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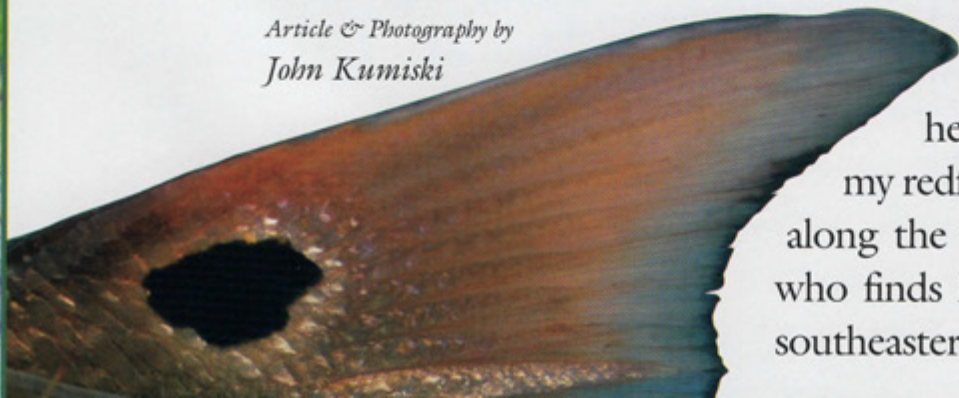
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The Hunt for **REED** October

It's green grass and high tides forever when it comes to autumn redfish in the Southeast. Throw in some great sight casting, and you've got a memorable fly-fishing road trip.

*Article & Photography by
John Kumiski*

The plan was elegantly simple. I would drive from my central Florida home to North Carolina, and then fly fish my way back along the coasts of the Carolinas and Georgia. With red drum as the target species, I planned to pair up with local guides (and a few friends) along the way for a two-week road trip in classic southeastern redfish country. So, after months of planning, I hopped into the chariot and set off on the 12-hour drive from the Mosquito Lagoon to Morehead City, North Carolina, to start my redfishing adventure. What I learned along the way home will help any angler who finds himself in any of these premier southeastern destinations. >>>>





The author fished with Capt. Seth Vernon (pictured) on the Intracoastal Waterway near Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, where they caught fish up to 30 inches on a receding tide.

Tarheel State Reds

To kick off the trip, my friend Steve Baker and I met Capt. Joe Shute on a chilly autumn morning in front of Joe's shop in **Atlantic Beach, North Carolina**. Joe soon had us zipping across the water, headed for the salt marshes that lie inside Beaufort Inlet. "We have redfish twelve months of the year," Joe said. "Probably the best time for tailing fish is from the end of July through September. At the beginning of October the fish start schooling up, and we do real well from then into January, sight-fishing to big schools of fish. We still have tailing fish then, too, just not quite as many. We have an outgoing tide now, so we'll see what we find when we get there."

What Joe found was a small tidal pond, maybe two or three acres in size, that was just full of redfish. The pond was draining down a small creek. Joe put his skiff in the middle of the creek, and the fish just kept on coming, wave after wave of hungry, dumb fish. What they lacked size, they made up for in numbers and attitude.

"During the winter I like a high outgoing tide," Joe explained. "But if the water's cool, and you have a shallow-draft skiff, you can stay right in through low water. It really doesn't seem to matter to the fish very much. I catch fish at

dead-low water. They pod up in the middle of these little bays, and they are extremely easy to see, and they will still take flies readily. As long as you sit there and don't make a lot of noise, those fish will keep circling through the basin and you can catch some on every pass if you work them right."

One of the many things I learned on this trip was

Along much of the Atlantic seaboard, there are two distinct redfishing times dictated by the high and low tides.

that along much of the Atlantic seaboard there are two distinct redfishing times, both dictated by the tides. There is the low-water fishery, during which the fish are schooled up on shallow mud flats, and there's the high-water fishery, during which the fish are on top of the marsh, foraging for fiddler crabs in the spartina grass.

