



Guided fishing trips out of Grand Isle are almost always successful and often lead to big fish like this one. DIY anglers, however, have access to the same water, and with some careful planning, can also post big results.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZACH MATTHEWS

THE

trailer tires rolled back with an audible squelch, sinking past the axles into the rich black mud of the Louisiana marsh. "How's that look?" I called out the open window of my 4Runner, which was locked in four-wheel drive. "Great, babe," my wife, Tracy, replied from the narrow shoulder of the highway, where she stood casually assembling an 8-weight fly rod. I set the emergency brake, rechecked to make sure my rig was still on dry ground, and began loading the boat.

We launched our skiff-rigged Gheenoe directly off the narrow edge of one of the most unique highways in North America. Louisiana Highway 1 cuts like an arrow in a diagonal path across the state, from Shreveport in the far northwest all the way to the coastline about two hours south of New Orleans. There, it makes a 90-degree dogleg to the east, with its last stretch connecting the coastal communities of Port Fourchon and Grand Isle. Port Fourchon is a Halliburton town, full of roughnecks waiting to board helicopter ferries out to the offshore derricks lurking in the haze. The *Deepwater Horizon* memorial was erected there. Grand Isle, meanwhile, is a resort community, crammed with what the Cajuns call *fishing camps*—slat-built houses on stilts with the comforts of home directly over the marsh.

Between the two towns is probably the most accessible stretch of redfish sea trout, and sheepshead fishing in the United States—especially if you, like us, want to guide yourself. This area is "coastal" only in that it's tidal and salty; open water is actually a few miles farther south. Everything here—from the structures to the roads—is so close to sea level, ocean and earth almost become one. When the very mild Gulf tides are in, you can wet a line or launch a boat practically anywhere.

Tracy is a relatively nascent fly angler, but her skill set is growing, and she

Roadside REDS

A DIY trip in the heart of bayou country.

by Zach Matthews

is particularly adept at poling our little skiff. I rebuilt our Gheenoe several years ago with this exact stretch of marsh in mind. Using marine plywood, fiberglass and epoxy, I rigged the boat with front and rear decks and a solid central floor. Poling from a cooler in the rear, the boat handles like a skiff version of a Corvette. You can absolutely fish the Louisiana marsh from a conventional flats skiff, and many anglers do, but this fishery is the textbook definition of “microskiff” water. Extremely small craft such as canoes, kayaks, or Gheenoes gain easy access to the twisty back channels and can literally scoot between pools that would stymie a larger boat. Local anglers pursue redfish while seated in kayaks, or they stand to pole and cast in canoes and similar craft. Having a motor opens up a broader area but certainly isn’t necessary to catch fish.

After taking a few minutes to get oriented, Tracy and I decided to use the breeze to our advantage and searched downwind along the outer edges of a few marshy islands a couple hundred

yards from the highway. When I heard Tracy’s pushpole begin clicking on oyster beds, I knew we were in business. Redfish are structure-oriented fish much like freshwater bass, but in the marsh, there aren’t many hiding places. Oyster beds provide some of the only vertical variation and offer places for bait to congregate—and for redfish to hunt. Consequently, if you find oysters, you’re likely find redfish nearby. In fact, you can play this game in advance thanks to the wonders of Google Maps, giving yourself a head start on where to focus your search. Oyster beds look like white specks or dots, usually on the fan of a miniature tidal “delta” on the southern sides of the islands.

Sure enough, moments after we heard the audible cue of the pole tapping oyster shells, we saw incoming fish—a small school with a primary bogey headed straight at us, like an incoming bomber on a slow strafing run. I tossed a spoon fly in front of the lead fish which was perhaps 60 feet out and moseying along in no particular hurry.

It immediately slashed at the fly, missing wildly. With my hands now shaking from adrenaline, I frantically stripped line in and threw again, accidentally casting over the fish as it closed. With most species, that’s a blown opportunity, but redfish are special.

Stripping in still more line, I chanced a final cast, high-sticking the fish at the nose of the boat. By dragging the spoon through the water, instead of stripping, I enticed a take. The redfish locked eyes with me precisely as it bit down on the spoon and immediately went bananas.

A six-pound redfish is a great fight on an 8-weight, but not an especially difficult one. Redfish have soft mouths that hold hooks well, and they are not leader-shy, so you can get away with 12- or even 15-pound tippet. Unless they can tangle you up or snip you off on an oyster bed, the fight is generally a foregone conclusion. After a couple runs, we scooped the fish into our oversized net and laid it gently in our icy cooler.

