

SCHOOL'S IN!

Article by Captain Lace Allenius. Photos by Capt. Jeff Hagaman & Sam Root

After loading up the car at sunrise and grabbing a quick breakfast, I excitedly sped off towards O'Neil's Marina. While I was taking in the budding dawn, I was headed for a redfish adventure that would be beyond compare. Fishing with Capt. Jeff Hagaman is a well-known pleasure and I have become accustomed to being put on the best fish around when I venture out on his boat. After arriving at O'Neil's, we loaded up the Grizzly cooler, our Tsunami lures and the live bait necessary for a great day of inshore fishing.

The redfish hatchery in Tampa Bay, Florida can produce up to one million reds per year, consequently, the redfish population is booming around Saint Petersburg during the month of March. With that being said, there are different times during the year when redfish travel through Tampa Bay waters. Usually, during the winter months, they travel from upper Tampa Bay down to lower Tampa Bay. In March, they are making this transition.



It's not uncommon, these days, to find redfish schools anywhere between one hundred and five



hundred fish. Most of these fish are over the slot size. This is because the big schools are getting together in order to breed. For both male and female redfish, a 27" fish is three years old and sexually mature. This time of year proves to be a wonderful opportunity for fishermen to catch plenty of reds. With the right knowledge and equipment, March redfishing is almost always a successful experience.

O'Neil's Marina is one of Capt. Jeff's favorite marinas to begin his adventures from. Nearby, in the lower part of Tampa Bay, the redfish bite is sizzling hot during March. Located at 6701 Sunshine Skyway Lane South, O'Neil's is one of the best-known marinas in the Saint Petersburg, Florida area. They have been in business for more than fifty years and O'Neil's is a full service marina offering

a bait and tackle store, fuel, boat ramp, dry and wet storage as well as powered lifts. It's a one-stop shop for all things fishing in the Skyway Bridge vicinity.

When choosing your tackle for these redfish, it's sensible to use a 7.5-foot medium rod and Tsunami artificial baits. Use a 3/0 circle hook with 10lb braid and 25lb fluorocarbon leader. It is also a good idea be prepared with live sardines and cut sardines or pinfish. These baits are all great for catching reds and it's a must to have the proper bait options when you hit a big school of fish!

When it comes to table fare, redfish are very tasty when blackened, fried or grilled on the "half shell". When you prepare a fish on the half shell, it means that you filet the fish with the skin left on and put the skin side down on

the grill. Don't flip it while it cooks and this produces a delicious result. I usually like to keep it simple when using this technique. Just rub the filet with olive oil, add salt and pepper, squeeze fresh lemon on top and you're good to go!

Redfish are schooling fish and they either eat by being aggressive and darting out in front of other fish to grab their prey, or they merely feed off of the bottom. Once you find the school, it's good to bounce the bait off the bottom. This increases your chances of staying in the strike zone. When redfish "tail" while feeding, it means they are sticking their nose down and their tail goes up and can sometimes be visible to anglers with a trained eye. Attracted by their keen sense of smell, cut bait works nicely when on the prowl for reds. As a general rule, the fresher the bait, the better.

When you fish for redfish on topwater baits, such as a sardine swimming on top or a topwater plug, they often miss a few times, if the angler is moving the bait too fast. If this happens, slow your retrieve down and you will likely get more bites. This is because the mouth of a redfish is on the bottom of its head and it takes a bit more effort for them to eat bait on top of the water. To put this in perspective, reds' mouths are structured differently than snook, whose mouths are near the top of their heads, making it easier to feed on the surface. This is also different from trout, whose mouths are directly centered on their heads, thus they prefer food that is straight in front of them. Because of their anatomy, reds are primarily bottom-feeders and it's important to use the right technique when fishing for them on topwater.



While fishing for redfish, there isn't usually a large bycatch, but occasionally you can pull in a few good trout. Redfish like mullet, so fishing around large



schools of mullet is always a good idea. This is because reds utilize mullet for two purposes. They not only eat mullet, they also use them for protection from dolphins (porpoises). Reds linger around large schools of mullet, because the mullet will alert them of when the enemy is near. The more eyes out there the better, for protection and knowing when to swim away.

When looking for redfish, there are certain areas in the water where you want to look. Good underwater terrain includes oyster bars, shoal bars and grass flats with differences in them such as potholes, propeller cuts, deeper depths in the grass etc. All of these areas are great for holding schools of redfish and if you find a school that likes to sit in certain areas, it's not uncommon that they will return the following year. This is all dependent on certain factors, however. As long as the tides, water temperature and time of the year are the same, they'll likely be back there again.

At the end of the day, when the tide bottomed out, we decided to go snook fishing. We were successful and after a couple great snook and a few trout, we tied it together for an inshore slam. As the sun grew heavier in the sky, the satisfaction of a great day of fishing filled my heart. Nothing beats an exciting day on the water and we had definitely found what we were looking for. If you are visiting O'Neil's Marina, ask for Capt. Jeff Hagaman and get ready, because the redfish bite is on fire this time of year! ▣

To Contact Capt. Jeff Hagaman, please call 727-639-2492 and visit reel-adventures.com.