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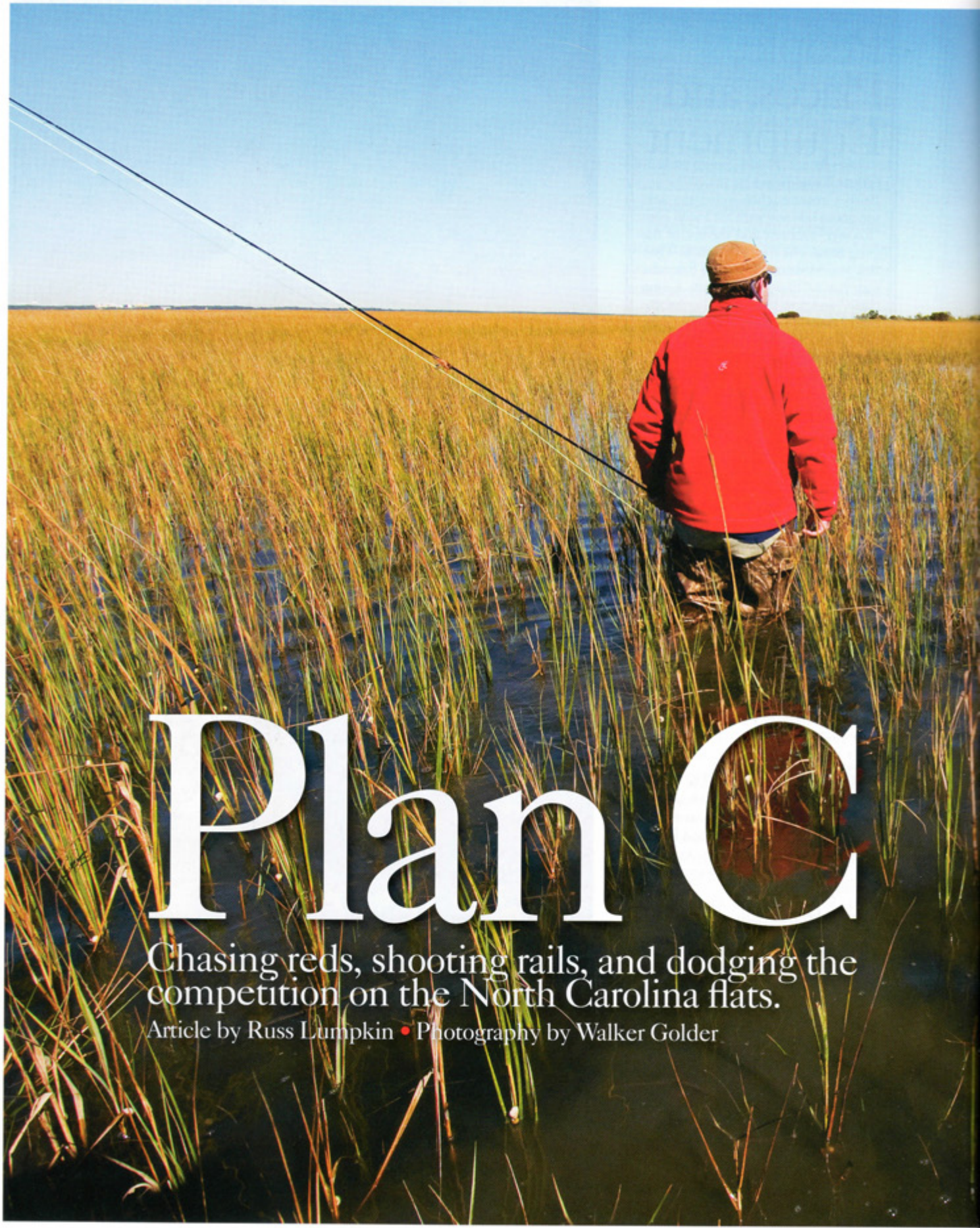
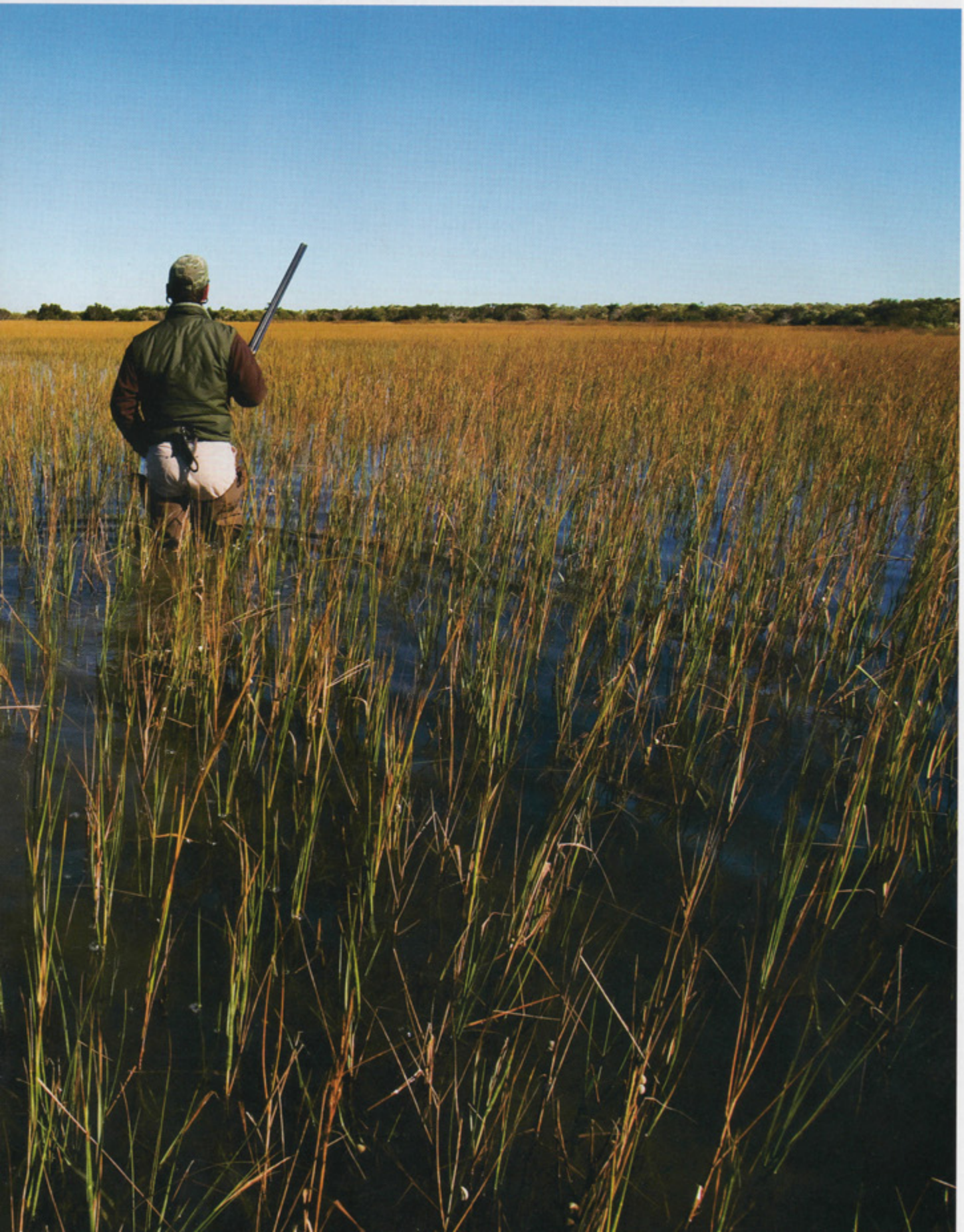