One place this is not true, however, is in **upper Pamlico Sound**. There the situation is very different, and two days later, Steve and I were speeding across an apparently endless expanse of water, away from the village of Oriental, with Capt. Gary Dubiel. The water we ran across was the confluence of the Neuse River with Pamlico Sound. There is a tremendous amount of shoreline here, and this area is the biggest breeding ground for red drum in North Carolina. It boasts a lot of adult red drum that move during the summer months to spawn and huge populations of juvenile fish that spend from three to five years in this area before moving out to the Atlantic and joining the schools of adult fish.

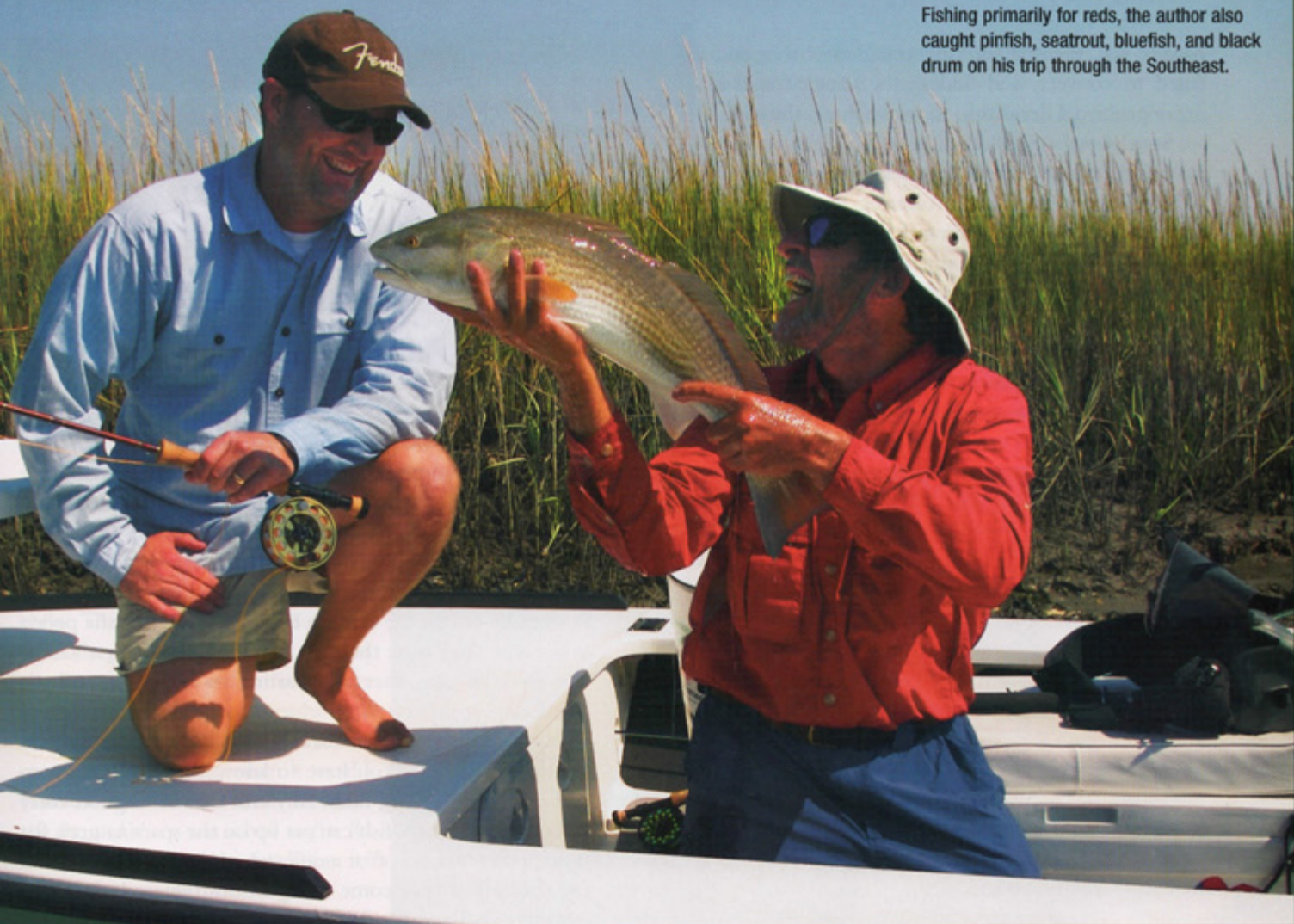
"We have a lot of tree-lined shorelines, so we can usually find spots that are protected from the wind," said Dubiel. "We have a wide variety of habitats, from creek fishing to very open water fishing, depending on the time of the year and the size of the fish that we're pursuing. We have everything from open marsh grass fishing to very wooded, lakelike situations."

