

The Redfish Warm-up



THROUGHOUT THE WINTER, REDFISH IN the South Carolina Lowcountry huddle in tight schools around shallow, low-tide flats and try to avoid marauding dolphins. These immature inshore reds spend most of their time in water less than two feet deep. Larger inshore spottails—from about 18 to 30-plus inches—occupy the same habitat and feed primarily on small fish but binge on crabs and shrimps when they're available. Most of the fishing in the winter months is confined to these flats, but as the days lengthen and shallow waters warm, fishing spreads to other venues and other stages of the tide.

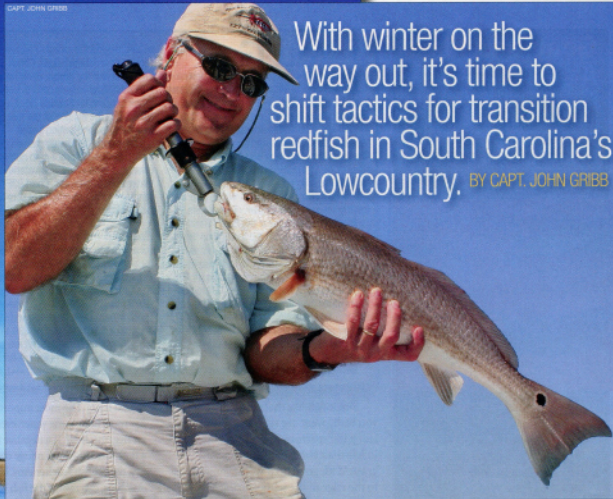
During the transition from winter to spring, baitfishes, crabs, and shrimps slowly return from their winter sanctuaries. With

the presence of bait, the redfish—and speckled trout in deeper water—begin to feed more actively. The transition runs from March to June, and wading anglers and skiff captains spend this time on the water stalking tailing reds that grub fiddler crabs in the grass on high-water flats.

Fishing the Change

The change from winter to spring also brings blustery March winds that can drive anglers mad—it interferes with casting and stirs up silt that can kill all sight-fishing. The arrival of April, however, usually calms the breezes and, on sunny calm days, brings prime sight-fishing for schools on the low-tide flats. These schools may hold anywhere from a few fish to dozens of similar-sized spottails. As

CAPT. JOHN GRIBB



With winter on the way out, it's time to shift tactics for transition redfish in South Carolina's Lowcountry. BY CAPT. JOHN GRIBB

Winter redfishing along the Carolina coast rarely yields trophy-size fish, but you can find large schools that offer continuous action. Anglers in the know seek shallow flats that warm quickly and that are adjacent to grass edges.

the water rises and high tides get higher, however, redfish begin foraging the flooding grass edges and oyster bars.

On calm days with good visibility, fly anglers can see the fish at close range. If you are within casting range and see the fish before they spook, cast your fly slightly in front of them. If they see you and spook before you cast, immediately shoot a fly into their midst, and you'll often get an instinctive hookup. Assuming you can cast at least 50 feet, speed and accuracy are often more important than the ability to cast long distance.

If clouds interfere with sight-casting, look for subtle agitation of the surface, or nervous water—little pushes and belly flashes may be all you can see. Watch for glimpses of white or light-gold reflecting off their bellies and lower sides when they roll in

shallow water. This behavior could relate to feeding, or it may be an attempt by the fish to dislodge hitchhiking parasites. But for whatever reason, when you see flashing bellies, place a cast in front of the fish—they are prone to eating flies.

In half-tide conditions when both trout and redfish are possible targets, blind-cast to shoreline pockets and indentations. In low-water conditions, these same spots will hold lone foraging fish that can give you an opportunity to sight-cast. This happened last year on a day that had been a total skunking until I spotted a small-looking fish behind an oyster outcropping no more than six feet wide, with only inches of rising water flooding into the gap behind it. A cast right on the edge of the oysters produced an immediate strike from a 24-inch redfish.

Gear and Flies

An 8-weight outfit for spottails is about right since inshore redfish top out at around 33 inches and 13 pounds. Floating lines are the norm, and leaders in the 9-foot range, ending with 15-pound fluorocarbon tippet, will fool fish most of the time.

Hot Lowcountry flies include the Electric Chicken, popularized by Capt. Jack Brown, and the author's favorite, a large Lefty's Deceiver. —J.G.



PHOTO BY JEFFREY BROWN

Captain Jack Brown's Electric Chicken

Hook: Mustad 34007 size 1.

Thread: Chartreuse 3/0.

