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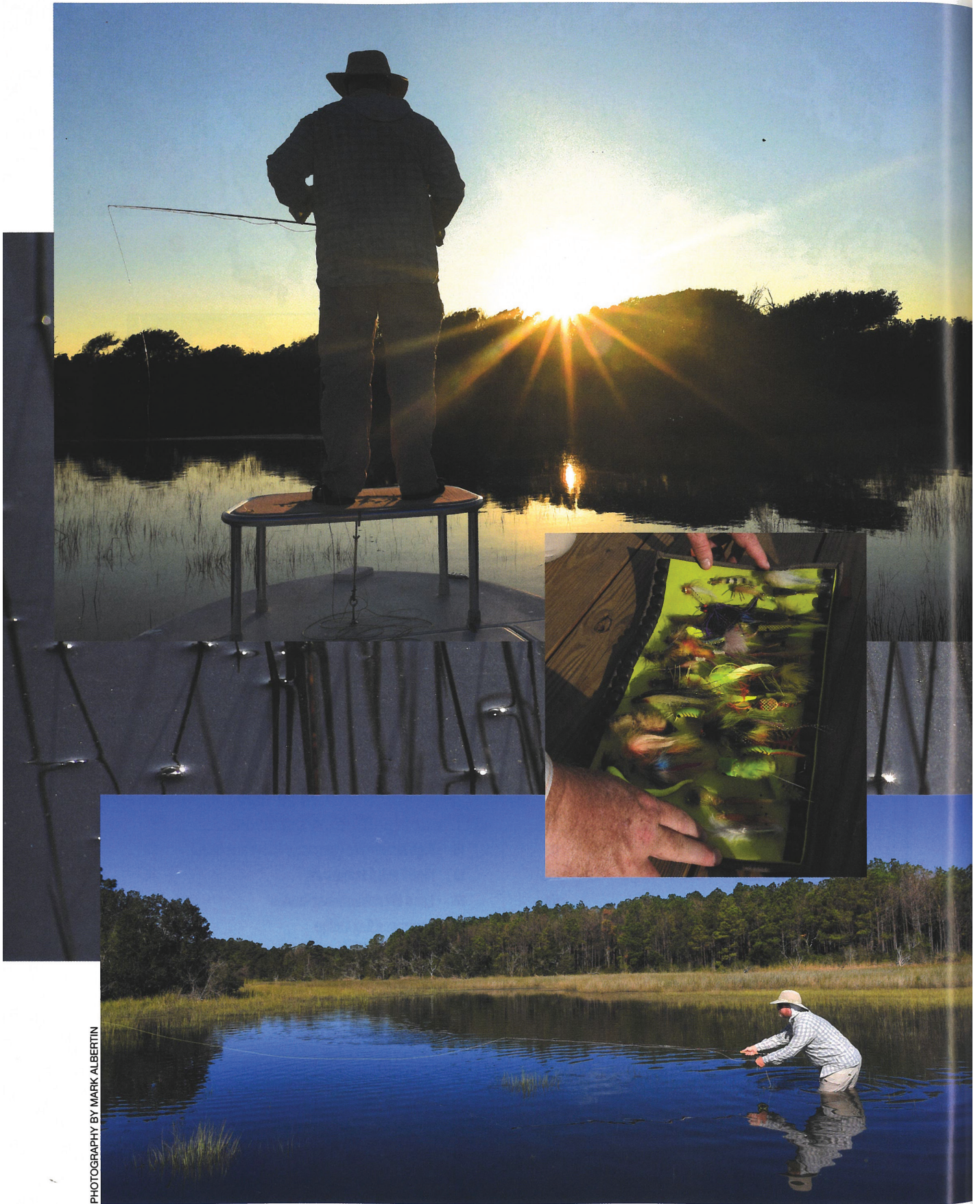
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