

## How to Catch Redfish by Terry Ricket

My first redfish was caught on a gorgeous winter day kayak fishing the flats of one of the more popular fishing areas in Tampa Bay, called the [Weedon Island Preserve](#). This incredible chain of small mangrove structures has been fished for 10,000 years – long before we had pens to write fishing reports, or special hooks to purchase.

The redfish turned out to be a respectable 24 incher that I muscled in with gear way too heavy for flats fishing – it was the first rod/reel setup that I ever bought. I got it for \$39.99 at Walmart. Now that I know what I know, I can justifiably say that I didn't know better at the time. I now frequent, and have close friends that work at local tackle shops. The rod that I had was made for pier fishing, but it definitely did the job for a few months and it definitely helped me learn how to catch redfish...

### Fishing Techniques; Catching Redfish on the Flats

Fishing techniques are pretty similar year-round for redfish. They can be found on flats anywhere in the Gulf of Mexico, from Northern Mexico all the way to Florida, and all the way up the Atlantic coast as far north as Massachusetts. Generally redfish feeding behaviors stay the same year round, which makes it fairly easy to find and catch them. A good place to start looking for reds year round is directly in and around mullet schools. Whenever you see mullet jumping erratically in and out of the water, they're kicking up food that redfish would normally have to root around for. Luckily for redfish, mullet are vegetarians; they don't eat the forage that gets kicked up so redfish are more than glad to clean up after them. This makes finding forage much easier for the redfish, so they always tend to hang out with mullet. Sometimes there will be hundreds mixed in with the mullet. But there will always be a few – even if they're not apparent. Try the back-edges of the mullet schools. Remember, the reds are eating what the mullet just kicked up. The mullet are moving while the reds are stopping every time they see a little crab kicked up. So they tend to be on the back-ends of the schools.

## Redfish Characteristics

Redfish – for the most part – have a red-copper colored back that fades into white on its belly – hence the name "redfish" or red drum. But, just like all fish they change color depending on where they are or their mood. When redfish are feeding heavily they are known to have a beautiful blue colored tail. If they are in very clear, clean water, they might be a silver color, but if you catch them in their usual habitats they will be a red-copper color. Almost all redfish have a black spot on their tail that scientists believe is to fool predators into thinking that it is their eye so that they will attack their tail instead of their head, which will allow the fish a better chance to escape. Although most redfish have a single spot on their tail, some have several on their tail, back, and sides. I have seen redfish that had absolutely no spots on their body at all and one that probably had probably about 40 all over it.

### Habitats where Redfish are Generally Found

Redfish are a skinny water fish for much of their lives, although they move into much deeper water once they exceed about three feet in length. They migrate offshore in the winter to spawn and can be found on reefs and in deep-water channels (hence the nickname "channel bass"), but generally live inshore in very skinny water (2-4 feet). A very common place that redfish tend to hang out is near oyster bars. One of their favorite foods also live on oyster bars, and that is small crabs. As long as there is decent tidal movement, crabs will be plentiful, and their predators will be there as well. Targeting redfish on days with very strong tides will usually result in the most action. But be sure to check your tide chart to make sure you don't show up at a dead low tide. Depending on how deep the water is at the oyster bar, you might just get there and find it totally exposed, with no water at all. It is a good idea to explore in the dead of winter, when the tides are at their lowest so you can learn where the structure is when covered by spring and summer flood tides. But fishing the dead lows is tough, and often not nearly as productive as the higher or incoming and falling tides turn out to be.

Redfish can also be found in or around:

- Estuaries
- Rivers
- Grass flats

- Residential docks
- Mangrove shorelines

If you read the magazine, you will find a lot of stories about fishing docks. Some of the most exciting redfish fishing is done around residential docks and mangrove shorelines with light tackle. If a redfish is sitting under a dock and a bait is thrown on its head, it's gonna eat it...and quickly. If you're lucky you'll get it clear of any structure and get it boat-side, it's one heck of a fight. Same rules go for mangrove shorelines: if you're lucky enough to get the fish away from the trees without it breaking you off, you'll be in for a good fight.

