

Tactics

RED-HOT WINTER

South Carolina's Lowcountry heats up in the coldest months with shallow-water redbfish.

IT MIGHT NOT MAKE MUCH sense, but most years I catch more South Carolina redbfish—regionally known as spottails or spottail bass—in the coldest three months of the year than during the entire rest of the season. And I catch most of them by sight casting with flies.

For much of the year, the shallow water of South Carolina's coast is murky or turbid. Although the water is actually very clean, in the warm months it is so thick with life that you can't see into it very well. Also, our sand is closer to fine silt—or "pluff mud" as we call it—which does not reflect the sun well. For Lowcountry sight fishermen, finding spottails requires recognizing their wakes as they move through shallow water, or spotting an occasional tail or the flash of a white belly when the redbfish feeds. Most of the year, actually seeing the fish is difficult.

Winter Is Different

In the winter, however, the water becomes quite clear. We rarely see fish shapes in the water more than a long cast away, but we can see them, and that's the good news. The bad news is that winter redds can easily see the anglers, too, and they are also gathered into large schools that easily spook. Nonetheless, the fact that they are schooled up rather than cruising as singles or small groups does offer a crucial advantage in winter. When they swirl on bait, the rippling of the water is much more evident. You can see the commotion of a big school at greater



The author (left) and his sister-in-law, Dawn Gribb, conduct a little comparative study on fly choice for Lowcountry winter redds. Clouser patterns are favored locally, but the author has found large Deceivers to be equally effective, particularly in chartreuse and white.

distances and then approach with caution until spotting the fish.

From March through November, Carolina water nearly overflows with nutrients, from the tiniest larvae to full-size baitfish. There are shrimps, fiddler and blue crabs, lots of mullet of various sizes, mud minnows, and many other prey fish. But in winter the shrimps disappear from the shallows, the fiddler crabs burrow into the sand, and the mullet and most other baitfish disappear. The flats become pretty barren, as the redfish spend their days drifting around, searching for scant meals, and avoiding ram-paging bottlenose dolphins.

Most of the fishermen also disappear. That is understandable since it's sometimes cold and gray, but it is a shame. The spottails are still there. They are hungry, and they will often eat anything thrown near them that resembles food. Pick a day when the wind is down, regardless of the temperature, and hit the flats. The payoff is big-time action.

What to Look For

Everyone enjoys the antics of dolphins. Usually their actions are meaningless to the redfish angler as the big mammals hunt for trout, mullet, or most anything else. In the winter, however, they target



Lowcountry winter reds school by size, and although they are not the largest fish of the year, if you find them the action can be hot and heavy on light tackle.

schooled redfish almost exclusively, and if you find Flipper making a big commotion, you've likely found a good redfish spot. Dolphin watching is fascinating, but I

cringe at every spectacular charge, knowing a big redfish may have become dinner.

Just recently, we watched several dolphins repeatedly attack a redfish school within 100-yards of where we were working another school. As they hurled their 600-pound bodies through the school in inches of water, I could easily imagine the redfish's terror.

The good news is that you have found a good spot, and redfish are around. The bad news is that they are spooked. We often work very close to feeding dolphins on a flat. When the dolphins move away and the redfish settle down, we have a chance at them. The name of the game in winter is to locate the schools before the dolphins do.

Low-tide flats on a falling tide are the place to look for redfish most of the winter. A good spot would be a gradual sand flat dotted with some structure, such as oyster bars, bordering a channel drop-off and feeding up into some grass. At high tide, the whole area will be flooded, and the fish could be anywhere. At low tide they filter back toward the channel.

All our inshore redfish are sub-adult, pre-spawning-age fish ranging to about 30 inches long. Especially in winter, they prefer shallow, inshore flats, where the sun warms the water fastest, where the limited food supply congregates, and where they can best avoid the dolphins.

Plan to approach these low-water flats about two hours before low tide and drift or pole around quietly, watching for pushes or small wakes. If redfish are there, they will be in schools of similar-size fish lurking around looking for food. Sometimes they will ripple the water or even froth it up chasing bait, often in just a foot of water or less. When poling in such shallow conditions on a falling tide, there is not much room for error. We all get stuck occasionally, but it's no fun in winter, so proceed with caution.

Winter Techniques

Studies show that the larger, inshore redfish predominantly eat fish rather than shrimps or crabs, yet most of the year shrimp imitations worked in a hopping motion are effective. A locally popular,



This redfish was taken on an Electric Chicken, a great winter pattern tied with pink ice chenille and chartreuse rabbit strip. Some anglers prefer an all-purple or black variation in the coldest months.

fuzzie. Clouser-style fly called an Electric Chicken is tied with pink ice chenille and chartreuse rabbit fur to closely imitate the local favorite spin-fishing lure: a red-headed jig with a pink and chartreuse plastic shad trailer. These fuzzy flies continue to work all winter, although some anglers switch to all purple or black in the coldest months. Other Clousers or Half-and-Halves also work, but for me, winter is Deceiver time. Chartreuse-and-white is a good color combination.

On the winter flats, redfish will be frothing the water, grubbing the bottom, quietly cruising, or just floating in place. Fish in the first two modes are easy to catch. The cruisers are a bit tougher, and the floaters are difficult.

The ones that froth the water are chasing bait. When you are in range, just drop a cast into the commotion, move the fly, and you'll hook up. When fish are

grubbing in very shallow water and showing their tails, presumably they are hunting crabs. But almost any pattern thrown near them will elicit a strike. The

and make one long strip to tighten the line. The strike will probably be immediate, but if not, keep slowly moving the fly with the rod still pointed at the fish. When he strikes,

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important thing is to get a fly into the action before they see you and leave.

In both cases, hit them on the nose and then move the fly. Don't worry about really long casts, 60 feet is normally enough. It is most important that the line, leader, and fly fully extend to the fish so you are ready for a strike. Point the rod at the fish

make a hard strip-strike.

The cruising fish are looking for food. The same flies will work, but you need to lead the fish a little. On some days you will encounter schooled fish floating in place that will not take a faster-moving fly. These are the most frustrating fish to catch. Throwing a small crab pattern on a

The Red Zone



A good low-water tidal flat will have grass in back (right), flanked by structure such as these oyster beds (left), and a gradual slope that gives way to a shallow, sandy bottom. Throw in a nearby channel, and you have a surefire combination for winter reds.

floating line or, even better, on a sinking shooting head sometimes gets a strike. A shooting head with a short leader gets the crab down and keeps it there. Obviously, a slow retrieve with a crab pattern is necessary. If the fish are not on the flats, try a Deceiver on a sinking line or a Clouser in the deeper water near the channel drop-off before leaving the area.

The spottails will act pretty much the same in the early spring as in winter, until the water warms and the schools break up in March. But then, when the weather gets nicer, there will be more competition on the flats. So, why not go now? Just remember, hit the fish on the nose, move the fly, strip-strike to set the hook, and then hang on and have fun. ■

Capt. John Gribb is a former northeastern striped guide who now resides in the Carolina Lowcountry, where he catches red-fish year-round.



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