

Redfish Drills - 15 tips for a successful trip on the flats

3/30/2020

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The number one question I get when someone books a redfish trip with me, is what flies they should tie. I get it, they're stoked about their upcoming trip and want to catch a fish on a fly they tied. The second question usually has to do with rod wt, tippet size, or something similar. The truth is, all that stuff only matters if you can put a fly in front of a fish and convince him that it's something worth eating. If you can't make that happen, then it won't matter if you have 16lb tippet vs 20lb tippet, or a one prong weed guard vs a two prong weed guard.

Below are the 15 points I feel are highly important for having a successful redfish trip. Heck, this stuff is valid for any sight casting flats trip, be it bonefish, permit, tarpon, etc. I'm a redfish guide though, so I'm going to give it a redfish spin. And by all means, talk to your guide about fly selection, rod wt, and leader construction...but the stuff below, is what your guide really wants you to focus on.

1, 2 & 3) Presentation, Speed and Distance. This is the magic triangle of important stuff. This is 80% of catching a redfish on fly. Almost everything we talk about from here on out will fall under one of these categories. Before we break these topics down, here's the important part. Presentation and speed will trump distance.

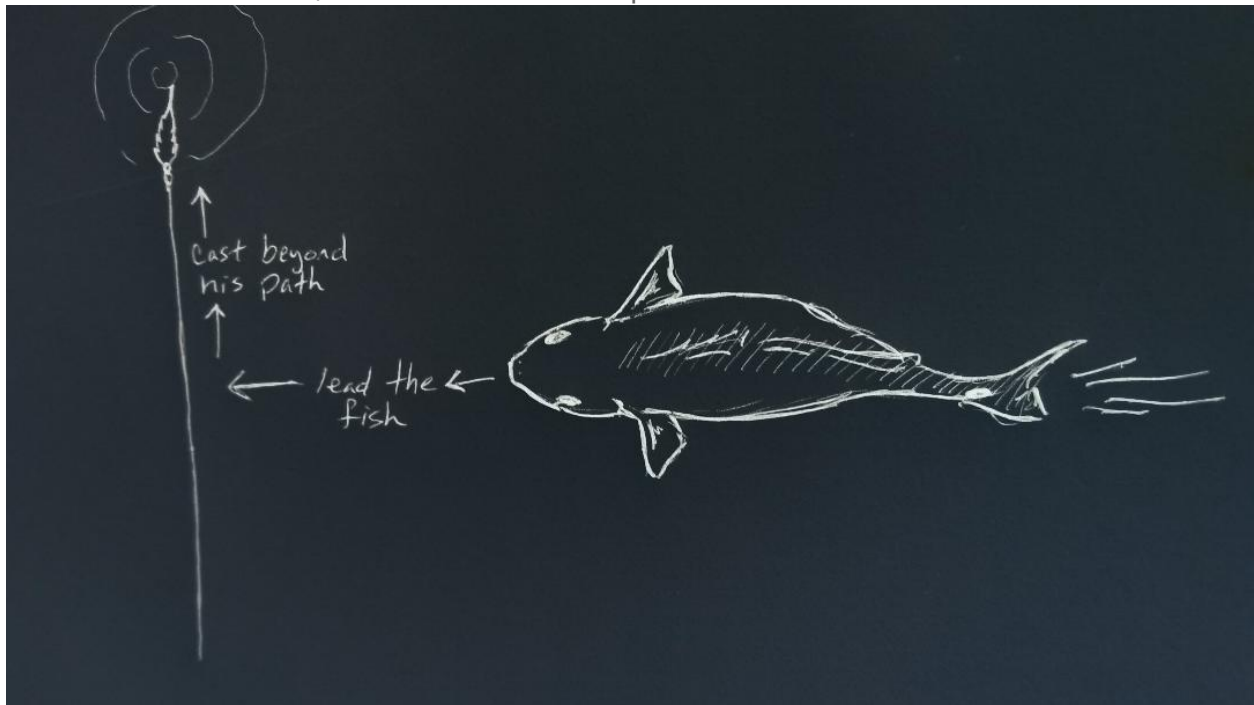
1) Presentation encompasses where the fly lands in relation to the fish, how the fly lands, and how the fly is moved in relation to the fish.

