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# FEAR FACTOR

*North Carolina's Cape Fear Coast offers a shallow-water wilderness tailor-made for chasing redfish on the fly.*

*By Capt. Seth Vernon*



Bordered by the “graveyard of the Atlantic” on one side and the busy southern town of Wilmington on the other, Cape Fear enjoys some of the Southeast’s most exciting shallow-water sight fishing for red drum. While the area is better known for pirates and Civil War naval history, one of the best-kept secrets along this charming stretch of coastline is how accessible the redfish flats are to saltwater fly anglers willing to paddle, wade, or pole a little shoreline. For a closer look, it’s first necessary to understand the local tidal influence, and then to separate these waters into three specific regions: the lower Cape Fear River, Masonboro Sound, and Topsail Sound.

## Tides and Fish

Influenced by an average tidal range of four feet, Cape Fear redfish spend their entire lives following the ocean’s ebb and flow. Our resident schools tend to move great distances in search of safety and prey, and the best tide phases to fly fish usually occur during the falling tide, through dead low, and into the first three hours of the rise. The lower water levels concentrate fish into smaller areas and make them easier to visually locate. Seasonally, the rule is the higher the water temperature the higher the tide you fish, and vice versa. However, the last three hours of the falling tide usually provide more chances for multiple hookups. During the past three years, I have consistently found red drum schools in excess of a hundred fish sometimes gathered for two to three weeks at a time. Most of the redfish range between 4 to 10 pounds before leaving our estuaries by their third or fourth year to spawn. It appears that our “one per person, per day” fishing regulations on red drum in the 18- to 27-inch slot is helping the resource grow. Our hope is that we will eventually get

the redfish will have moved away. Other indicators that should not be ignored are signs of bait, such as menhaden, shrimps, and crabs, and the predators that feed on them, including wading birds, ospreys, pelicans, and terns. I have also found feeding fish more regularly on the “clean” side of a bay—which is sometimes the lee area—due to the cleaner water and often higher concentration of bait seeking shelter in the lee.

Finally, if you are new to this area and uncertain of the terrain you are fishing on a falling tide, use caution and secure an exit for yourself, or you run the risk of being stranded for a few hours waiting for the incoming tide. The redfish know this and will recede from the flats to deeper water, where they wait out the slack low in favor of the next incoming tide.



WALKER GOLDEN

### *The Knucklehead*

**Hook:** Mustad 34011, size 2/0.  
**Thread:** Mono tying thread.  
**Eyes:** 7/32-inch pearl 3D prismatic eyes.  
**Body:** Orange Loco Foam.  
**Head:** Black Loco Foam.  
**Tail:** Pearl Flashabou.  
**Sides:** Gold leaf glued and pressed.

## The Cape Fear River

Traveling south toward Bald Head Island by way of Carolina Beach on Hwy 421, you will pass through the community of Kure Beach and arrive at the historic site of the Fort Fisher Recreation Area. A wild and undeveloped beach bordered by remote backwaters, it is the perfect setting to explore from a shallow skiff or kayak. The paved road turns to dirt within sight of the Cape Fear River, where you will find the Ft. Fisher boat ramp offering a beach launch for kayaks and two finger docks and ramps for boaters. The upper bay is known as the Basin and is fed by a complex series of several shallow bays, including Middle Bay and Buzzards Bay to the south, which are connected by several small creeks to the Cape Fear River. While the Basin is actually a part of the lower Cape Fear River, it is separated from the river by a visible man-made tidal

# As the tide rises and floods the marsh, baitfish seek safety in the spartina grass with redfish in hot pursuit.

the commercial and recreational nets that threaten the survival of these fish removed from our estuarine nurseries.

When trying to locate redfish in new waters, always study local charts and aerial photographs before exploring the area by boat. Look for protected waters or shallow coastal bays that have a crescent shape, nearby deep-water retreat, a good tidal flow without too much current, and at least three of these five elements: mud, sand, sea grasses, oysters, and spartina marsh. If the bay you are fishing is deep enough for porpoises to comfortably live there through the majority of the tide, chances are good that

dam that was built in 1880 by the Army Corps of Engineers to prevent sediment from filling in the Cape Fear River channel. It is possible that the construction of the rock wall also contributed to the eventual closure of nearby Corncake Inlet and the buildup of sediment on the inside of the Basin. In any case, nature has run its course in these bays, resulting in an ideal flats fishery for redfish on both the high and low tides.

