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A magazine exploring the *exceptional nature* of Bald Head Island, North Carolina



excursions & expeditions



By Seth Vernon  
Photography by Walker Golder

In Pursuit of the Carolina Coast

# GRAND SLAM

er to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to obtain.

– Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*



The warm salt air creeps over my skin as the August full moon pulls acres of tidewater through a labyrinth of creeks and spartina marsh. Water surges over oyster beds, bringing with it the myriad baits and the game fish that pursue them. The water silently steals into the secret reaches of Bald Head Island where redfish, speckled trout and flounder thrive in the nutrient-rich waters of the Cape Fear River. Today, I have journeyed here in pursuit of these great game fish and the coveted Carolina Coast Grand Slam.

Angling lore is rich with highly coveted achievements: the pursuit of a world record, catching a citation-sized species of fish on rod and reel, or simply targeting a species and pursuing it on the lure of your choice no matter the consequence. Some anglers pursue the Royal Slam, catching nine species of billfish in a lifetime, or the Super Grand Slam, catching a snook, permit, bonefish and tarpon in a single day. But the Grand Slam is an angling achievement in its own right, and depending on where you live, the species are different. In the tropics, catching a bonefish, permit and tarpon qualify as a Grand Slam, but the bonefish population in the Carolinas could make that pursuit an impossible feat for many anglers. Therefore, anglers along the Cape Fear coast have chosen the combination of a flounder, trout and red drum caught in a single day as the Carolina Coast Grand Slam. If you think it's an easy accomplishment, just ask how many your local angling heroes have racked up over the years.

The first morning on Bald Head Island,



Capt. Seth Vernon scans Bald Head Creek in search of red drum.

I awake to the sound of the surf as it advances and retreats off of East Beach, pulling grains of sand back to the ocean like a perpetual hourglass. There are no city lights intruding on my windows and no traffic speeding by in the dark. I step onto the back deck of the cottage overlooking the marsh behind Keeper's Landing and listen as the birds begin their song in the dim twilight; their voices ring clear through the wax myrtles in the still morning air. The tranquility of this island is refreshing and I can't remember when a hot cup of coffee has tasted better.

It takes about 10 minutes to load all of the tackle and photographic equipment into the cart for the ride to the marina. Rods are checked and rechecked before being carefully loaded—if I break another rod it most certainly will be now or in some screen door, as I have rarely broken one while fighting a fish—and I do one last look around before feeling positive I haven't left anything behind. My angling companion and friend, Walker Golder, mans the wheel of the cart on this exceptionally dark morning. Except

for a slice of fuchsia sky coming on with the dawn and the little patch of light from the beams on the golf cart as it hums through the maritime forest, we are alone, save an occasional deer or fox crossing quietly before vanishing into the palmettos.

Even the marina is quiet—the water is calm, the ferry absent. Impatiently, Walker and I load my flats skiff with spinning rods, a couple of seven- and eight-weight fly rods for trout and drum, and an eleven-weight just in case there's a tarpon that can be seduced by a fly amongst these Cape Fear currents. Anticipation is elemental to the success of our Grand Slam pursuit. Preparing the gear, studying the tides, maps and wind, and finally arriving at the destination in pursuit of our quarry are all important rituals that lend a personal reward to the already magical gift of being immersed in the watery marshes of this eco-rich island. As I turn the key on the skiff, I think of the names of the places we'll fish on this adventure: Fishing Creek, Bluff Island, Cape Creek, Smith Island, the Basin, Cedar Creek, the Thoroughfare, and Muddy

Slough, along with many other places that either don't have names or have informal monikers like One Fish Point, Dave's Flat, Palmetto Cove and others.

I turn the wheel and steer the bow to northwest, thinking of where to begin the day. The water is rising fast and the trout should be pushing closer to the marsh on the points of the feeder creeks that touch the river, especially those with hard oyster bottoms that help create eddies and upwellings. Trout it is. Close to the mouth of Bald Head Creek, we anchor the skiff in six feet of water and begin throwing Heddon Spooks and MirrOlure Top Pups parallel to the marsh where saltwater foam lines form in the currents. It's cloudy, so I opt for an old-fashioned red and white colored lure and start "walking the dog" with the plug, at first with a steady cadence that gives a metronome-like clack to the rattles inside the plug. Walker chooses wisely and puts on a jerk bait to get "down to business" on the fish. On my fourth cast the plug gets tossed five inches into the air.



**RED DRUM**



**FLOUNDER**

Anglers along the Cape Fear coast have chosen the combination of a flounder, trout and red drum caught in a single day as the Carolina Coast Grand Slam. If you think it's an easy accomplishment, just ask how many your local angling heroes have racked up over the years.



**TROUT**

“Stay cool, keep walking it,” Walker tells me. He’s an excellent trout angler so I follow his advice. I finish the retrieve and nothing happens. I cast again near the exact spot where my lure was attacked and within five feet of retrieving the plug a trout explodes again and this time is hooked. The trout makes a solid run with the current before doing some head shakes and giving up. As I land him I realize he won’t break any records and his attack is definitely mightier than his size, but what he lacks in weight he more than makes up for in aggression and looks. Trout are beautiful, from their yellow mouths and dark black spots to their finite silky scales and purple iridescence. They are also wary fish—they have great eyesight and are selective feeders, so learning when and where they can be caught takes a lot of trial and error. However, once you unlock the code and begin finding a pattern, you’ll be tough to compete with on the water.

Minutes after releasing our trout, Walker is jigging lightly with his bait and gets a solid “thump.” Seconds later his rod is bent hard.

“Drum?” I ask.

“Flounder,” Walker states.

A small tug of war ensues and a nice Cape Fear flounder is brought to hand.

