

# REDFISH TAILS

Paul Procter goes in search of Florida's 'tailing' redfish. They take a fly with enthusiasm

# ON THE FLATS

and fight as hard as bones. Just watch their fins break the surface and make a cast »



**W**HEN it comes to tropical saltwater fishing, bonefish tend to head our wish list, closely followed by tarpon and permit.

Admittedly, pursuing the 'big three' in surroundings where shorts and sandals are the order of the day takes some beating. That said, there are more humble fish out there that pack just as much punch as the coveted bonefish and best of all they can be far less fussy when it comes to taking a fly.

At first glance redfish might not appear all that appealing, but up close they're stunning, elegant creatures, befitting of anyone who cares to wield a fly rod!

Redfish (*Sciaenops ocellatus*), also known as 'red drum' are well spread throughout the Atlantic Ocean with their range stretching from Massachusetts down past Florida and into the Gulf of Mexico. Although found on saltwater flats, redfish are fairly tolerant of brackish water too and will often infiltrate freshwater lagoons that are connected to the sea.

Aptly named because of their reddish/pink upper parts, redfish also have a distinctive black eyespot near their tail. Apparently, scientists reckon this fools predators into thinking their tail end is the head, allowing redfish a chance of escape. While most redfish have a single black spot either side of their tail, it's not uncommon to find fish with multiple spots. However fish lacking any spots whatsoever are much rarer.

With an underslung mouth, it's obvious redfish are bottom feeders with shrimps, crabs and worms very much their principal prey. But, every bit a predatory fish, they're not adverse to taking pinfry, small mullet and even flounders too. So imitations can vary from things like a Gotcha (shrimp pattern) to small bunnies that are more in keeping with predators like tarpon or snook.

John Machin has pursued redfish along America's east coast for a number of years now and while this obliging fish can be found in several locations, he's happiest on Florida's southern shores. Here the Everglades National Park is home to a spectacular range of wildlife,



Redfish have a 'false eye' either side of their tail.

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including many types of striking fish species. With mudflats spanning mile after mile and plenty of backwater lagoons a thriving population of redfish call this home. In the wee small hours on a March morning, John and I meet up with Florida saltwater guide Dave Hunt.

**Dawn's ideal for tailing redfish**

UNDER darkness we head south in a bid to be on the water at first light, a prime time for tailing redfish. With a couple of hours to kill behind the wheel, Dave chats away enthusiastically about redfish in these parts. A knowledgeable sort, his talk soon spread to alligators, snake heads, tarpon and even sharks, not only making time pass quickly, but causing us to foam at the mouth in anticipation.

Arriving a tad later than expected, we launch from the Everglades dock just as dawn breaks. Motoring out in the half light, other skiffs can be seen making their way to rich hunting grounds too. Fingers crossed they'll have a different game plan and hopefully we won't have to end up sharing a flat. I needn't have worried, as one by one, boats splinter off to go their own merry way. By the time we cut our engine the only

thing in sight is the occasional pelican wheeling overhead, waiting to plunder any shoal of unsuspecting baitfish below.

The sun has climbed higher now and while we just miss that magical witching hour, a rising tide has Dave revved up. Being estuarine, flooding mudflats make for turbid water which doesn't help when it comes to spotting fish subsurface. However, very much like bonefish, redfish tilt their heads down when forging and this in turn causes their tails to break surface. Known as 'tailing' this is your best chance of locating fish in such conditions. A calm surface helps too, because you can spot tailing fish a few hundred yards away and today we've been blessed with just that.

**Slow and smooth movements**

DEFTLY poling in water no more than thigh depth, Dave eases towards two spade-shaped tails that have been waving at us from a distance. As we get within 40 yards, with several redfish to his credit, John kindly offers me first cast. It's vital that your movements are slow and deliberate in a skiff. A clumsy footfall now, or fly box dropping in the hull will send out a sonar shockwave, alerting your quarry that all is not well.

Perched on a platform on the bow of a skiff while trying to drop a fly accurately some 25 yards away isn't easy because, believe me, excitement alone can cause you to lose balance! Bending your knees to lower your centre of gravity helps

as does keeping an eye on a distant object.

With Dave's advice ringing in my ears, my line extends towards those flickering tails. The fly drops about three yards ahead of the lead fish which clearly senses a disturbance and lurches forward. My first pull on the line and everything locks up though, rather than set with the prescribed 'strip strike', instinct kicks in, causing me to lift my rod as if catching a trout! Everything goes tight for a moment, but then my line falls slack.

Like many saltwater species redfish possess hard mouths that are difficult to penetrate when lifting your rod. Instead, more direct contact is achieved by a sharp pull with your line hand when retrieving. Executed correctly the 'strip strike' instantly drives a hook point home, leaving you to simply raise the rod to cushion that initial blistering run of a bemused fish. Sounds simple in theory, but a lifelong trout fisher, my hard drive is wired to 'lift' on feeling resistance!

