

SEA GRANT

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By

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Are you looking for some fun at the beach? How about combining a little pompano fishing and a sand flea hunt? Pompano are reportedly being caught along the Gulf beaches and one of the best baits is a sand flea. Catch some sand fleas and you might catch a nice pompano.

Sand fleas are actually small crabs that are also called mole crabs. These thumb-size crabs live in the surf where ocean waves reach the sandy beach. Mole crabs survive in this seemingly hostile environment by burrowing backwards into the shifting sand just below the surface. As the water from a wave recedes, they stick feathered antennae into the water to catch microscopic particles of food. The antennae are then drawn across their mouth to extract the food particles. Sand fleas always face the sea and when their antennae are extended, little v-shaped patterns can sometimes be seen in the film of receding water. These v's are not readily observed on our relatively steep beaches but are more easily seen on the wide, flatter beaches of the east coast.

Mole crabs move up and down the beach with the tide. If they remain exposed an instant too long they become prey for the ever present wading birds. On the other hand, if they lose their grip in the sand and tumble into deeper water, hungry fish are waiting. Among the fish cruising the surf zone from Spring through the Fall are pompano. This

highly prized species feeds on a variety of small crabs, clams and shrimp found near the shore. The occasional careless mole crab is fair game for voracious pompano.

Mole crabs are caught by children and fishermen by sifting sand in the surf zone. Sometimes the small crabs can be seen burrowing back into the sand after being exposed by waves and can be scooped up by hand. Sand flea rakes, available at some local bait stores, can increase your catch rate. Since sand fleas tend to aggregate, you should find more than one in the same place.

Large sand fleas are almost always females and often have yellow eggs underneath the curved tail. You might see very small mole crabs attached to the large females. These are males that lead an almost parasitic life.

If you are trying to keep your catch alive for the kids or bait, do not put the crabs in a bucket full of water. They will do much better with just enough water to keep their legs wet or with moist sand.