

Tripletail-Beyond Crab Trap Buoys

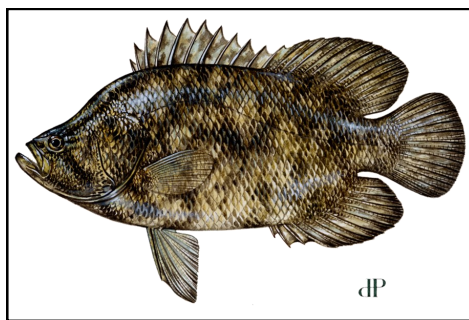


October in Florida means the start of stone crab season, but for many anglers in southwest Florida, this time of year also means an increased likelihood of seeing the uniquely shaped Atlantic tripletail (*Lobotes surinamensis*) as they are commonly spotted floating near crab trap buoys. While they inhabit Florida waters year round, it is thought tripletail migrate to warmer waters during cooler months and back to northern latitudes during warmer periods.



Globally, tripletail inhabit mostly tropical and subtropical coastal waters, but in the U.S. they can be found from Massachusetts south along the Atlantic coast throughout the Gulf of Mexico. They are not thought to be very abundant in any particular location, and are unique as they are the only member of the family Lobotidae found in the region. Individuals can reach over three feet in length and weigh as much as 40 pounds although anglers commonly encounter much smaller individuals.

Tripletail derive their name from their large rounded dorsal and anal fins, which in addition to their caudal fin, makes it look like they have three “tails”. The fish has a deep, laterally compressed body and a large mouth. They also have small eyes and a sloping forehead.



There are still many unknowns about the life history and reproductive biology of tripletail, but it is thought they can live up to ten years. Spawning takes place offshore in deeper waters during summer months, and females are thought to spawn multiple times during the spawning season.

Like many fish, tripletail can change their color to match their surroundings.

Juveniles tend to be mottled with yellow, brown and black and have white pectoral fins and a white margin on their tail. They are commonly associ-



ated with Sargassum and other drift algae and resemble leaves or debris. Adults also have varied mottled patterns ranging from dark brown to reddish brown or brown with a tint of gray. They are found in the open Gulf waters but can also occur in passes, inlets and bays near river mouths. Typically tripletail are solitary, but occasionally will form schools. They tend to float on their sides beneath objects such as crab trap buoys or debris or near structure such as pilings or navigation markers.

Tripletail are ambush predators and will opportunistically feed on a number of small finfish and invertebrate species particularly crustaceans. Casting a live shrimp or crab directly in front of their view often results in a vigorous strike from these otherwise seemingly sluggish fish.

Tripletail is a [regulated species](#) in Florida. There is a two-fish recreational daily bag limit and individuals must be at least 15 inches in length. They may only be harvested using hook and line gear. They are also harvested commercially on a limited scale with the same minimum length and gear requirements.



Tripletail is considered an excellent eating fish. Its meat is sweet, white, and flakey, and is often compared to grouper and snapper.

References:

Florida Museum of Natural History Ichthyology Department:
<https://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/fish/Gallery/Descript/Tripletail/Tripletail.html>

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Fishing Regulations
<http://myfwc.com/fishing/saltwater/recreational/tripletail/>

Texas Parks and Wildlife: A Weirdly Wonderful Fish
<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/fishboat/fish/didyouknow/tripletail.phtml>

University of Southern Mississippi Gulf Coast Research Laboratory
<http://www.usm.edu/gcrl/public/fish/tripletail.php>



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