Plan C

Chasing reds, shooting rails, and dodging the competition on the North Carolina flats.

Article by Russ Lumpkin • Photography by Walker Golder



Highway 421 runs south out of Kure Beach, North Carolina, and ends at the boat landing, just a couple of double hauls below Fort Fisher State Park. Cut right out of the shoreline and framed with railroad ties, the landing is designed to keep the sand out and the water deep enough to handle a boat trailer. The buildup of silt at the narrow passage to the bay precludes heading out at dead low tide. Shallow-draft boats need only a little clearance, but the gillnet boats that share this landing clear the silt only if the water is up. We're set either way—with a near flood tide, Seth's skinny-water Beavertail skiff idles unimpeded into the no-wake zone.

We wave to birdwatchers on the shore. Their camera lenses look like rocket launchers, but the folks look friendly and seem interested only in discerning godwits from dowitchers. It's a beautiful morning, good for bird watching or, if you're looking for sport, sight-casting to tailing reds and shooting rail.

A bright early November sun rises steadily above the horizon and inches the temperature upward toward a comfortable mild. We're heading to the high flats of the middle bay, south of the landing and just north of Buzzard Bay.

"When we get back up in the creek, we'll look for rail until the tide reaches full high," Seth says. "Then we'll ease onto the flat and see if the reds are in there. I really want to get you onto some tailing reds. If that doesn't work, though, I have a plan B."

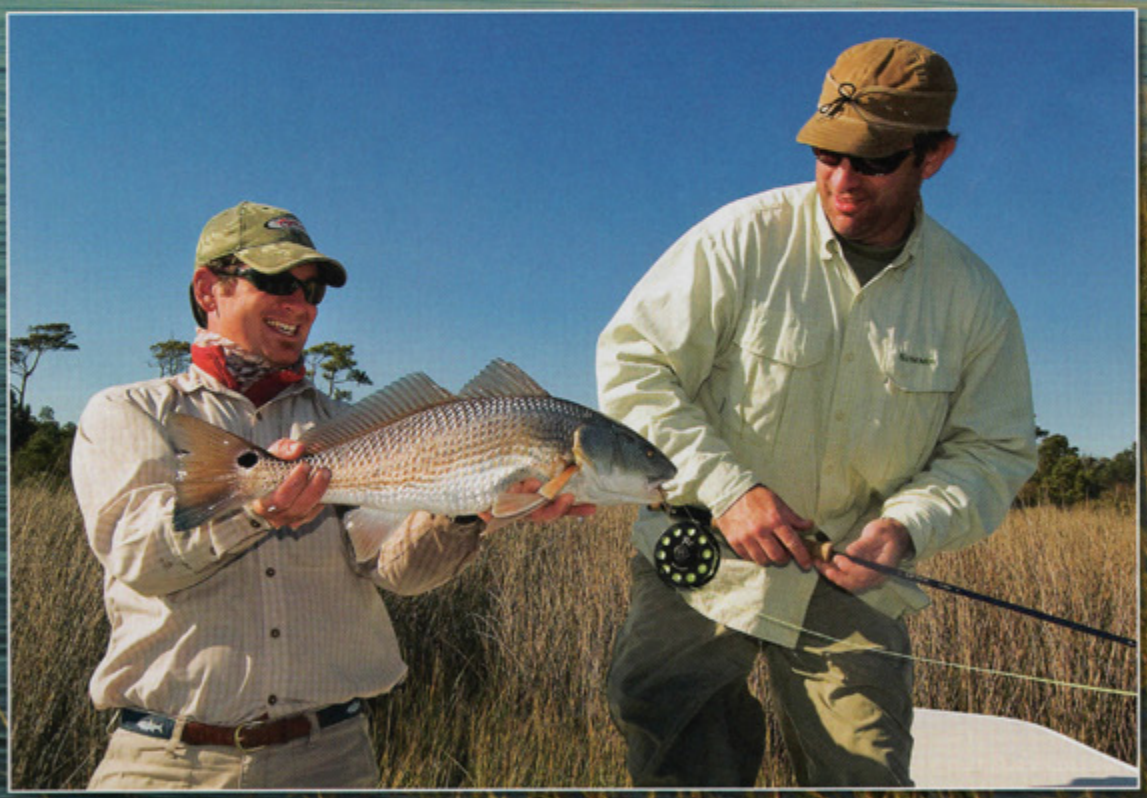
It seems all that's left is making a couple of decent shots and a few careful casts. What could possibly interfere?

With a few rail in the bag, Captain Seth and the author work in vain for schooling reds. The lighthouse at Bald Head Island stands in the distance. Inset: A day after fishing in vain, the good captain (left) hoists one of several reds caught in quick succession.

Seth leans on the throttle, and we zip along parallel to an old retaining wall built by freed slaves; its mortar still grips the ballast stones from wooden ships and rocks carted in from the Piedmont. The wall is a boon to oystercatchers, which scurry along the top looking for easy meals. Speckled-trout fishermen, also hoping to catch dinner in the current rising over the wall, are parked at intervals on the lee side.