"We have a non-tidal estuary here, with some variations in the fishery without a lunar rise and fall in tide. We do have crystal-clear water, either, so we do a lot more blind casting than sight-fishing. But we get high numbers, especially on fish less than 25 inches."

Capt. Joe Shute, of Atlantic Beach, North Carolina, said the best time to chase tailing redfish is the latter half of summer.



Fishing primarily for reds, the author also caught pinfish, seatrout, bluefish, and black drum on his trip through the Southeast.



When we arrived at the fishing grounds, the water was indeed dark. Fishing was fairly slow, but by blind-casting a large white Clouser Minnow with an intermediate line we picked up a variety of species, including pinfish, seatrout, bluefish, flounder, black drum, and puppy drum. Then Steve spotted a fish cruising right along the shoreline, and a perfect cast resulted in a strike. A few minutes later Gary swung an eight-pound redfish aboard, the best fish of the trip so far.

At Wilmington I found myself stepping aboard a skiff with two young edgy guides named Eddie Stewart and Seth Vernon, formerly a co-owner of the Intracoastal Angler, a fly shop in **Wilmington, North Carolina**. During the run up the Intracoastal Waterway past a collection of very impressive homes, Seth noted with dismay the height of the tide. "I like to fish the bottom half of the falling tide or the first half of the rising tide. The fish seem to be most active then. With this high-tide the water is way too deep for me to fish effectively." Eddie brought us deep into the marsh to some of his favorite high-water spots, but even he wasn't happy with the depth of the water. Everywhere I went on this trip they were

experiencing the highest tides in several years, and it definitely affected the fishing this morning.

One thing about areas with tides, though: Wait a short while and the water level changes. As the water got skinny my hosts located a school of at least 50 redfish. We took turns on the rod, and all had success with fish up to 30 inches.

Legendary Lowcountry

It's hard to beat a salt marsh as a place to watch the sun rise, and a couple of days later Richard Stuhr and I witnessed a beauty from his skiff. There were fish tailing, deer bounding off through the water after they sniffed our scent, purple martins diving and wheeling just above the water's surface. Richard wouldn't let me bring a rod during our foray. "If you're going to take pictures, you can't bring a rod. You'll see a fish and all thoughts of picture taking will disappear."

