

# The Miami Herald

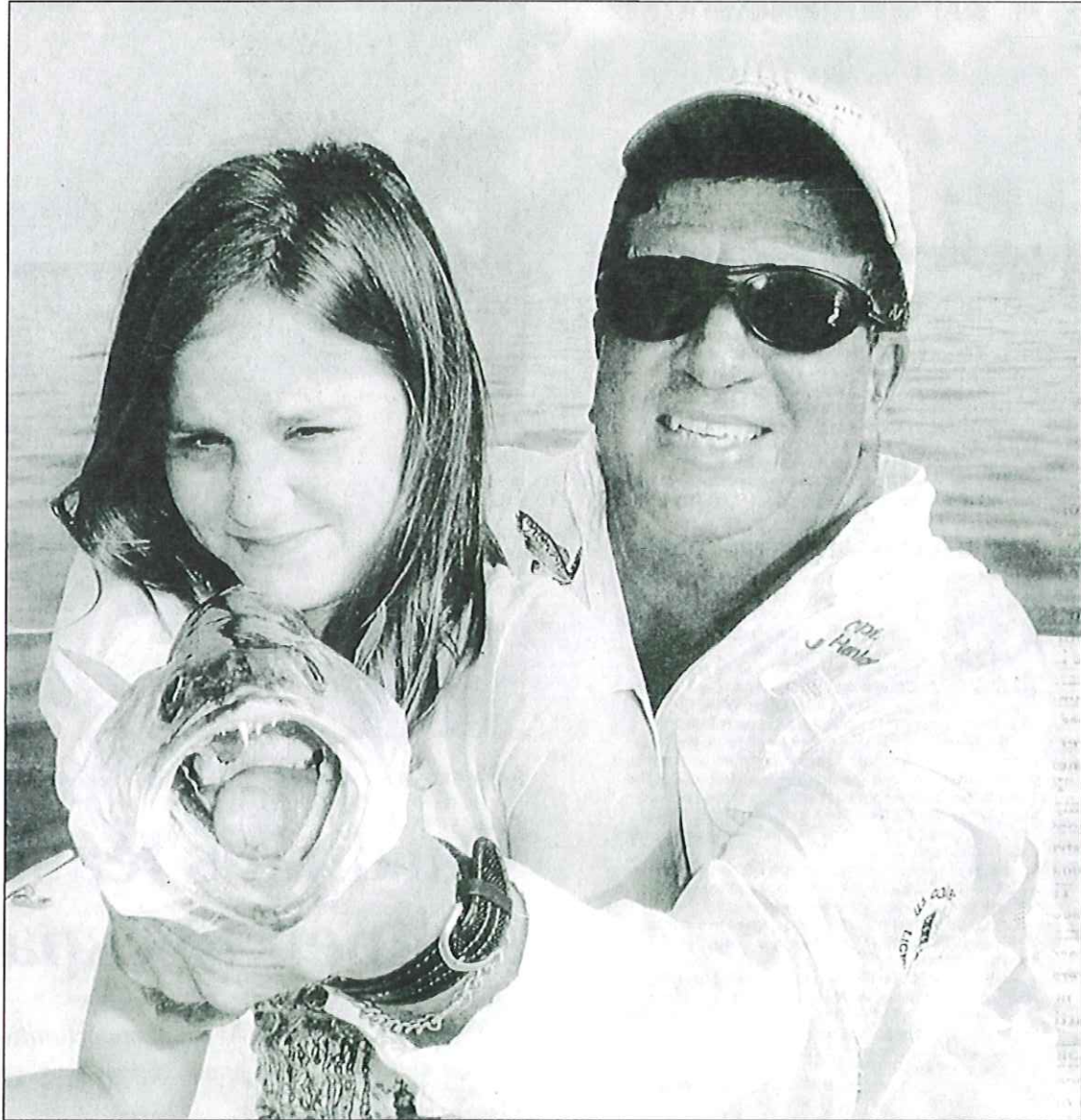
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## OUTDOORS THURSDAY

### FISHING



SUE COCKING/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

**CATCHING ON:** Captain Jim Henley, above right, led a group that includes 12-year-old Alissa Tondasch to spotted sea trout in the morning and her 10-pound limit of shellfish in the afternoon at Steinhatchee Landing.

## Guide to an easy catch



## At Steinhatchee Landing, picking up your limit of spotted sea trout and scallops is easy – with the right person to help.

