



ADRIAN GRAY

VALLEY OF THE GIANTS

IN THE KEYS, BLACK GROUPE
TOP THE BOTTOMFISHING
WISH LIST. BY DAVID CONWAY

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Anglers in the lower Keys speak of a deepwater location called the Valley of the Giants, where big black grouper show up reliably, season after season. Whether factual or somewhat embellished, the legend of the valley is a testament to the respect Keys anglers give black grouper, the toughest bottomfish to beat this side of 300 feet, and arguably one of the best on the dinner table.

Reefs, Wrecks and Ledges

On the Atlantic side of the Keys, you'll primarily find blacks at three structure formations: around coral heads at the main reef, wrecks beyond the reef, and along live bottom and ledges beyond

JACKPOT: Many grouper lairs hold multiple fish, enabling skillful anglers to pluck more than one from each spot.

the main reef line, usually between 130 and 250 feet deep. A fourth structure, the patch reefs in Hawk Channel, hold grouper in winter, but that's primarily during the spawning-season closure (January 1 through April 30).

An important feature of bottom relief in the Keys is the intermediary reef line, a dead reef that rises up just beyond the main reef line and runs parallel. That structure runs only intermittently, however. In the upper Keys, the intermediary reef line runs from Carysfort to Molasses Reef, and then drops off in the middle Keys. Its profile rises again in the lower Keys and continues southwest of Key West. Where it runs and doesn't, along with the water quality, determines the nature of the black grouper fishing in that area.

Key Largo has a strong bottomfishery off the reef and in deeper water. I've had incredible days of black grouper fishing there. The Gulf Stream flows close to the fishing grounds, bringing good water quality. Key Largo anglers are big on live baits, especially

speedos, often available in local waters and considered one of the best baits for big grouper. Even a local party boat, Capt. Chandler Warren's *Gulf Stream*, is a renowned grouper-catching ride.

"The opening of the season on May 1 coincides with some of the best mutton snapper and yellowtail fishing of the year," Warren says, "so those are great times on our boat."

To the southwest, off Islamorada,

the secondary reef isn't as prominent, so Capts. Ryan and Scott Wenzel, brothers who together run 4Reel Charters, search for black grouper closer to the main reef.

"The reef drops off quickly here, from 60 to 90 feet," Ryan says, "and we look for spotty, live bottom, and coral heads that stack up on the roll-off from the reef. Our go-to depth is about 80 feet."

You want to mark coral heads, Ryan adds, but also read the surrounding bottom for yellowtails, live growth and nearby relief. For more accurate reads, he sets his sonar on high chirp.

SWS TACKLE BOX

WENZEL BROTHERS' SETUP

ROD: Shimano 5-foot-6-inch Tallus bent butt or equivalent

REEL: Shimano Tiagra 50-wide, 80-wide or equivalent



LINE: 65- to 80-pound braid, 150 to 200 feet of 50-pound mono top shot, 15 feet of 60- to 80-pound mono leader

TERMINAL TACKLE: 10-ounce egg sinker, 8/0 or 9/0 circle hook

BAIT: Live speedos, grunts, jacks



WE LIKE TO ANCHOR FOR BLACK GROUPE BECAUSE THAT'S HOW WE CATCH THE BIGGER ONES. THE MORE YOU SIT ON A SPOT AND CHUM, THE MORE LIKELY THE FISH WILL COME. WE CHUM OFF THE STERN AND DROP CHUM BALLS.

—CAPT. SCOTT WENZEL, 4REEL CHARTERS

“If you don’t have chirp,” he says, “set your fish finder to 200 kHz to read the bottom and tell whether it is live or not. On the screen, there will be fuzz showing on the bottom, not hard, solid marks. You won’t really mark the black grouper. They might be underneath the rocks. It’s more about looking for that live area than about a single fish mark or one spot.”

Anchor and Chum

“We anchor for black grouper because

that’s how we catch the bigger ones,” Scott says. “The more you sit on a spot and chum, the more likely that the fish will come in. In addition to block chum off the stern, we’ll drop chum balls, even before we send down a bait. When the chum ball hits the bottom and disintegrates, the grouper really get curious.”

Some anglers use sand in their chum

WRECK RULER: Black grouper sometimes exceed 100 pounds and are often the apex predators at a wreck or reef.

ADRIAN GRAY (2)

TOP PRIZE: Elated wrecking crewmembers inspect a hefty black grouper before hoisting it over the gunwale.

balls, while others prefer to mix in oats. Both combine the chum balls with attractants, such as thawed block chum, bits of cut bait or menhaden oil. To be effective, the ball must hold together as it sinks and break apart once it reaches the bottom.

While the brothers target black grouper with heavy outfits and braided line to get the fish up fast, they also use a long 150-foot mono top shot to absorb some of the shock during the fight. “You pull a lot of hooks if you don’t have the top shot,” Ryan says.

On the Drift

In the lower Keys, the deeper side of the intermediary reef makes terrific drifting grounds for black grouper. In my days in Key West, we’d routinely catch nice ones in 250-foot depths, drifting jigs tipped with bait on light tackle within sight of Sand Key Light.

“My favorite way to target black grouper is to drift over active bottom in a couple hundred feet of water, way west of Key West,” says Capt. Jamie Connell of Flying Fish Charters. “I like to cover ground, and if I find a small area that is significantly more productive, I can anchor on that specific spot. Also, by drifting, I feel like it is harder for other predators like sharks to stay with me and eat our baits or the fish we’re targeting.”

