

# TRIPPIN'

WRITTEN BY CAPTAIN TIM DAUGHERTY - GET HOOKED FISHING CHARTERS



## The real deal on fly-fishing for elusive tripletail along Florida's Gulf Coast

Crab buoys, channel markers and floating debris are considered obstacles by many boaters. I, however, like to call them "hotspots." How many times have you been out fishing and passed right by a row of crab pots or a barnacle-encrusted piece of flotsam? We've all done it. I, too, was once guilty of passing by these "fish havens," but if you take the time and look a little more closely at these objects, like I did, you may come across what I consider, black gold. It doesn't matter what kind of angler you are, there is no denying the excitement that comes along with sight-fishing, and when it comes to fly-fishing for tripletail, dropping a fly right on the fish's nose and watching it inhale it in an explosion of whitewater is no exception!



Tripletail can be targeted year-

ound along the Gulf, but without exception, the spring months through the fall are my favorite times of the year to target them on fly. Weather patterns during these months are, for the most part, calm and predictable, with light winds in the early morning and late evening and perhaps only a late afternoon shower to contend with. Coincidentally, stone crab season starts up during this time of year, running October 15 through May 15. "What's the big deal with stone crab season," you ask? Read on and you'll understand.

In my opinion, and I'm sure you will agree that with rising gas prices, the best part about targeting tripletail is that there is simply no need to run way offshore. You can typically hunt these fish within sight of land, just off

the beaches or in the numerous West Coast passes. In short, three words sum it all up - *CRAB POT BUOYS*. Again, you may be asking, “What do crab pot buoys have to do with tripletail fishing?” The answer is “food.” Like most other species, locate the food source and you’ll locate fish! It’s that simple. One of the tripletails’ favorite pieces of structure is the crab pot buoy. Trips’ may hang out under any old buoy, but if you can locate a string with growth on it, you will certainly increase your odds. Something else to keep in mind; you can find abandoned crab pot buoys or “ghost buoys” year-round so timing your fishing trip with stone crab season is not critical, but it surely helps.

***“If you prefer ultra-stealth fishing, search the find a line of buoys in shallow enough water where you can break out the push-pole.”***

When approaching a line of bobbing buoys or any floating marker that may hold fish, be sure you don’t get too close and cause too much commotion. I have to admit, tripletail are not as spooky as laid up tarpon or tailing redfish, but if you run right up on one, it will surely sound. The fish may not be gone for good, but it may take a while for it to resurface. I would recommend keeping a safe distance from any object potentially holding fish while always wearing a quality pair of polarized sunglasses. Once targets are located, slow down and double back. When you get to within 30 yards of the object, shut down the main engine and employ the benefits of the trolling motor which allows a stealthy approach and facilitates multiple casts at a single target. If you prefer ultra-stealth fishing, search the find a line of buoys in shallow enough water where you can break out the push-pole.

Tripletails that lurk in the vicinity of buoys, markers and other debris are typically hunting crabs, shrimp and small bait fish seeking shelter from predators. As the tide comes in and out of the passes, crustaceans and critters of all sorts get washed in and out with the moving water and often seek shelter beneath stationary objects. As ambush predators, this is where tripletail shine the brightest. The fish camouflage themselves as a piece of floating debris, hovering nearly motionless just below the surface. Waiting in the slack current behind floating objects, the masters of deception pounce on nearly anything that drifts by - essentially creating their own feeding station.

Almost prehistoric looking with very small eyes and a color scheme ranging from black with hues of yellow in juvenile fish, to black and grey in adult specimens, the tripletail is given its name because the dorsal fin and anal fin are elongated which somewhat creates the illusion of three tail fins. They are not streamlined by any means, but I believe the elongated fins aid the fish in short but very powerful bursts of speed. Even fishermen trolling off the east coast from Virginia to the Florida Keys, encounter tripletail miles offshore under flotsam and weed-lines when baits intended for dolphin or other pelagics are devoured by the aggressive feeders. Often looked at as an oddball, the tripletail is the only fish in its family of fishes found in the Atlantic Ocean.



Any sort of debris - especially with growth - is where you'll find tripletail masterfully lying in ambush.

Catching a tripletail on the fly can be extremely rewarding. Fish in excess of 20 pounds are taken regularly, with most averaging five to ten pounds. And don't be surprised when your tripletail takes to the air; they can be quite acrobatic during the fight. When making casts, it's imperative to make your fly appear as natural as possible. Make sure during every presentation that your offering lands up current and drifts back to the waiting fish. Most of the time the quarry will follow the fly as it drifts by and devour it. Take care to set the hook quickly, especially when practicing catch and release because these fish inhale their prey like snook or tarpon.

I generally bring along three fly rods. They are as follows; an 8 weight, 9 weight and 10 weight rod. As an Orvis endorsed guide, I fish the Orvis Zero Gravity mid-flex saltwater fly rods. I've found that anything less than a mid-flex rod is tough to use for bigger fish that skillfully wrap you around buoy lines. For reels, I use the Orvis Battenkill large arbor for the 8 and 9 weights and the Orvis Mach VI for the 10 weight. Although a large

arbor fly reel is not necessary, it is my reel of choice for retrieving a lot of fly line quickly.

***“With their small mouths, sharp spines, and thick skin, there aren’t many good options for landing this powerful fish.”***

Let’s talk fly line and leader material. For my piscatorial pursuits when targeting tripletail, I find Orvis Floating Redfish Wonderline to be ideal. It’s long forward taper ensures ease of casts and a soft landing, which is perfect when a delicate presentation is required. When fish are a bit deeper in the water column, I prefer a clear intermediate sinking fly line. This line has a solid mono core with a weight forward taper and a slick coating for ease of casting. The sink rate is one foot per one and a half seconds, which I find ideal in these situations.



For my leader and tippet I use a fairly simple, yet very effective system. My leader consists of a three foot piece of 50 lb. TripleFish monofilament connected to a three foot section of 40 lb. mono to an additional two foot section of 30 lb. mono. I attach all three lines using a surgeon's knot and connect the top section to the fly line using a nail knot. For the tippet, I use a one foot piece of 40 lb. Mirage fluorocarbon. You can go lighter if you like in clear water but due to the structure you’re often fishing around, try heavier first and downsize until you persuade the fish to strike. I prefer tying my fly to the tippet using a no-slip mono loop. This knot allows for more natural action in the fly.

Fly patterns I have had most success with are the Merkin crab, Bonafide crab and the EP minnow. The majority of shrimp patterns work well, too. If you are one who likes to tie flies, match the hatch!



One final tackle suggestion; carrying along a landing net never hurts. With their small mouths, sharp spines, and thick skin, there aren't many good options for landing this powerful fish.

Special care should be taken on the fillet table as well. A very sharp knife is a must, as the tripletail's skin is like leather. Cleaning a couple of these fish will put your fish cleaning skills and the best of knives to the test. I also recommend wearing a glove, as tripletail have very sharp spines and razor-sharp gill rakes. It's best to fillet these fish by slicing down along the spine, then up over their thick rib bones and finally back to the tail. As far as edibility, tripletail are hard to beat. You'll find the meat to be very firm, almost steak like, white and flaky. No matter how you prepare it, you won't be disappointed. I strongly suggest butter, garlic and the grill. Happy hunting!