

**South Texas Redfish Report – this report comes in two parts. First is the story of her experiences written by Barbara Klutinis for her Golden West Fly Fishers Club newsletter. Second, our brief trip report of our initial trip to fish these waters.**

### **Redfish at 10 O’Clock**

(from the newsletter of the Golden West Women’s Fly Fishers Club)

By Barbara Klutinis



Southeast Texas is not a predictable destination for me. In fact, it is a part of the US that still remains a mystery to me. The only reason I know it even exists is that now I have been there...to fish for redfish in early November. In so doing, I feel as if I have discovered an unspoiled “last frontier,” a tropical saltwater wonder of exotic birds and unique scenery called the Laguna Madre.

Four of us in the Golden West Women’s Fly Fishers Club have formed a “saltwater contingent,” having fished together two years ago in Cancun for bonefish: Deirdre Moy, Jean Edwards, Mary Chevoya, and myself. Our host was Jeff Kean with Casa Arroyo City, a local lodge 30 miles from Harlingen, Texas. Don Muelrath, of Fly Fishing Adventures, who will be our GWWF guest speaker in January, made our trip arrangements. If you will be planning a trip for redfishing, bear in mind that hurricane season is early June through early November.

The Laguna Madre is a large saltwater flat that is separated from the Gulf of Mexico by a spit of land and a pile of sand dunes. It covers nearly 268 square miles of mostly shallow flats with an average depth of 1-2 ½ feet. This area has limited fishing pressure and is loaded with redfish, sheepshead, and speckled trout. It is one of the country’s largest estuary systems, and one of the most remote, undeveloped, wild coastlines left in the US. In November, temperatures range in the low 80’s with winds between 10-30 mph. In some ways, this area resembles a scene out of the movie “Waterworld” (sans Kevin Costner) with the flats reaching well into the horizon.



In order to get around in this area, fishermen use skiffs, or flat bottom tunnel-hull boats that can navigate in only a few inches of water. After motoring to a destination, the guide will mount a four-foot high podium and, with a large pole, sneak silently around the flats, reminiscent of a gondolier in Venice (without the singing). Once a fish is sighted, anglers take turns casting from the front basket, a two-foot high stand encircled by a wire basket, which aids in balance and visibility. Anglers need only a 7 or 8 wt. rod (preferably salt-

water, but not essential) and a saltwater or redfish line with lots of backing. Floating lines for trout tend to get gummy in saltwater.

There are several ways to spot a redfish, as they tend to travel in pods of 20-40 fish or patrol areas as singles or doubles in search of prey. Because the guide's perspective is from a 9-10 foot view, he can spot the pod, the red color, or the tails as far away as 150



feet. Our lead guide, Rick Hartman, also depended on laughing gulls, a smaller version of a seagull with black wings. Keen fish finders, these gulls travel in flocks, singles or pairs, hovering over their target or swooping endlessly in the same area in search of smaller feeding fish, which just happen to be in the same spot as the redfish. The most exciting time is when you see a whole flock of gulls following a pod of redfish. The gulls literally land on the backs of the redfish, which are so busy feeding that they don't even notice the gulls on their backs. That's when you

heave your line into the pack, hoping not to hook a gull by accident (...leaving you really "gullible"). Another way to find redfish is to look for nervous water or wakes (they look like little boat wakes) left by a tailing redfish. The broken water surface can be seen best on the glassy flats as you glide around in flatboats. You can also look for the actual tails (ala bonefishing) because, like bonefish, redfish feed with their rumps in the air. Also like bonefishing, redfishing involves a lot of gliding and hunting on seemingly endless flats, frequented by moments of intense and sometimes frenzied casting.

What impressed me the most about this trip was the delicate balance of this ecosystem, and how every element can affect every other element. For example, there are a number of factors that can wreck a day of redfishing, starting with the weather. Since visibility is the key to stalking redfish, a day of full sun is optimal. Cloud cover can cast a sheen on the water, which makes for poor visibility. An absence of wind and a glass-like surface is also optimal, because when waves break on such shallow flats, silt on the bottom rises to the top, creating murky water. Rising water levels also create visibility problems because the redfish burrow in the deeper water, out of visible range. When intense wind and visibility are to your detriment, you can resort to breaking out the spinning rods.

