

## Lowcountry Reds

Sampling food and fish in Charleston BY JOE DAHUT

THE POLICE OFFICER beamed bright lights through the driver's side window, where I sat brushing my teeth and tuning the dial from a radio preacher's sermon to anything else.

"You planning on sleeping here, my friend?"

"No sir, I lied, mouth full of Colgate. I was just getting ready to start fishing."

The officer looked at his watch and frowned, which likely read as mine did—11:30 P.M., Charleston, South Carolina. Ninety-seven degrees.

As he backed away from my tailgate I playfully rigged the eight-weight and perused my fly box to prove I wasn't going to bed. Besides, there was a nearby Walmart I could flee to if he decided to come back and check on me. The police lights trafiled off down the dirt road and I was alone at the launch again. Having already pinched fly line through the first three guides, I decided to keep going and see what swam around the dock at night. With a stomach full of Rodney Scott's BBQ spare ribs, I hauled a few casts across the dark water. There was a heron lurking by the streetlight, and I saw the sideways shuffle of a couple fiddler crabs. The marsh and its defining residents were present even in her darkest hour.

By morning the colors were on full display from the bow of my friend Jeremi's skiff. Charleston's various landscapes echo untold stories—abandoned docks groaning in the wind, drooping trees above skinny grass, and endless acres of brown water completely controlled by the tide. The target was redfish by way of a black-and-purple Drum Beater—local tyer Scotty Davis' pattern for high-tide redfish in the grass. Our version had gaudy yellow eyes. We scanned the surface for a happy redfish wake. Jeremi was barefoot on the platform, daggering his push pole into oyster beds as we moved along. In Charleston, Jeremi told me, getting a shot at one of these fish is a gift. Yet we were on the water only briefly before a school of rats pushed their backs around a grassy corner. We were the only people floating through the skinny mud that morning, so I shot a cast into the feeding lane and came right to the prize of the Lowcountry marsh, a redfish whose colors were peachy and glazed, with a signature singular spot on the tail.

Pelicans spooked schools of mullet into a frenzy, and alongside them followed the redfish. Dolphins cruised by our boat in a rhythmic bob that sent fish running the opposite direction. With the tide rising, we decided to make a move and look for less-harrassed fish. Sure enough, a school of nearby reds woke to the slap of the drum beater, and with every cast, my glass rod practically folded in half. Jeremi and I were in awe at the reckless hunger for the fly, but we didn't complain, and we didn't stop fishing, despite the heat that was causing me to sweat from parts of my body that I didn't know could sweat. After putting three fish in the boat and feeding a few more, we called it a morning and retreated to air conditioning for tacos and cold drinks.

There were now quite a few boats trotting around the same spots we casted to that morning. The oysters no longer sang their popping song, and the redfish had slid somewhere out of sight from any anglers. Back at the boat launch, there were old men crabbing and the sun was blazing off the beak of the heron I met the night before. Smelling of sunscreen, sweat, and redfish slime, we headed to Charleston's Taco Boy with big, tired smiles. ▲

