



*Charles Golla with Spanish Mackerel
Photo by Charles Golla*

Fishing Padre in September by Charles A. Golla

September is one of the best months for fishing the Padre Island National Seashore (PINS) because the Fall baitfish migration is in full force and hungry game fish are sure to follow. During this time of year, finger mullet are exiting the bay systems. Seeking protection, they travel along the shallow waters of the surf zone for cover as they stage and start swimming south to warmer waters. Large concentrations of Spanish mackerel and jack crevalle move in from off shore to feed on the mullet. In conjunction with the mullet migration, dusty anchovies start moving south from the northwestern Gulf. Large concentrations of tarpon follow the anchovies. Skipjack, bluefish, whiting, and pompano also congregate in the surf zone at this same time. Sharks also show up in large numbers to take advantage of the abundant food source. During the fall migrations, game fish will often gorge themselves in preparation for the winter. The activity steadily increases until the first real cold front in late November.

Every trip down PINS in September promises to be an adventure. If you're already familiar with the national seashore, you know the excitement that awaits you during these fall migrations. If you're new to the seashore, this is a great time of the year to participate in the action. With practice, you will learn to read the surf.

This includes locating bait concentrations and reading the surf structure.

Baitfish, Birds, and Slicks

Fishing at this time of the year will be at its best. I can promise you there is no better opportunity for a fly fisherman to encounter a trophy fish in the surf zone. And locating game fish is as easy as it gets because you can simply drive the seashore until you see bait frantically busting the surface of the water or birds diving into the water and catching bait.

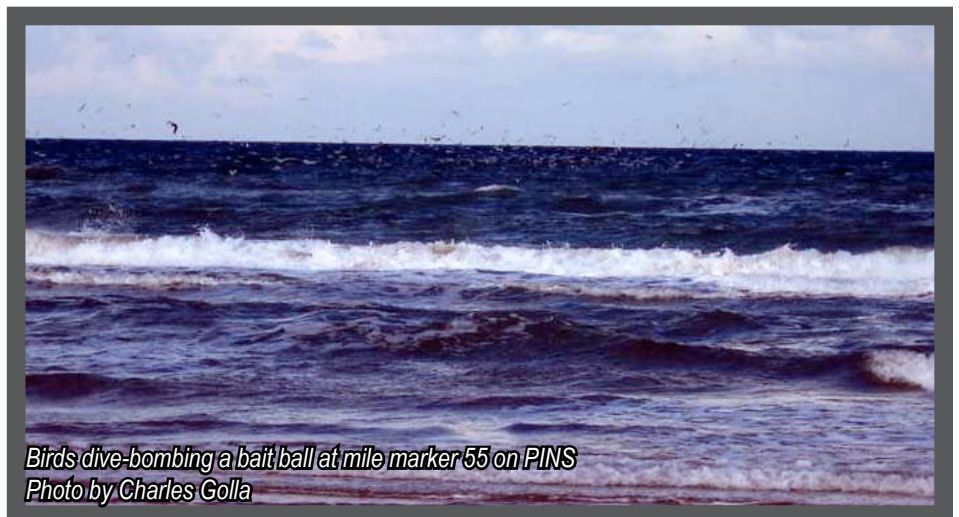
Bait Balls are large concentrations of bait. It's not uncommon to find every game species of fish under this mass of bait. Skipjacks, Spanish mackerel, and bluefish will be the first game fish you will see herding these bait balls on the surface

of the water. Trout, redfish and whiting follow the bait activity from below, under the action. As the feeding activity intensifies, the bait ball will move in and out of casting range. The longer bait ball stays together, the greater the chance that jack crevalle and tarpon will move in around the edges. Bull and blacktip sharks will follow the jack crevalle. If the bait ball is moving north or south and in and out of casting range, the feeding frenzy is relatively fresh. As the bait wears down, it starts moving in a circular pattern and indicates the frenzy has gone on for some time. It is at this point that you have the greatest chance of seeing tarpon and a large concentration of game fish.

Mullet are good indicators of structure and the presence of game fish. If you see mullet lazily moving through one of the bars, there's a good chance that no game fish are present. If you see mullet all pushed up along the edge or frantically jumping as they pass over a particular bar or structure, game fish are close by feeding on mullet.

Birds are key indicators of the type of game fish present. Black terns stay with tarpon. Brown pelicans seem to congregate around larger concentrations of jack crevalle. Large concentrations of birds resting on the beach are a good sign that something has just happened in the immediate area offshore, and that game fish are normally still in close proximity. Any sign of bird feeding activity should be investigated.

Slicks do form in the surf zone and will indicate feeding game fish. However, slicks



*Birds dive-bombing a bait ball at mile marker 55 on PINS
Photo by Charles Golla*



*Chris and Justin Golla hunt redfish in the surf
Photo by Charles Golla*

in the surf don't last very long because of the action of the waves on the nearby shore.

Surf Structure

Generally, game fish are lazy by nature and choose to stage in areas where they have to exert the least amount of effort to feed. In the surf, this means areas where the structure will either trap bait or where strong currents will bring the bait to the game fish. Surf structure comes in many forms and that structure can change in a matter minutes with the rise and fall of the tide.

Bars are the shallower formations that occur between the deeper water guts. Waves break on top of the bars; normally there will be have a series of two to four bars.

Guts are the deeper water formations that are found in between the bars. The first gut is directly east of the first bar and so on.

The Wade Gut is considered the first deeper formation of water that touches the shore. One would normally wade through the wade gut to access the first bar.

Splash Zones occur on the shore or over shallower bars. This agitation causes the water to turn off-color in the immediate area. Bait uses the off-colored water for cover. Game fish patrol the edge of off-colored water and will dart in and out in search of bait. You want to make every effort to keep your fly in this location.

Chokes or Pinch Points occur where deeper water guts get necked down by the shallower water bars. This forms a funnel for water to pass through. The increased current in these locations allow game fish to ambush bait down current.

Suck Outs with falling tides normally only occur on the first bar as the tide is dropping and wave action overfills the residing wade gut. Water pressure forces a narrow pass through the forward bar until the pressure is relieved. The area of a suck out normally turns a little off-colored with each wave action over fill cycle. Bait that is trapped in the shallower wade gut is forced through the suck out and into the next deeper gut. Game fish stage in deeper water just in front of these suck outs and await their prey.

Close Outs are large shallow formations coming off the shore where there appears to be no wade gut. Bait will sometimes congregate on top of a close out for shallow water protection. Close outs also force larger bait to travel around the deeper point in the first gut. Game fish congregate in this location. Close outs also provide good access points to deeper water.

Key Holes are deep pockets in the wade gut that are normally found directly down current of a close out. Game fish will stage in a key hole waiting for bait to come off the shallow close out. Key holes also provide cover for bait over night and are prime locations at sunrise and sunset. Rising tides are more favorable for key holes.

Charles Golla is an avid surf fisherman and member of the Rockport Fly Fishers.



*Chris Golla with Jack Crevalle
Photo by Charles Golla*