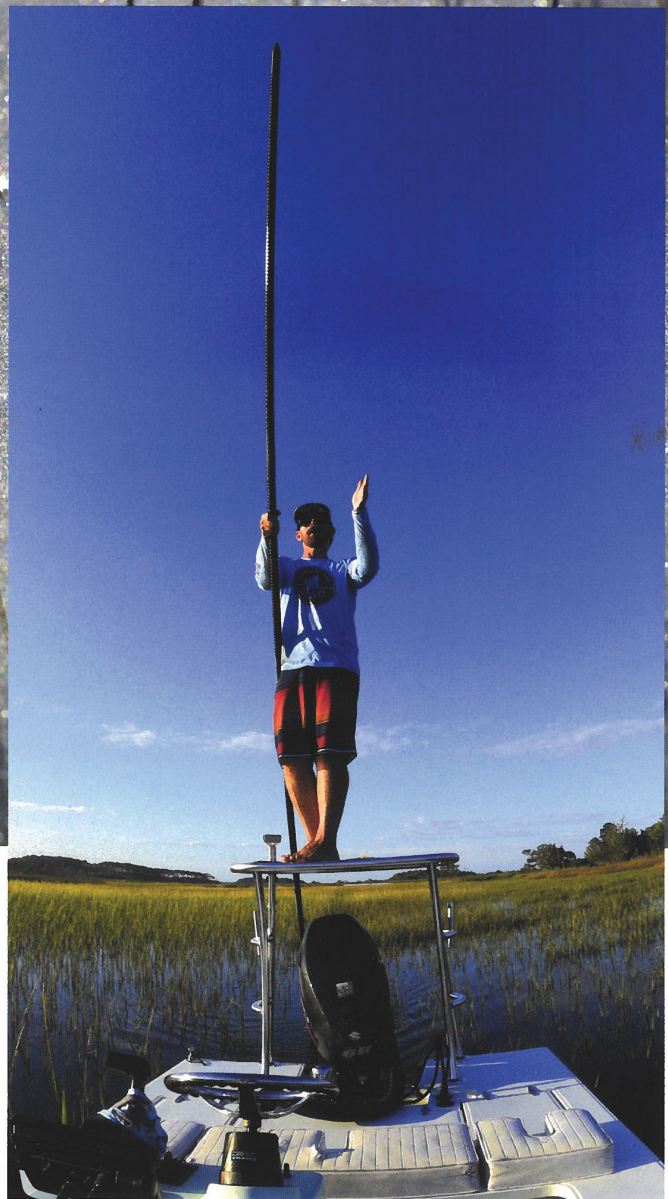
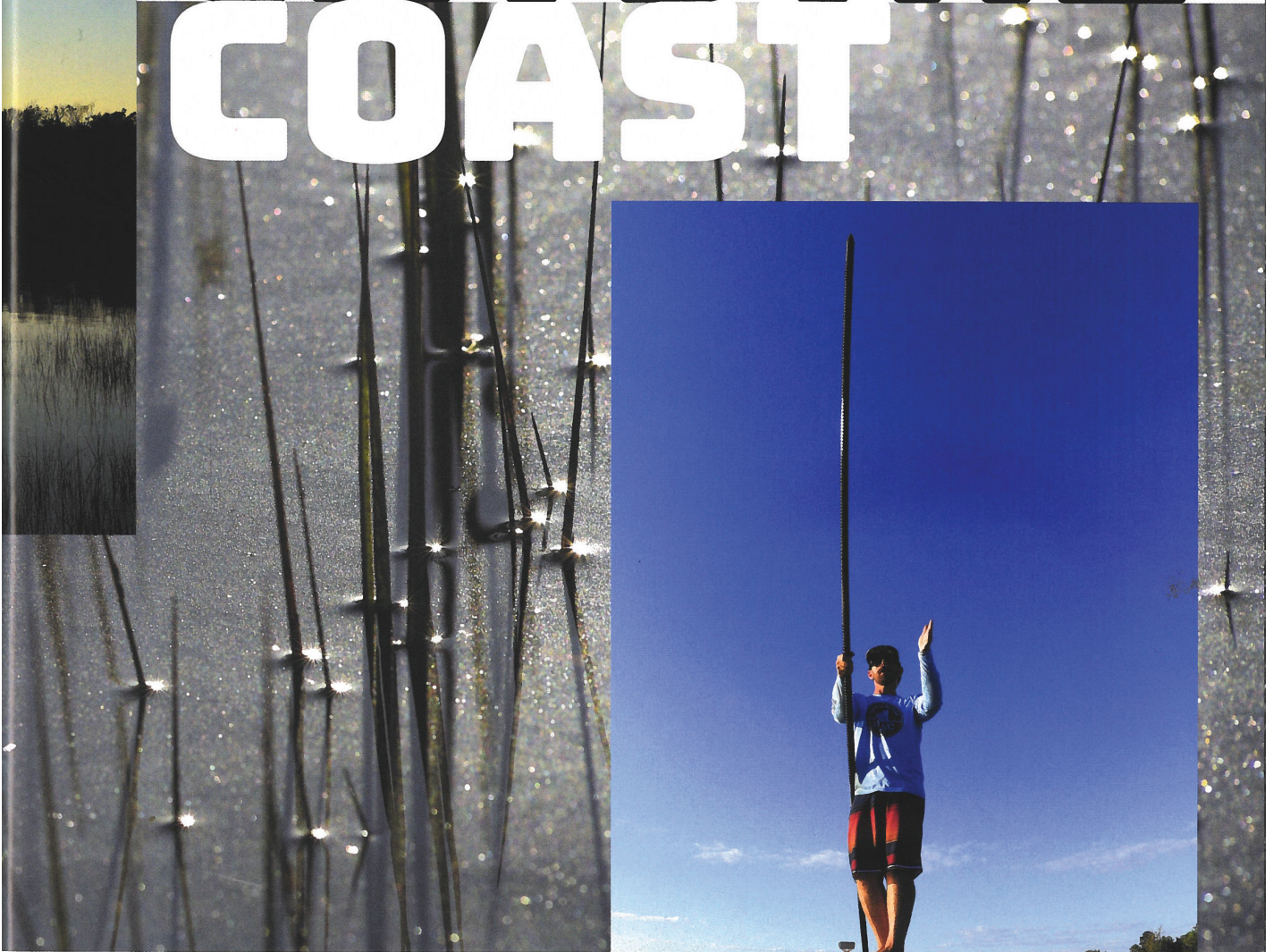
THE **ZIMMERMAN** AGENCY

