

On the **MEND**

LOUISIANA'S REDFISHING REBOUNDS AFTER LAST YEAR'S STORMS
TEXT AND PHOTOS BY PAUL SHARMAN

CAPT. GREGG ARNOLD POLED THE SKIFF TOWARD THE SPOT WHERE I'D sighted the tail briefly waving like a flag in the wind. Three pairs of eyes, cloaked in the requisite polarized glasses — all at different heights — scanned the area looking for any sign of the owner.

Suddenly, there it was, sitting stationary on the bottom, minding its own business, never suspecting its day was about to be ruined. Redfish have healthy appetites, and the sight of the crab fly dragging a foot in front of this drun's nose was obviously too much. With a single lazy flick of the tail, it pounced on the fly, sucking it up in one fluid movement.

"Set it!" screamed Arnold.

No problem. The 10-weight Cross Current bucked from the strong pull; my first Louisiana redfish regretted its recent dining choice.

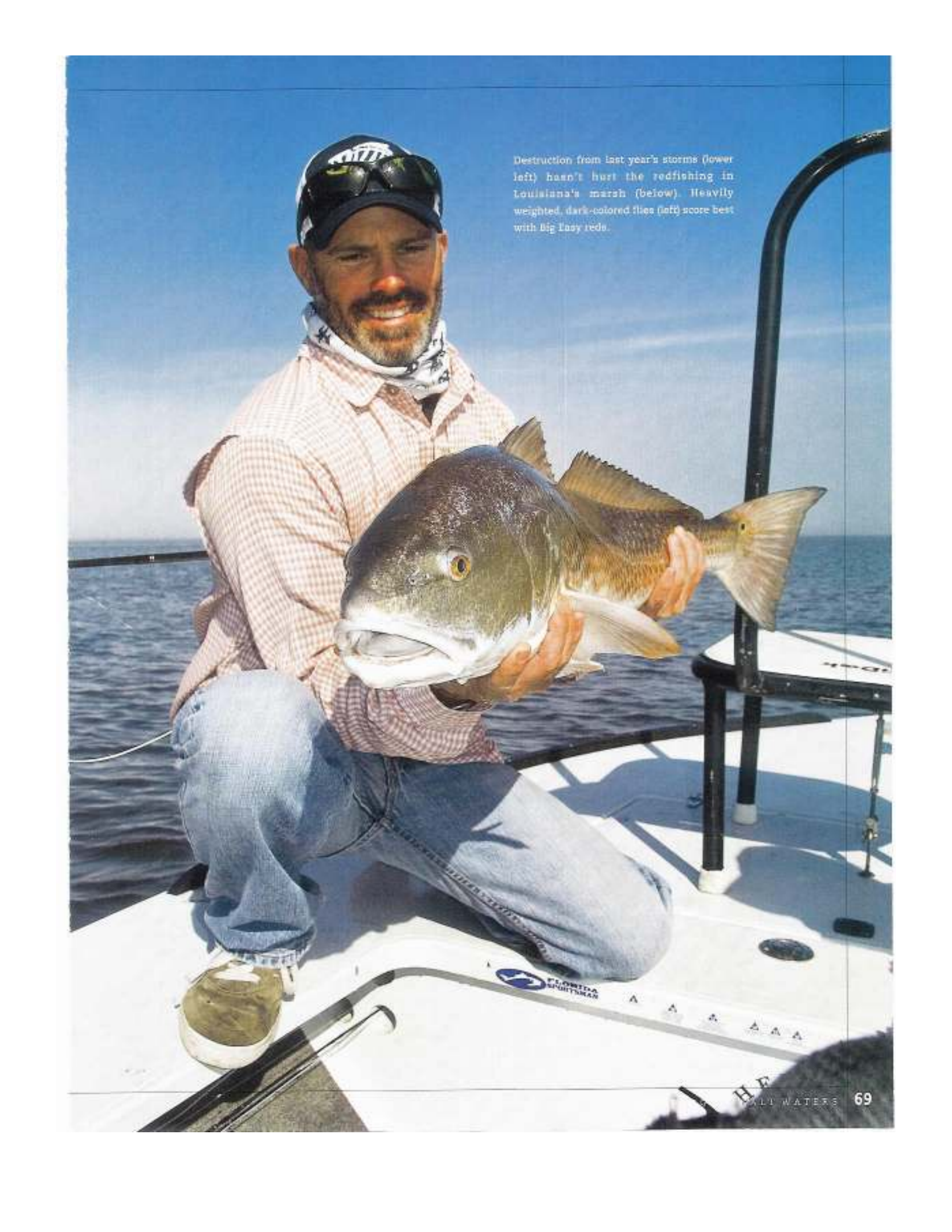


AFTER THE STORM

When Hurricane Katrina rolled ashore on August 29, 2005, Arnold had wisely evacuated to his home state of Kentucky to escape the wrath of the storm. The widespread trail of devastation along the Gulf Coast left him homeless and temporarily out of work.