This is a magical place to fish, and I have experienced some of my best redfishing days on these unique flats. Wind and tide are both critical to a successful day here, preferably a light easterly

or southerly wind with a falling tide. With a little experience, it is possible to fish the falling tide for several hours and obtain better visibility by understanding how these bays drain. In this system, the lower portion of the bays around Cedar Creek and Buzzards Bay may have begun filling up while the tide in the Basin and Middle Bay is still falling for another hour.

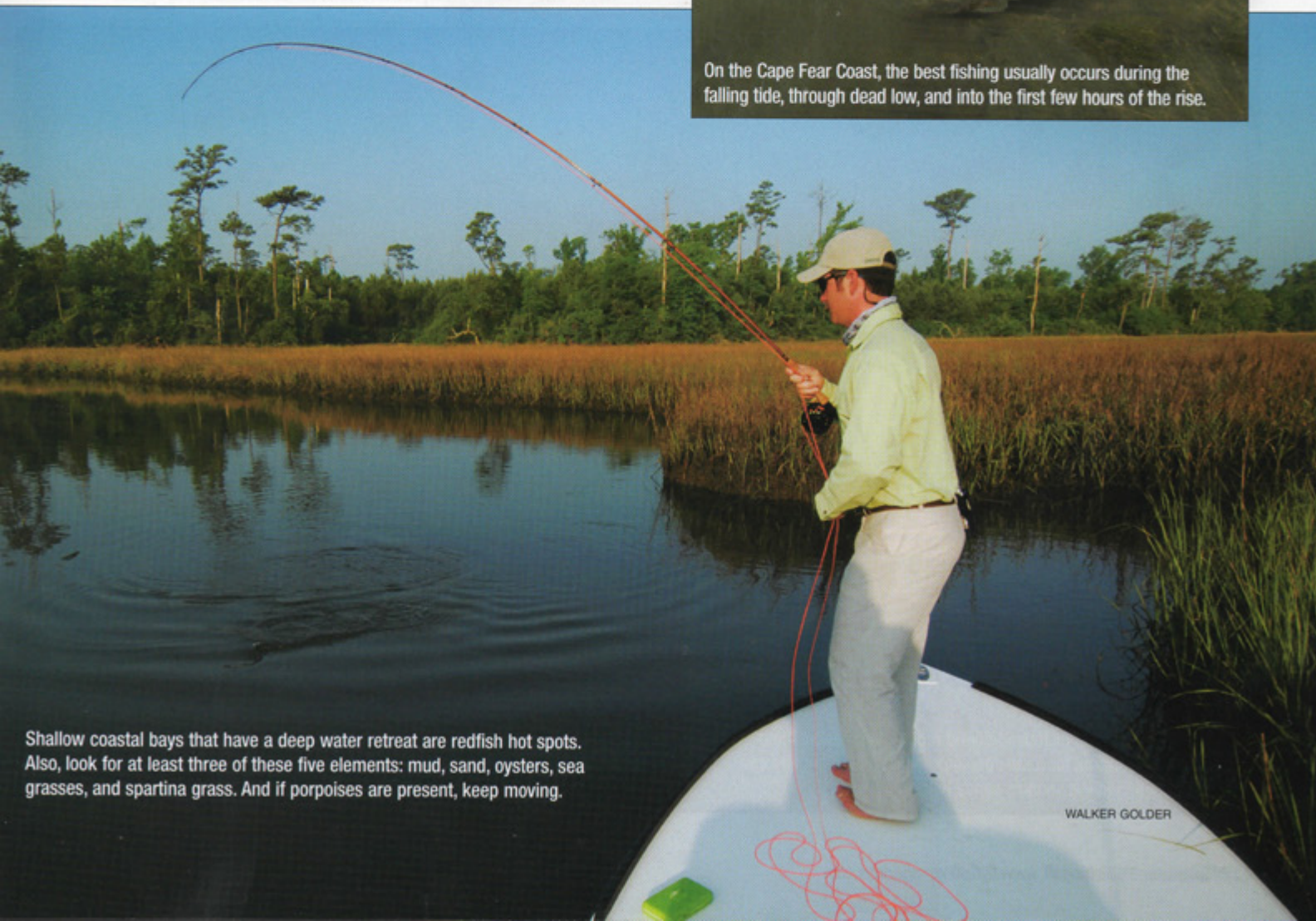
On calm summer days, I have spent hours stalking tailing redfish both from a boat and on foot in mere inches of water as they crawled through the mud with their backs exposed or paused to tail over live bottom. Crab flies are very effective in this situation, and I use a variety of Raghead patterns with colors favoring brown and tan. Cathy's Fleeing Crab is commercially available and an excellent pattern.