That’s unusual for me. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I catch and release,

In the fall, bull redfish crash the handful of passes or deeper channels to spawn. They are easy to dredge up with frozen shrimp on heavy tackle but may also fall for a spoon or weighted shrimp fly. Keep the fly near the bottom, and use at least a 10-weight rod.



Tracy cradles her first redfish the result of at least five years of practice on the carp flats back home in Atlanta.



but I make an exception for redfish because of their deliciousness and the efforts I have to go through to catch them. Still, I will take only a couple from any given trip. In the 1980s, thanks to celebrity chef Paul Prudhomme, blackened redfish became all the rage. The result was a general collapse in coastal redfish stocks across both the Gulf and Atlantic states; a collapse from which the fish have yet to fully recover. Thanks to the hard work of organizations such as the Coastal Conservation Association, redfish stocks have rebounded substantially, but this is still a fish that could vanish if we aren't mindful of the consequences of a few too many po'boys. Knowing that, I make a special effort to always treat redfish to what you might call a full-dress funeral. Kept fish immediately get wrapped in a thick plastic bag and placed on ice, to maximize freshness. I clean them as soon as possible, vacuum-sealing any fillets I cannot eat immediately.

Redfish come with their own skillet, as people like to say, so you can grill them skin-side down on any open fire. Roasted

on a Big Green Egg or similar grill, with a little Tony Chachere's Creole Seasoning and an abundance of butter, there is no better fish for the plate. Smallish, keeper redfish are best served as fillets, while the larger bulls make for fantastic po'boys. Just let the meat cook until flak and white; once the flakes separate and become opaque, load with butter and serve. For po'boys, you can tong the meat straight into a crusty, fresh baguette, serving with good mayonnaise, lettuce, and ideally a sun-warm summer tomato.

The Louisiana marsh is a special place partly because it is a nursery for all those big offshore bull redfish that anglers like to target in early fall. Six-to-ten-pound redfish abound, are available year-round, and make perfect fly rod targets. Tides in the northern Gulf are almost nonexistent; which is an extreme difference from the four- to eight-foot tides that dictate everything about fishing on the Atlantic coast. On the Atlantic side, near Charleston

or Savannah, redfish anglers focus on spring tides, when the fish can be targeted while feeding on flooded spartina beds. In Louisiana, the fishing is more dependent on water clarity (a function of rain), as well as wind and sunlight. You can catch fish from dawn until dusk if conditions unspool the right way.

I was introduced to this area by local anglers out of Baton Rouge, one of whom was nice enough to show me the ropes several years ago. Catch Courmier gently paddled me around in a small canoe, meandering through the narrow channels of Bayou Laurier and Bayou Ferblanc. Once upon a time, as Catch explained, the Louisiana bayou was much more densely clustered with grass and mud islands—and with oysters and fish as well. Over the last century, oil and gas operators have cut multiple canals through the marsh (straight-line scars you clearly can see on aerial maps). With hurricanes, rising sea levels, and the channelization of the Mississippi itself, the marsh has slowly been eroded. Places marked on the maps as *Lake* this or *Bayou* that are



Cordgrass flats abound in the marshes surrounding Louisiana Highway 1, but some areas can only be accessed by micro-skiffs, such as this custom-rigged Gheenoe.

now really open water, and each year the marsh recedes a little farther. The channelized Mississippi is hemmed in by levees near New Orleans, but its tributaries as far north as Arkansas, Ohio, and even Montana have almost all been dammed. Dams hold back sediment. If all that sediment made it to Venice, the last stop before open water, the mouth of the Mighty Mississippi would be many miles farther into the Gulf of Mexico. In some respects, this is a vanishing fishery, and it is fairly likely that it will be gone completely within the next hundred years, unless things change.

Catch explained that each of the primary game fish in the marsh has its own niche. Redfish hang out around oyster beds and will tail in the cordgrass if the tides allow. In the fall, they seek out deep passes, where bulls upwards of 40 pounds congregate for their spawning activities. Sea trout, another fine-tasting quarry, favor shallow cuts draining grass banks or flats they like moving water and can be caught with something similar to a (freshwater) trout fisherman's nymph rig. Sheepshead—a black-and-white-barred fish resembling a jailhouse snapper—are scattered everywhere in large schools but can be the

hardest fish to actually catch. The trick to sheepshead fishing is to just barely crawl your fly over the muck in front of a feeding school. Courmier invented a special type of lengthened spoon fl, resembling a twisted metal swizzle stick with a hook through it, that he calls the Coma Spoon. It is sheepshead crack.