**S**TEINHATCHEE — There are few pursuits better than fly fishing on the flats and lobster hunting on the reef. But even I need a break once in a while from rocket-surgeon bonefish and pugilistic lobster. This need to scale down and evolve from Type-A to Type-



OUTDOORS

SUSAN COCKING

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Greek alphabet usually occurs in August, which is the peak of scalloping season in Steinhatchee, a sleepy hamlet (pop. 1,400 or so)

snuggled into the Gulf Coast's Big Bend region.

Since there are few people or businesses, but miles of undeveloped wetlands and pristine grass beds, Steinhatchee is a tractor beam for thousands of recreational bay scallop catchers from as far as Georgia and South Florida each summer. Historically, it is one of the most productive scalloping grounds in Florida.

### TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Captain Jim Henley, the in-house guide at the Steinhatchee Landing resort, specializes in full-day, fishing/scalloping trips during the scallop season July 1-Sept. 10. He recently guided our group of four low-key anglers/divers to a healthy harvest of fish and shellfish — all caught before 2 p.m.

Henley opted to tackle spotted sea trout first thing in the morning, and then dive for scallops later. He explained that trout are happy to bite early in four to six feet of water, but tend to bury themselves in grass beds as the sun gets higher. About that time, Henley said, scallops concealed on the bottom decide to seek the sun's warmth and perch themselves prominently on blades of turtle grass where they can be plucked easily.

Using three-inch Berkley Gulp new-penny shrimp on

### IF YOU GO



To book accommodations and a scalloping/fishing trip through Steinhatchee Landing, call 352-498-3513. You can also charter or rent boats at Ideal Fishcamp and Motel (352-498-3877); River Haven Marina (352-498-0709); Paradise Suites (352-498-5005); Westwind Fish Camp & Motel (352-498-5254); Sea Hag Marina (352-498-3008); and Keaton Beach Marina (850-578-2897).

### SCALLOPING RULES

- Florida saltwater fishing license required.
- Bag limit of two gallons of unshucked scallops or one pint of scallop meat per person up to 10 gallons (unshucked) per boat.
- Scalloping waters extend from the Pasco/Hernando county line northward to the Mexico Beach Canal in Bay County.

Bass Assassin jig heads and Kwik Cork bobbers, all four of us began catching sea trout at once. Besides Henley, I was the only one on board with any fishing experience. My companions: Patti Hanley of Hollywood and Bernard Carpenter and Alissa Tondasch, both of Cape Coral, each caught their first sea trout.

Alissa, 12, in full angling mode after initial misgivings about being on a boat in the open Gulf, managed to catch and release a small shark larger than Carpenter's. She wouldn't let him forget it for the rest of the day. In about three hours, we amassed 12 trout. I was glad I didn't bring my fly rod; I would have been lucky to catch one or two.

Just as Henley predicted, the trout grew scarce as the sun grew hot.

The group then headed inshore to lush meadows of turtle and eelgrass about four feet deep where, still sitting on the boat, you could pick out individual scallops.

Henley cautioned everyone to avoid standing on the grass, and instead float around picking up shellfish. Pretty easy to do because the water was so shallow.

"This is probably the best year we've had in 10," Henley said. "We haven't had any red tide. We've had the right conditions, and we've learned to take care of the estuary."

Kicking along the surface with fins, and looking down

with mask and snorkel, it seemed like there was a scallop every two feet. The brownish-white bivalves with tiny blue eyes look like miniature flying saucers depicted in 1950s sci-fi movies. They clamp their shells shut when they see you looking at them, and sometimes try to swim away backward. But they are pretty slow and comically ineffective.

Occasionally, they manage to pinch when they are grabbed, but unlike moray eels or nurse sharks, they quickly let go without drawing blood. The common travel guide ease-of-scalloping analogy — "like picking up Easter eggs underwater" — is accurate.

### HAPPY HOLIDAYS

Again, I was the only one in our group who had caught scallops. But everyone else quickly got into it — especially Hanley, who relishes lobster diving.

"This is *fun!*" she said after dumping two large bags of shellfish on Henley's deck.

I don't think it took more than two hours to catch a boat limit of 10 gallons of shellfish. By 1 p.m., we were heading back to Steinhatchee Landing with Alissa — under Henley's direction — taking the helm.

Henley said he would clean the trout but had no intention of spending several hours shucking scallops. Instead, he took them to a local so revered for her careful and sanitary wielding of a scallop knife that she — like Oprah or Ronaldinho — is known by her first name only — Beverlylyn.

We took the results of Beverlylyn's handiwork, plus trout filets, to Fiddler's Restaurant, where the staff prepared a gourmet platter — fried, sautéed, blackened and broiled.

It almost was too much for five adults and one child to finish. Nobody ordered dessert.

Somehow, I doubt I could have duplicated that result with a fly rod and tickler stick.