(continued)



PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK ALBERTIN

The **CRYSTAL** **COAST**



*Chasing redfish in the
wakes of storms and
the paths of pirates.*

by Mike Floyd

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THE ZIMMERMAN AGENCY

(continued)

The back roads of Eastern North Carolina meander through a seemingly endless expanse of family farms, tobacco barns and tidy row crops. The region comprises hardy hamlets full of undaunted people—and that is by necessity. For when it comes to battling some of nature's worst behavior, it is this area in particular that stands stoically in the arena and leads with a stainless steel chin.

This expedition to the seaside towns known collectively as The Crystal Coast has been in the making for roughly 18 months, first to chase cobia in May of last year, then false albacore the following September, and now, hopefully, redfish on a tailing tide as August comes rolling around again.

(Opening spread) The morning breaks clear and calm—perfect for sighting tailing reds. When balling baits near the surface, Spanish mackerel often fall for colorful streamers. The author makes a presentation into the Spartina. John Mauser is a knowledgeable guide at an academic level; he's also a marine biologist.

The cobia quest was squelched before it even began, thanks to a week of severe weather that left the bays and brackish rivers where *Rachycentron canadum* comes to breed in a state of turbid disarray. On its heels came Hurricane Florence, a seething cauldron of slow-motion despair that dumped nearly eight trillion gallons of water on a region already saturated from a summer of drenching rains. But finally, I seem to have found my window, with conditions that project as ideal under a cloudless, late summer sky.

When John meets me at the ramp along the Newport River, the sun is already rising over what I would come to know as the Middle Marsh. A smattering of fishermen have beaten us to the punch, but they appear to be members of the center console contingent, set upon sprinting to the beaches of nearby Shackleford Banks and Cape Lookout National Seashore with conventional tackle in hopes of finding a variety of migratory species balling baits and crashing the surface.

Their intentions are of no concern to us, for John's flats boat—a bit of an oddity in these parts, it seems—advertises a different agenda. Within minutes, we are gliding out of the channel and easing gently into a watery meadow with the cities of Beaufort and Morehead City still visible in the background. John stands barefoot atop the polling platform, surveying the scene, a man in his element.

A marine biologist by trade, he has made a life of understanding and appreciating the little battles going on all around us. Millions of marsh periwinkles flee the incoming tide by climbing blades of *Spartina* grass, while beneath them swims an army of blue crabs and mud minnows, determined to knock each snail from its perch and back into the food chain. Baitfish in a variety of shapes and sizes vault from the water and scatter in all directions, fleeing unseen predators bent on their destruction. Less than 50 yards away, an osprey hovers momentarily before plunging feet first into the water and absconding with a writhing meal. Even the live oaks and cedars that stand



among the black needlerush that lines the marsh are in a constant struggle against the creeping doom of saltwater intrusion.

