

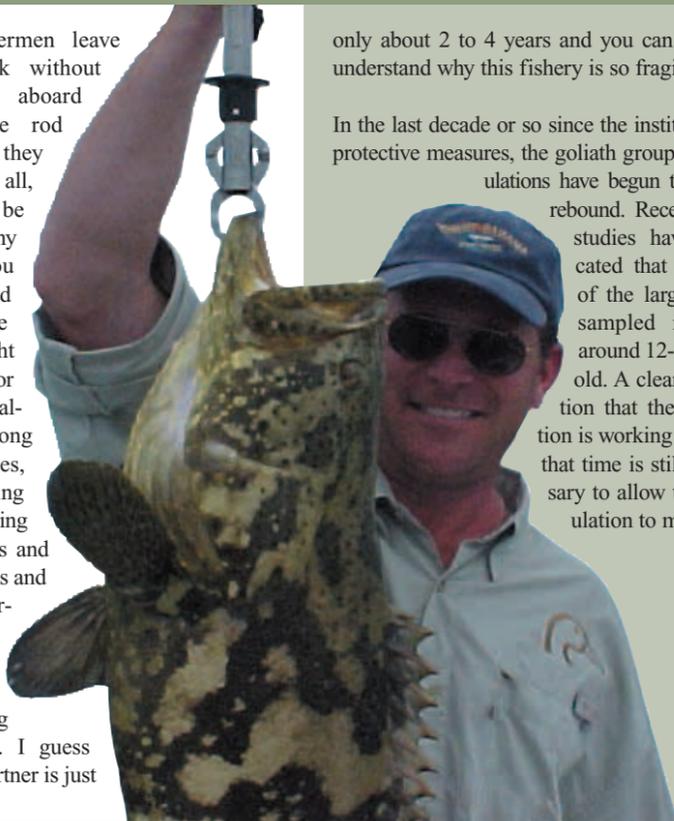
A large, brown grouper fish is being held by a person's hand in shallow water. The fish is the central focus, with its textured skin and fins visible. The person's hand, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, is placed on the fish's side. The water is dark and clear, showing the fish's reflection. The overall scene is a close-up shot of the fish and the person's hand.

shallow water
GIANTS

**Article & Photos
By Capt. Charles Wright**

*These jumbo members
of the grouper family are making
a Big comeback, in a Big way.*

Few fishermen leave the dock without having aboard every possible rod combination they can carry. After all, you have to be prepared for any situation. You need a plug rod for accurate casts into tight areas, another for long distance ballistic shots along the shorelines, specific spinning rods for throwing jigs on the flats and casting live baits and since you purchased those fly-rod outfits, you better bring them along "just in case". I guess your fishing partner is just



This baby goliath pins the boga.

only about 2 to 4 years and you can quickly understand why this fishery is so fragile.

In the last decade or so since the institution of protective measures, the goliath groupers populations have begun to slowly rebound. Recent creel studies have indicated that the age of the largest fish sampled is right around 12-13 years old. A clear indication that the protection is working but also that time is still necessary to allow the population to mature.

about any fishery throughout the State. Most common are juveniles in the 5-25 pound range, which are found throughout the backcountry in fairly high numbers. Being the only grouper able to tolerate brackish water, it's also not uncommon to see fish in the 10 to 60 pound range taken in tidal rivers.

For anglers, what separates the goliath from its numerous close cousins is the fact that monster size specimens in excess of 300 pounds can be pursued and captured in relatively shallow water — hence the name, shallow water giants. In the Ten Thousand Islands and Everglades National Park you can easily find fish in that size range in as little as 10 feet. The key is structure. Find the structure and you will likely find the goliath. However, to pursue and actually have a chance of landing one of these Volkswagens, you really need heavy tackle.

Gigantic goliath grouper prefer large habitats and very large food so to have a chance of looking one in the eye, get out the stand up gear. Short stout rods coupled with two speed reels are an excellent choice. 100 lb. test leaders are a must just to prevent being busted off every time and this is also no place for snap swivels. Recommended is the use of a large circle hook, which will almost always assure a lip hooked fish, minimizing the danger to the fish and making for a quick and easy release. Do not attempt to lift three to four hundred pounds of goliath into the boat. Their bodies are not designed to support that much weight out of the water and dragging them across the

gunnels will damage internal organs, eventually killing the fish. Photograph and release these precious beauties in the water.

