

# SMOKE 'EM

## UNDER THE COVER OF DARKNESS!

ASK ANY ANGLER IN SOUTH FLORIDA ABOUT FISHING OPPORTUNITIES THAT EXIST AFTER DARK, AND YOU'LL PROBABLY HEAR ANSWERS LIKE SWORDFISH, SNAPPER AND SNOOK. THE ONLY PROBLEM WITH THESE ANSWERS IS THAT THEY LEAVE OUT ONE OF THE MOST HIGHLY SOUGHT AFTER MIGRATORY MENACES ROAMING BOTH COASTS OF FLORIDA.

BY CAPTAIN ORLANDO MUNIZ  
*NOMAD FISHING CHARTERS*

**K**ing mackerel or kings as they are affectionately called, encompass all of the attributes that make an ideal light tackle target. Capable of savage strikes resembling runaway train wrecks, followed by long sizzling runs and sky-rocketing leaps, kings could very well be the perfect near-shore adversary. One misconception is that in order to be successful, anglers must slow-troll live baits, freshly cut strips or silvery ribbonfish during daylight hours. Sure, while these approaches are highly effective and continue to produce outstanding results, it's under the cover of darkness when a different sort of fun begins- drifting and dreaming.

After dark, you must throw out or at least rewrite your playbook. Fishing during these low light hours stacks the odds in our favors, especially for the anglers who know how to

take advantage of the situation. First, you don't have to fish live bait, even though it wouldn't hurt. Fresh dead bait is all that is required for presentations that are both attractive and productive. A number of anglers prefer to strengthen their dead bait by soaking it in brine or just powdering salt on the baitfish. This move works, but it is not mandatory.

Another distinct advantage of night fishing is that low light allows you to beef up your terminal tackle such as leaders, hooks, swivels, etc, which could be a big benefit during clear water conditions.

### FINDING THE ACTION...

Though it may sound like a cliché, before you wet your line, you will have to decide where to fish. You might want to start your search outside the inlets,

especially if your outing takes place during the outgoing tide. Kings are opportunistic feeders that enjoy taking full advantage of unsuspecting prey forced out with the flowing water. Wrecks situated in 70 to 170 feet of water are also worth investigating; just keep in mind that king mackerel usually prefer to spend their time along the down-current side of the structure.

Once you decide where to begin your search, locating active fish can be accomplished in a number of ways. The first, and possibly the most proven method along the southeastern seaboard is to start your drifts in no less than 160 feet of water during evenings with easterly breezes that will push you toward shallower water.

Personally, I like to make my first drift nice and long in order to cover as much ground as possible. On the *Nomad*, completing the first drift in 50 feet of water is not uncommon.





is why you'll find the best of the best heading out to the kingfish grounds with nothing more than 12lb. to 20lb. class spinning outfits.

Any lighter, and you increase the odds of losing fish should lines become entangled during a flurry of action. Conventional tackle can also be utilized effectively even though casting can be more troublesome.

Effective rigs for kings can be tied in a wide variety of manners. My personal favorite has been a staple of the Southeast Florida head-boat industry for years. First, you take a ¼ to ½ ounce bullet-shape lead-head jig and add a couple of trailer hooks. Mustad #34091 are perfect; just don't forget to pinch the eyes of the trailer hooks. Once your jig is ready, add a three foot piece of 80lb. monofilament leader or trace of #4 wire. I prefer the mono because it can be tied quickly and doesn't kink, although rigging with a wire bite tippet will greatly lessen the odds of losing both fish and jigs. Another equally effective rig, and one that is very similar to the above, is to place a sliding egg sinker directly on your leader- allowing it to rest on the knot tied to three single, long

shank hooks rigged in unison. You can bait either rig with fresh ballyhoo, a Spanish



REGARDLESS OF HOW YOU CHOOSE TO RIG, WIRE IS A MUST WHEN TARGETING BONE CRUSHING KINGS.

sardine, herring or even a cigar-minnow. All three hooks should be buried in the bait as straight and as streamlined as possible with the first hook lodged in the head of the bait.

Lately, there have even been reports of techniques involving the use of chemical light sticks like those used in swordfishing. Rigging for kingfish is really only limited by your imagination, so don't hesitate to try something unique even if your fishing buddy thinks it's a silly idea.

### THE RIGHT SPREAD...

Now that you're all rigged up and ready, it's time to deploy your baits. You will need to experiment with different weight combinations in order to

stagger your offerings throughout the water column while keeping them from tangling when a pack of hungry mackerel decides to attack. Avoid the common mistake of setting the hook too fast, and let Mr. Rod Holder do his job. In case you haven't met him, Mr. Rod Holder is one of the best anglers I know. He has nerves of steel and never takes any breaks. Constantly holding your



WITH HOLDERS DOING MOST OF THE WORK, EVENING KINGFISHING PROVIDES A RELAXING ATMOSPHERE.

favorite outfit will cause you to lose valuable time when another rod gets blasted. The best system is to set out all of your baits and let the vertical movement of the boat bring the offerings to life.

Another common mistake is fishing too many lines, so only deploy as many as your crew can effectively handle. When the bite is on, multiple hook-ups are common, and you will have fish criss-crossing which can quickly turn the situation hectic. Also, pay close attention when deploying your baits because kings are known for striking as the tasty offerings flutter toward the bottom.

