

POPPING FOR TARHEEL REDS

CATCH CAROLINA BULL DRUM ON
JERKBAITS AND TOPWATERS

TEXT AND INSIDE PHOTOS
BY CHRIS WOODWARD



JASON ARNOLD / JASONARNOLDPHOTO.COM

Pamlico Sound's big reds swim beneath bait schools, often harassing them and chasing them up to the surface.



Charlie Adams sailed his umpteenth cast beyond a school of pogies dimpling the surface of North Carolina's Pamlico Sound. He began ripping the jerkbait and popping cork back through the water. One sharp pull, followed by a pause, and then several turns of the reel handle — all the way to the boat.

"Make as much noise as you can," Capt. Richard Andrews prompted. "And remember, the pause is just as important as the pop."

Just as Adams, whose company works with Carolina-based Grady-White Boats, thought about lifting the pearl Z-Man shad from the water, a 50-pound bull red drum piled on, slamming the rod tip to the surface. Our hearts skipped.

The fish powered down with its broad tail, trying to dislodge the hook. It streaked and circled. Adams followed it, keeping the line away from the trolling-motor foot at the bow and the trim tabs and prop aft.

Andrews grabbed the landing net. The fish teetered over the metal lip. Its ponderous head seemed an anvil weight — a freakish fit to its otherwise streamlined bronze body. Andrews quickly popped out the sharp jig hook and revived our fish.

RECORD DRUM

Like the ocean, Pamlico Sound stretches toward an empty horizon. Its 1.5 million acres dwarfs Rhode Island. It rivals the great Everglades. And it's home to behemoth bucket-mouth redfish.

As I looked out over North Carolina's immense inland sea this past September, I wondered how Andrews, who operates Tar-Pam Guide Service, ever finds those fish. "I'm looking for enough visual sign — ripples, slicks, dimples — telltale hints of bait," he told me, as we stowed our gear and continued scanning a broad, shallow bay.

The late-afternoon sun showed us a circle of rough water about the size of a kiddie pool.



Andrews used the trolling motor to guide the Grady-White 251 Coastal Explorer toward the bait. We stopped to drift.

Historically, Pamlico Sound anglers might have anchored up and loaded large circle hooks with chunk baits to soak on the bottom. But in the past few years, several captains have discovered that these bull drum follow and push the poggy schools. If you make enough noise with a popping cork and jerkbait, you can cause havoc.

Red drum grow quite big in the Tar Heel state. Eighteen of the 24 current IGFA line-class world records and the all-tackle-record red drum — a gargantuan 94-plus-pounder — all came from North Carolina waters. Many were probably caught in the surf off the Outer Banks, but a good number likely came from the sound.

Other records hail from Virginia and Florida — places like the Chesapeake Bay and Indian River Lagoon — with many fly-caught trophies logged in Louisiana. However, big bull reds can be found throughout the species' range — from Massachusetts to Texas. Tagging research has shown that most of the larger fish migrate inshore and offshore for spawning and food, but they don't range too far north or south.

These days, all bull reds must be released. The largest fish are often mature female spawners, crucial to the species' survival because of the vast number of eggs they produce.

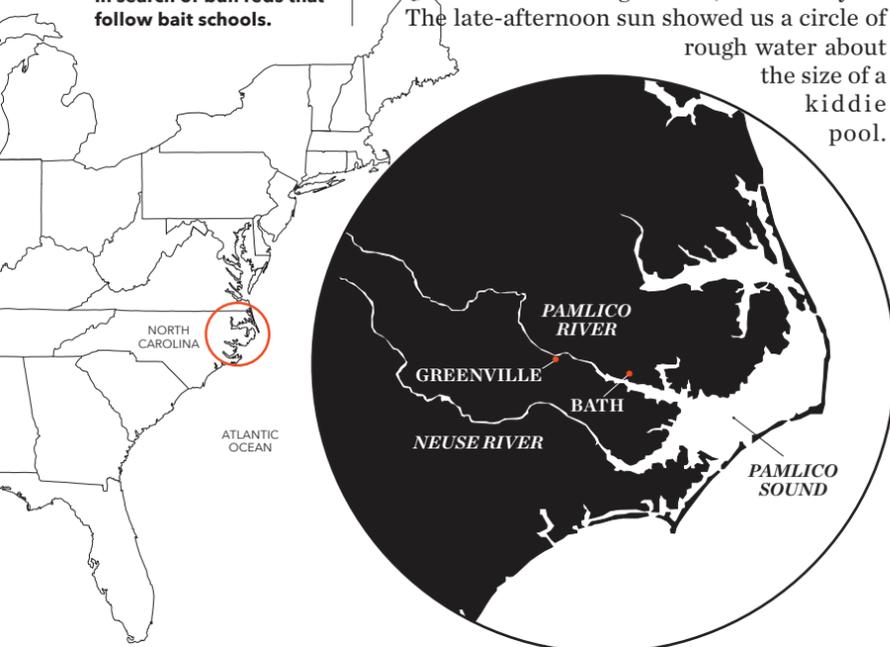
WEATHER WORRIES

Rain in July last year drenched the normally productive month of August for this fishery.