Where you place your fly has a lot to do with water clarity, water depth, how fast the fish are moving, and how spooky the fish are. A winter-time redfish in North Carolina may spook at a fly landing 10ft from them, whereas I've seen redfish in Louisiana turn around and eat a fly that just landed on their tail. In general, I tell my anglers to cast AHEAD and PAST the fish.

If your fish is moving forward searching for food, then we obviously want to lead the fish. How far we lead the fish is usually dependent on how fast the fish is moving forward. If he is bumping along, we might try to put the fly 4 or 5ft ahead of him. If he is moving at a pretty good speed we may cast 10 to 15ft ahead of him.

And if he is barely moving, say tailing in the grass, we may have to put the fly 6-12 inches in front of his face for him to notice it. It's all relative.

If the fish is heading left to right, or right to left, not only do we need to lead the fish, but I like to cast beyond him also. Meaning across his line of travel, basically overshooting him by a few feet. We do this for two reasons. One, if he decides to track away from us as he proceeds forward, we are still in position. If he keeps tracking straight ahead, then you can strip your line in, to bring the fly into his path. The second reason we cast beyond him, is so that we can strip the line past his nose at an angle perpendicular to his path of travel. The best way to get an eat, is by triggering an instinctual feeding reaction as the fly comes across his line of sight. You want the fly to come across his face about a foot in front of him, where he has no little time to think, and has to make a split-second decision to eat.



That works well if the fish is moving across our skiff's path. But what if the fish is coming at us? In that situation, we'll cast short of him and wait until he is a foot or two from the fly before we start stripping it in. Basically, "cat and mousing" him with the fly as he approaches us. We'll keep the fly moving at the same speed as him, and pray he likes the fly you tied him.

All of the above is just a starting point. You'll obviously analyze your presentations on the water, and adjust depending on how the fish react. And most importantly, take any advice your guide gives you.

2) Speed. When I say speed, I mean speed of presentation. Meaning how quickly we can go from spotting a fish to presenting the fly to the fish. Several things factor into this. Seeing the fish. Communicating with your guide. Being ready to cast in an instant. And reducing the amount of time you are in the air, casting. Presentation and speed are equally important.

Usually by the time a fish is spotted, you are already at “go time”. Sometimes, you will see fish moving across a flat at a distance and can plan your attack, but most of the time you need to immediately go into auto-pilot mode and start casting the second you have eyes on the fish. Every second that goes by, equates to a reduced chance of catching that fish. He’s going to turn, move out of range, or sense your presence and spook at some point...and the clock starts ticking the second you see him. We’ll cover several ways to increase your speed of delivery in the following points.

3) Distance. Most every angler does the same thing when they test out a fly rod. They strip out all of the fly line until they see the backing knot, and then try to cast the whole thing. I do too. But before I do that, I cast the rod at 30ft, 20ft, 40ft, 15ft, and even 10ft. If the rod loads and performs well there, I know it’s going to present well to redfish on the flats. Then I’ll cast it at 60ft, then I’ll strip the whole line out and try to bomb a 100ft hero cast.

The reality is that most redfish, probably 70% of them, are hooked 20 to 50ft from the boat. Of the remaining fish, 20% are hooked at less than 20ft. And maybe 10% are hooked at more than 50ft. There are several reasons for that. One is that most anglers have a tough time casting much more than 50ft with accuracy in a high-pressure situation. Another reason, is that most redfish are spotted within the 50ft range...hey, they’re sneaky. It’s also harder to feel a redfish eat and set the hook at those farther distances.

When you practice, focus on quick, accurate casts at realistic distances. We’ll talk a little bit more about that in rest of this article.



4) Practice accuracy at realistic distances. Grab some paper plates or some cheap hula hoops from the dollar store. Scatter them out in different directions from 10ft to 60ft, and practice hitting them. I'm not kidding about the 10ft casts. Okay, it's not really a "cast", but figure out what you're going to do when you have a redfish pop up 10ft away and you have 3 seconds to put a fly in front of him.

Put one out at 80ft and practice it too. That 80ft shot is probably one that you'll never make on the flats, but if you can make an 80ft cast in your yard, you'll be able to make a 50ft cast on the water with the wind in your face.

Now imagine your paper plate is a redfish. Don't try to hit the plate, try to lead the plate and drag it across his nose. I get a lot of anglers on the water who cast directly to the fish, because they are used to casting directly to a target. If you are casting at the fish in real life, then your fly will either land behind him, or on him. I surveyed 100 redfish, and 99 of them said they do not like being beamed in the head with a Clouser.