As a rule, Tracy and I take turns on the deck. As soon as I landed a redfish we swapped positions—the always-delicate dance in a Gheenoe of moving one angler forward and the other back. From my position atop the cooler I had an even better view, and I knew we were still right where we wanted to be. Twenty minutes after landing the first fish we

pooled into a broad, shallow bay speckled with oysters. Tracy spotted the school of redfish cutting across our bow as soon as I did and had a fly in the air before I could even make a suggestion. There is something unbelievably special about watching someone you love handle herself on the front deck exactly right, especially when you taught that person yourself. Tracy and I had a daughter six months before our trip, and one day we will teach Margot these same skills, together.

Tracy's spoon slipped into the cream-coffee-colored waters 15 feet in front of the lead redfish which veered toward the fleeing fl. Just as I lost the fish in the glare, Tracy's rod tip began bucking. The redfish peeled line from the reel, making strong runs across the flat—in vain. Tra-

cy pumped the fish to 45 degrees, then reeled down, fighting the fish exactly as she had been taught. A few minutes and one scoop-and-score with our net, and the fish was boated, joining its brother in our cooler.

I'd like to tell you that we nonchalantly landed that fish with the sangfroid of anglers who had done it all before. The truth is, we probably looked more like JV football players who unexpectedly found ourselves in the end zone for the first time. We hooted and high-fived each other across the decks, nearly over-setting in the process. A five-year plan to build a microskiff, hone our poling and sight-fishing skills on local carp, then self-guide in a distant marsh had all just come together. We had to allow for a little basking in the glow of success.

That afternoon, conditions shifted on us. I blew a couple easy shots, and then the wind picked up, cutting our ability to see into the water almost to nil. On our way back to New Orleans, we bought ultra-fresh shrimp from a fisherman's shack, with his boat backed right up to the lemonade-stand storefront, paying less than half what frozen shrimp cost at home in Atlanta. That evening, cleaned up and back in our city duds, we sipped cocktails

over an elegant downtown bar, secure in the private knowledge that no one else in that fancy restaurant spent the morning self-guiding for redfish. No other couple in the room made such a great team.

That's the electrifying thing about DIY destination fishing. Just as catching the first fish on a fly you tied yourself adds special meaning, so it is with an entirely self-run trip. We owe thanks, of course, to anglers such as Catch Courmier, who showed us the local ropes and who worked out the tactics. We owe Google Maps, and even the Louisiana Highway Department, for making that fishery so accessible. At the end of the day, though, on this trip, we relied only on ourselves, and that is special indeed. ■

Zach Matthews lives in Atlanta, where he practices law when he isn't pursuing striped bass. He is also the host of the Itinerant Angler podcast, now in its second decade of programming. He's a long-time contributor to many outdoor publications. This is his second selection for Gray's.

If You Go

The northern Gulf of Mexico is one of the least-expensive saltwater destina-

tion fisheries in the country. A single day's Louisiana fishing license costs only \$17, and hotels are generally less than \$100 per day—if you can find one. The marshes around Grand Isle are vast, but the area is fairly unpopulated. Port Fourchon has a couple motels catering primarily to roughnecks and roustabouts (both are actual job descriptions on the oil rigs), but the rooms are clean and cheap. Grand Isle is more of an Airbnb town, with a multitude of apartments or suites available for \$200 to \$300 per night. Grand Isle is not, truthfully, all that grand, so don't expect chandeliers and doormen—or, for that matter, more than a couple restaurants. For a fisherman, though, it is very nearly paradise.

Any stretch of marsh near this part of Highway 1 is accessible by canoe or kayak, but basic safety rules apply. Always wear a life jacket in small craft, and it is best to fish in pairs or groups. Cars can safely be left by the side of the highway, but be sure to pull well onto the shoulder—large trucks ply these roads for the oil and gas trade. Any local gas station can make a creditable po'boy, and Louisiana is famously laissez-faire when it comes to beer and liquor sales. All the inshore marsh has cell phone reception.