Throughout the southwest region of Florida, goliaths can be found on offshore wrecks and reefs as well as inshore bridges, trestles and docks. These inshore areas are the easiest to locate and can often hold some very large fish in surprising numbers, often, in excess of several hundred pounds, so be prepared for a fight!

Big fish mean big baits. Few of these gentle giants can pass up a 14" mullet or a jack the size of a small dog anchored on the bottom. One of the goliaths favorite meals is a small stingray. However, handling this particular hook bait can be a challenge.

To actually hook, fight and release one of these bruiseurs on recreational fishing gear, everything must go your way. These powerful fish will pull like nothing you have ever experienced before. If a hooked goliath decides to take you 'back home', your done! Once hooked up, you must consistently apply maximum pressure to keep his head pointed in the right direction, which is up. The odds are definitely with the fish. They are big, your on their home turf, they know it very well and I assure you, they do not intend on leaving without a fight!

Bulky as they are, goliaths are surprisingly agile. I have watched more than one hooked cobia get run down and gobbled up by what appeared to be a barn door. On different occasions I've witnessed three or four goliaths competing on the surface for a hooked snook. It's similar to a bream eating a cricket just on a grander scale and much more exciting

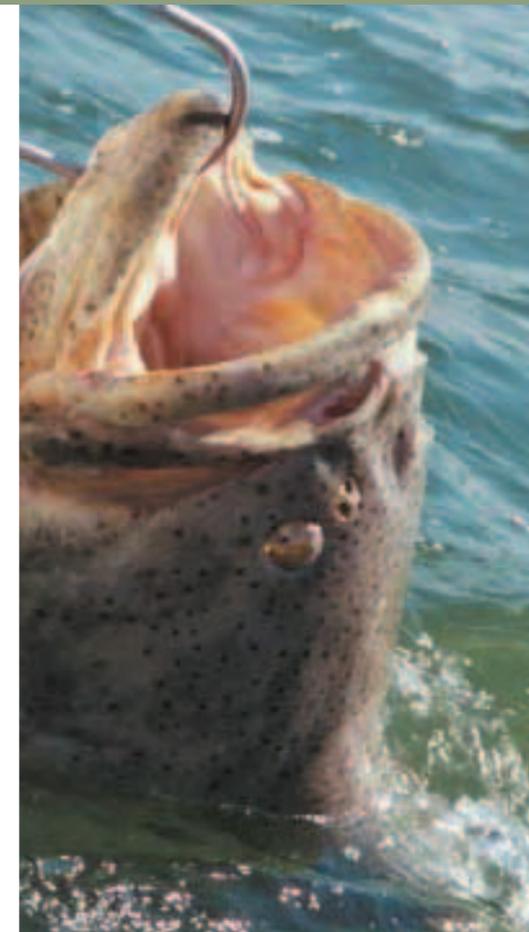
If you intend on anchoring, one of the most important things that you can do to improve your odds of success is properly positioning the boat. It is best to be as far away from the structure as you can while still within casting range. While anchored up wind, you can exert the maximum force in the needed direction out and away. I kid you not when I tell you that pulling these extremely large and powerful fish out of their lairs is a tremendous task. If you set up directly on top of the wreck, they will take you back into the structure without even pulling a single foot of line off the reel.

If on a drift, an angry three or four hundred pound goliath will pull your flats skiff around without even breaking a sweat. Like all groupers, the first few feet and seconds of the fight are the most crucial. If you are 15 seconds into fight and are still hooked up you have a good chance of landing the fish. However, most encounters with goliaths, similar to bull

rides, do not last that long. Regardless of the goliath's enormous size do not expect a dramatic strike. Even bait that we might designate as being XXL, fits easily into the front end of this giant. They will often approach the bait, nonchalantly gobble it up and then take their sweet time heading home. Few things in the wild push them around, so they are not used to being in a hurry for anything. Typically, you will feel a couple of hard thumps and then nothing. That's your strike. When the thumping stops, reel tight and hang on! Like a giant suction pump, a goliath feeds by inhaling the large volume of water surrounding its prey. The unfortunate bait is inevitably sucked in along with the water.