Contrary to popular belief, we found that an expert ability to double haul over 45 feet is not necessary. An absence of wind is almost impossibility, given the nature of these open flats; however, a good guide can maneuver the skiff so that you can cast with the wind at your back, thus enhancing your distance. As a matter of fact, Rick said a wind of 10-15 mph is ideal. Seldom did we encounter a need to cast more than 35 feet. The phrase most cherished on this trip was "redfish, 20 feet at 10 o'clock." You begin false casting a time or two as the guide constantly readjusts your target..."3 feet to the right... 2 feet further... now 9 o'clock." "Drop it." "Wait.... Wait... now strip.... strip faster.....You got him!" Ah, the tug. Then away with your line, running, running half way to the next island! Whoa! You find yourself thinking, "There he goes into the backing. Wow! I didn't know I had that much backing! Will it break? How can I hold onto this fish? Will

he ever come in?" Twenty minutes later, you are holding a beautiful 24-28 inch pinkish-scaled redfish with black dots on its tail.

Because redfish feed early in the morning, the optimal time to fish is at dawn. This necessitates being on the flats at sunrise, which turned out to be a good thing. The first morning was a bit rough, but after that, I looked forward to watching the sun peek out from its cumulus cloud covers, with the skiffs and their "gondoliers" forming a romantic silhouette against the red sky. Sometimes sunrise was met by alternating pink and white wings of Roseate Spoonbills fluttering against the newly awakened sky, soon followed by a flock of very large pelicans lining up for takeoff like jets on an aircraft carrier. The Spoonbill has now become my favorite bird, mostly because of its picturesque flight patterns. I will also remember how, at one point, we glided into an area that had alternating areas of fog and cloud reflections. You could not tell where the sky ended and



the water began. In this vague horizon, two pelicans took flight, their intertwining wings performing a delicate ballet in this fog shrouded interface.

These memorable visual impressions are what feed my love affair with fly fishing.

### TRIP REPORT: SOUTH TEXAS REDFISH



Tailing redfish provide an exciting fly rod target. I've heard this many times, but experiencing it did indeed prove to be challenging and fun.

Redfish occur in many places throughout our South Atlantic and Gulf coastlines. Some areas in Florida and Louisiana provide lots of redfish action. I was attracted to the southern Gulf coast of Texas, near the Mexican border, for these reasons:

- The promise of 200+ plus square miles of mostly

shallow flats with limited fishing pressure.

- Frequent shots at tailing fish on those shallow flats.
- A new lodge that offered a unique headquarters for a few anglers, but especially for gatherings of four or six fly fishing friends who could reserve the lodge exclusively for their group.
- A destination that could provide an interesting fly fishing opportunity in either late October/early November or the spring – times of the year which traditionally can be hard to find a place to satisfy the passion in the USA.



My trip took place in early November on the Lower Laguna Madre, one of the countries largest estuary systems, which extends into northern Mexico. We had marvelous weather for three days with temps in the low 80's with light or no wind. From a fishing perspective, there were two days of great productivity with sighted fish and two that the fish were more difficult to find, but still available.

The lodging arrangements were indeed unique - a large lodge with two independent floors, each floor with four bedrooms and its own large kitchen plus a well appointed living area with big screen TV. It is located on the water and at night, attracted by large flood lights, baitfish and shrimp swim close to the dock in the back yard, attracting larger predators. Fun action with an after dinner drink and fly rod! Comes with a cook to prepare the meals.....or you can have groceries supplied and cook yourself. Packages are tailored individually and the pricing is not outlandish.

As far as the fishing went, in addition to the tailing fish, we had some heart-pounding opportunities with 5 to 7 pound fish in very shallow water, literally right on the bank.....in a few cases, their backs were out of the water as they pursued their prey. Good stuff.