I have also witnessed some spectacular topwater redfish bites in this region. Typically, as the tide rises and floods the marsh, baitfish seek safety in the spartina grass with the redfish in hot pursuit. I often hear them splashing in the grass as they chase prey long before I see them in the dense cover. These conditions are perfect for the Knucklehead, a fly designed by local tier Matt Martin. Cast this noisy popper parallel to the marsh grass near the redfish's location, and then begin a slow pop-pop-pop-pause retrieve. The fish usually overtakes your fly in about four strips. More often than not the hookup ratio on these encounters is low simply because the voracious surface strike from the fish startles the angler so badly.

Be patient if you venture into these wild waters, as this area is remote and predominately shallow sand bottom. Travel slowly at



On the Cape Fear Coast, the best fishing usually occurs during the falling tide, through dead low, and into the first few hours of the rise.



Shallow coastal bays that have a deep water retreat are redfish hot spots. Also, look for at least three of these five elements: mud, sand, oysters, sea grasses, and spartina grass. And if porpoises are present, keep moving.

first, and familiarize yourself with a nautical chart. I guarantee that if you plan wisely, you will not be disappointed.

## Wrightsville Beach

Farther north, U.S. 17 intersects with Eastwood Road/Hwy. 74 East and leads to the more populated destination of Wrightsville Beach. The waters of Wrightsville Beach are clear, easily navigated, and for fly angling are better protected by a west wind than the Cape Fear region. The Intracoastal Waterway, which runs north to south on this stretch of coastline, provides a thoroughfare to some spectacular redfish schools fishable by sight. Beyond the flats along the ICW, try fishing the creeks on the western side of the ICW and the backcountry lagoons and bays of the barrier islands that separate the ICW from the ocean. Fishing in this area is most accessible from a boat due to the amount of boat traffic moving in and out of Masonboro Inlet and the distances that need to be covered to effectively fish the tide on various flats. The Wrightsville Beach public boat ramp is easy to spot as you cross over the ICW on the causeway bridge and is a very modern facility with five ramps.

While sometimes crowded, fishing at Wrightsville Beach can be unrivaled, with several natural inlets providing good tidal flow.

Because this area is more populated, it pays to get an early start during the peak season. Redfish display some exciting feeding behaviors, but the most common in this area is what I call “winking” fish. When large schools or groups of redfish are grazing over live bottom, it appears that these fish are feeding by slowly turning on their sides to sip or grab prey. The result of this behavior is that the fishes’ scales reflect light from a great distance. I have spent many successful trips catching fish engaged in this manner of feeding due to their aggressive disposition. The redfish here do much of the same things they do in other places, including tailing when they are searching for crabs, or striking topwater flies, and of course making nervous water while pursuing bait in the shallows. My favorite pat-

