
REDFISH BLUETAIL TOURNAMENT

Sponsored by Sea Island Fly Fishers



I decided to enter the 3rd annual Sea Island Fly Fishers (SIFF) Redfish Blue Tail Tournament scheduled for October 2019. I spoke with my good friend, Tom Walker, a longtime resident of the Lowcountry and a recent convert of mine to fly fishing for Redfish. We agreed to enter as a two-man team, chose our date to fish, and notified John Holbrook, the Tournament Director. Tom and I fish together frequently and enjoy each other's company, so it presented itself as to be a fun day. As the date drew near, we had plans to pre-fish a couple of areas to locate any fish holding in those areas. Unfortunately for us work and other commitments prevented



us from carrying out our plan. Tom and I opted for a contingency plan of wading the marsh instead of running and gunning in my **Ranger Ghost 169** technical flats skiff. I always use my favorite apps to plan a wading trip—**Tides Near Me**, **Phases of the Moon**, and **Ventusky** for accurate local wind forecasts. This time was no different. We knew a few secret spots and with some degree of confidence, hoped to find fish on the day of the tournament. We chose two areas that were about 1- ½ hours apart in the crest of the tide. The strategy was simple. If the first area failed to produce, we could fall back to the second area and ply our skills there.

Tides Near Me app gives me access to some eighteen (18) tide stations in the waters that I regularly fish. I simply choose the station closest to the area I intend to fish, and it tells me the tides, the sunrise and sunset, the moon rise all for up to one week from the current date. Further, the height of the tide related to mean tide is also in the data set. **The perfect tide, in my opinion, is a 6.0' tide +/- .5'.** Experience has taught me that tides over 6.5' feet result in too much water on the flat. The

fish have too great an area to swim and forage for food thus making them exceedingly difficult to pattern. Too low of a tide and there is simply not enough water for the fish to get up onto the flat. In other words, I am looking for water level that is between shin and knee deep. The one drawback to Tides Near Me is the app projects for only 1 week. If you need something for a month or a year, I recommend tides.net website.

“The perfect high tide to wade is +6.0 ft, ± ½ foot.

DAVID BANKSTON

Tom and I met at my house the morning of our day to compete. After some conversation while checking over our gear we loaded up and traveled to our first area. Tactics were important. Previous experience had taught us that we needed to arrive at the flat no later than 2 hours prior to high tide. That allows us time to walk leisurely out on a relatively dry flat, pre-position ourselves, and await the flood tide and hopefully happy fish start tailing.



Redfish Ritalin Flies

239flies.com

Once we were on the flat and assessed the water clarity, I decided to tie on a fly pattern known as the Redfish Ritalin in a predominately copper color. I copied this pattern from watching an instructional video posted by a fly shop called 239flies.com . I have tweaked it slightly to better match our local water conditions, but it is overall the basic pattern taught in the video by Nick Davis. Tom opted for a variation of the pattern that is known as a Marsh Critter. It has a little less flash and a little more fluffy materials. Both patterns are designed to imitate a crab or shrimp, possibly a minnow in certain color schemes, and both have proven successful. So much so that an Inshore Grand Slam— Redfish, Spotted Sea Trout & Southern Flounder—all caught in a single day with this fly is a very real possibility.

Now I am a tinker by nature, I love to fiddle with things and see if I can build a better mouse trap. I derive great pleasure in building my own fly rods and tying my own flies. I attempt to justify it by deluding myself that it saves money to “roll my own flies” and build my own rods because “built beats bought”. Truth be told, it probably costs just as much as a retail purchase, but I experience such a euphoric sensation when doing battle with a fish that was enticed to eat my artificial fly with my custom fly rod that I built.

Tom and I drew lots for whom would get first shot at the best flat and with a cheery good luck wish we parted company for our designated fly fishing beats. The morning proved to be one of those chamber of commerce days, an almost magical blue bird sky day with a gentle breeze, easy to cast, and just enough to keep the No-See-Ums at bay. As I waited for the tide to flood over the marsh, I marveled at all the shorebirds, crabs, minnows and bait fish, snails, and more. The eco tour alone is worth the all the planning and effort it took to get out on this flat. It is safe to wade across the short marsh grasses because the ground under foot is firm, unlike Pluff Mud into which you sink to your hip. That’s a bad day. No. An unbelievably bad day.

I love being alone on the flat, taking it all in while slowly my troubles and cares fade away. I continually scan the area, never concentrating too long on any one thing. I have found that I usually catch the tell-tale sign of a fish out of my peripheral vision. Once it catches my eye then I can focus in on what it is and identify the pattern. Periodically I watched Tom as he cast, curious if he was targeting a specific fish or simply exploring likely clumps of grass that might hold a fish.

