

Part 1

Chasing Tailers at High Tide

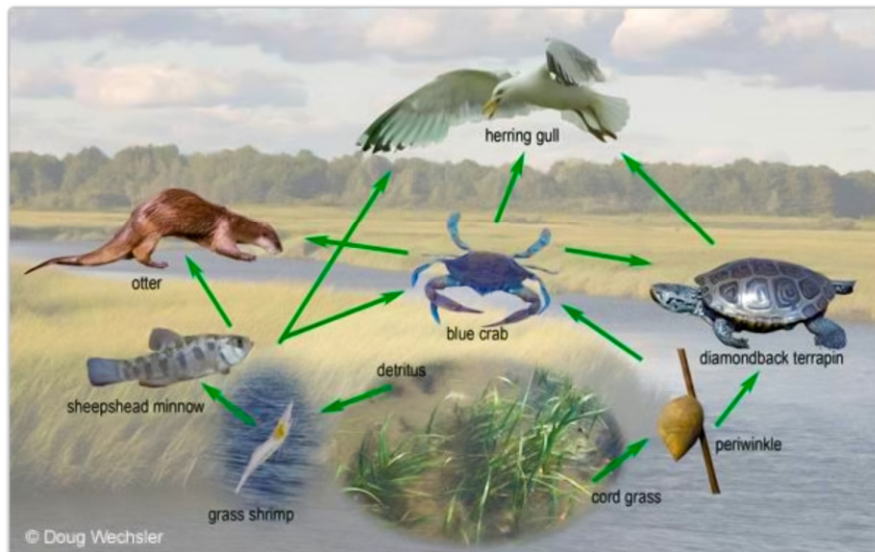
WADING FOR REDS IN A TIDAL SALT MARSH

by Peter Lami | February 18, 2022

I chase Tarpon in the Florida Keys and trout all across Greater Yellowstone in Montana and Wyoming but nothing compares to the South Carolina Lowcountry. There are hundreds and hundreds of hammock islands that are a magical place to explore by boat, but a few of us lace-up our wading boots and step into the High Marsh Zone of these sea islands with our fly rods.

Salt marshes occur along much of the Southeastern coast where the twice-daily tides alternately flood and drain vast low-lying areas just inland from the ocean. South Carolina has about a half-million acres of salt marsh, more marsh than any other Atlantic coast state.

The twice-daily ebb and flow of the tides greatly influence life in the salt marsh. Variation in flooding and elevation divides the marsh into two zones, high marsh and low marsh. The low marsh floods daily while high marsh is flooded only during twice-monthly "spring" tides and during storms.¹



¹Dynamics of the Salt Marsh — <https://www.dnr.sc.gov/marine/pub/seascience/dynamic.html>

I would be amiss if I didn't tell you about the birds and bees turtles before we start talking about 'Chasing Tailers' at high tide.

Oystercatchers are my favorite bird. They really do eat oysters. How do they perform such magic? From Wikipedia, "They use their bills to catch shellfish. As they walk across a shellfish bed, they look for a mollusk with a partially opened shell. When they find one, they jab their bill into the shell and sever the muscle that causes the shell to clamp shut. This can be dangerous, however, as they are sometimes drowned when they don't completely sever this muscle and the shell clamps down on their bill. A strong, tightly rooted mollusk can hold the bird in place until the tide comes in. They also feed by carrying loose shellfish out of the water and hammering at the shell or by probing the sand for soft-shell or razor clams." If you ask me, these birds are way too smart to drown!



Photo by Peter Lami

The current American population is ~43,000 birds. Our resident Oystercatchers live here year round and are monogamous. They often nest on shell beaches due in part to habitat loss. The Broad River shoreline has a shell beach and sure enough, I discovered this Oystercatcher nest with one egg.

Two other birds, the Clapper Rail and Marsh Wren, only nest in South Carolina's salt marshes. That's a whole other story.

diamondback Terrapins. One of the few permanent reptiles of the salt marsh-tidal creek ecosystem is the diamondback terrapin which moves into the grass during high tide to feed on periwinkle snails and will move to high ground to lay its eggs above the high tide mark. This small turtle comes in a variety of colors, from spotted and light green to dark brown and black. I haven't seen one yet, still looking.

In **Part One** of this series of articles about wading and fishing for Redfish, I try to answer the most common questions and, hopefully, put your worst fears to rest.