Unless you're trying to fix a casting issue, don't watch your back cast. Learn to feel the back cast so that you can keep your eyes on the fish...or better yet, the area where your fish is going to eat your fly.

5) Practice with a weighted fly. Take a crab pattern or a Clouser and clip the point off. Practice making your fly land on the target. Practice getting your leader to lay out straight. There is a huge difference between practicing with a weighted fly and a fly-less leader.

6) Learn to double haul. Like really learn it. It will reduce your false-casts, increase your speed of delivery, increase your distance, and increase your accuracy. If you don't know how, then get someone to show you in person. I'm happy to teach anyone the double haul on a charter, but that is not the time to learn it, plain and simple.

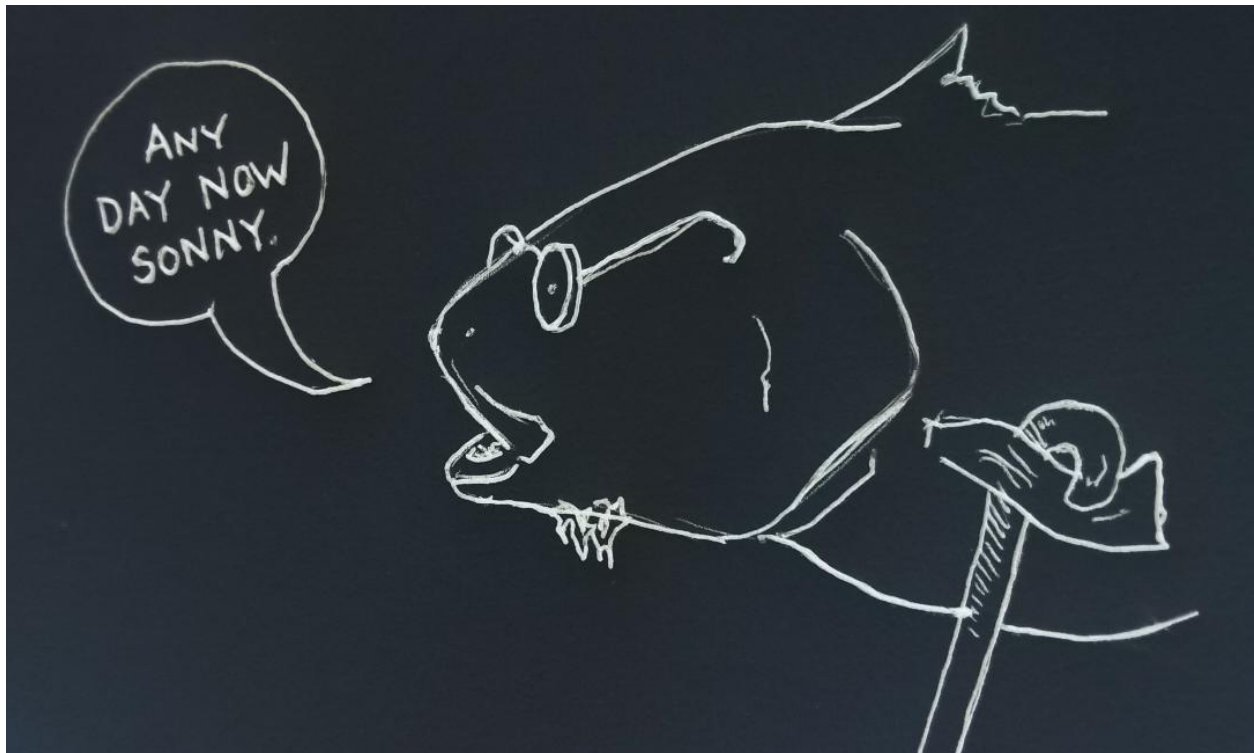
If you are double hauling incorrectly, you are usually worse off than not double hauling at all. The most common thing I usually see, is an angler hauling on his back-cast, and then trying to feed the line back on his forward cast, causing slack and loss of rod load and speed.

I want to say this in the nicest way possible, because I truly and deeply care about you and your experience on a redfish trip. If you pay a guide \$500/day to stand on his skiff and be poled to redfish, and you can't double haul, you just paid for a sight-seeing tour of the marsh. It's that important. I am more than happy to take you on a sight-seeing tour of the marsh, but I'm pretty sure you came to catch fish.



