

Redfish Feeding Facts

By Capt. Chuck Eichner

Water LIFE Charlotte Harbor

Florida's most sought after fish often seems to be the most mysterious. The subject of countless tournaments where the difficulty of the pursuit makes it the perfect gamefish. To say the least, the Charlotte Harbor redfish is temperamental, spooky when boats approach, constantly relocating upon the changes of tides and moves often unpredictably with the weather. The redfish is a member of the drum family of species that is primarily considered a bottom feeder. A redfish's mouth is positioned below its head nearly parallel with the bottom of the water it lives in, with jaws that open in a manner best designed to feed off the bottom. It has a stout blunt point nose directly above the mouth opening that is perfect for poking and uprooting bottom creatures that get inhaled for a meal. The olfactory gear on the redfish is better than its eyesight which helps the patient angler that bottom fishes to catch lots of reds.

So why all the fuss about lure fishing for reds when nature designed them to be bottom feeders that rely heavily on their sense of smell to feed? Quite simply they have voracious appetites and will eat nearly anything that lives in the aquatic world and a lure or fly that is properly presented will be attacked! Any local angler will tell you that it is a lot harder to catch redfish on lures than bait. The tough part about lure fishing is picking the right lure for what the fish is feeding on at any given day or location. The redfish near the Myakka River might be focused on glass minnows and the fish in Pine Island could be rooting out crabs.

To best understand the redfish you might want to consider what forage species are available to them. A partial list follows:

Finned Species- Pilchards, threadfin herring, Spanish sardines, glass minnows, mud minnows, eels, pinfish, mullet, ladyfish, countless fry & fingerling young of year gamefish and a multitude of true minnow species. Redfish will also eat other baby redfish.

Crab Species- The crab variety in Charlotte Harbor is extensive. A few common ones include blue claw, stone, pass, hermit, mole, fiddler, calico, spider and mangrove. There are many subspecies as well not to mention a variety of lobsters that inhabit our waters.

Shellfish- A variety of species of clams, oysters, mollusks and barnacles.

Shrimp- A huge variety including pink, grass, snapping and others.

Other Creatures- Our sub-tropical waters are a nursery for nearly everything that swims in the gulf. One throw of the castnet will verify this with little worms, pipefish, starfish, sand dollars, trumpet fish and a host of "bug-like" creatures found mixed in the grassbeds.

That's quite a menu for the redfish. On the rare occasion that I eat a redfish, upon cleaning I almost always find small undigested crabs or crab parts in their bellies. Without a doubt this is one of their favorites or is it just that it takes longer to digest crabs? The bottom line to this is that the bottom hugging redfish will root, cruise or chase just about anything to feed its appetite.

You can find them around oyster bars, sand flats, weedy flats, potholes, on the beach, offshore, in canal systems and up the rivers. They will follow the mud trail of a stingray or manatee scooping up aquatic creatures left in the wake. Most anglers don't give much thought to what reds really eat. Pitching white bait quickly swimming under a cork or free-swimming will catch a few reds here and there, but reds are more comfortable wallowing around exerting a minimum of effort to catch dinner. Did you ever wonder why redfish love to hang around



This redfish drawing was done by Englewood marine artist Kasey Scott. Scott grew up in Michigan but took spring breaks in the Florida Keys where he says his every waking hour was spent fishing and diving. Scott, once a professional tour golfer, has won numerous art awards and says he is now pursuing his 'other passion' ... art, and the environs of the lakes and oceans. You can see more of Kasey Scott's work at: www.kscottunderwater.com

oyster bars? First, oysters attract a variety of small aquatic creatures and minnows that are there for the taking but I am willing to bet that the real attraction is the delectable oyster themselves. An oyster or clam for that matter is a gourmet snack and trust me if you shuck an oyster and put it on the hook you are going to get bit! This is not as crazy as it sounds. To our north in the Carolina's, the redfish, known there as red drum are exclusively fished for with clams.

For the most consistent redfish action take bait with you. The easy to get shrimp and blue claw crab are good to have aboard. While on the water collect a few pinfish, some ladyfish or whatever is nearby. Fish them on the bottom with a basic rig and wait. The hard part is the waiting. You can speed things up by dicing up some of your bait and broadcasting it in the area you are fishing. Remember the scent will attract them from far away.

The purist on the other hand will

scoff at bottom fishing. A keen flats boat being cautiously poled in position to present a fly or lure is truly exciting. Sight fishing regardless of method is always exhilarating. I know of no other fish that can be pursued in so many ways and has so many different names. Locally we call them a redfish and when their big we call them a bull red. When their small we call them rats. Our northern neighbors call them channel bass, red bass or red drum. Call them what you want. The redfish is one bad fish that hits like a freight train and pulls like a bucking horse! Be kind when you de-hook your fish to let them swim another day and leave the hook inside if its deep. The fish you just caught may have been released weeks earlier by another conservation minded angler - how great is that!

Capt. Chuck Eichner is a local charter captain. For information or to book a guided fishing trip call 941-505-0003 or go to his website: www.backcountry-charters.com

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