

**FLORIDA
WAYPOINTS**
30.06°N • 84.49°W
SOPCHOPPY, FL
By Jennifer A. Sheffield



Artwork from over the years at the Worm Gruntin' Festival, a Florida classic. April 13, this year.

Out-Bait the Best

You'll dig this tribute to a fishing staple. Go!

If you freshwater fish, folks in a small North Florida town say there is nothing better than a Sopchoppy worm as a line offering. Catching the best crawlers in the Apalachicola National Forest, which surrounds Sopchoppy, comes down to a ground-shaking witchcraft called grunting, and every spring this "Worm Gruntin Capital of the World" hosts a free public party—celebrating live bait.

The grueling craft was big industry, before the 1970s invention of the plastic lure, but Sopchoppy as a destination dates back to its founding, as a depot, for the CT&G Railroad in 1894, and a deep woods nightspot, for nearby Camp Gordon Johnson recruits in WWII. It's a place where you can buy groceries in a gallon can that holds 500 worms. Tallying them is how children learned to count.



Local legend Gary Revell is an expert grunter—and a bluegill's worst nightmare.

Local pride stems from being the first spot which verified a theory by Charles Darwin in his 1881 book, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms*. Said theory: If the ground is beaten, worms believe they are being pursued by a mole and surface. This is why hammering stobs of hard wood into the ground and rubbing them, with pieces of iron, is sweet music, to its generations of commercial gatherers.

First-time competitors, 12-and-under, arrive early and are given a plastic cup of dirt to practice in. Other contests include Wakulla County's Horseshoe Championship, plus hula hooping and a 5K race. Sopchoppy feels like a town time forgot, but they swear your next fishing tradition starts here. See www.wormgruntinfestival.com; sponsored by Sopchoppy Preservation and Improvement Association (SPIA) FS



IF YOU GO

WHAT: Worm Gruntin' Festival

WHERE: Sopchoppy Depot Park

WHEN: Every second Saturday in April; April 13, 2019; 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

WHAT ELSE: Sopchoppy Depot Museum: Saturdays 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Built in 1891, locals refer to it as the Gopher, Frog and Alligator Depot.

MYRON B. HODGE CITY PARK: Located on the Sopchoppy River, the 35 acres provides an elegant setting for camping with 26 RV plus primitive sites, baths, dual boat launch facility and fishing piers.

OCHLOCKNEE RIVER STATE PARK: This is where salty Apalachee Bay meets laid-back Mashes Sands beach. Angelo and Son's seafood restaurant sits over the water, where it was built with lumber salvaged from Camp Gordon Johnson. Holiday Campground is a popular home base for explorers.

FOR THE RECORD BOOKS: 2003 "Worm Queen," 76-year-old Lossie Mae Rosier started worm grunting in 1950 and she raised 11 children on the money the bait brought in.

TACKLE SHOPS: Crum's Mini Mall, (850) 984-5501, crumsminimall.com; Jerry's Bait & Tackle, (850) 421-3248, jerrysbaitandtackle.com