

The Reds Are on a Roll

Braving bad weather on an empty stomach for a shot at just one fish.

I'M PICKING UP MY DINNER PLATE, when the phone rings. It's Dave Beall, the best fly rodder in these parts. With unassuming grace, he's been wandering the flats of Charlotte Harbor for over 30 years. These are his stomping grounds, his home waters; the place he knows like the back of his hand.

"Just looked at the radar. There is some ominous crap hanging just offshore, but I think we have a two-hour window. Meet me at the ramp at six p.m.," Dave instructs.

"I'm on my way," I reply

Pushing the plate aside, I rise toward the door. Knowing Dave might call, I've already packed my gear in the car. Minutes later, I reach the ramp. Dave is backing the boat down with his 1997 Ford F-150, a workhorse of over 300,000 miles. Aboard the trailer rides his chariot of choice—a 16-foot tunnel-hulled,

olive drab, aluminum johnboat. Ridden hard and put away wet for decades, it's a homely beast, bearing a patina that would make a "rat rod" aficionado drool. Things with history suit Dave.

As the boat slips off the trailer, I notice there is no line attached. I shout to Dave while running down the dock, hoping to intersect the craft, which is floating off freely. Dave arrives alongside me and calmly picks up my 8-weight. With a smooth cast, he drops the fly inside the boat, steers the fly to a pile of stuff in the back, and then strip-strikes. The rod bends; Dave reels in our ride.

"First time that ever happened," Dave grins.

"Love your solution, man," I answer.

Most folks might panic. Not Dave. He handled it with his usual unflustered aplomb—converting an awkward event into child's play. Had he done the whole

thing accidentally on purpose? Frankly, I can't tell, and it doesn't really matter. Either way, I'm impressed with Dave.

We leave the marina under a difficult sky. Hanging low like chunks of black wool ripped asunder, menacing clouds threaten, courtesy of a tropical depression in the Florida Straits, barreling our way. It already rained hard today. White sheets of water whipped by the wind. In fact, the mess ended only a little over an hour ago. This deal looks dicey.

Dave yells over the engine. "There was a school of reds out here last night. Caught three. But, it was flat calm. Got wind tonight. That's going to make them damn hard to spot."

"Hey, let's give it a shot. Hope the rain holds off," I reply.

"Yeah, it's worth a shot," Dave adds with a nod.

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ROSES ARE RED, BY PAUL PUCKETT

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This summer, the red fishing was unusually meager. It had veteran guides scratching their noggins. Few reds came up on the flats, and the ones you found were as cautious as a cat burglar. Even a carefully presented fly sent them heading for the hills. It's been downright frustrating. For weeks, I poled my standup board down the flats, itching to hook them up. And tide after tide, I've paddled home singing the blues.

Now, the world is changing. High overhead, hidden in the storm clouds, a big moon builds, signaling the approach of fall. Redfish sense it right into their bones. Coming out of the woodwork, they're beginning to bunch together, feeling the urge to spawn. Gone is their infernal pickiness, replaced with wild reckless abandon. It's a transformation so sudden, so surprising, it smacks of a Dr. Caligari brain swap. Finally, the reds are fired up, crazy for a bellyful.

"They'll be schooling up until the first big cold front of October," Dave informs me.

"Gotta love it. No more jacking around," I reply.

The schools are few and far between, however. So finding them is the key to success. In the month ahead, the water will clear, making the job far easier. A big pod of reds color the water a copper red, but right now the water is still tannic, dark with the summer rains. To spot a school, you have to spy their bow wake. Not always easy to do.

The screaming motor sends us northward, several miles with zero luck. Dave shrugs his shoulders and spins the johnboat on its heels. Southward we run with urgency, flying into the failing light. Schools of mullet scatter before us. While dark mangroves zip by to our east, the storm looms to our west. Time grows increasingly short. Just when it looks like we'll come up snake eyes, Dave backs off the throttle.

"There they are! See them ahead, a hundred yards to our left?" Dave states with glee. "Keep an eye on them. Get ready."

It's not at all surprising that Dave saw them first. Once upon a time back in my youth, I had 20/10 vision and could fish a size 24 Trico on a long leader or spot a striper swirl in the inkiest night. Dave has all

that and more, and his ability to see fish on the flats borders on the supernatural. Other anglers in the area talk about it in awe.

Many times, I've stood next to him on the flats while he pointed out fish I couldn't see for the life of me. It's unnerving.

Slowly we close the gap. The motor dies. Dave picks up the pushpole. With a wide, flat bottom, the johnboat is a pain to pole, and Dave struggles to stay up with the school. They're on the move.

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Move over, Duck
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the Redfish Rulers.*

Then bingo, our luck changes. The school slams on the brakes, and boils in a feeding frenzy. A dozen large tails pop up and wave hello.

"Oh my God, look at that! Must be seventy-five fish in that school. Drop the fly right in the middle of them," Dave tells me.

The wind kisses my cast, curving it off to the right. Yet the first strip produces an explosion. The rod bucks wildly. Three seconds later, he's off. I strip in and check the hook. There is a large scale impaled on the point.

"Damn, foul-hooked that one," I say, holding up the fly.

"You'll get another chance," Dave answers. "That fly is kind of small. Put on

something bigger. Something they can see—at least a 1/0."

With murky water and night on our doorstep, Dave's idea makes beaucoup sense. Flipping through my flies, I spy a white streamer of unknown lineage. It's a little rough and tumble, been beat on a few times, but it will do. Right now, the reds can chew the laces right off your shoes. Fixed to the end of my tippet, the fly dangles above the deck, ready for war, as Dave poles down the school.


"Hear 'em?" Dave exclaims. "Listen to 'em!"

A year ago, Dave told me he could actually hear reds on the flats. Really? What was he going to do next, sell me a bridge? Humoring him, I went along, assuming it was a joke. Weeks later, while sitting on my kayak having lunch, I heard it myself. Reds in shallow water grunt softly, not unlike pigs. Amazing. I couldn't believe my ears. After that, I joked with Dave we should make a redfish call. Move over, *Duck Dynasty*; here come the Redfish Rulers.

We close in on the reds. Dave ceases poling and the wind eases. The fly lands smack in the center of the feeding ruckus. *Wham!* One strip and a big red is on. Hell-for-leather, it launches off to the northwest, lofting my fly line over the flats. Redfish may not run as fast as bonefish, but they are incredibly strong. Under pressure, my 8-weight goes parabolic as the old Pate reel spills line. Stubborn, powerful, and persistent, reds bulldog you to the bitter end; and this is a decent fish. Circling back toward us, the red views the boat and takes off again. Three more times it visits us, and three more times no dice. Eventually, we end up eyeball to eyeball.

"Wow, that's a nice one!" Dave announces, lifting the red free from the water.

"Thanks, brother. That was very cool," I announce.

As the red returns, so does the rain. Droplets dot the flat, in countless expanding rings. After jumping to the transom, Dave pulls the rope and the motor barks to life. Smiling, we navigate home through the night. Yes, the reds are on a roll. 

Ed Mitchell's website is www.edmitchelloutdoors.com. His latest book is *Along the Water's Edge*.