“Do you realize we’ve been on the water for 20 minutes and we are already two-thirds of our way to a Carolina Slam?” I exclaim.

We thought it was going to be easy—little did we know! Flounder, or “flatties” as they are affectionately known, are great game fish and extremely aggressive in these waters. Finding flounder is as simple as looking for current seams and creeks that are shaped like funnels. Catching flounder, as I have learned, is another story and catching big ones takes patience. Today, Walker shows me something I have not tried on flounder before—using a light action rod,

he bounces the jig lightly along the bottom with his tip up and waits for the flounder to thump his artificial lure.

The pinnacle of this fishery for both Walker and me is stalking our final catch—our state fish, the red drum—in the flooded spartina with fly rods. The thrill comes from the hunt. Stalking these wary redfish in shallows is as exciting an experience as one can hope for. We decide to use the apex of the incoming tide as an opportunity to pole the boat up onto the flooded grass flats and hunt “tailing” redfish feeding in the grass. Tailing red drum literally bury their heads in the grass, feeding on the shrimp and crabs they have pinned down and in the shallow water, their tails emerging like little flags waving from the mirrored surface. Walker takes over poling and guiding the boat while I get my fly rod and line ready to cast. Within the first six minutes, Walker spots a nice tailing fish on our flat and we begin the stalk.

“Do you see him?” Walker asks.

“Twelve o’clock. Ninety feet.”

“Oh yeah,” I reply. “He’s moving left, correct?”

“Yes, wait for him to turn,” Walker whispers. “I’ll get us closer.”

A few tense minutes pass and the redfish finds something tasty and stands on his head.

“Oh my God, did you see that!?” I ask.

“Take him now!” Walker pleads.

I measure out the distance and gently land the fly 10 inches to the right of the fish. No sooner do I get the fly line tight in my hand than the redfish turns, exposing his back and tail, and clobbers the crab fly pinning it to the bottom. Instinctively I strip the fly to get tight and feel it pull out of the fish’s mouth. The drum explodes in fright at the tension of the line and sprints off to the far reaches of the marsh. I am heartbroken, stupefied and thrilled to have had such an



## TACKLE BOX

### Spinning Tackle

**Rods** 7 foot medium action | 8-17 lb. class or 6-14 lb. class

**Reels** Saltwater light tackle to match rods 30 or 40 series | 15 lb. braided line with 2 or 3 foot 15 lb. fluorocarbon leader

**Lures** MirrOlure Top Pup Color 808 | Heddon Spook in red and white | D.O.A. Jerk Shad in new penny, root beer, chartreuse and red and white | Redfish Magic Spinner bait | Johnson Silver Minnow a.k.a. Gold Spoon in 1/4 oz.

### Fly Tackle

**Rods** 9 foot fast action | 7 weight: Speckled trout, flounder and red drum | 8 weight: Red drum, black drum, spanish, king mackerel, tripletail etc. | 11 weight: Tarpon, cobia and jack crevalle

**Reels** Saltwater fly reels to match rods with a backing capacity of 200 yds. 20 lb. Dacron

**Lines** Weight forward floating lines to match rods, sinking and floating lines for tarpon | Leaders should be 9 feet 13.2 lb. test for 7 and 8 weights, 15 lb. for fishing in spartina | Tarpon leaders should be 20 lb. class tippet with a 60 lb. bite tippet

**Flies** Reds: Vernon's Killer Kwan, Jalapeno Popper, the Flexo Crab and Rodeo Minnow | Trout: Clouser in Chartreuse/White, Gummy Minnow, Epoxy Shrimp, Mayfield's Rattle Mullet | Flounder: Weber's Rattle Shrimp, Murdichs Wiggler in White, Clouser in Black | Tarpon/Cobia: Dan Blanton's Whistler in Red/Yellow/Orange, Black and Chartreuse/White

encounter at all. Walker calmly spins the boat and says, "Shake it off partner, let's find you another tailer..."

While red fishing in super shallow water is challenging, the reward is plenty. Tailing fish offer fishermen the same thrill a big gobbler in full strut offers a turkey hunter. Seasonally, we rely on light winds and big tides around the full and new moon to target these fish, and it is a special treat to pursue them. I know I need to be prepared to make several casts at these fish, and to be persistent—when the fish is tailing it can't see the fly. The key in the shallows is stealth in all things—quiet feet, boat hatches and cooler lids—and don't rock the boat.

The tide forces Walker and me to retreat out of the flooded grass, so we decide

to set up an ambush in the deeper water. We throw topwater plugs, as we did with the trout, to find hungry redfish chasing baits that have washed out of the creek mouths. The plan works. Seeing the occasional redfish busting bait along the shoreline, Walker coaches me into a spot where he suspected a red to be working. On my third cast with the Heddon Spook we watch breathlessly as a 10-pound drum inhales the lure from the surface and crashes so hard it makes the muddy water look like a latte. With the foam settling, my reel screams as the big fish tears the line off of the reel. The pressure of the fish on the line and the bend in the rod is impressive. Five minutes later, the mighty redfish is lipped on the Boga Grip for some photos before being revived and

released—healthy, and perhaps a little wiser. The Slam is complete!

Walker and I retreat back to our cottage, one fantastic day of fishing behind us and another great day ahead. With the Grand Slam complete, who knows what we might seek out tomorrow? With so much to choose from, it's easy to be distracted by fish activity anywhere in the backwaters of Bald Head Island. The magic of these waters is unimaginable, and with a little persuasion I may convince Walker into poling me one more time for a rematch on those tricky tailing fish in the flooded spartina marsh. 🐟

*Captain Seth Vernon is a fishing guide and writer who feels lucky to call the Cape Fear Coast his home.*

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