For those times when conditions make anchoring at a wreck favorable for targeting black grouper, Connell has a few tips: “You will never get a grouper out of a wreck if you’re sitting directly over it, so anchor way up-current and let out enough anchor line to get close. A lot of



SWS PLANNER

WHAT: Black grouper

WHEN: May through December

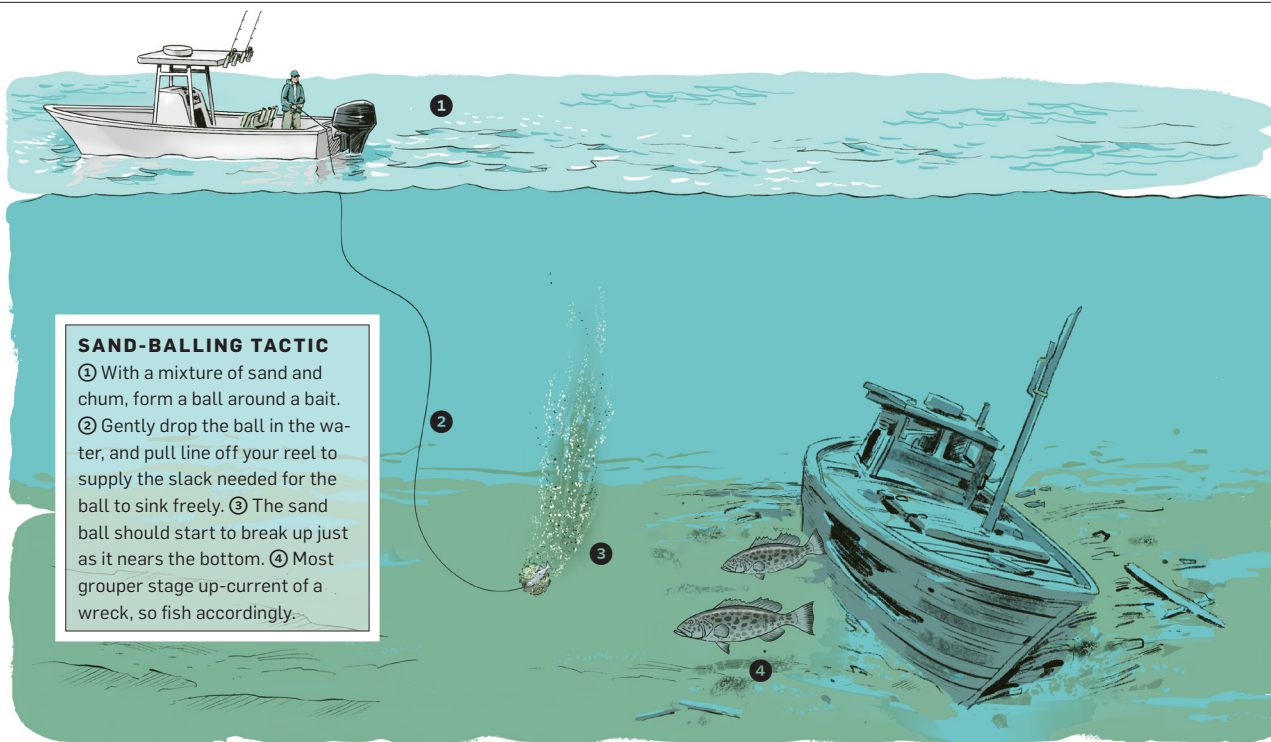
WHERE: Florida Keys

WHO: Anglers on boats capable of fishing some 10 miles off the coast. From most Keys marinas, access to grouper grounds is only out that far, or even closer. The following charter operations will also put you on fish:

Gulf Stream Party Boat
Key Largo
305-451-9788

Capt. Ryan and Scott Wenzel
4reel-charters.com
786-860-2320

Capt. Jamie Connell
flyingfishkw.com
305-304-7667



SAND-BALLING TACTIC

① With a mixture of sand and chum, form a ball around a bait. ② Gently drop the ball in the water, and pull line off your reel to supply the slack needed for the ball to sink freely. ③ The sand ball should start to break up just as it nears the bottom. ④ Most grouper stage up-current of a wreck, so fish accordingly.

BIG'UN: Yanking a black grouper this size away from structure requires both stout tackle and plenty of muscle.

big predatory fish, like black grouper and jacks, tend to be on the up-current side of the wreck, while fish like mutton snapper prefer to hang out on the down-current side. If you spot more marks up-current, what you're seeing on your fish finder is probably some grouper."

Connell, like the Wenzels and most other captains now, uses heavy gear and braided line. "Regardless of where I'm targeting black grouper," he says, "I always start out with a heavy outfit. You don't want to get smoked by a big one right away."

Reliance on heavy gear is understandable. Black grouper are big and powerful, and while they often give you a second chance, it may not be on the same day. ☹️

SWS TACKLE BOX

CAPT. CONNELL'S SETUP

ROD: 6-foot, medium-action, 80- to 130-pound class

REEL: Maxel Oceanic 50-wide or equivalent

LINE: 100-pound braid

LEADER: 10- to 15-foot leader of 100-pound fluorocarbon

HOOK: 9/0 3X circle hook on Carolina rig

BAIT: Strip of bonito or large, live goggle-eyes, pilchards, pinfish or ballyhoo



SCOTT SALYERS; ILLUSTRATION BY STEVE SANFORD