

## Winter Time Flats Fishing

A very common misconception among coastal anglers is that trout and red fish go deep in the winter and the only way to catch them is to fish deep. They do, indeed, seek the warmth of deep channels during the coldest of times but believe me when I tell you they will be back on the flats as soon as the sun shines. January has been the best big trout month for me. The average high temperature for Rockport in January is 64 degrees. That means plenty of warm sunny days. In the past two years my clients have landed 14 trout between 25" and 31" in January. Most of these were taken by sight casting.

The best flats fishing in the winter is three to four days after a cold front when the winds lay low and the sun shines bright. Reds and trout, especially big sow trout will lie up in the shallow water to warm. When I say shallow water, I mean shallow water. Most of my winter time trout are caught in water a foot or less deep. Look for areas with soft mud and grass with deep water access. In the Rockport area the spoil islands along the ICW and Aransas Channel are prime big trout and red fish habitat in the winter. Shallow flats with pot holes are great spots to sight cast to big trout. Look for them lying on the bottom around the edges of the pot holes.

During the winter there is not much need to hit the water at the crack of dawn. The fish are going to be there to warm so give them some time. My theory is they will not eat until their body temperature equalizes with the water temperature. Big fish require more time to reach the temperature equilibrium than smaller fish. In other words the little ones are going to get hungry first. I usually start my winter charters around 9:00 or 10:00 a.m. The later start will also aid in sight fishing as the sun will be higher in the sky.

Another misconception is you need to fish a big bait to catch a big fish. In the winter most of the fish I have cleaned, even the big trout, have eaten small crabs and shrimp. My favorite flies have been a size 4 or 6 Boone Butter Rum Sand Flea, a chartreuse and white Foxy Clouser with lead eyes or small crab patterns. I normally begin with slow strips as the fish tend to be a little lethargic but some of the fish caught have eaten flies that were ripped through the water. You will need to experiment to find the speed they want.

You will need to experiment with lure presentation too. I prefer slow sinking lures and my favorite is the Chatter Tube made my Texas Rattlin Rig. Corkies and the Mirrorlure Catch 200 also work well. When the fish are real spooky I'll switch to a smaller lure like the Texas Flats Killer Minnow rigged on a 1/16<sup>th</sup> ounce jig head.

One other thing to remember when fishing the shallow flats in the winter is that it is also duck season. When poling or drifting a flat look for decoys around the duck blinds and along the shorelines and avoid them. The duck hunters will be out early but they also tend to head back to the boat ramp by 9:30 or so on sunny days. That is another good reason to start your fishing a little later. Avoid confrontations and never, ever, take a fishing rod to a gun fight.