The catastrophic storm surge caused the infamous breaching of the levees that separate Lake Pontchartrain from New Orleans, and nearly 80 percent of the city was flooded to some extent. Meanwhile, hurricane-force winds pounded the city and outlying areas. One of the oft-mentioned reasons for the breach was the inability of the salt marshes to absorb the storm



A man with a beard and sunglasses on his cap is kneeling on a white boat, holding a large, dark-colored fish. He is wearing a light-colored checkered shirt and blue jeans. The background shows a clear blue sky and the ocean. The boat has a black railing and a logo that says "FLORIDA SPORTSMAN" with a fish icon. The text "H.F. ALLI WATERS" is visible in the bottom right corner.

Destruction from last year's storms (lower left) hasn't hurt the redfishing in Louisiana's marsh (below). Heavily weighted, dark-colored flies (left) score best with Big Easy reds.

Low-light conditions make fishing tough, but selective fly-rodgers can take maximum advantage.



FFSW TIPPET

Look Down!

Early on in our trip, Capt. Gregg Arnold pointed out a common mistake most of his clients make when confronted with low-light conditions.

"Most fishermen are constantly trying to spot fish 100 yards away and end up missing fish that are under their rod tips," he says. "Scanning around close to the boat is much more effective as you're angling your vision down into the water, helping you spot fish swimming past that would otherwise go undetected."

Although Arnold says that keeping an eye out for tailing and waking redfish is good, if that's all you look for, then you'll miss many opportunities.

Our persistence paid off; Bowman, who was up on the casting platform, was able to target a small red that eagerly ate his fly. It was only a small fish — perhaps 5 pounds — but we were glad to finally get the skunk off the boat and hoped it was just the beginning.

surge, thanks to years of erosion. These were the same marshes we were now fishing some five months after the storm. The long-lasting effects of the storm were evident everywhere we looked.

I was keen to discover whether the storm had had any long-term influence on the fishery and the ecosystem in general. Conway Bowman, a friend of mine and former host of ESPN's *In Search of Fly Water*, had visited Metairie, just outside New Orleans, while filming several years earlier. He'd fished with Arnold and caught a 20-pound tippet IGFA world-record redfish weighing 41 pounds 10 ounces. The choice of whom to fish with was easy. A few phone calls at the start of the year revealed that the marsh, although hit hard and with trees and structures totally leveled, was still harboring fish in a biting mood. The week before our arrival, we got news that Arnold had just guided clients to pending state records for sheephead and black drum and was seeing plenty of redfish.

Boy, did that last week drag on.

We had three days booked in the land of giants to sight-fish for large reds, and we were going to need them. The route out to the boat launch took us through mile after mile of storm-damaged property. Through the window we saw a continuous line of tugboats stranded high and dry on sand flats, steel cargo containers flipped as if made of cardboard into the marsh, and devastated homes and businesses.

Approaching the boat launch, we discovered that the oyster-boat landings and small fishing businesses once lining the bayous had been completely obliterated. In many

instances a concrete foundation was the only indication that a structure had once stood there. Cars were in the water, and boats were upside-down on the banks where Katrina's fury had left them. Still, man was fighting back — the oyster fishery had already been given the go-ahead that the shellfish were safe for consumption, and the boats that had survived were busy offloading sacks of the freshly harvested bivalves.

ONE FISH, TWO FISH, REDFISH, SHEEPSHEAD?

The cold front that arrived with us pushed thick clouds before it. Jumping out of the truck, we were greeted by a lack of wind, overcast skies and bugs — lots of them. We were instantly covered in no-see-ums that seemed incredibly thirsty, judging by the instant attack. (We later learned to put on the bug juice

before leaving the car.) Launching the boat was a quick task, and we were soon roaring off into the maze of channels heading out into the marsh. The first two days were hard — enjoyable, but hard. Sight-fishing relies on good light penetration into the water, and with the gloomy weather we had a difficult time seeing fish until we were right on top of them. This meant we spooked far more fish than we were able to cast to. We had perhaps three or four shots the first day, with just one brief hookup. What we did see, though, was encouraging. Egrets, herons and pelicans were our constant neighbors throughout the day, indicating there was food to be had in the marsh. We also caught sight of a couple of large black drum ambling past, but they weren't interested in flies.

Day two dawned, and fog joined the overcast skies, limiting our vision even more. Still we had learned our lesson the day before and knew to slow way down to give ourselves a chance at spotting fish close to the boat. In a small creek system I spotted a disturbance ahead of the boat and cast to it, allowing my weighted crab fly to sink down into the melee. One strip and I met with solid resistance. I was expecting the supposed redfish to make a run and so was surprised when a large black-and-white-striped fish flashed at me from under the water. It was a sheepshead, also known as the permit of the marsh.