### CHUM 'EM UP...



The next step is to lure them in. Just like effective reef and wreck fishing, chumming is paramount. Most nighttime drifters like to hang a block of chum from the transom-

leaving a nice scent trail that will call in hungry kings patrolling nearby waters. Personally, I like to spice up my chum slick with fresh bits of pilchards, herring or sardines that have been soaking in menhaden oil. The key behind the chunking process is to keep the pieces flowing slowly and steadily. Don't make the mistake of tossing out a scoop of chunks and waiting 30 minutes before repeating the process. Dropping two or three pieces every couple of minutes is much more effective and will entice fish into eating the hook baits. Just like dolphin fishing, make sure you toss out a few chunks when fish are striking in the hopes that they will stick around.

### BONUS CATCHES...

Anyone who has ever fished at night knows all too well that there are many critters roaming around looking for an easy meal. Kingfish baits will be

ANDY DISPLAYS A TYPICAL NIGHTTIME KING TAKEN ON THE NOMAD.



suspended anywhere from just under the surface down to the lower third of the water column. As a matter of fact, you should make it a point to fish a bait directly on the bottom as well. Many trophy-size grouper and snapper have fallen victim to this ploy. Besides bottom dwellers, don't be surprised when you connect with cobia, Spanish and cero mackerel.

### MORE TIPS...

Nothing is more important than being prepared well in advance of the action. Night fishing involves more attention to small details often taken for granted during daylight hours. Items such as a gaff, spotlight or gloves need to be ready in a moment's notice. You don't want to be fumbling around while battling a quad of kings. Also, it is imperative to have more rods rigged and ready in case of an all-out assault. Rigging that may seem simple during daylight hours becomes far more difficult on a rocking boat in the darkness of the night. In addition, every member of your crew should keep an eye on any boat traffic in the area, especially when fishing in the vicinity of inlets. If you choose to anchor, make sure that the end of your ground tackle is secured to a poly ball that you can toss out in the event a huge smoker decides to head for Cuba. Be sure to note your exact position so that you can later locate the ball in the dark.

### BAG LIMITS...

Before you bag the mother lode, make sure that you check the latest rules and regulations. Some anglers may get so excited during a red hot bite that they forget how to measure and count.

On nights when the prevailing breeze pushes you offshore, simply start your drift in shallower water and work your way out. During the first important drift, it is imperative that you make a mental note of the precise depth where action occurs. From there, you can begin to narrow down your drift window which will allow you to spend more time on the fish. Deploying a drift sock, also known as a sea anchor, will help by slowing the boat down and keeping your vessel perpendicular to the drift.

The modern approach to pinpointing a hot king mackerel bite involves utilizing state-of-the-art high-tech electronics. These innovative pieces of equipment are very helpful during the day, but they become invaluable tools at night. Kings will show up as streaks and scratches on the depth sounder. It's obvious why a quality fish-finder can make the task of locating 'life' much easier. Chart plotters can also help you keep close track of structure and areas of concentrated activity so that you can work the most productive depths over and over again. Don't be discouraged if you don't have the latest and greatest electronics mounted on your dashboard. You can still cash-in on the bite with nothing more than a simple depth finder.

### TACKLE & RIGGING SUGGESTIONS...

No matter what type of boat you own, techniques for night time kingfishing remain the same. Most of the mackerel encountered under the cover of darkness average 5 to 15 pounds; however, it isn't uncommon to run into smokers in the 30 to 50 pound range. Kingfish have very sloppy eating habits and are sometimes foul hooked. Fishing heavy tackle increases the odds of pulled hooks which

Clockwise From Top Left: ©FSFMAG, ©Captain Orlando Mumiz (2)

Clockwise From Bottom Left: ©Captain Orlando Mumiz (3)



CAPTAIN MUNIZ SAVES ONE FOR THE SMOKER.

No matter how heated things get, it is important to carefully release juvenile or unwanted fish. Currently, Florida law allows each angler to possess two king mackerel measuring at least 24 inches to the fork of the tail.

### EVENING DELIGHT...

Due to its simplicity, night fishing for kings can be done even on weeknights without losing much sleep. Spring means longer days, so you can work till 5:00 p.m. and still be on the water well before sundown. The key to fishing in

the evening is to have everything prepared well in advance. Every member of the crew needs to share in the responsibility. With everything set to go, it will only be a short run to the fishing grounds and you won't have any crowds to deal with. If you are not already taking advantage of this exciting light tackle fishery, there is no better time than now to get in the game. Because spring time is king time! See you out there...



## KNOW YOUR MACKEREL

### - KING MACKEREL

Iridescent bluish green; sides silvery, streamlined body with tapered head; no black pigment on front of dorsal fin; lateral line starts high and drops sharply below the second dorsal fin; young fish often have yellow spots similar to Spanish mackerel.



### - SPANISH MACKEREL

Greenish back shading to silver on sides, golden yellow irregular spots above and below lateral line; front of dorsal fin black; lateral line curves gently to base of tail.



### - CERO MACKEREL

Iridescent bluish green; sides silvery, yellow spots forming lines above and below a bronze stripe from pectoral fin to base of tail; front of first dorsal fin is bluish black; lateral line curves gradually to base of caudal fin.



Clockwise From Top Left: ©Captain Orlando Muniz, ©Diane Peebles (3)



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