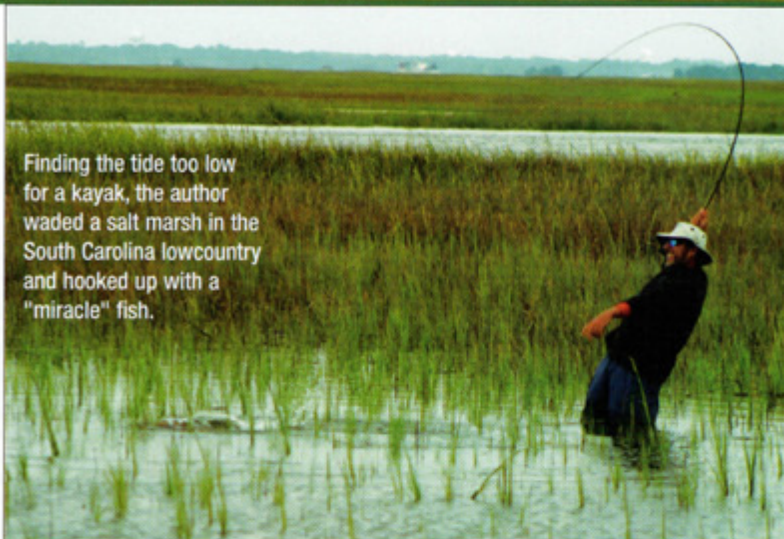
Richard knows me well, since most of time I would rather cast to a fish than photograph someone else doing so. While I've had superb fishing with him in the past, the high water again had the reds very scattered throughout the marsh and

hard to see. Richard had only one decent shot and failed to convert, and finding the Charleston fish uncooperative, I decided to move on down the road.

Southwest of Charleston off Highway 17, **Beaufort, South Carolina**, has a healthy dollop of old-style Southern charm, featuring many historic manor homes, fine restaurants, art galleries, and shops. If you're an angler, one of the nicest shops is Bay Street Outfitters, owned by Tony Royal. Tony had arranged for Steve Baker and I to borrow a pair of kayaks from David Gorzynski at Beaufort Kayak Tours. Tony supplied us with a map to the spot where the fish were supposed to be thick. The rest was up to us.

As it turned out, Steve wasn't up for much activity, saying something about "last night." And kayaking wasn't an option at first anyway since the tide had not yet come in. So, I put on wading booties and went out looking for it. When the water did come in, I was quickly knee deep in the marsh.

If you've ever gone to a place for the first time and don't know the drill, you know that self-doubt comes all too easily. I was just thinking to myself, "If I see a fish, it will be a miracle," when that miracle happened. A fat fish was wading through the grass about 60 feet away. I waded into position and let fly with a cast. The first one missed by a bit too much, but the second cast was right on. The fish rushed the Bunny Booger like it hadn't eaten in a month, and next thing I was chasing it through the grass. It made the solo adventure all worthwhile.



Finding the tide too low for a kayak, the author waded a salt marsh in the South Carolina lowcountry and hooked up with a "miracle" fish.

The next morning, local guide Tuck Scott picked Steve and I up at the landing at a very civilized starting time of 10 a.m. to fish the high tide. Tuck soon had us on fish, and I quickly blew three straight shots, gave up in disgust, and handed the rod to Mr. Baker. Using his version of the Bunny Booger, he caught the first fish he saw. I got up on the poling tower and Tuck took the rod. He, too, got the first fish he saw. By now the water was starting to fall again, and the fish disappeared.

As we returned to the dock Tuck talked to us about fishing these marshes. "You have to know what to look for to find fish on the tailing tides. Any area that has a good entry and exit point where fish can get up on the spartina grass flat at one point and get off at a different point is good. They will use flats where they come and go from the same entrance, but there will be more fish if they have several entry and exit points. These can be a small creek, or even just a little dip at the lip of the flat, something they can use to get on top of and off of the flat. They feel safer with as many different exit points as possible.

"I prefer wading when fishing for tailers in the marsh. You can't spook them with the boat when you wade, and you can get pretty close to them because they're preoccupied. Plus, it's just you and the fish, which is very cool."

Tuck's favorite flies include the Dupre Spoonfly for the tailers because it is so weedless and because fish attack it aggressively. Any kind of Electric Chicken fly works well, too. (Electric Chicken is a chartreuse and hot-pink color combination in any given pattern.) Bunny flies with weed guards work for redfish in any circumstance. A brown Clouser Minnow works well, and crab patterns such as the Merkin are always good to carry. Tuck likes his Merkin flies to be very dark, such as black, dark purple, or dark brown. There are a lot of other flies that will work here. You need something that will get down when you're not in the grass, or something that's good and weedless and will sink moderately fast for tailers. These fish are not very picky.