Having messed up the first chance, I'm not going to blow my next opportunity. So nearing another pod of tailing redfish, I constantly tell myself to 'strip strike'.

With those teething problems behind me, we are soon into fish and they really do pull! Admittedly they might not quite equal >>



After spotting feeding fish Paul makes a long cast.



Drumfish. You'll soon know when they're swimming by!



John Machin has fished for redfish for many years.

While not as popular as bonefish, Paul rates the redfish for its power, beauty and speed.



Paul Procter steers a good redfish to hand. The sunlight brings out the colour in the orange/red fins.





A flat calm is perfect for spotting feeding redfish at range. You'll notice their tails breaking the surface and then slowly but surely the skiff moves in.

*"...low light levels are not good for spotting fish beneath the waves. Instead we track redfish by furrowing 'V' wakes."*

bonefish in the acceleration stakes, but their sheer power beggars belief. Suddenly those 12-14lb tippets advised by Dave don't seem overkill at all. On that note, generally speaking, leaders need only be nine to 10 feet long, though given the unusual circumstances of a flat calm we extend ours to some 14 feet – the idea being to land a fly well clear of any fly-line disturbance.

**Unweighted flies are best**

EQUALLY, many redfish/bonefish patterns boast chain eyes positioned on top of the hook shank, so they swim hook point uppermost. However, these announce their arrival with a definite plop that sends nearby fish scurrying. Be it a loosely based crab or shrimp representation, unweighted flies give us an edge when pitching at tailing fish. In more blustery conditions where wave action exists then, very much like trout, redfish become far more tolerant and it's possible to drop a fly only inches from where a fish is digging about.

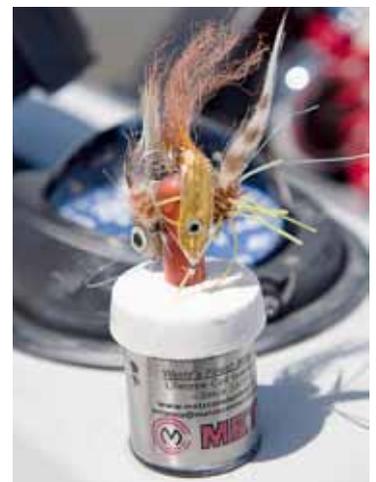
Guide Chris Myers treats us to a very different perspective by taking us to a freshwater lagoon the very next day. Another early start, though this

time we're in position well before night gives way to day. Dawn can be surprisingly chilly this close to the equator, calling for a second layer. Despite crystal-clear water, low light levels are not good for spotting fish beneath the waves. Instead, we track redfish by furrowing 'V' wakes as they shoulder their way across skinny flats. Pinpointing fish isn't a problem now though getting them interested in a fly proves far from easy.

We must have thrown a good half dozen different patterns at nervous water and yet an hour passes without so much as a single sniff. Once more the redfish really switch on under a blazing sun. Not that we complain because they're well and truly visible now, giving us what can only be described as classic 'flats fishing'. This population of redfish seems more tenacious than ever, even in a more brackish environment. As for flies, we finally find success with a Black or Olive Fritz Tadpole, tied with red dumb-bell eyes so the fly fishes with an inverted hook point.

Poling this vast lagoon, Chris suddenly becomes very animated. Digging his pole to check our drift, he takes off after what looks like a huge grey smudge to the untrained eye. This turns out to be a shoal of black drum, a close relation of redfish. Apparently they're more highly prized too, which accounts for Chris's excitement. Incidentally the term 'drum' is derived from a sort of croaking or deep drumming sound made by both species when they're alarmed. As yet, the redfish we'd encounter have remained silent, but these black drum are quite vocal. Following a bit of nifty casting, both John and I manage a black drum apiece before the whole shoal becomes edgy and separate in spectacular fashion.

Thankfully the redfish hang about until a good hour or so after high tide, before retreating out of the lagoon and back to deeper water. We'd enjoyed several hours of amazing sight fishing for a species that rarely gets mentioned outside of their natural range. Why they remain such a secret is beyond me because, for my money, they're exceptionally strong and hard fighting. Best of all though is their willingness to take a fly, which let's face it is why we go fishing! 🐟



Top patterns copy shrimp, crab or fish.



John Machin cradles a fly-caught drumfish.



**Florida factfile**  
**SEASON** Although there is year-round fishing, October to April offers some of the best fishing for redfish and black drum. Granted, January can be a tad cooler though this isn't always a bad thing.  
**FLIGHTS** Depart from Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow and Heathrow to Newark before connecting to Fort Lauderdale, or direct to Miami.  
**PRICES** With extensive knowledge and understanding of redfish, black drum, bonefish, peacock bass and large mouth bass, Fly Fish Florida organise regular trips to Florida with prices starting around £1,600 excluding flight.  
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