Angler Charlie Adams (left) and Capt. Richard Andrews celebrate the first big bull of the day.

Above: The crew aboard a Grady-White 251 Coastal Explorer plies the vast inshore waters of North Carolina's Pamlico Sound in search of bull reds that follow bait schools.



Generally, Andrews schedules popping-cork bull red charters during the peak months of August and September. But he has caught these big reds as early as May while cork fishing the lower Pungo River for trout. He knows of some bulls caught as late as November.

During our end-of-September trip, changing weather with stiff breezes and cool temperatures slowed the bite. Not to mention those high winds made it more difficult to see the bait schools, and tougher to work the lures. "A lot of days, you have to be prepared to fish both ways — with corks or with bait," Andrews says.

On the other hand, with a west wind — which dominated the coastal region in summer 2013 — the bait really shows well, he says.

Andrews targets the western Pamlico Sound near the Neuse and Pamlico river mouths. Lower salinity in those regions concentrates baitfish and crabs. "We look for those bait schools. Usually we don't see many birds over the bait; the key is to look for bait showering or flaring," Andrews says. "We'll get upwind of the bait and do a controlled drift for a mile or two. We'll hit each school. Sometimes bluefish and glass minnows will be mixed in. Bluefish are a good sign."

In 2013, anglers averaged 20 to 40 big reds a day on the cork. From a tower boat, Andrews has

even seen packs of bulls competing beneath a bait on the retrieve. In 2014, because of weather conditions mostly, that daily average dropped to five or six fish a day.

CONTOUR TRACING

On our second day with Andrews and a full crew from Grady-White aboard two boats, high clouds and light winds replaced the bright sun and blustery breeze. We motored our 251 Coastal Explorers across the Pamlico River, through some winding marshland and out into another broad bay.

I had run this boat model before — in March 2014 — to test its fishability. I found it delivered in multiple ways. Not only could it float very

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shallow like a skiff, it also made a stable platform. Its sharp entry and medium freeboard gave it an offshore feel, and its nearly 25-foot length easily accommodated four anglers.

Once we throttled back, Andrews started working the phones. “We’ll be riding the contour lines,” he told me. “Everything is terraced [on the bottom] here. There’s a shallow inside break and a deeper outside break. Sometimes we just cast to the breaks. But the bite percentage goes way up if we see bait.”

Water depth matters little. Anglers catch fish

Whether merely large – like this fish – or truly massive, mature Carolina red drum will ruthlessly attack a jerkbait on a jig, worked behind a popping cork.

from 5-foot depths out to 22 feet – a veritable pit in this vast shallow bowl. However, because redfish usually spawn around full-moon phases in saltier water, the action often falls off during those periods.

Our crews began to spot the silver flashes of flipping pogies. “There’s a big school between our boat and yours,” Andrews confirmed to our buddy boat over the VHF radio. “It’s a calm morning; they should hear this cork from a long way away.”

Andrews broke out a phalanx of 7-foot

medium-heavy Temple Fork Outfitter spinning rods paired with Quantum Cabo 40 reels and 40-pound PowerPro braid. He ties the braid to a 24-inch monofilament leader with a uni-to-uni-knot connection. To the terminal end of the mono he attaches an orange, cup-faced Bomber Paradise Popper. The length of mono between the braid and cork keeps the braid from twisting around the top of the cork wire. Once the braid twists, it fouls the action of the cork.

Below the cork he ties 15 to 20 inches of 60-pound mono leader and a 1/4-ounce jig head, usually a Hogy Little Big jig head with a 6/0 hook. A heavier jig head would pull the cork underwater. “You need a heavy-duty hook with a wide bite on it. A regular jig head they’ll open up.”

Andrews likes to use the Z-Man 7-inch, pearl, scented jerk shad (it’s bluefish resistant), or Z-Man SwimmerZ swimbaits. But he also throws topwater poppers such as the Sebile Splasher 152 in white.

HOOKUP FLURRY

Andrews and Adams stepped up to the fore and aft casting decks on the 251, and fired cast after cast toward intermittent pogy schools.



Andrews controlled the drift with the Minn Kota bow-mount trolling motor.

