

Part 5

Chasing Tailers at High Tide

John Holbrook Interview

Peter: This is my friend John Holbrook. He finished **2nd Place** in **The Savannah Fly Invitation Redfish Tournament in 2021**
— Ride The Flood Tide —

Peter: Congratulations John! Just to be invited to the Savannah Tournament is a big deal.



Peter: How did you and Mark Nutting out-fish all those guides from Beaufort and Savannah who are on the water every day?



John: We caught the most Redfish, the biggest Redfish at 33 ¼” inches, and the Redfish with the most spots, missing 1st Place by a mere ½”-inch.

Mark [Nutting] did all of the hard work finding the fish and poling the skiff. All I had to do was to feed the fish. Ninety (90%) percent of our fish were caught on the high tide.

Peter: What are the visual queues that you key in on to spot Redfish at high tide?

John: A fish aggressively tailing is easy to spot, but that doesn’t happen all that often. If your are only looking for a tail wagging in the air, you’re going to miss most of the action on that flat. You need to recognize how Redfish move in the water and the telltale signs that signal their location and direction they are swimming if you want consistent success.

This is what I’m looking for — ¼”inch to ½ inch of the dorsal fin or tail — very, very small. It’s not that hard especially if the Redfish’s tail catches the sunlight’s reflection. Also, as a Redfish pushes through the Spartina grass you’ll see the stalks of grass move in the air and part in a way that you can identify.

Peter: You’ve told time and time again you can spot Redfish as far away as 300 yards. How do you do that?

John: I have found tailing Redfish over 300 yards away by seeing the flash of the sunlight on the tail. Now I could not see the actual tail, but that tail moves with a certain period and frequency and I can normally ID it as a Redfish. Having said that keep in mind that a Blue Crab up on a stalk of grass will sometimes wave his claw with the same period and frequency, and has fooled me on more than one occasion. I just assume it’s a Redfish every time.

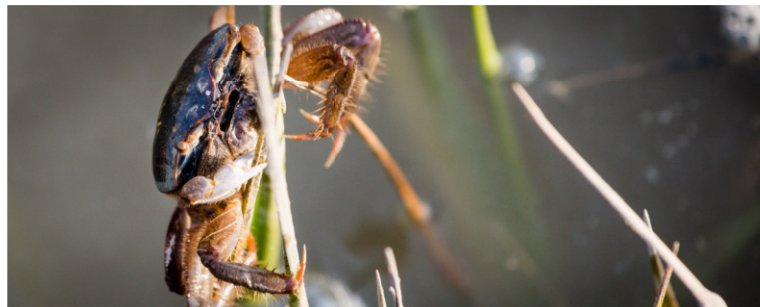


Photo by Peter Lami

Peter: It’s hard to describe all the ways Redfish swim across the High Marsh. Can you give it a shot and tell us what you are looking for?

John: It doesn't take much water for the fish to move onto the flat. You have to pay attention and observe intermittent movements. It can be a push, fleeing bait, or even nervous water.

I keep an eye behind me too. I have on numerous occasions spotted and caught fish while watching another fisherman and catching movement out of the corner of my eye!

Peter: What are some of the special tactics and techniques you use on a high tide flat?

John: I always start two 2 hours before high tide. Some of my favorite flats are 1-½ miles long from the car so it takes me some time to get into position. This is more of a hunting tactic than merely fishing. I try to ambush the fish at the point where the feeder creek crest over the top of its bank. Now's the time I am on point — watching, watching, watching. I have seen schools of Redfish with their backs out of the water queued up to get onto the flat to feed.

Peter: So, you're just beginning? What's next?

John: That's right. I can break it down for you. First, you have the '**Staging**' phase, kinda like being in a deer stand as I just said. Next is the '**Cruising**' phase. Fish spread out all across the flat. I'm retreating from my original starting position as the water gets deeper, about up to my knees. Now comes the best part — the '**Tailing**' phase. This is prime time when I'm searching for — this is some really funny stuff — **Classic Tailers, Crawlers, Flutters, Tippers, Floaters, Diggers and Snakes.**

Did I forget any of them?

Peter: Did you have that written on your hand? <laughs> You nailed it.

John: The '**Departing**' stage is the final act. All four stages — Staging, Cruising, Tailing and Departing — call for different tactics because you see so many different Redfish behaviors from one stage to the next.

Peter: I'd like to bring you back to the beginning — the 'Staging' part when the water coming onto the flat has not quite reached a depth sufficient for the Redfish to leave the feeder creek.

John: You can definitely hook-up a Redfish at this stage if you have done some recon and know where the fish will be traveling from. To do it, tie on a heavier fly with a sturdy weed guard to get the fly down in the taller grass. It's important that your fly presentation be delicate and accurate. Otherwise,

you can aggravate the fish to the point that they do not enter the flat if you go after them too hard.

Peter: So don't close the door on 'em. Right?

John: Right. I rarely target Redfish anymore during this phase as it will generally put the fish down after you cast a few times or catch one. Then the rest of the school won't come onto the flat in that area. An exception to this is if I know I have a limited time window (getting dark) or I am fishing a tide that I know will not put enough water on the flat for them to enter it.

Peter: What kind of techniques do you use during the 'Cruising' stage?

John: This is anytime the fish are coming onto the flat while the tide is incoming, but are not currently actively tailing. The Redfish appear to be slowly meandering around. Sometimes they will sit relatively still — watch for some of the small signs we talked about before. The conditions will dictate your presentation.