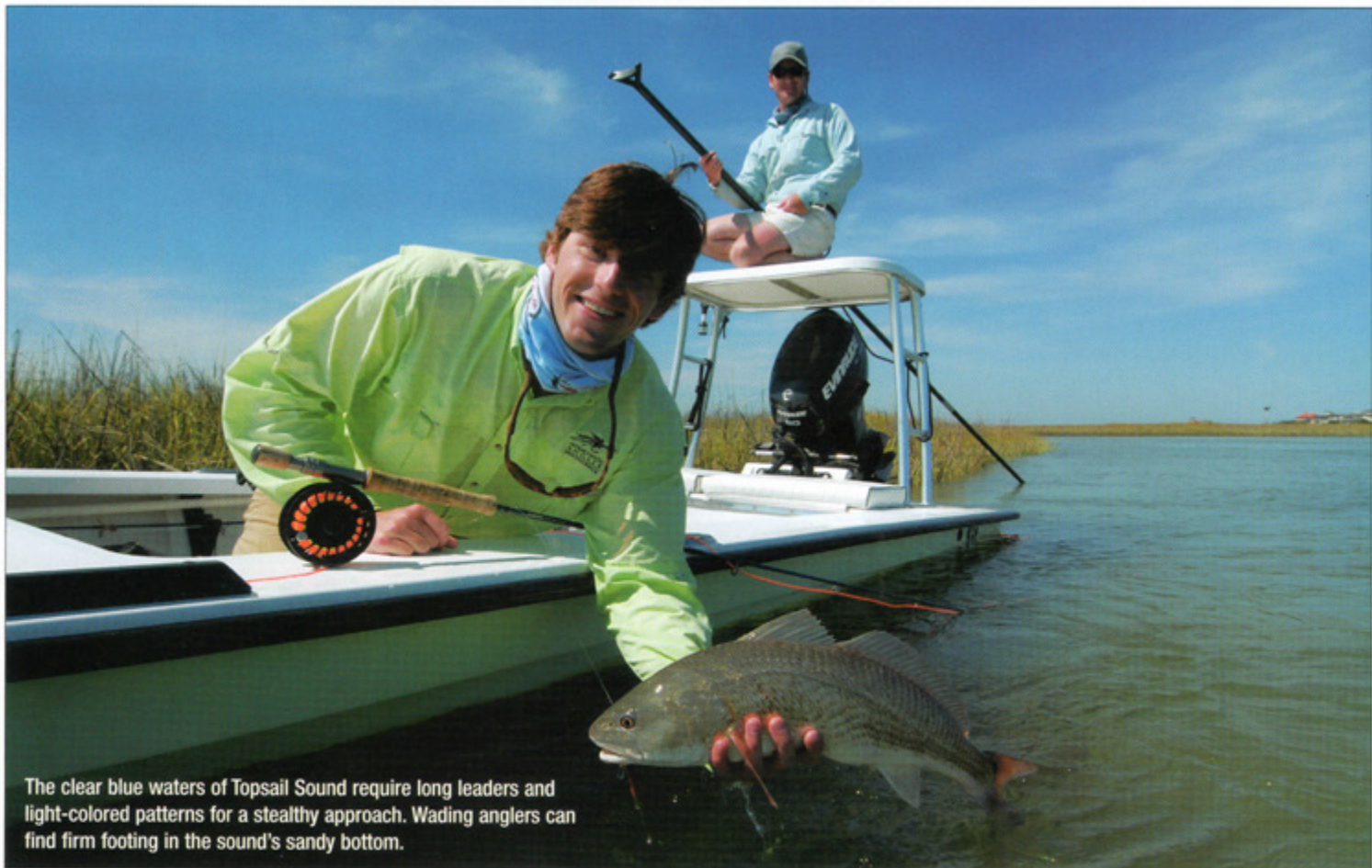
terns for these backwaters are the Slammin’ Bunny in orange and olive, Borski’s Bonefish Slider in tan, Murdich’s Wiggler in root beer and chartreuse, and the Rattle Shrimp in gold and tan.



WALKER GOLDFER

### Rattle Shrimp

**Hook:** Gamakatsu SC15 1/0-2/0.  
**Thread:** Tan Uni-Thread, size B.  
**Eyes:** 5/32-inch gold bead chain.  
**Body:** Small Gold Flashabou Tubing.  
**Tail:** One quarter inch of Flashabou tubing, brushed out.  
**Wing:** Tan craft fur under root beer craft fur barred brown with a Sharpie.  
**Wing accent:** Six strands of Gold Krystal Flash Accent.  
**Rattles:** 3-millimeter mini glass fly rattles.



WALKER GOLDFER

The clear blue waters of Topsail Sound require long leaders and light-colored patterns for a stealthy approach. Wading anglers can find firm footing in the sound's sandy bottom.