7) Keep it at 1-3 false casts. Any more than that and you are really hurting your odds of getting a fish to eat. I've seen anglers with beautiful loops, that took 17 false-casts to deliver...by the time the fly hit the water, the redfish had died of old age.

How do you make a 60ft cast into the wind with one false cast? By perfecting your double-haul.



8) Never lose contact with your fly line. A lot of anglers do their final double haul and let loose of the line as it shoots out of their guides. When the fly lands in front of the fish, they take their eyes off the fish to grab their line and start stripping. Even worse, sometimes the line is wrapped around the reel foot or fighting butt and has to be untangled. Where's the fish at this point? "He-gone."

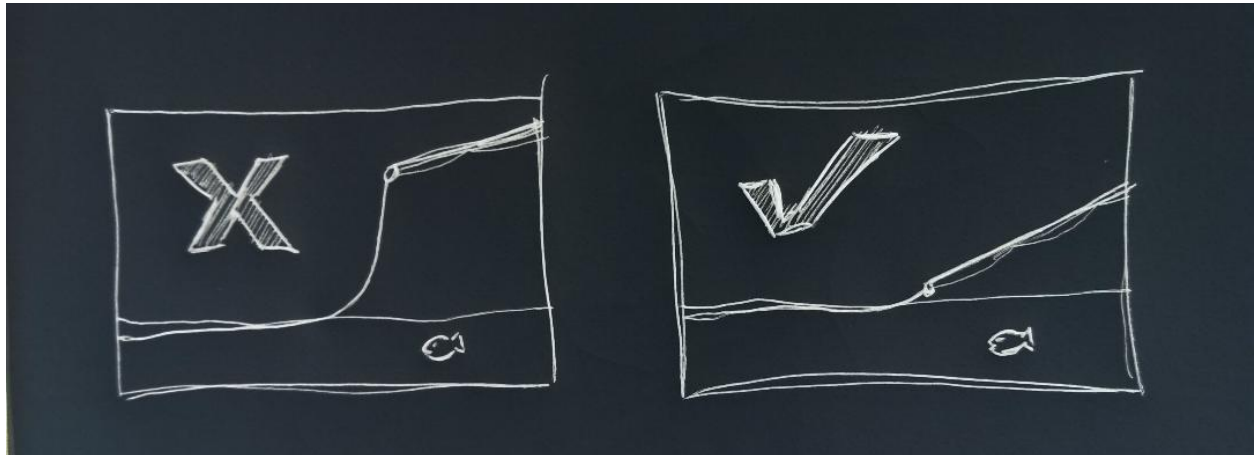
When you shoot your line, form your thumb and index finger into a circle and let the line shoot through it. As the line unrolls and starts to fall to the water, close your fingers and you have control of the line again the second it touches the water. On top of that, you can feather the line through your fingers at the end of your cast to put the breaks on it and kick your leader out straight. Just like how bass anglers feather a baitcasting reel with their thumb.



8-1/2) Line management. There is nothing more frustrating than making a cast to a fish, and the cast coming to a stop 10ft short, because your line is wrapped around something. Your fly line is like your child, you should always be aware of where it is at all times. Some skiffs will have a line management device such as a bucket, a mat or deck spikes, but even if they don't, it's still your job to make sure the line stays in the boat. Fly lines love to wander off of a boat deck and either end up wedged between the boat hull and the mud, or wrapped around a trim tab. Make your guide happy, keep your fly line in the boat when not casting.

