a falling tide it often is more productive to try farther offshore in water from 1 to 2 feet deep or around offshore sandbars. Avoid nights when the tides are abnormally high.

Stingrays also frequent the shallows at night. They are flat and sometimes can be mistaken for a flounder or stepped on by the unwary. The inexperienced gigger should make certain of what he has gigged before picking it up. If in doubt, simply hold the creature on the bottom with the gig and wait for the water to settle before attempting to retrieve your catch. A multipronged gig is helpful in such cases, since it usually is possible to lift your catch from the bottom unassisted with such a gig.