Like any healthy fishery, there are subtle hints of underlying violence in every direction.

It is, perhaps, a microcosm of the larger battles that have taken place here over time—but especially the last few years, when an assembly line of hurricanes has tried to beat this unassailable region into submission. Since driving across the Cape Fear River a day prior, we have seen myriad evidence of the most recent showdowns between man and nature.

Thousands of pines stand as deadwood, broken off midway by the savage winds of storms gone by. Blue tarps still stretch across the roofs of a few schools and homes, waiting for repairs, while sailboats lay hopelessly stranded beyond reach, standing nobly atop high ground. Someday, a yet unnamed tempest will rage ashore with enough water to send them on their way, but for now the sun-bleached vessels blend into the landscape as guano-stained perches for pelicans and gulls.

Later today, on the nearby South Core Banks, we will witness once splendid beachfront homes holding court in disrepair, abandoned to face the elements after ownership was transferred to the National Park System in 1976. That these weekend retreats have survived shifting sands and summer blows for this long is a testament to their weathered timbers and architectural craftsmanship, but they'll soon exist only in history books and memories.

From the casting platform here in Middle Marsh, I peer into the tannic water and set about trying to convince a redfish that my shrimp fly is a legitimate actor in this grand theater. But the fish are skittish, and the morning affords merely a pair of fleeting shots—neither of which are tailing but rather mudding in the very backs of two different creeks. In both instances, they are gone before my fly hits the water.

Redfish are here year-round and in the grass from April to October, but John

is quick to point out that their numbers in North Carolina are not what anglers might expect to see in Louisiana or the Florida Panhandle. There, the action is more comparable to a dove shoot, where any miss is quickly forgotten thanks to another bird flying in moments later.

But this is a different type of fishing, and the pain of missing an opportunity is amplified by the knowledge that you may not immediately see another tail around the next bend. No, this is more like an archery elk hunt, and the challenge sharpens the senses. Here, the margin for error is so slim that every cast demands precision. There is no room to be sloppy or careless.

As the tide begins to recede, decision time comes sooner than expected. The day is warming quickly, and we reach into the cooler for refreshment just as a yellow sulphur butterfly pays a visit. It sits atop the casting platform, angled wings blowing slightly in the heightening breeze, while John quietly celebrates our good fortune and we are reminded, yet again, of the unique advantages born of fishing with a scientist.

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"There's our sign," he says with a knowing smile. "I've been waiting all summer to see that butterfly. It means the albacore are almost here, if they're not here already. They always arrive within a week of seeing our first sulphur."

Eager to find out if our flighty guest is truly a harbinger of good fishing, we are soon coasting through the no wake zone beneath the Gallants Channel Bridge, which connects Beaufort and Morehead City. Moments later, with throttle down and heading toward Cape Lookout in search of false albacore, baitfish explode to the surface 150 yards off our port bow.

John brings the boat to a crawl, puts a six-weight rod equipped with a weighted one-inch white Clouser into my waiting hands, and instructs me to cast into the mix with an emphasis on beginning my strip before the fly hits the water, then keeping it coming as fast as I can. It pays immediate dividends, and we are on the board with six Spanish mackerel in the first dozen casts.

Fish are still on the rise when the radio call comes in from John's friend and fel-

low guide, Perry. Like John, Perry works from a flats skiff out of nearby Swansboro, but has made the one-hour drive "down east" today in hopes of honing in on whatever might be gathering along the beaches. Apparently, he and two friends are on a school of big Spanish mackerel, with loads of bluefish and jacks thrown in for good measure, and we are encouraged to quickly join them. The gear is stowed, and we are again at full speed, this time running along the beaches of Shackleford, where wild horses sun themselves contentedly among the dunes as we scurry past them toward the chaos.

The contrast between the calm morning marsh and the bedlam we discover around Cape Lookout Shoals and Shark Island is breathtaking. Sheltered no more by the harbors of Beaufort and Morehead City, we have now entered a different realm, fully exposed to the winds and waves, as the nearby Cape Lookout lighthouse lords over the scene.