Peter: Conditions? Such as ...

John: Sure. Conditions include: Cloud cover, wind, water clarity, temperature, time of day, and so on.

Having cloud cover and some wind can allow you to move quicker towards a fish. While on a clear, windless, sunny day you have to be stealthy so as to not spook the fish.

You have to take into account the prevailing conditions, speed and direction the fish is moving. This determines how far ahead of the fish you need to cast to keep from spooking the fish.

I always try to cast ahead of cruising fish and a little further past the intersection point. You can always strip a fly closer to get the fly into his area of awareness, but you cannot hope to catch a 'Cruiser' if you cast short.

If fish are really spooky you may even have to switch to a lighter fly.

Peter: I can definitely relate to what you're saying. Sounds a lot like my Tarpon on the oceanside in the Keys.

John: Cruising Redfish require the most finesse. Remember that you normally have to barely move the fly — windy, murky conditions may require bolder

movement, but in general you will be amazed how little you have to move the fly.

This is important. Do not move the fly toward the fish. A common unforced error.

Peter: Yup. You just f#*%%* up.

John: If a Cruising fish gets on top of your fly, DO NOT MOVE IT! You are better off waiting for the fish to pass and then making another cast.

Be patient and try and move your fly like the prey it is meant to imitate — fleeing away.

Peter: What techniques do you use to catch classic ‘Tailers’?

John: Tailing fish are typically the easiest to catch, they are happy and feeding. You just need to lead them according to the conditions — the better the visibility and more calm it is the farther you lead them. I also use a light colored fly on bright sunny days, and a dark colored fly when the visibility is poor due to low light or dingy water.

Peter: What about “Diggers”

John: Diggers are waiting for the crab or shrimp that it is after to dive to the bottom or bolt away as the case may be. Often, a cast right on top of the fish’s head works best. Movement of the fly can be more aggressive in this case.

I always lead a Digger on my first cast, not on top of the fish. I would put it right in his face on the next cast if he acts like he didn’t even see the fly.

Diggers will literally bury their head in the mud trying to dig out their prey. Their area of awareness is rather small when exhibiting this type of behavior. Consequently, more accurate casts are needed to drop the fly right on top of their head. Add to that, casting a heavy fly in the prevailing conditions calls for intermediate to expert fly casting skills.

Peter: How important are casting skills to be successful?

John: More than a few Redfish I spot on the flat are 200 yards away. There’s no time to waste because you got to get there before the fish disappears. I sometimes sprint across a flat to get closer, slowing down about 65 feet away. Now is the time I need to make a distance cast. You have to stay within yourself though. If you can only cast 45 feet, then be as stealthy as possible and move into range before false casting and taking your shot.

Often when fishing on a high tide flat you can move and position yourself within 30' of a fish, if they are happy.

Peter: Let's start to wrap this up. Tell me about the '*Departing*' stage.

John: This is the term I use to describe Reds that are slowly leaving the flat when the tide starts falling. Chances are good that these are the same fish that meandered past you that you might not have seen hours ago. They always return to the channel they came from, and here's the good news, often stopping to tail occasionally. Again, normally they move towards a deep Tidal Creek that holds water during low tide.

There are two primary ways to target these fish.

First. Move into an ambush position to intersect the fish on their way back to the tidal creek. Redfish pause, hesitate and otherwise move in unpredictable directions. This can make for a very difficult presentation cast because you may not have the right angle. I have pursued a fish for 400 yards without catching up enough to get into casting position.

Second. Redfish instinctively know when it's time to leave the flat and they really hustle off. Watch for them to 'push' water on the way out.

I have never, ever seen Redfish stranded at low tide. They move quick during the '*Departing*' stage. This brings up another point about casting skills. Learn how to make a so-called '*Saltwater Quick Cast*'. It will pay big dividends.

Often Redfish will be high in the water column during this phase, so switching to a lighter fly can be crucial in keeping your fly in the reds cone of visibility.

Peter: Every great fly fisherman I know keeps field notes in a fishing log. Others, usually guys with 10 years experience or more, just have great memories. Do you keep a log?

John: Yeah. I sure do. I keep track of conditions — date, time, tide height, weather conditions, water temperature and clarity, stuff like that.

In addition, I keep notes on what flies worked, what the fish were doing, how many I spotted / hooked.

Redfish behavior and patterns start to come into focus for me from this type of data. I really don't know how any fly fisherman can truly become consistent without keeping track somehow.

Peter: Any last thoughts you would like to share?

John: I will leave you with one more thing to think about. There are happy fish, nervous fish and then there's spooked fish. Once a Redfish is spooked it's over. Right? Or is it?

Peter: I think I know where you are going with this. Redfish seem to have many degrees of 'spook'. Chico Fernandez explains in his book [Fly-Fishing for Redfish](#). "A Red may spook, run 20 feet, and start feeding again, begging to be fished. Or, it may spook and go 100 feet and stop and start feeding, as if it had forgotten the incident that spooked it a few seconds ago. The Red may spook, leaving the flat, but at a slow or medium speed. And finally, yes, it may spook and leave at high speed."

John: Yeah. That's true. It's very strange behavior, but I've seen it time and time again. The fact is, I've caught many Redfish on a high tide flat that I thought was spooked.

Peter: What lessons can we learn from this?

John: Fish hard! *<laughs>*