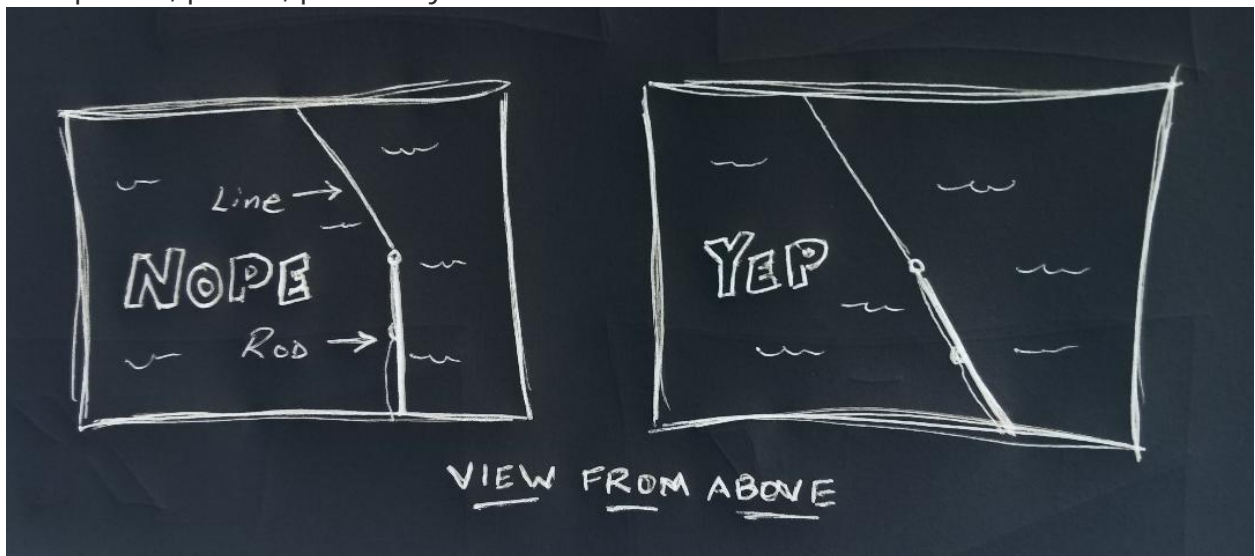
9) Tip down and Strip Strike. Speaking of contact with your line, practice letting your rod tip drop to the water's surface, as your cast is falling to the water's surface. I'd rather have my rod tip under water than 3ft above water. If your rod tip is above the water, your line falls down from your rod tip to the water, causing slack. The

higher the tip, the more the slack, the harder it will be to feel an eat, and to get a hookset.



Along with that, always keep your rod tip pointed at the fly. If your rod tip is at an angle to your fly line, and you get an eat, your rod tip will bend towards the line and absorb your strip strike. Keep your rod tip pointed straight at the fly. Keep as straight and slack free of a connection to that fly as possible, so that you can drive your hook point home when that redfish eats.

And please, please, please try not to trout-set.



10) Practice from the ready position. Ready position is having the amount of line you can cast (no more) stripped out, 4 or 5ft of line plus your leader out the rod tip, fly line pinched against cork with your casting hand, and holding the fly in the non-casting hand. This way you can be ready at a moments notice. When a fish is spotted, you can toss the fly out in front of you, transfer the line into your hauling hand and begin your false casts...all in one smooth motion. Practice it at home, so that it's part of your routine when you're on the water.



11) Stand on a cooler. Seriously. There is a good chance there will be a casting platform of some type on your guide's skiff. Utilize it, you'll have a better view of the fish, and your back-cast will be higher above the grass. If you practice standing on something elevated, it will force you to be conscious of your balance as you cast.



12) Think clock-face and distance when practicing. Almost all guides use the clock face when calling out fish. Learn it, and call out directions when you make casts in your yard. And remember, 12 O'clock is always where the boat is pointing, not where you are facing. Happens all the time, don't ask...

Get comfortable with eyeballing distances too. A quick method of estimating distances is thinking of your rod as "10ft" and of the skiff as "20ft". So if a guide calls a fish at 40ft, think "two boat lengths".