The wall ends just before we reach Zeke's Island, and Seth noses the boat south toward open water, not far from where the Cape Fear River empties into the Atlantic. There isn't a house or condo in sight—and hasn't been since we left Kure Beach. Only the lighthouse at Bald Head Island, a mile or so distant, rises above the treetops. And other than a great array of birds and other fishermen, there's nothing to see but a pair of small buoys, tethered to gillnets. "Those weren't here yesterday afternoon," Seth says. "If we don't get shots at tailers on the flats, I'd planned to . . . Well, that net may mess with my plan B."

How strange to speak of gillnetters and their threat to red drum in North Carolina, where *Sciaenops ocellatus* is the state fish. Some years ago, the blackened-redfish craze spread from Louisiana all the way to North Carolina, and the population of reds decreased. Since then, limits to commercial harvest have helped reverse the decline. Still, North Carolina is the only state on the East Coast that allows inshore gillnetting. The commercial anglers can legally harvest only seven redfish, but the nets can be left unmonitored, and they catch anything that tries to swim through—



At high tide, rail hide in high grass and take flight only when there's nowhere else to run.

sea turtles, sturgeon, diving ducks, loons, marine mammals: everything. If the net drowns 30 reds, only the seven legal fish get reported. There's no way to quantify the full toll—and minus an honest count, the laws regarding the commercial take of redfish is based only on partial truths. This is where sharing of the resource between commercial and recreational interests takes divergent paths.

When we enter the creek, Seth doesn't let off the throttle, and birds of various feather—tri-colored herons, ducks, plovers, sandpipers, a wide variety of waders—scatter at discordant angles. The tidal creeks are narrow and winding, and Seth handles the hairpin turns like a road racer. Finally, deep into one of the creeks he slows the engine, drifts to a stop, and the bedlam ceases. Soon, we hear only the birds and the sound of ocean waves crashing onto

the distant beach.

"Look," Seth says, pointing toward the dunes. A small whitetail doe moves among the sandy hillocks before disappearing into a copse of live oak.

"We're supposed to have a six-foot tide today. It should peak in an hour or so," Seth says. The six-foot tide is significant, because that's how much water is needed to not only cover the highest flats but also to give redfish enough clearance to enter the high ground. If all goes according to plan, I'll be sight-casting to reds inside of 60 minutes.

Seth tells me to load my shotgun, a little Spanish 20-gauge boxlock I found at a pawnshop. At low tide, rail can hide from predators just about anywhere in the estuary, but when the tide consumes the real estate, the birds literally run out of room; then they hole up in the tallest grass and flush only when trouble approaches.

I take the bow, and Seth poles against the rising current toward high grass clinging to a bend. A bird flushes within easy range. Clapper rail have very short tail feathers and are not great fliers, and when I miss I take some ribbing. We continue upstream, and one rises well ahead of us. Though a much tougher shot than the first, this time the bird tumbles into the creek. The current brings it to us. I lean over the bow and retrieve it. Despite its size, the rail lacks heft—it's all feathers and air. Its little toes look bubbly and, for lack of a better word, grippy. These birds literally can run from blade of grass to blade of grass.

I down another rail before it's time to change weapons. Seth poles upstream a little farther before pushing his skiff onto the edge of a flat. I gather my fly rod and anticipate the sight of tailing reds, but Seth begins to sense the tide may be falling short. There's not much wind, but it's contrary to the current. The difference between enough water and not enough is a matter of half inches. We linger only long enough to determine that the water is indeed receding. There'll be no casting to tailing reds today.

Even though the tide failed to rise as high as predicted or as high as our hopes, it's still pretty high—at least high enough to corral the rail into the high grass. So we cross the creek to a big wide flat and chase the birds afoot. We walk on open ground, in water ranging from an inch to ankle high and mud from a couple of inches to thigh deep. The golden grass, the shotgun, and a constant autumn breeze puts me in mind of open prairie and upland birds. We take turns busting through the tallest, thickest grass. Seth asks to shoot my little 20, and connects on the first flushing rail he sees. We scare up a half dozen others and add another three or four to the bag.

