

Two eyes glowed like neon BBs from between the matted blades of Tampa Bay turtle grass, reflecting the beam from my miner's helmet and signaling the presence of tomorrow's stir-fry dinner.

"All right, Mr. Shrimp," I whispered aloud in the moonlight of the Tierra Cia flats as I slowly lowered the trap. "Hold still for just another few seconds—you're the last one tonight... Gotcha!"

In the three hours following a radiant sunset over Tampa Bay, I had lowered a

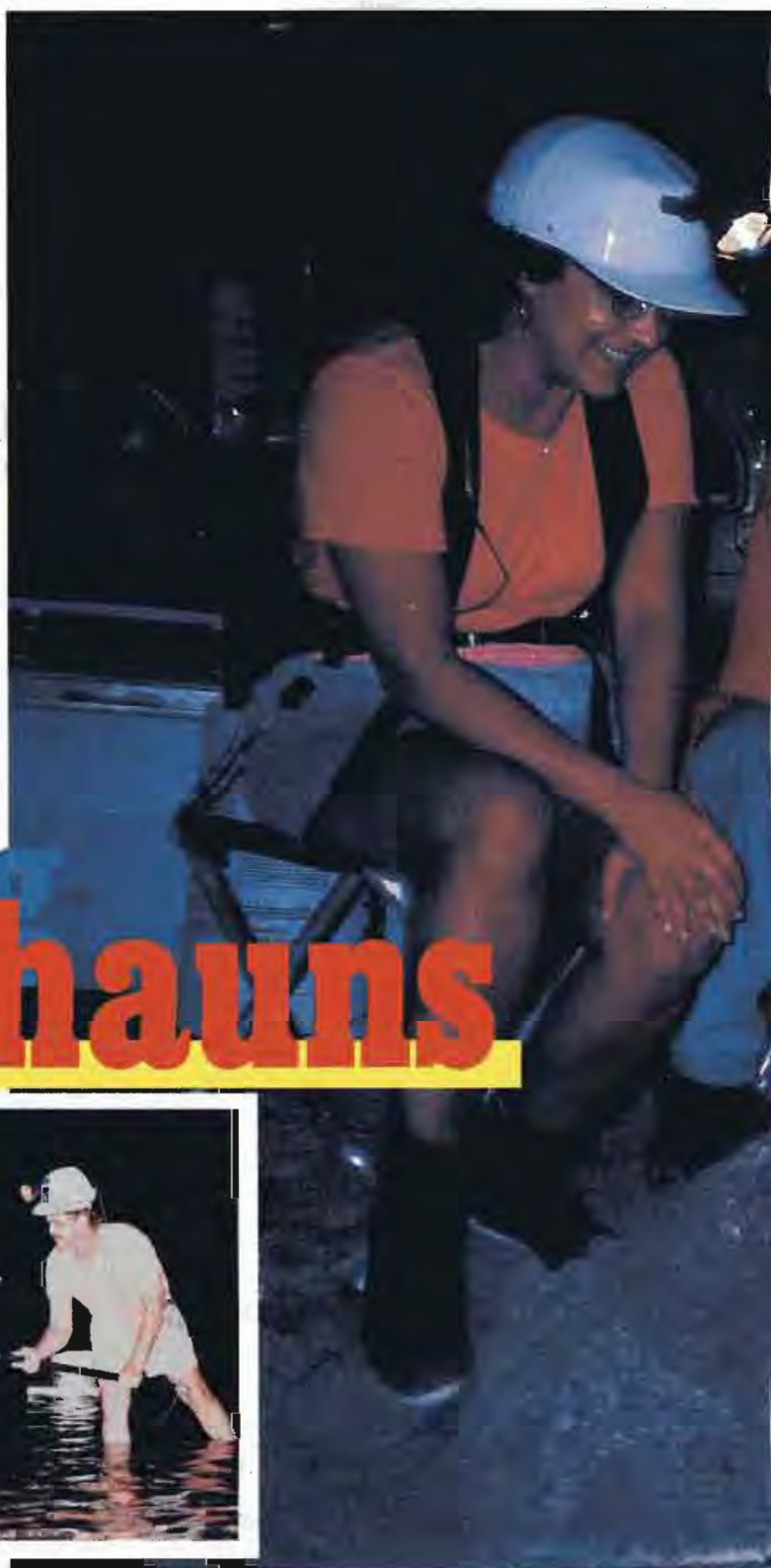
wire cage the size of a shoe box mounted on the end of a pole over 35 dozen shrimp, one at a time, pulled the string on the trap door and dropped them into a 5-gallon bucket floating at my side. Over the next few weeks until the season ended on the June waning moon, I stashed