Tackle, Flies, and Guides

Although I carried a 7-weight in all places I fished, a nine-foot 8-weight outfit will perform well. Gary Dubiel preferred intermediate lines, but everywhere else the guides used a weight-forward, floating line. Leaders were about nine feet long (except on the sinking line, where a three-foot leader was plenty), and all had tippets of between 16- and 20-pound fluorocarbon to guard against the thick cordgrass and omnipresent oysters.

The Dupre Spoonfly came up over and over again in conversations with guides. The effectiveness of the Size 2 black Bunny Booger has also been noted. The Kreelex Clawdad, while lacking a weed guard, performed well during low-tide situations. While Seth Vernon has a true fly tier's love of fly patterns, most of the other guides use a fairly small number of flies. All have weed guards, and most are weighted. Gary Dubiel insisted on a size 1/0 white Clouser Minnow, and my brief experience with him certainly justifies his faith in this pattern. If you intend to fish any of these areas, call the guide first to see what they prefer.

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| North Carolina | Atlantic Beach: Capt. Joe Shute, www.captjoes.com
Oriental: Capt. Gary Dubiel, www.spectfever.com
Wilmington: Capt. Seth Vernon www.intracoastalangler.com |
| South Carolina | Charleston: Capt. Richard Stuhr, www.captstuhr.com
Beaufort: Capt. Tuck Scott, www.baystreetoutfitters.com |
| Georgia | Brunswick: Capt. Greg Hildreth, www.georgiacharterfishing.com |

Georgia Peaches

Even though Brunswick, Georgia is only a four hours' drive from my home, I had never fished there. Local guide Greg Hildreth took Tom Mitzlaff and me onto an enormous salt marsh, and again, a monster tide was in the offing. "Our normal high tide here is about seven feet," he said. "Today it's over ten. I think our window for these tailing fish will be short, because the water is going to get too deep pretty quickly."

Nonetheless, he put us on some fish right away. Tom started off with a spoonfly, but the wind was honking and the spoon kept sailing off target. "Do you have a fly that will punch through the breeze better?" asked Greg. I rifled through my box and tied on a black Bunny Booger.

Greg Hildreth and Tom Mitzlaff watched the fish approach, tailing as it came. Then they sat silently as I cast and missed, cast and missed again. The breeze was playing havoc with my casting accuracy, and the discolored water demanded that it be there. The fish was only 20 feet away from Greg's Mitzi when I just flopped the Bunny Booger out in front of it. We were all holding our breaths now as I waited for the fish to close that last six inches, wondering when it would realize we were there. I finally twitched the fly, and there was a boil as the fly line came tight, and the fish began its mad rush through the thick grass.

Then Tom took a turn on the pole as Greg fished and I photographed until the water was too deep to see any more. Over lunch Greg told us about his area. "Like many other places along the East Coast we have a high-water fishery on the big tides, reds tailing up in the grass, eating fiddler crabs and shrimp. Then we also have a low-tide fishery, which happens every day, all year long.

"The high-water fishery doesn't last all year. It starts in late March or April, when the fiddler crabs come out of hibernation, out of the ground. That's what the tailing reds are keying on. It lasts into the fall, when it gets too cold for the crabs, and they go into hibernation again.

"Our average tidal range is seven feet, with bigger tides on either the new or full moon, depending on which month it is. That varies. During the warmer months if you get a tide in the eight-foot range you can get into the grass and find those fish tailing.