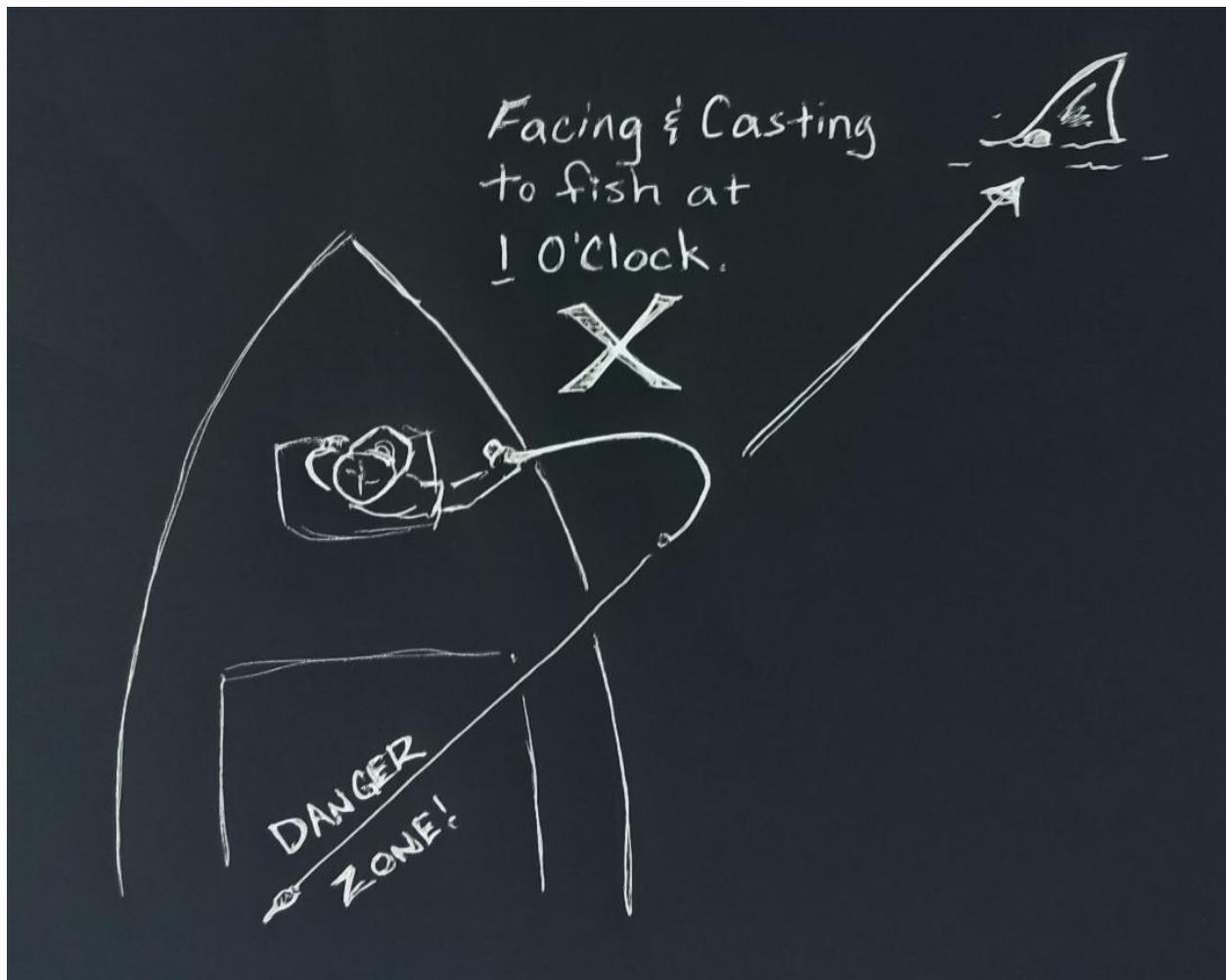
When you are actually fishing, start your trip by making sure you and your guide are in agreement on directions and distances. His 50ft might be different than your 50ft, just saying.

One last thing about communicating with your guide. When he spots a fish, his job is to communicate it, and your job is to locate that fish as quick as possible. This will greatly increase your chances of making a good cast. You could listen to your guide call a fish's direction and distance, and blind cast it, but chances are your fly won't land where he's looking. Really the clock-face and distance is for the guide to describe to you where to look for the fish, then it's your job to try to see the fish so you have a target to cast at. If your guide calls out a fish that you don't see, point your rod where you think they're directing you to, then listen for direction. Slowly move your rod in the direction that they tell you, until they say to stop. Sight down the rod and if you don't see the fish, start expanding your viewing area. If it takes too long, they'll probably tell you to just start casting and they'll direct you from there.