The recovery of the goliath is absolutely fantastic for sport fishermen. Many a day of slow snook fishing or water too muddy to sight fish has been "saved" by targeting these bulldogs. The action will only increase as the conservation measures continue. Early in my fishing career, I was as guilty as any about harvesting too many of these very special fish. I know first hand how fragile the fishery really is and how easily we can again wipe them out. Personally, I would like to see all of the implemented protection continue long enough to allow this slow growing population plenty of time to mature and stabilize.

As with any issue there will also be controversy. Many, particularly in the guide community, feel that there are already too many goliaths.



Goliath himself.

going to have to carry his arsenal in his lap.

The above mentioned line up will handle just about any shallow water species that you will encounter anywhere throughout the State with one exception the shallow water giants, the goliath groupers. To land even the juveniles you're going to have to step up your tackle. Leave the little stuff in the racks and break out the 50 pound standup gear, your fighting belt, and a back brace. You are going to need them all!

The goliath grouper, recognized as jewfish prior to 2001, is the largest member of the grouper family. These slow growing monsters can reach eight feet in length and close to 800 pounds, that's right 800 pounds! That is, if fortunate enough to live long enough. Past exploitation and excessive over harvesting resulted in the goliath groupers protection from all harvest in 1990 throughout the Gulf of Mexico and the Southern Atlantic Federal Waters. In addition, in 1993 closures in the Caribbean were also implemented. So, regardless if targeting goliaths intentionally or not, release every fish unharmed.

Thought to live up to 40 years of age, a goliath requires a solid seven to ten years just to reach maturity. Compare that for a moment to the fast growing dolphin whose entire lifespan is

With the excesses of the past now in check, the goliath is coming back in a big way. With a wide range covering most all of the Florida peninsula, you can find these great fish in just



Even the juveniles need 50 lb. standup gear!

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A tough day of snook fishing is blamed on the goliath grouper eating the snook out of house and home. Of course these statements are often followed by "back in the old days, the snook fishing was much better." In times of past, the snook fishing likely was much better due to considerably less fishing pressure from all around. I ask you to consider this. As these same individuals claim there were a lot more snook in the good old days, don't you think that there were more goliaths also? We were not hammering either species back then and they co-existed extremely well. Mother Nature seems to have a wonderful way of balancing things out. We have taken steps to minimize our negative impact on both the snook populations and those of the goliath grouper. Perhaps we should just let Mother Nature continue to do her thing.

The Ten Thousand Islands area is recognized as the nursery for this species and is home to the largest population of juveniles. I have been in backcountry creeks and watched anglers jig dozens of small goliath-ettes, which were no larger than just a few pounds. Almost all of the islands will hold at least a few resident babies, typically fish less than 20 pounds. If you know that they are there and plan it well, you might even be able to use that bait caster that we tucked away in the rod rack to drag one out of its home. Most likely however, you will end up with wide open eyes and an astonished look on your face.

So if the opportunity arises, grab one of the stand up outfits you've got, find some shallow water structure in the 10,000 Islands area, drop down a big bait, and hold on for the ride of your life.



About THE WRITER
Capt. Charles Wright runs Chokoloskee Charters. With four different boats to choose from, he is able to allow his anglers an opportunity to experience all the fishing opportunities the area has to offer. He grew up in south Florida and the Keys and has fished the Everglades National Park since 1972. Schooled as an environmental engineer and an FAA Certified Flight Instructor, he sold his consulting firm and moved to Chokoloskee after hurricane Andrew. Using a small private plane, he regularly scouts the area for new fishing grounds. This is a unique "on top" perspective to the area. Besides Florida's southwest coast, Charles regularly fishes the Florida Keys, Miami and the Bahamas, but he maintains fishing the Chokoloskee area is the best the state has to offer.