## Gear and Guides

Cape Fear Coast redfish require a 7-, 8-, or 9-weight fly rod with medium to fast tapers for battling the wind. A well-matched large-arbor reel will help recover line quickly when a fish swims at the boat and will hold ample backing for insurance on bigger reds. Local anglers typically use 9-foot leaders either knotted or tapered, with 10- to 17.6-pound tippet, depending on the fly and hook size. When fishing in the spartina marshes, shorten the leader to 7½ feet and tie on some 15-pound fluorocarbon for added strength. For attaching the fly to the tippet, my most trusted loop knot is still the Duncan loop, for use with both monofilament and fluorocarbon.—S. V.

### Greater Wilmington Fly Guides

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#### Capt. Seth Vernon

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BILL TAYLOR

Fishing around the beach offers plenty of adventure without sacrificing the amenities found in a harbor community, and I am always grateful for the fact that we can catch redfish all morning and stop for waterfront dining by lunchtime if we are so inclined.

### Topsail Island

Continuing north beyond Hutaff Island, you will enter the blue waters of Topsail Sound. It is rumored that Topsail received its name when mercenary sailors hired to defend the new colony from pirates spotted the topsail on the mast of Blackbeard's ship, which was hidden in a cove on the sound side of the island. Topsail Island, now developed and offering comfortable amenities, harbors some excellent shallow-water fly fishing. With 24 miles of coastline protecting the sound side of Topsail, the fishing possibilities are seemingly endless. The sandy bottom offers some good wade fishing as well as contrast for sighting fish on the light colored bottom, and the redfish in these waters can grow very large. I have encountered some of my biggest backcountry redfish within viewing distance of New Topsail Inlet. Due to the clear water and sandy bottom, I prefer to fish this area with a selection of lightly colored fly patterns and long leaders for a stealthy approach. I stock my fly box with the Slammin' Bunny in chartreuse or sand, Borski's Bonefish Slider in tan, the Craft Fur Rattle Shrimp in tan or chartreuse and white, as well as the Mighty Minnow and some small shrimp flies, such as a pattern we call the Garfield.

Spend some time exploring the waterway extending north to the Surf City bridge and the surrounding bays and creeks, such as Stump Sound, Everett Bay, or Becky's Creek on the western side of the waterway. I also fish the interior waters of the spoil islands between Banks Channel and the Intracoastal Waterway on the

incoming tides. Topsail tides are about 40 minutes behind Masonboro Inlet, so I usually depart from Wrightsville and fish the falling tide up to Surf City during the day. If your intention is to fish exclusively in Topsail, check out the Turkey Creek boat ramp. This ramp is similar to Ft. Fisher and has an unpaved surface and only two slips for launching. Access is available by following U.S. 17 north from Wilmington through the town of Holly Ridge toward the community of Folkstone. Turn right onto Old Folkstone Road

and drive about two miles to the intersection with Turkey Point Road. Follow this road for two more miles to arrive at the Turkey Creek public boat ramp. The access to the flats to the south around Topsail Island or to the north around New River from Turkey Creek is ideal and makes for a strategic central location depending on the fishing conditions. There is enough water here to spend a lifetime fishing, and each season offers new possibilities. Don't miss the opportunity to venture into Topsail Sound on your next trip to the Cape Fear Coast, as these fish can be as big and strong as they are numerous.

So, warm up your double haul, slip on your flip-flops, and head for the Tarheel State for some fun chasing our state fish—the red drum. There are miles of marsh yet to be discovered, plenty of saltwater game fish to chase,

and loads of Southern hospitality waiting for you on the Cape Fear Coast. ■

*Wilmington resident Capt. Seth Vernon is a full-time fly-fishing guide, writer, and photographer with experience ranging from Alaskan salmon to Yucatán bonefish, permit, and tarpon. This is his first contribution to Saltwater Fly Fishing.*



WALKER GOLDER

### Slammin' Bunny

**Hook:** Owner Mosquito 5177-111, size 2/0.

**Thread:** Chartreuse Uni-Thread size B.

**Eyes:** 3/16-inch hourglass brass eyes in nickel finish.

**Body:** Olive crosscut Zonker palmered forward.

**Legs:** Clear orange/fire-tip Sili Legs.

**Tail:** Two-inch piece of olive Zonker strip with seven strands of pearl Krystal Flash.

**Collar:** Orange crosscut Zonker palmered forward.

**Gill:** Pearl holographic fish-scale Mylar.