

# REDS ON THE SHOALS



By Kayak Kevin Whitley

this is going to be a rough evening!" On top of the high rise I looked over to the shoals between Smith and Fisherman Islands, the red drum destination. I didn't have to strain my eyes to see the shoals were white with big breakers. I arrived at the launch meeting up with Ric Bumley and Lee Williams. I smiled and said, "Did y'all see the shoals? It's going to be a wild wave riding night!"

Most people think we're crazy, and some think we're just stupid. I've got to admit, I'm an adrenalin junky and kayak fishing for bull red drum on the Fisherman Island shoals will always get the adrenalin pumping.

We time our paddle out with the last of the outgoing tide. The current rips in the area. We look for a deeper slew next to the shallow shoal and the breakers, to set anchor. In this surreal environment, the waves and current can be confusing, even down right dangerous. Last year, half of the group that paddled out got seasick in the dizzying swells and turbulent current.

We set up in a line along the edge of the breakers. Lee was up front and Ric was behind me. We were 50 yards apart. When the tide switched the waves began to grow. Occasionally a set of 5-foot swells would roll through and break 10 feet away along the shoal. We were out of range of the breakers, barely. But not out of range from the rest of the almost breaking, peaked out, part of that wave. I watched Lee as he climbed the growing rolling wall straight up, his bow in the air, then over and disappearing behind. And then it was my turn. I paddled forward over my anchor rope giving it some slack. The climb up the wall seemed to take forever. I could see daylight through the thin, over vertical, wispy top. I busted through with a spray of water, with my bow completely out of the wave. I crashed down the back side after the wave past the mid section of the boat. I didn't give my anchor line enough slack, and it would snatch me down through the wave. I turned around to watch Ric disappear then explode over the top, entire bow air-borne. He was smiling as he slammed down the back side.

You have to be in top kayak angler condition to fish the burliest place for the burliest fish in the bay. The shoals are not a place for the novice. In my opinion you need at least a year on the water experience to survive the shoals. Because after dealing with the life threatening waves and the ripping

I was driving over the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel on my way to the Eastern Shore for the spring appearance of the big bull red drum. I drove past the 13-mile marker and looked down at the nine-foot shoal. Five-foot surf-able swells were breaking like rolling barrels of whitewater. I thought to myself, "Wow,

current, when that reel clicker starts screaming, you have a whole new situation to deal with, which is a big angry, bull dog tough red drum on the end of your line, trying to pull you into the wash.

Imagine the conditions on the shoals under the crushing, pounding waves, with thousands of gallons of sandy water churning and grinding, and powerful currents strong enough to move mountains of sand during one tide cycle. Now imagine the fish that thrives in that environment, built for power with heavy shoulders, a wide crescent tail, armored with solid scales, a thick head to take the pounding waves, an under-slung mouth, and pointed nose for rutting crabs out of the swirling sand. Bull red drum are big mean fish with a bad attitude. Most of us kayak anglers have caught small reds and know they put up a surprisingly tough fight for their size. Now multiply that by ten!

## SURVIVING THE SHOALS

We fish the incoming current for two reasons. One, that is when they seem to bite, and two is safety. If anything disastrous happens the tide will push you in. I look for a clear path back in from the shoals. There's been too many times in the past that we were surrounded by breakers, trying to find a way out in the dark.

I anchor facing into the waves, in at least six feet of water. I cast one bait into the whitewater on top of the shoal and drop one behind me in the deeper slew. Both are in free spool with the clickers on. I use heavy JB custom rods loaded with 40-pound high visible braid. The standard sliding weight fish-finder rig is above a bead and barrel swivel that is connected to 60 to 80 pound mono leader, snelled to an 8/0 Gamakatsu circle hook. I use 2 to 6 ounce of weight, depending on the current.

The reasons the bull reds are there at that particular time is for the crabs that are emerging from their winter hibernation and shedding they're shells. The scent of the shedding crabs draws them in and soft shell crabs are an easy and delicious meal for the reds. Peeler crabs are the number one bait. We use to cut them in half, which made it easy for the rays and dog sharks to pick them up. Learning a lesson from Justin Hurst, I've started using whole peelers and hard crabs. This cuts down on the critters. When I get a run, I know it's a red.

I thread the hook into the back knuckle and out the front joint. I wrap the legs on to the shank with a rubber band to secure the crab to the hook and to make it more hydrodynamic in the current.

The reel will sound like its going to explode when a red grabs and runs away with the bait. With circle hooks you just ease the drag up to work the hook into the reds jaw. I try to fight them lightly on anchor while the red is on the shoal. If I tighten down, I will get pulled into the disastrous white water. Once the fish comes off the shoal, I tighten down on'em. I'll drop my anchor rope with a crab pot buoy attached and winch myself to the red. It's really a good idea to fight them entirely on anchor. The longer your free floating during the fight, the further you will have to paddle back against the current to your anchor.

Big reds have a 'handle' under their chin. I'll leader the red, facing parallel to my kayak. I slide my fingers where the gill plate meet the chin and pull with my leg and the handle. We are quick with the tagging for the Virginia game fish tagging program, and our pictures, so we can get them back in the water.

The big red drum fishery is catch and release and the chance of catching a release citation 46 inches is high. There are no puppy drum there. If you're new to kayak fishing, paddle a lot this year and get some time on the water for the reds on the shoals next year. If you've got some time in the plastic boat and want to test your skill and your thrill level, then get ready. As for the kayak fishing adrenalin junkies, this is our favorite time of year. GET ON'EM.

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