### Favorite Baits

When learning how to catch redfish, bait is probably the easiest thing you'll learn: use pretty much anything – including a stinky piece of plastic (Gulp!). Redfish is an inferior eater, meaning the lower part of his mouth is shorter than the upper. Redfish will root on the bottom using their nose to find food. When they are rooting for food in shallow water, their tail sticks up out of the water – hence the name "Tailing Redfish".

Redfish will feed on:

- Crabs
- Shrimp
- Live and cut mullet
- Live and cut pinfish
- Live and cut sardines
- Minnows
- Sand dollars

Yes, sand dollars. Next time you decide to take a redfish that you catch home for dinner, as you're filleting them look in their stomach. You might be surprised what you'll find.

**Live bait:** My personal favorite bait to catch redfish is live shrimp.

Especially while they are actively "tailing" or rooting around for food. If you don't have any terminal tackle and can get within casting range without spooking them, you will get a hookup, trust me.

Probably the second best bait – in my opinion (I know this is a lot of fishermen's #1 bait, over live shrimp) – is fresh cut pinfish or ladyfish (called

deadbaiting by locals). Although I do agree if there's a fresh cut bait sitting there soaking as a redfish happens to swim by, he's going to hit it, the reason I like live shrimp better is for the simple fact that throwing them at tailing fish is a lot more "stealth". If you throw a big chunk of cut bait at tailing reds, once they hear the KAPLUNK they aren't sticking around for too long. Yes, they might come back...might, but probably not for a while. And why would you want to scare away such a beautiful sight anyway???

**Artificial bait:** My personal favorite artificial baits are probably Gulp! because they smell. Like I said earlier, redfish use their nose to root around on the bottom to look for food. Gulp! are probably the #1 bait for redfish in the whole state of Florida. Every artificial-using fisherman I know uses Gulp! Gold spoons are also a very popular and effective artificial bait for redfish.

### Best Tackle to use to Catch Redfish

I've been in situations where 14 lb fluorocarbon leader was more than enough to catch very nice sized reds; usually on the flats. I've also been in situations where 30 lb fluorocarbon was not enough to muscle the fish from going directly into nearby structure and breaking me off. Therefore, there are various setups you could find useful while you're learning how to catch redfish. You will find experienced fishermen will use different setups in situations than others would. So, the following information is just a guideline to go from. Once you get some hours under your belt you will start developing your own preferences that might work best for you.

**Flats:** If you're out in the middle of a flat where there's no structure for the fish to break you off, I would suggest starting with a 2500 class reel, a 7'6 medium or even a medium-light rod, 10-15 lb braided line, and 20 lb fluorocarbon leader.

**Mangroves and oyster bars:** Fishing around structure like mangroves and oyster bars requires a little heavier tackle. You want to be able to muscle the fish a little bit so that they can't break you off. I would start with a 2500-3000 class reel, stay with the same 7'6 medium with 15 lb braided line, but I would upgrade the leader to 25 lb fluorocarbon. If your leader gets cut, you might think of upgrading it again to 30 lb.

**Residential docks:** Fishing residential docks are by far the most challenging inshore fishing in my opinion. It seems like every time you hook

into a nice sized fish they immediately take you sideways right into the dock pilings. I like to use a 3000-4000 class reel paired with a 7 foot medium-heavy rod, 20 lb braid, and 25-30 lb fluorocarbon leader. You will get broke off fishing docks. It happens.

### Finding your own Redfish

I started out not-much caring what was pulling on my line, and to a large extent, I still do not. Granted, a day-long ladyfish harvest isn't exactly on the top of my fishing wish-list, but hey, they fight hard, jump like a tarpon, and are a lot more fun than catching trout. They are open-water predators, so if I see birds I have often found ladies, which for a child on a fishing trip for the first time, their rainbow antics are enough to hook the kid better than it hooks the slimy, gray-poop-filled mini-tarpon (they are tarpon, you know). But if you want to pick a real fish to devote your angling time to, think redfish. They're cooperative, a blast to catch, not the easiest species to master, and certainly deserving of your time. Getting into a school of those big breeders, or pulling a thirty-incher out from under a dock in the dead of December will do it for you, too.