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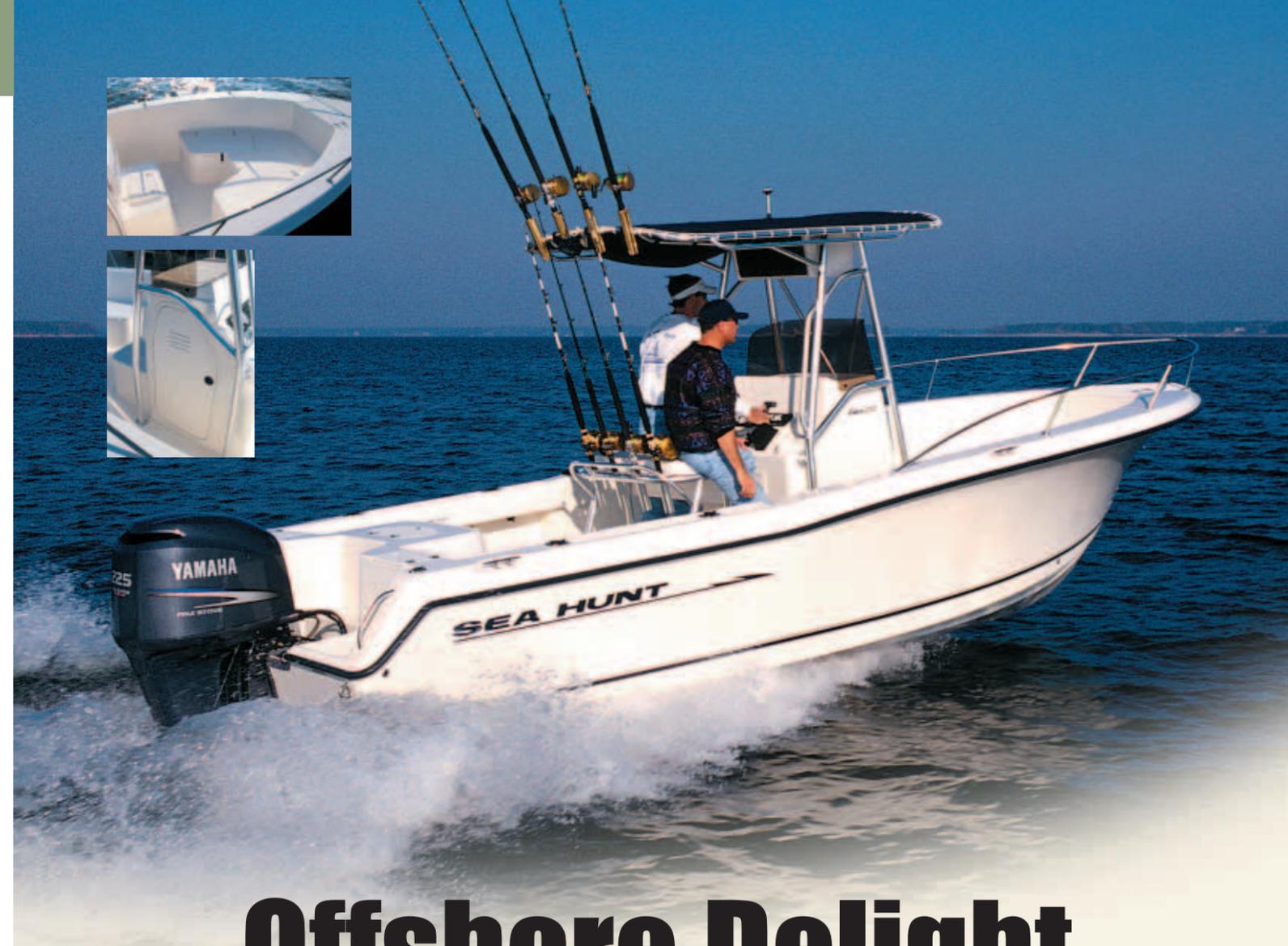
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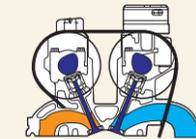
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