Tampa Bay anglers used to call them bait, but now they call these big pink shrimp dinner-in-the-freezer.

By ROBIN SMILLIE

Chasing Leprechauns



away 19 pounds of shrimp tails—some of them big as my hand—to be fried, boiled, barbecued, sautéed, and cooked into wife Cathy's scrumptious recipes.

I'm thoroughly smitten by this newfound sport that ends each outing with families sitting around a campfire feeding

pinched-off shrimp heads to raccoons that brazenly orbit the firelight. Sure, recreational shrimpers have been bully netting shrimp on the flats for some time now, and reports of great catches taken from bridges and piers are common, but this sport is quite a bit different. It calls

for a huge amount of patience, homemade gear constructed of wire mesh, plumbing parts, duct tape, hard hats, and most importantly, the tutelage of Gulfport's Don Kelly, considered the guru of shrimp trapping by his clan of 20 or so ardent followers.



Shrimp dippers await a late supper following the hunt. Inset, a headlamp and a spring-trap do the job. Opposite, a floating plastic bucket holds the catch.



"Catching shrimp is like catching leprechauns," says Kelly, washed in freckles and a wispy white beard that in younger days was red. "If you move too fast, they'll disappear in the blink of an eye."

He admits to knowing little more than that about catching leprechauns, but, thankfully, a lot more about catching shrimp.

Kelly is the inventor of the Ozello shrimp trap, a small cage made by bending hardware cloth (1/2-inch-square galvanized wire mesh) into a box and attaching it to the end of a pole. The trap's secret to success is the hinged door, which is activated by pulling a string alongside the pole. By freezing the shrimp in a strong beam of light, then slowly placing the trap down over the motionless crustacean and swinging the door closed, the shrimp is trapped in the cage. The trap is then lifted from the water and held over a bucket—releasing the string allows the trap

door to spring open and the shrimp falls into the bucket. All of this is done at night while wading in ankle-deep waters carpeted with seagrass.

Partly responsible for the contraption's 16-year evolution from an open wire bas-

ket on the end of a pole to today's high-tech progeny are Honeywell engineers. These are Kelly's friends, who by day are electronic and chemical wizards designing some of America's most amazing devices, and by night they can be found roaming the ankle-deep flats of Tampa Bay, motorcycle batteries duct-taped to their belts and lighted heads swinging from side to side like big blue herons in search of an evening meal.

"The traps I build today are the result of a lot of experimenting," explains Kelly. "I've tried all sorts of materials, but basically the design has remained the same."

Kelly offers an example of the trap's evolution by explaining that he used to buy mousetrap springs until the company went out of business. "Now I make my own springs by bending stainless steel leader wire. It lasts longer and dozens of springs can be fashioned from one roll. The regulars keep coming up with lots of new ideas, too."

Kelly and his followers work the grass-flats of Tampa Bay beginning in April and on until the run strengthens and dies off in June.

Make a Trap

The materials for building your own nighttime shrimping equipment are fairly easy to find, and best of all, cheap.

The trap, light and bucket are all made from common hardware store items.

The heart of the operation is the trap itself. Kelly sells his ready-made Ozello Shrimper to newcomers and friends, but says eventually most become "regulars" and end up fabricating their own. "Some make their traps big as a bucket," says Kelly, "but I catch more shrimp with a smaller trap—I call it my sportsman's model. The shrimp are just as easy to catch with a smaller trap, so why lug all that weight around?"