Beneath us lies crystal blue water that reveals an undulating ocean floor, unevenly carved by heavy currents, with depths

that range from two-to-eight feet and occasional pockets, much deeper, where sharks have set up camp. While I have never actually fallen from a boat, the mind instantly defaults to what might happen should my balance fail me as I cast into the balls of anchovies and menhaden holding tight along the edges of current, pushed to the surface by the feeders below.

Mariners have been wrecking ships along this unforgiving stretch of North Carolina's coastline for time eternal. Today, even with top-notch boats and the luxury of modern electronics, things could quickly go wrong. John navigates the currents and shallows flawlessly, but that an ancient schooner might have sailed through this cut in search of safe portage along the alluring banks of Shackleford, only to discover far too late that water scores of feet deep only seconds earlier had suddenly become too skinny for safe passage, seems an understandable error, easily made by even the most seasoned of sailors.

Within sight of here, just such a thing happened to Edward Teach—the notorious Blackbeard—when he ran the Queen



Anne's Revenge aground just offshore of Beaufort in 1718. Whether or not he scuttled her on purpose is for historians to decide, but this certainly seems a likely place to make an irreversible mistake.

Answering Perry's call pays immediate dividends with a fish that surprises us all. It's a houndfish, also known as a crocodile needlefish, and an apparent rarity on the fly. John tells us he never sees more than two or three boated per season, due to their leader-cutting teeth and stone-hard jaws. It leaps with surprising agility until we finally net and release it. The catch kicks off three solid hours of non-stop action with a variety of species, but we find no albies, and finally accept that the sulphur's presence is not going to prove prescient today.

If we're going to catch redfish, it's time to make another move.

Swansboro is a forty-minute drive due west, beyond the towns of Atlantic Beach and Emerald Isle, and we stop for a bite in its vibrant downtown district. We mosey into a waterfront bar, where all eyes are

focused on The Weather Channel. Hurricane Dorian is smashing the Bahamas as a class five nightmare, but it is an unexpected shift in the ubiquitous cone of uncertainty that puts everyone on edge. What had been projected as an east Florida landfall as recently as this morning has been dramatically revised, with a sharp turn up the eastern seaboard putting Swansboro in pole position for a direct hit by early next week. On cue, the manager walks by our table, catches a glance at the screen, and mumbles "Not again."

Given recent history, little wonder this tight-knit community of guides, commercial fishermen, and small business owners feels unjustly targeted. With the news of Dorian's shift, a palpable sense of dread permeates the restaurant as previously vibrant conversations about fishing and music take on a subdued tone, replaced with talk of evacuations, cancellations, and things that must be done before yet another maelstrom bears down upon them in the week ahead.

But there is nothing to do now except fish.

To my surprise, the boat landing in Swansboro is one I visited more than two decades prior, when an old friend and I fished this area while visiting his nearby ancestral home. Bryant and I had enjoyed good fishing in those days, but casting to tailing reds was not yet on anybody's radar. In mentioning this to John, I quickly realize it's not the first time he's been asked if the redfish are newcomers.

"A lot of people think these fish are recent to this area, but that's simply not true. They just hadn't been discovered yet."

For sheer variety of species and year-round action, this region of North Carolina has few rivals. In addition to excellent angling for redfish in the marshes and along the beaches, the area offers bluefish up to 20 pounds from April through November, a spring and fall run of albacore that peaks around Halloween, a strong cobia run from spring through mid-summer with an occasional push all the way into fall, and bonito near shore in April and May. Throw in the riches of flounder and speckled trout, and it's no surprise many fishermen haven't made the extra



effort to find tailing reds. Perhaps they've been hiding in plain sight all along, overshadowed by the bevy of options.

Back on the water with an incoming tide, I can tell we're in John's home territory as he exudes exactly the kind of calm confidence you want to see in your guide. We drift out of the White Oak River and glide on to his favorite flat, where things are tranquil and silent save for the waves crashing on a nearby beach, out of sight just beyond the dunes. It is serenity beyond measure, and we have roughly two hours to marinate in its offerings.

A tailing fish shows itself almost immediately, and John poles us within 50 feet of the oblivious 20-plus incher. My aim is true, but the fish has moved itself slightly during my back cast and I land the fly within inches of its head. With a bit more chop on the water, the cast might have been a home run. But the afternoon breeze has subsided, things are now dead calm, and the fish is spooked without affording me another shot. Only minutes later, a second fish offers a similar setup at closer range, but I botch

the opportunity entirely, putting the fly dead center of its back.