How do you go out there and not get stuck in the mud?

Safety starts with a basic understanding of all the Zones in a salt marsh. I'll go into much more detail later in the article but here's the quick answer. Only wade in the **High Marsh Zone** (short grass, good footing). Never wander into the Low Marsh Zone (high grass, pluff mud).



Blue	=	Tidal Creek
Green	=	Low Marsh
Orange	=	High Marsh
Red	=	Upland Boarder

The only grass seen in the photo below is **Black Needlerush** which is a reliable indicator the bottom is hard and safe to wade across.



Can you drown?

A real tragedy would be if you stepped into a deep **Tidal Creek**. These very small creeks may be 12-, to 15-feet deep at a 7½ foot high tide and can really fool you because you think you can get across. *No you can't.* The tall *spartina alterniflora* marsh grass, sometimes called cordgrass, always grows at the creek's edge, so

learn to recognize all the different salt marsh grasses and you will be safe.



Photo by Peter Lami

Do the alligators bother you?

American Alligators are rarely, if ever, found on small hammock islands because of the rarity of year-round, freshwater bodies large enough to sustain adequate prey for these reptiles to survive.

You are much more likely to see a turtle than an alligator.

What about poisonous snakes?

Snake habitat only exists in the interior of sea island hammocks. They are not to be found in the **Upland Borders** of the hammock or **High Marsh Zones** where we flyfish.

Can you get lost?

Yes, if you lose situational awareness, especially when a rising tide floods over your breadcrumb trail back to the parking lot. In other words, it sure doesn't look the same walking back out to your truck as it did wading in. Don't panic. The water is very shallow, above your ankles but below your knees. Learn to distinguish between the **High Marsh Zone** and **Low Marsh Zone** to stay safe.

Here is what I have learned from reading "*Guide to the Salt Marshes and Tidal Creeks of the Southeastern United States*" by Denise Sanger and Catharine Parker with South Carolina DNR published in 2016.

"When you first approach the salt marsh by land, you will find yourself in the marsh Upland border. This is the zone between the high marsh and the uplands. The elevation in this transition zone is above the highest tides. Plants occurring here are tolerant of salt spray and occasional storm surges. They are also adapted to living in coarse sandy soils that do not retain freshwater. Plants living in the marsh upland border generally have thick, waxy leaves able to store freshwater during periods of low rainfall. Sea ox-eye daisy and marsh elder are characteristic plants of the upland border.

As you look out at the marsh from the Upland border, you will see the marsh platform. The marsh platform is the primary surface of the salt marsh and refers to the flat, broad area extending landward from the water. The platform accumulates sediment brought in with the tide and provides a stable surface for vegetation growth. Tidal creeks and rivulets (very small tidal creek like structures) dissect the platform creating the Low Marsh and the High Marsh zones.

Hammock islands are marsh platforms that supports glasswort and black needlerush in higher elevations to Spartina in lower elevations. Many terrestrial organisms, such as raccoons and great blue herons, and aquatic organisms, such as blue crabs, red drum (aka Redfish), and spot, feed throughout the marsh platform."

OK, I apologize. We just waded into the deep waters of science and so I will stop here. I'm clearly in over my head.

Lastly, and this is important, **Join the Sea Island Fly Fishers Club** to make new friends who will share their experience and show you a “secret spot” to go wade for Redfish. Thereafter, I predict you will be ready to strike out to find a few “secret spots” of your own. Good luck!



SUMMARY

The salt marsh-tidal creek ecosystem is a place of wonder; however, exploring them has risks.

A dangerous feeder creek, aka cut or rivulet, that appears easy to cross, but is too deep at high tide. Notice the hammock island in the background of photo.

Rule #1 No matter what, no matter the reason DO NOT GO into the tall dense spartina grass. Take caution any time you enter a salt marsh or tidal creek and always have a partner with you.

Tidal creeks and Low salt marshes are composed of “pluff mud.” When you step on this mud you risk sinking up to your waist and getting stuck. If you get stuck the best way to escape is to lie on the mud surface and crawl your way to safety.

Rule #2 Regardless of how you are exploring the salt marsh, it is important to know your local tides. You want to know what time high-, and low tide occur to prevent being stranded or battling the tide to return to your starting point.

If you ask me, just like those Oystercatchers, you are way too smart to drown if you follow the rules!