As the tide flowed in and the tepid water rose over my ankles, I imagined Redfish digging, tipping, swimming like a snake, a few floating and the classic tailing feeding behavior for which Redfish are famous. Mullet began to scoot in-, and out of the grass and across the small ponds of water. As I idly watched it all suddenly before me there was a flash of copper in the sunlight to my right. Where was it? I looked away. There! I saw it again, this time a Redfish really was in front of me, just beyond my accuracy/distance casting skills. I began a clearing cast so my fly line loops wouldn’t tangle on my presentation cast. I silently shuffled my feet as I eased my way ever so slowly closer to the tailing fish. Just as I prepared to present the fly to my ‘Tailer’ (yup! the tournament winner) slipped beneath the water and disappeared. Redfish do that. I don’t know why they disappear so fast but damn they’re gone. When they do this, it reminds of a submarine cruising at periscope depth diving silently back down into the depths to escape an enemy ship. I

wouldn't tangle on my presentation cast. I silently shuffled my feet as I eased my way ever so slowly closer to the tailing fish. Just as I prepared to present the fly to my 'Tailer' (yup! the tournament winner) slipped beneath the water and disappeared. Redfish do that. I don't know why they disappear so fast but damn they're gone. When they do this, it reminds of a submarine cruising at periscope depth diving silently back down into the depths to escape an enemy ship. I watch for a few minutes longer but to no avail, the fish has evaded its hunter.



**Salt Water Casting Skills Certificate
Awarded to David Bankston (Center)**

Peter Lami—FFF Master Certified Casting Instructor | Chuck Ingle — SIFF President

Soon, a second fish reveals its presence tickling the Black Needlerush grass and then fish shoulders pushing the water. A shot at redemption. Again, it is just beyond my comfort zone. Wading for Redfish isn't a numbers game. You are after one fish well-caught. I am hesitant to close the distance on a fish, preferring to wait for the fish to come to me or cut it off from a path to egress. No surprise. The fish knows something is amiss, it can feel my presence in the water. It amazes me how far the ripple rings from my wading radiate across the water's surface even on a calm flat when I simply shift my weight from one foot to the other. The fish feels this vibration in the water, an unnatural pressure change. While it may not be certain what the disturbance is, its life depends on situational awareness. The fish knows danger. I always practice my distance and accuracy because if you cannot land a fly within a 3-foot circle of a target at a distance of 65 feet, you're not playing the game at a high level of skill. It is worth repeating, you need to get comfortable with an accurate 65 foot cast. Meanwhile, this fish disappears as well, leaving me to contemplate my navel.

As I stand there gazing absent minded into the water, I suddenly realize I am looking at a big fish just 20 feet from me, floating, and facing away from me. Floaters are usually found in deeper water. This fish is sitting up high so I can see him and he's just kinda well floating. These are really tough because they're not super happy fish so you gotta lead 'em. I was careful to cloak my shadow and then ...

A dozen thoughts race through my brain in a nanosecond, the most prevalent being, 'don't blow this'. In spite of all my fly casting practice and all of Peter Lami's lessons, I simply flipped my fly as though I had a cane pole in my hand to a spot about two feet ... was it his head or tail. I really couldn't tell at this point. Damn! As my fly fluttered down in the water column the fish swirls and crushes the fly. The water blew up like a washing machine. The line came tight, I clamped down on the line in my off-hand, and with a strip strike set the Daiichi 2546 hook, Size #2 in its jaw and battle is on. The fish streaks toward open water. I feel the crook of my index finger burn as the line pays out while I struggle to get the fish onto the reel. I want to let go of the line but if I do the fish will surely be gone. It is about at this moment I remember I have a GoPro camera on my head. I reach up and start the camera and press the 'Record' button. Back and forth the fish swam with impressive speed and endurance. Left, right, away from me, towards me, all the while I fought to position my rod to keep constant pressure on the fish. Never let the fish rest I reminded myself, line is either going out or coming in. Just as I thought it was about to land the fish it panicked. Repeat. The fish made a strong run towards open water, weaving through the grass that put added pressure on my leader and tippet, taking me well into the backing before giving up the fight—turning on its side, exhausted, and ready to allow me a photo opportunity.

I wet my hands, removed the fly from the corner of its mouth, measure the fish, snapped a photo of the tail spots for the tournament, then I begin to revive the fish. I always take special care and go to great lengths to ensure the fish will live to see another day. It's the quiet time that I get to thank this noble fish for its heroic fight. The Fish slipped from my fingers and glided back to the grass, disappearing into the deeper water again like so many others I have come to admire. I smile.



David Bankston