“There are a few more fish here,” he said presciently. On his next cast, the cork rig disappeared, engulfed by the massive maw of our target species. In place of the bait, a large boil welled to the surface.

After a sharp diagonal run, the redfish powered sideways, and we could see its bronze scales in a cresting wake. It kicked its tail up and dived. Minutes later it seemed to tire, lolling a bit and swimming slowly. Then it turned, twisted and shot away like a rocket.

Andrews fought the red to the boat a second time; finally it wallowed and relaxed. Andrews held the telescoping net in one hand and guided the fish into it. A few photos and fist bumps later, Andrews lowered the red gently into the water, and it swam back to the sound.

Shelley Tubaugh, Grady-White’s vice president of marketing, casts a bait toward a pogy school. Bull reds suspend under the baitfish, pushing them to the surface.

SOUND SUGGESTIONS

CAPT. RICHARD ANDREWS FISHES THE WEST SIDE of North Carolina’s Pamlico Sound near the mouth of the Pamlico River from the small historic town of Bath. According to the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina, Bath was the first incorporated town in the state (1705), and home to Blackbeard the pirate and the oldest church in North Carolina.

Anglers can find accommodations such as hotels and bed-and-breakfasts in nearby Washington (which claims to be the first city named after the president). Bath and Belhaven feature waterfront condos and efficiencies available for nightly rentals.

US Airways flies to the Pitt-Greenville airport, 36 miles away. If you’re driving to the sound, Bath is about 75 miles east of Interstate 95.

Andrews launches his boat at ramps downriver from Bath. Contact him at Tar-Pam Guide Service – 252-945-9715, tarpamguide.com. Andrews’ charter rates for the 2015 bull red season include half-day (four-hour) trips for \$400, three-quarter-day (six-hour) trips for \$500, and full-day (eight-hour) trips for \$600.

For more information about Bath, go to visitnc.com and search for the town name. To learn about Washington, visit washington-nc.com; for Belhaven resources, try belhavennc.us.



Capt. Richard Andrews’ redfish arsenal: Bomber cup-faced Paradise Poppers, 1/4-ounce jig heads, Z-Man 7-inch jerk shad (in pearl or electric chicken), Z-Man SwimmerZ swimbaits, and Sebile’s white Splasher 152.



“ WE’VE JUST GOT TO FIND THAT ONE MAGIC SCHOOL. SOMETIMES THEY JUST TEAR THROUGH A SCHOOL OF BAIT. I’VE SEEN THE WATER TURN RED.

A third bull redfish to the net: Since all bulls must be released, it’s important to treat them gently, holding them horizontally while supporting them at their belly.

Our crew stowed gear and settled back to work. On his second cast, Adams hooked up again. While a redfish bite on a jigged cork is dramatic, it often occurs just below the surface, so it’s not quite the smash-and-grab of a topwater take.

Still, bull redfish move dramatically and strongly. And when you see that giant rust-and-white head breach the surface, it’s always surprising.

As the day warmed, the wind stirred and switched. After that first flurry of hookups, we saw hardly any bait. We started blind-casting, and went back to drifting so we could work the baits faster and cover more ground. To buoy our spirits, Andrews said, “We’ve just got to find that one magic school.” And then to tempt us, he said:

“Sometimes they just tear through a school of bait. I’ve seen the water turn red.”

Hoping to see a color change, we all chose directions and scanned in earnest. But the wind ripples rivaled any bait sign.

Our third day showed up cold, windy and even spitting rain. The highlight of the dreary morning came as we beat our retreat, battling surprisingly rough conditions in the Pamlico River. Andrews angled the 251 with the trim tabs to meet a quartering 3-foot chop, making the ride pleasant and dry.

I had really hoped to see this bull-drum fishery at its best. The promise of it still intrigues me. But sometimes — as seasoned prognosticators say — you just have to be happy with the opportunities you’re dealt. ☺

BY THE BOOK

- North Carolina limits recreational anglers to one redfish a day in state waters.
- The slot size for legal fish is 18 to 27 inches total length.
- It’s unlawful to possess a redfish in federal waters (3 to 200 miles from shore).
- According to the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission, no directed commercial fishery exists for Atlantic red drum, although fish are landed as bycatch in several states, predominantly North Carolina.

The annual catch — taken mostly by gill nets — is restricted by quota and a daily limit. Harvest and sale in New Jersey through Virginia is restricted to recreational bag limits.

- Along the Gulf Coast, commercial harvest is prohibited in all states except Mississippi, according to the University of Southern Mississippi. That commercial catch is limited by an annual quota and by the recreational minimum length of 18 inches (only one fish over 30 inches may be kept).