It's early afternoon, and though the chance for tailing reds has passed, we haven't forgotten them. "I really wanted to get you on those tailing reds," Seth says.

"I'm just happy to be here. I'd love to catch some redfish, though, tailing or not."

"Yesterday I had a great plan B. You know where we saw that gillnet? A huge

school of reds was there yesterday, working the eastern shoreline, catching that late-day sun. I don't know how it'll be with the gillnet there, but we'll go see."

So we zip back out of the creek and across middle bay, and spot the same small buoys we saw earlier. Seth idles alongside. "These were set out late yesterday afternoon, so for at least twenty-four hours that net has been catching and killing fish."

Seth is one of many North Carolina guides and anglers pushing for redfish to be listed as game fish, protected from commercial harvest; or an outright outlawing of gillnetting; or at least amending the laws to make gillnetters more responsible for their nets and more accountable for their catches. Commercial fishing provides a livelihood for many people on the North Carolina coast, especially those who live in isolated areas, and the gillnetters aren't without their political allies. The struggle to change

Despite its height, a rail has less breast meat than a mourning dove, but they taste great.

the laws is tough and ongoing.

Seth poles the eastern edge of the bay, and I alternate between blind-casting and looking for muds. Frantic mullet and small rays skirt up a cloud every now and then, but there's no sign of reds. "They were here yesterday, a huge school, with fish up to nine or ten pounds," Seth says.

We're riding southward, back to the boat landing, and I'm telling Seth how good the rails were last night, how I'd expected them to taste fishy and was surprised how sweet they were. "What'd you do to them?"

"I just splashed them with red wine then threw them on the grill," Seth says. "Did you bring your shotgun?"

"No. I'm hoping we can get on some reds."

"There's better than a six-foot tide again today; we'll try the flats for tailing fish. But if that doesn't work, I've talked to a guide north of here who's scouting for us—looking for schooling fish."

"So, plan C?"

"Right. Plan C."

Seth zips back across the bay. The day is mild, nearly identical to the day prior: a big sun and royal-blue sky and a barely perceptible breeze. And although I'd been here just 24 hours before, the unspoiled dunes, the golden grass, the bird life and deer walking on a beach unspoiled by condos feel as fresh as a new day.

In the tidal creeks, beyond numerous bends and wild turns, Seth slows the skiff, and momentum carries us into a narrow finger of water alongside the high flat. We wait a few minutes. The water appears to be on the rise, and downstream we hear redfish splashing in the shallows, bumping the grass, getting ready to enter the flat. But as our anticipation rises, Seth says, "The tide didn't make it! It's already on its way down. I can't *believe* this."

Looking around, I notice a stick in the middle of the channel; its first half-inch above the water is dark, and a few minutes later a full inch of wet wood is exposed.

Seth digs out a cell phone and calls his friend. Within a minute, we're heading back to the landing with a plan to drive north. "He say's there's a big school, a hundred and fifty fish, near Topsail. Time for plan C."

So we head north, and by midafternoon we pull into the boat landing at Topsail. The sun, beginning its westward descent, paints the horizon powder blue.

I mosey down to the landing while Seth parks the trailer. There's a lot of activity, and a round-faced cheerful little guy, maybe age 10, asks, "What you fishing for?"

"Redfish," and I smile.

"What's the biggest you caught?"

"The next one I catch will be the biggest. I've never caught one."

"Hawww," he laughs, "I've caught one thirteen pound—"

"Son," the father interrupts. "Get over here and help me." And the boy scampers off.

Easing through a no-wake zone, Seth asks, "What was that kid saying?"

"Oh, he was just asking what I was fishing for. He said he'd caught a thirteen-pound redfish."

"In a gillnet maybe. Did you see their boat and equipment?"

"Not really, I was just talking with him."

"They're gillnet fishermen. His dad called him away because he didn't want him talking to us. He knows I'm working to restrict what they're doing.

You better be careful."

He guns the motor, and we ride southward, paralleling the western shore of the Intracoastal Waterway. We ride only a few minutes, passing beautiful homes—even with all the development, the bird life and scale of nature is prodigious.

As the skiff glides to a stop, Seth looks around before ascending the poling platform. "See any nets on the way here?"