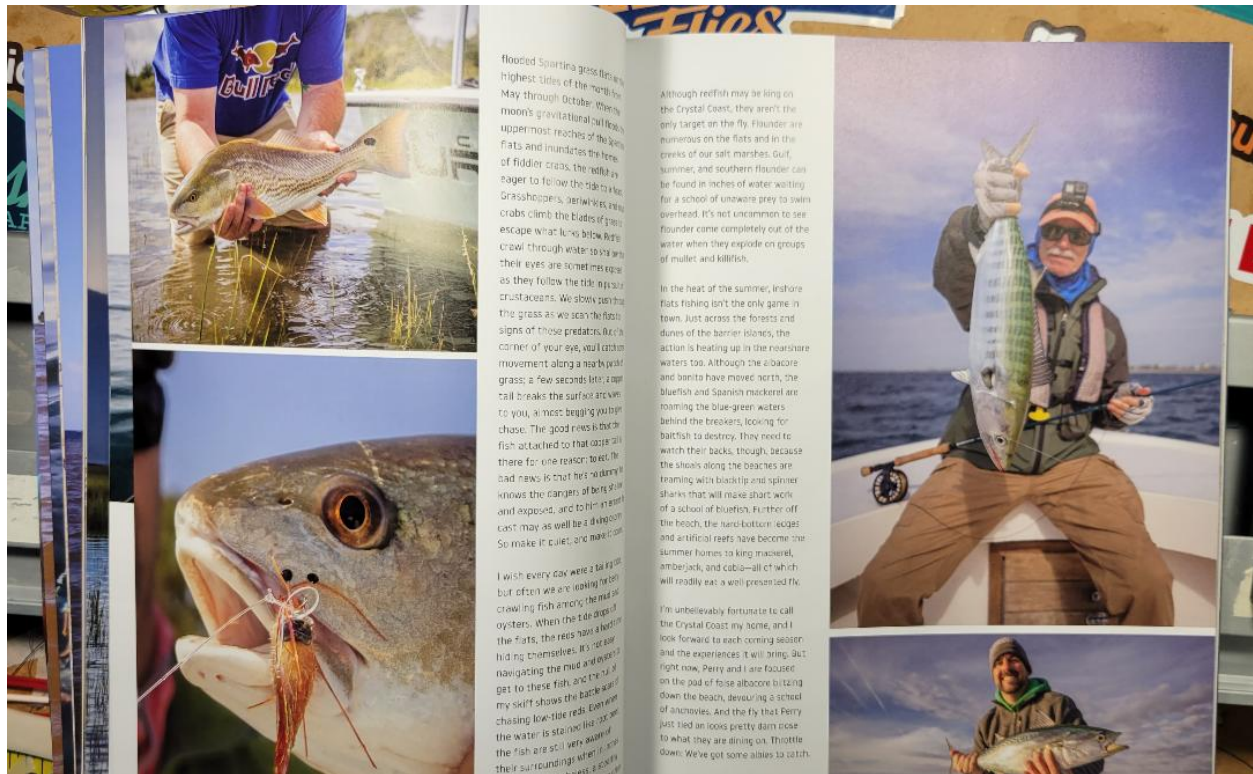
13) Change of Direction. Fish move. Practice changing the direction of your cast as you are false casting. Also practice picking a fly line up and laying it back down in a different direction. These pick up and lay downs and directional changes can come in handy on the water.

14) Get good at back casts. Meaning learn to shoot your line towards fish on back casts. As a guide, I try my hardest to spin the skiff to always give a right-handed angler a 10 O’Clock or 11 O’Clock shot at fish. This allows them to make a safe cast for everyone onboard (including me up on the poling platform). There are times when a fish pops up at 1 O’Clock or 2 O’Clock, and I can’t reposition the boat. If a right-handed angler makes a normal forward cast to that fish, his back cast is cruising right over top of his buddy’s head and right in front of my nose. Not a good situation for anyone.



Imagine again, if that same fish popped up at 1 O'Clock. Spin your body towards 7 O'Clock and start casting that direction. Keep an eye on your back cast and on the fish (I know, I said earlier to not look at your back cast, this is the one time where you should). Shoot your line on your back cast to the 1 O'Clock position. Spin your body towards the fish and start stripping the fly. Practice this scenario.

7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 O'Clock casts are forward casts. 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 O'Clock casts are back casts. Try your best to avoid 12 O'Clock casts, your guide will thank you. If I see a fish at noon, I am usually immediately spinning the boat to give the angler an 11 O'Clock shot.



15) Do it all without thinking. Practice all of it, from the spotting of the fish to the hookset, until you can do it all without thinking.

There's no way to cover everything, but the above tips should give you a head start before your trip. All of us fishing guides want our clients to have fun and be successful. Hopefully understanding these points will help alleviate some frustration on the water if you are new to flats fishing.

[1 Comment](#)

MARTY SHUBERT[LINK](#)

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Spot on commentary. I worked through many of these lessons with John's excellent coaching. Thanks John for a great summary. I am sending out the link to all my Flyfishing buddies.

REPLY

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