Tail: 1 1/2-inch chartreuse rabbit fur with skin side up. Nine strands pink Krystal Flash on top.

Collar: Pink or purple Estaz or Cactus cheryle.

Eyes: 2/16-inch gold Super Eyes.



Captain John Gribb's Five-Inch Deceiver

Hook: Mustad 34007 size 3/0.

Thread: Chartreuse 3/0.

Tail: Four or 6 extra-long white hackles, Krystal Flash.

Wing: White bucktail below and above. Chartreuse bucktail on top.

Collar: Red yarn gill.

Eyes: Wrap a big head of thread and dab eyes with a black permanent marker.

If You Go

One of my favorite spots in the St. Helena Sound area is the airport flat near Warsaw Island. Fish this area on low or rising tides for spottails in the very shallow water. The redfish are schooled on low-tide flats relating to oyster outcroppings and shoreline coves. Trout will be found near points as the water rises or falls from the grass. Access is easy from the landing on Lady's Island, down Sam's Point Road, Route 802, which also allows quick access to Coosaw River spots.

Port Royal Sound near the Broad River is easily accessed from the landing on the Chesapeake River, at the foot of the Route 170 Bridge. Run downriver to the Rose Island cut, and fish the small grassy islands on the Chesapeake side for trout on the falling tide. Then, cross over to the Broad River side and fish low tide for redfish along Daws Island. Farther upriver, above the Broad River Bridge, is a good series of flats around Hazards Creek.

Between Port Royal and St. Helena sounds,

Single fish like that are a plus, but what you really want are schools of fish staging along the spartina. Redfish will hold tight in less than two feet of water against the grass. With good boat work, you can cast to the edge of the school, bring a fish in, and then go pick off another. Retrieves that continue without a strike into deeper water may tempt a trout.

Keeping slack out of the line is very important. Flies that hit the water and sink to the bottom on a slack line often foul with moss, hang up in shells, or if struck by an aggressive fish, are often rejected before the angler feels the strike. Cast no more line than you can completely turn over, and one long strip is often needed to straighten the line. Keep the rod pointed at the fish and continue stripping at whatever speed is appropriate, but always with the line tight so you are ready to strip-strike on subtle pickups.

What Makes a Good Flat?

Spend a few years searching for redfish, and intuitively, you will figure out what a good redfish flat looks like. You can, however, shorten the learning curve by cataloging the characteristics of a fruitful flat.

Capt. Jack Brown, who is one of the best guides in the area around Beaufort, South Carolina, analyzed the flats he finds most productive and put together a list of

tucked behind the string of barrier islands, are dozens of productive flats. Check the Trenchards Inlet area and the Harbor River area. Two landings that allow easy access to both are Station Creek Landing on Seaside Road, St. Helena Island, and the landing at the foot of the Fripp Island Bridge on Hunting Island.

Many good fish-holding areas are shown on Top Spot waterproof map number N233 (available from www.bluewaterweb.com) and Waterproof Charts, Inc., Chart 93F (available from www.waterproofcharts.com and local tackle shops).

Guides & Information

Local sources of information and supplies include Bay Street Outfitters in downtown Beaufort, Grayco Hardware on Sea Island Parkway, and Lady's Island Boat and Dock Supply on Ribaut Road, Port Royal. For guiding services, check in with Capt. Jack Brown (843) 838-9369, Capt. Tuck Scott (843) 271-5406, or Capt. Richard Sykes (843) 838-2245. All are excellent light-tackle and fly-fishing guides. A South Carolina saltwater license is required. —J.G.

shared traits. The most important: A good flat must hold some water, even on the lowest negative tides. If a negative tide drains a flat's shallow-water refuge completely dry, the redfish's archenemy, bottlenose dolphins, can ravage the fish when they are forced back into a deeper channel.

Analyzing further, Jack found that water depths on the best "pluff mud" and sand flats change gradually, whether the flat is as large as a city block or as small as a basketball court. Also, there will almost always be grass on the highest portions of the flat—areas covered only at high tide—where the redfish forage for crabs and other food in the warmer months. Oyster beds are generally present, and these provide sanctuary for small fishes and other critters, and often a creek or tidal cut drains into the flat. Most good fishing spots will also have some much deeper water nearby.

The spring transition is not the easiest time of the year for fishing, but it gets progressively better as the water warms until the weather just gets too hot. But, after lean fishing in February and March, the sunshine feels good, the bait begins to run, and the fish get active. Life is very good in the Lowcountry springtime. ☞

Capt. John Gribb was a New England guide, but now he chases redfish in the Lowcountry.