Less than 200 yards farther into the marsh, a third fish peels out to seek cover in the creek channel when my second cast splashes down too close for comfort after my first landed out of range. Then a fourth fish, holding nearby, turns skittish in the wake of the third's departure, and I find myself casting toward a moving target to no avail.

After a touch of bad luck and a few lousy casts, I need a moment to regroup. This is feeling a bit like a dove shoot, after all, and the effects of a full day on the water have left my accuracy suddenly lacking.

Our search continues as the early genesis of a magnificent sunset sets the distant sky ablaze. With just enough fading light to reveal a bit of motion in the grass, perhaps 200 feet away, I turn to John and find that he's already polling us gently toward what will almost certainly be our final shot at redemption. Conditions are ideal for a stealthy approach, and John sets up a perfect casting position on what is

easily the largest fish we've seen all day.

A single false cast lands the fly 18-inches from the mouth of the tailing behemoth, meriting a swift reaction similar to what we'd seen from its predecessors—only this time it races toward the fly instead of bolting in the opposite direction. The water explodes as the hook finds its mark, firmly set, and the battle is on as the fish bulldozes toward cover along the edges of a nearby creek channel. We have, for a brief and shining moment, experienced perfection. A silent stalk under dimming skies, paired with a flawless cast that is rewarded with a heart-stopping take from a massive bull red.

It is glorious.

And then, just as suddenly, the once taut line goes inexplicably limp. John is the first to register what has happened, and his anguished cry from atop the polling platform echoes across the darkening flat as I stand in shock, arms akimbo, glaring at my own two feet. Time stands still, and moments later I reel in what remains of my line for what we both know to be the moment of truth.



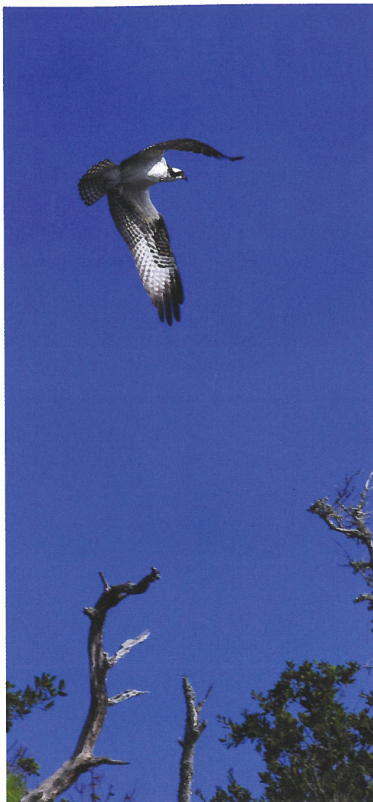
Will we see the tell-tale curly sign of a bad knot? Will this prove a mistake of our own making? Or are we to be minimally rewarded with the consolation of knowing we did everything right against a worthy competitor who proved our better? An examination of the leader reveals a clean cut through line that is otherwise without abrasion, and we both take solace in knowing there's nothing that could have been done differently. In this battle against nature, at least, we'd been beaten fair and square.

The Crystal Coast caught a break at the expense of Cape Hatteras, which was battered by Hurricane Dorian in early September while the rest of eastern North Carolina escaped largely unscathed. ■

Mike Floyd is the associate publisher of Gray's Sporting Journal.

IF YOU GO

John Mauser owns Tailing Tide Guide Service (www.tailingtideguideservice.com) and is best reached via e-mail at john@tailingtideguideservice.com or on his



cell at (910) 340-4811. October is his favorite month to be on the water, but this is an excellent fishery nearly year-round. The variety of species makes it an especially good choice if you're traveling with kids and your primary goal is simply catching fish. Mauser enjoys an excellent relationship with his fellow fly-fishing guides, and can be trusted to make a good recommendation if he is already booked. He also manufactures outstanding fly rods, which you can learn more about at www.mauserflyfishing.com.

Beaufort and Morehead City have a variety of options when it comes to accommodations, ranging from luxury to boutique to price conscious, but we found the Beaufort Ascend Hotel to be top-notch in every way. For reservations, call (252) 728-3000.

Dining options and nightlife are plentiful along The Crystal Coast, and we especially enjoyed the food, service, and atmosphere of the Boro Restaurant & Bar in Swansboro. Explore your options by visiting www.crystalcoastnc.org.

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