Saltwater anglers in North Carolina are happy that new laws require greater accountability of commercial fishermen.

"No."

"I don't want to fish where we won't catch them, and I don't want the gillnetters to see us in here. They're always on my mind."

He begins poling the boat northward near the western shore. A long tall row of pines beyond the shore shades us. The water is clear above a dark bottom. Rays, lots of them, and schools of small baitfish scurry away from the boat. Seth says that's a good sign.

We move forward, and streaks of heavy mud curl from the bottom. "Those are redfish muds, but not from the big school my friend says are here. I'm guessing the school is somewhere between here and that point." That point is a couple of hundred yards distant, beyond a long, slow, eastward-angling curve that eventually curls southward to face the western sky.

Then his voice rises, "See the nervous water?"

"No."

He points it out, and I can barely see irregularities in the light chop. "They're coming this way."

Finally, we're on them—no wind, no nets, no interference.

"Get ready, look right, three o'clock. Cast about forty feet."

My cast falls short. "Leave it, leave it. Strip. Strip. *Awww*—he had it. That's okay. They'll be back."

He poles, deeper into the curve. "One o'clock, forty-five feet." I couldn't see them, but somehow my cast fell just right. "Let it sit. Now strip. He's taking it." A strip strike sinks the Bonefish Slider, and it feels like I hooked a mule plowing a narrow furrow through the water, peeling line off the squealing reel. Soon enough, the fish turns, and I make up some lost line. At the boat, Seth hoists nine pounds of glinting copper, and then releases it.

A few minutes later, deeper still into the curve, Seth points the boat east-southeast. He barks, "Cast forty feet, now thirty-five. See them? *See them*!? Now thirty. Cast!" At 25 feet, I see dozens of shimmering fish leading the school, their white mouths working. Amazed, I manage to put the fly in front of the school, and a nice red takes it in a roiling boil.

For the next hour and a half, Seth poles me to the edge of the school and directs my shots. I land six more similar-size reds. Seth hands the final catch to me, and I feel its drum pounding. Deep in my chest, my own little drum matches it beat for beat. ■

Russ Lumpkin is the managing editor of Gray's Sporting Journal *and feels fortunate to live close to good fishing for coastal reds, Appalachian trout, and Savannah River bass. Now, if Gillian Welch would just pass through town every now and then . . . .*

If You Go

Since I visited coastal North Carolina, the laws regarding commercial gillnetting have changed. In the past, gillnetters could run as many nets as they could set, set them right next to each other, and

leave them unattended for days—killing everything from the flounder they were targeting to sea turtles and redfish that tried to swim through. Now, a single operator may have only 1,000 yards of nets, nets may be only 100 yards long, and any two nets must be separated by at least 25 yards. Also, gillnetting is prohibited during the day—commercial fishermen can soak their nets only from an hour before sunset to an hour after sunrise—and no gillnetting is allowed from Friday through Sunday nights. Other regulations are also in place to help decrease bycatch of sea turtles and redfish.

Capt. Seth Vernon operates Double Haul Guide Service out of Wilmington, North Carolina (www.doublehaulguideservice.com). He guides primarily for redfish, speckled trout, and flounder but also chases seasonal migratory fish such as Spanish mackerel and bluefish. He's one of the few guides in the Wilmington area who fishes for tailing reds. His rates for half- and full-day charters range from $350 to $500.

Clapper rail live in the high grasses bordering redfish habitat, and from early September to mid-November, these wading birds are legal game. Seth often incorporates a hunt for rails into the hunt for reds. Whatever your preconceived notions of rail shooting, it's much fun, and the breast meat is quite sweet.

For nonresidents, a six-day hunting license is $40, and a 10-day fishing license is $10. For more details, visit the Web site for the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (www.ncwildlife.org).

Late autumn on the North Carolina coast can range from chilly to borderline hot. Pack warm clothes, and dress in layers. You'll want something that sheds wind for the potentially cold ride across the water.

In 2009, Captain Seth worked with a team of filmmakers to produce *Redfish Can't Jump*. Seth says, "The purpose of the documentary is to address the issue of gillnets in North Carolina's coastal waters and the pros and cons of managing a resource this way. It also features some entertaining fishing footage." For more on the film, visit the Web at www.redfishcantjump.com.