I was told later they can be hard to target on a fly. Well, this one obviously didn't know that and gave a good accounting of himself, even managing to take a run or two against the drag of the 10-weight. I actually found myself thinking that I wouldn't mind coming back just to target sheepshead if they were that much fun. As the fish came to the boat, I could see a magnificent display of the long pearly-white teeth that are used to crush crabs and mollusks and to scrape barnacles off rocks, and so kept my fingers well out of harm's way as I posed for a couple of quick pictures before returning him to his friends.

It was good to get my first fish on board. But this was



Although redfish run big in the Louisiana marshes, the usually tricky sheepshead is another frequent target for fly-fishermen.

Rebound

The large influx of salt water brought by the storm surge associated with Hurricane Katrina caused large-scale die-offs of the natural flora and fauna of the Louisiana marsh. Grasses that help stabilize the marsh and forage species like shrimp and crawfish could not survive the sudden increase in salinity and have suffered heavy losses. Crabs, though, seem to be doing well. Captain Arnold believes that's because they can survive the change in water salinity and because they've gotten a reprieve from harvest for several months, allowing their numbers to increase. This means a valuable food source is available for the big redfish and black drum.

We could see new marsh grass sprouting, which should help win back some land from the water over time. However, with some estimates putting the loss of marsh habitat at 150 square miles, there is a lot of ground to be won back. The short-term upside for anglers, though, is that the fish will tend to be more concentrated and a little easier to find. Luckily, the area Arnold fishes is not heavily pressured by sportfishermen, and most others tend to target the seatrout anyway, leaving

the redfish largely undisturbed and naive to the ways of the fly-angler.

But more than the marsh has to recover. Many guides, boat crews, marina operators and bait-and-tackle suppliers lost their homes and livelihoods overnight. Captain Arnold initiated a grassroots movement known as Guide for the Gulf to assist those in need in the local sportfishing industry. The program received tremendous support from the fly-fishing industry and FFSW. To find out how you can help, please visit their Web site at www.guideforthegulf.com.

not what I had come for, and I wouldn't achieve my goal on this day. Zipping ourselves up against the cold air thrust in our faces on the ride back, we each silently reflected that we were starting to get a little nervous with just one day's fishing left.



SMOKE IN THE WATER

When things haven't gone as expected, the first thing you do when you wake up is glance out the window at the sky to see what may be in store. At last, I was able to allow myself a smile. The cloud cover was breaking, and the sun was poking through. Conditions continued to improve on the now-familiar drive down to the boat launch. By the time we arrived, blue sky dominated the few remaining clouds. We were even able to ditch our usual wardrobe of fleece and water-proofs, making us feel even better about our chances.

At our first stop of the morning, we worked along a flat toward an oyster bar in front of a small island. Bowman was up on point, and from my position in the boat I spotted movement ahead of us. We continued in that direction until Bowman whispered, "Smoke," referring to the puff of silt ahead of him. He held up his hand, signaling Arnold to hold the boat steady. The belly of line loaded the rod instantly; one forward cast was all that was needed to reach the fish in only inches of water, a few feet away.

Strip, strip, strip, pause ... strip, strip, strip!

The large fish engulfed the fly. In an instant the big red turned tail and was running hard. The drag of the G.Loomis Synchronix screamed in response, and all Bowman could do was hang on and watch several dozen yards of backing follow the fly line out the rod tip and off into the distance. This was the fish we had come for.

The husky redfish made several powerful runs away from

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the boat until Bowman was able to persuade it to come closer. Captain Arnold and I had already switched places, so I got to see the whole battle from up on the platform and out of the way while he coached Bowman and made ready to land the hard-won trophy.

The BogaGrip took hold, and the fish leveled out at 20 pounds, a great fish by most standards. But it's considered average here; a real giant is in the 40- to 50-pound class. Thanking our lucky stars for the sunshine, we were able to get some great pictures before sliding this rusty-gold beauty back into the water to grow bigger.

The day continued well. Bowman and I both landed a couple of fish in the teens before sending the captain up front for his chance. The azure blue of the sky and the puffy, white cotton-wool clouds reflected perfectly in the mirror-glass surface — perfect conditions for sight-fishing. We saw many more fish, but we had a plane to catch that evening.

Passing some terns and a lone osprey on top of a single battered tree trunk, I realized that I envied these fellow fishers who get to enjoy the marsh every day, as well as the guides, like Arnold, who live practically on its doorstep. I was glad to see that although the marsh may never be the same, it is recovering. The fishing is not only available, it is perhaps just as good as it was before Hurricane Katrina.

Make your own trip to the land of giants and help support the local sport-fishing industry as it gets back on its feet. They'll be glad to see you, and you might end up with the biggest redfish of your life. 



GETTING THERE, DOING THAT

Many carriers are still running reduced flights into New Orleans, but as of press time Continental was the only carrier back to a full schedule. It got us there and back with no delays.

Capt. Gregg Arnold can be contacted by phone at 504-237-6742, by e-mail at garnold@cox.net and via his Web site at www.fishinthelandofgiants.com. He also guides for tarpon later in the year in Florida.

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