To build your own trap, study the photograph and start with a 4-foot square of hardware cloth. Make cuts with tin snips or heavy shears, leaving the wire stubs sticking out from the piece you intend to use. That wire is necessary to wrap a connection to the adjoining piece after bending it into shape. The wall that the door rests against when it's open and the two sides are one piece; the top bottom and handle end are one piece also

bent into a U shape. Fit the two bent pieces together and wrap the wires to hold the edges together. Notice that the trap is not perfectly square—if it were, the trap door would not have a wall to close against. For that reason, you must configure the trap's bottom so it slopes.

Once the cage is constructed, pop rivet two small squares of sheet aluminum to the wall opposite the trap door. Drill a hole through those pieces to accommodate a wingnut and bolt. The two-fold purpose of this procedure is to attach the cage to the handle and at the same time make the angle of the cage adjustable—changing water depth dictates swinging the trap to a different angle coming off the handle. A small coil spring is placed between the handle and the cage to give tension to the adjustment of the angle. Using copper plumbing pipe and connections, fashion a dogleg connector at the end of the pole. A string tied to the trap door and run up the pole serves as a trigger.

If all of this is beyond your capabilities as a space engineer, Kelly can be reached at (813) 521-2983. He's nice enough to give free advice, and will even sell you a ready-made trap.



Here's the basic trap design. Above, these shrimp-on-the-grill couldn't be any fresher.



The equipment for shrimp hunting is specialized, but simple and easy to acquire.

"One night last May, my son Timmy and I got 95 dozen," recalls Kelly, sitting on an upturned bucket, carefully nurturing a grill covered in tails. "They were everywhere! Hardly had to move a step. If we hadn't gotten tired and went home, we could'a filled the freezer. Yep, May is probably the peak."

According to DEP shrimp specialist Phil Steele, what's happening is that the shrimp are maturing and migrating to the Gulf to spawn.

"These are pink shrimp and considered an annual crop," explains Steele. "That is to say, they only live one year on average. The large shrimp you're trapping in May and June arrived as tiny post-larval shrimp the previous fall and winter. They feed and grow until their instincts trigger them to migrate offshore where they spawn and die. Perhaps a few will make it back to the estuaries after the spawn, but not many."

Pink shrimp are nocturnal, says Steele, burrowing into the sand and muck of Tampa Bay during the day and coming out to feed at night. They feed on all sorts of flora and fauna, but mainly detritus—small particles of organic matter that settle onto the bay's bottom. Several factors trigger migration, including salinity and temperature, but when the full and new moons of spring cause exaggerated tidal flows, they really start to move. And that's when Kelly and his gang start to move, too.

Bobby Worthington is Kelly's right hand man, who on any good shrimping tide can be found volunteering his johnboat to ferry the merry band of shrimpers from

Shrimp Rules and Regs

Because shrimp trapping is done while wading in less than four feet of water, Florida residents are not required to have a saltwater fishing license; out-of-staters must purchase a non-resident license. The one caveat for Florida residents is that if you ferry to a shrimping spot in a boat, then a license is required.

Kelly and Worthington both agree that this type of shrimp trapping can be done all over Florida, wherever inshore grassflats and proper tide conditions are found. That includes Biscayne Bay, Charlotte Harbor, Ten Thousand Islands, the Indian River—the list seems endless.

But before you strike out, know that the Marine Fisheries Commission has recently closed great stretches of Florida's coastline to all forms of shrimping, recreational included.

"We wanted to close sensitive seagrass beds to shrimp trawling, and by way of bycatch reduction, take the pressure off all nursery species," explains DEP's Bill Tehan, a fisheries management analyst. "We held numerous workshops in all the closure

causeway to grassflat and back again. My friendship with Worthington dates back to the mid-'60s, when as teenagers growing up in Gulfport, he taught me the fine art of feeling out clams with our toes on the same flats where we were now trapping shrimp.