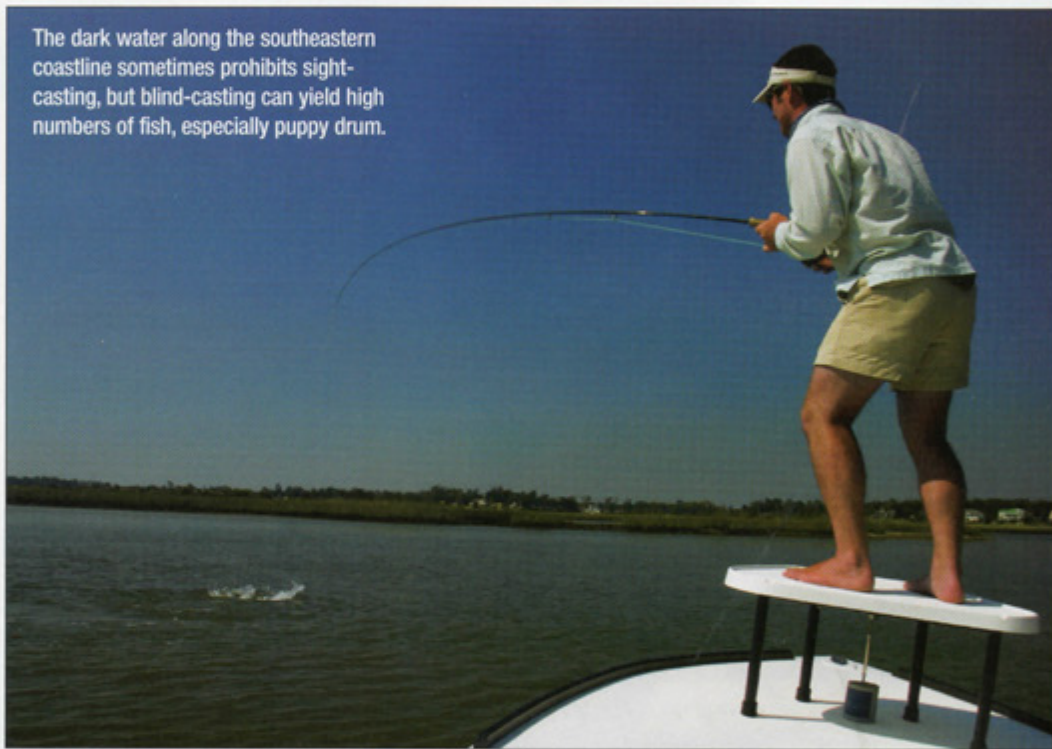
"In the winter, or when I don't have the big tides, I key on low-water fishing. You can do this every day. The fish congregate on mud flats to stay warm. Regardless of the tide,

the fish range between 22 and 32 inches, with the average being between 26 and 30 inches.

"The winter months are our strongest months for this size fish. They really gang up into large schools, and the water is clearest then. During the summer you might see five or six fish together as opposed to during the winter, when you see 25 or 100 fish together. Because of that, winter fishing is usually easier. But there's no grass fishing then. That's always better during the summer."

Greg brought us up into a tidal creek that afternoon for some low-water fishing. The amount of shrimps and small fish in the creek was simply amazing, huge quantities of both. While we did see some reds, they weren't moving very much or feeding very aggressively. They certainly didn't want

The dark water along the southeastern coastline sometimes prohibits sight-casting, but blind-casting can yield high numbers of fish, especially puppy drum.



anything to do with our flies, as sometimes happens. We pulled the boat out as the sun sank behind the trees, thankful for the high-water fish we'd gotten that morning.

All good things must come to an end, and after two weeks it was time to go home. On one hand, I felt lucky because I had experienced some wonderful fishing with some of the nicest people imaginable. Everything had gone perfectly. On the other hand, I was sad that the trip had gone by so quickly. It hardly seemed possible. But in the end, what I got besides a redfishing adventure was a world-class angling education and a bunch of new friends. How can you stay sad after a fantastic catch like that? ■

John Kumiski is a Saltwater Fly Fishing contributing editor and the author of Redfish on the Fly, Argonaut Publishing, 2006.