"Remember all those clamming trips out here to the Bayways back in the sixties?" asked Worthington as we sat by the fire chatting about old times. "We never knew these shrimp were here. If we had, I'll bet we would have figured out a way to catch them."

Worthington agrees that May is the prime month for shrimp trapping, and goes on to explain the importance of tides. "You've got to catch the last half of an outgoing tide—that's essential. Only nighttime will work and the water has to be shallow enough for wading. That all comes together about every two weeks for only three of four nights each cycle."

areas and heard very few, if any, objections from the recreational shrimping sector, so we included recreational shrimping in the closures. Surprisingly, after a couple of years of closure, we still haven't heard objections from recreational shrimpers. If we hear from them we would certainly revisit those closures."

Ironically, the namesake region for Kelly's Ozello Shrimper is included in the closure. Located between Crystal River and Homosassa, Ozello sits smack in the middle of the Big Bend closure area, a stretch of off-limit seagrass beds that runs from the Pasco-Pinellas line northward to St. Marks.

"Why, I'll bet those folks in Ozello don't even know that," says Kelly. "I'm sure that if they did, they would'a squawked like crazy. Every year during the spring run the bridges and shorelines are lined with shrimpers. That's fantastic shrimping country—I'll bet they just don't know."

Also closed to all forms of shrimping are several areas within Apalachicola Bay and short stretches of the St. Marys River region near Jacksonville.

There is a daily recreational harvest limit of five gallons per person, heads on; there is also a daily vessel limit of five gallons per vessel.

Worthington also advises keeping a monthly tide chart highlighting those nights. "Get this all down to a science because you're not going to go out there just any old night and be successful. If you start in April and shrimp these tides through June, you'll have enough shrimp for dinner once a week throughout the year."

As we packed up our cars and trucks to end another successful night of shrimp-

ing, Kelly pointed to a nearby bridge where several fishermen had been waiting for a first bite since we arrived three hours earlier.

"See those guys over there? I've been watching them all night and listening for the whoopin' and hollerin' that comes with a nice catch. They haven't caught one fish—not one. If they only knew how much fun we were having—I think I'll go over there and invite them to come

along tomorrow night."

As Kelly walked up the sidewalk, bucket of shrimp in hand, I admired his friendliness and willingness to share his passion for shrimp trapping.

I heard him say, "Bet you been wondering what we're doing out there with these headlights on. We're chasing leprechauns." **FS**

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The Bucket Brigade

The Ozello Shrimper bucket is a plastic 5-gallon model fitted into a Styrofoam board or ring. The key to an easy and

reliable shrimp release is the bucket's lid—more a funnel than anything. Once inside, even the liveliest shrimp will not be able to flip out through the toothy opening.

To fashion your floating shrimp bucket, take the bucket's snap-down lid and mark the top into eight evenly-spaced pie slices. Then cut the slices with a razor knife, ending the cuts about an inch inside the lid's inner ring. To permanently fix the pie slices downward and create the funnel effect, push a 1-pound coffee can midway into the slices. Using an electric hair dryer on its hottest setting, heat the plastic slices until they permanently droop inward.

Years of design evolution has answered the problem of a 16-inch bucket floating in eight inches of water. To solve the problem, drill two straight rows of ¼-inch holes an inch apart on opposite sides of the bucket, taking care to measure the holes evenly from the bottom so that they are directly across from each other. Fit an 18-inch-long, ¼-inch wooden dowel through the holes at the desired depth. The protruding ends of the dowel will form a stop so the bucket rests in the float at a desired depth.

The bucket bottom is then drilled with a hundred holes to allow water to pass through. The bucket should fit snugly into a Styrofoam life ring or a thick Styrofoam board with a hole cut from the center. Use a short piece of rope to tie the floating bucket to your belt. Some of Kelly's buddies have improved their bucket's performance by adding racing stripes and fancy paint jobs.