

Backwater Notes & Tips - Member John Givens, Editor

Backwater fishing tips and strategies from Jimmy Johnson “JJ”, esteemed fishing guide/bait/tackle shop proprietor with 30 yrs experience in the Amelia Island area and Terry Lacoss “TC”-the Godfather of Nassau County fishing guides, and Guide Jeff Crumpton-JC. Jimmy gave this presentation to members and guests of the Nassua Sport Fishing Association at the Dee Dee Bartels dock area on Saturday, 4/12/14. Terry gave this presentation on 1/25/15. Jeff gave his presentation to NSFA members and guests 1/28/15. The following is blended wisdom from the presentations:

Backwater-any area not in the ocean. Includes the jetties. Always fishes some sort of structure with some current and an ambush point.

Equipment:

TC prefers spinning reels to bait casting reels. He said all the companies make good spinning reels now and did not name a brand preference. He recommends the 4000 size with line from 15-30 lbs. If you use braid and a mono backing make sure the backing is the size of the braid so it won't cut into the mono easily. Amazing to me is that TC and JC do not use swivels. Rather, they tie their main line to their leader with uni-knots.

TC likes a 10lb mushroom anchor and the Frabill insulated bait bucket—even for use on a boat. He prefers a 105lb thrust hand controlled electric motor with 3 batteries for his large boat and an automated charger plug in that handles all his batteries. He will be doing an in-depth seminar in February 2015 for the NSFA club.

Float Rigs:

There is no need to use popping corks. While you can use the more expensive “stick” corks, it's much more economical to use the cheaper more rounded corks. Terry calls them Walmart corks-they have a small hook type device on the top which latches onto the line and allows you to adjust the depth of your bait. Jimmy says always use a “stopper bobber” (about 10 cents each) for bait adjustment—so their methods differ slightly. The order of progression for the stopper bobber set up is-stopper bobber, bead, swivel, sinker, swivel and about 18” of leader going to the hook. On some rigs, he will use a split shot instead of a lead sinker. I will prefer Terry's cork set up. Bait should be about 1' off the bottom per Jimmy and Terry says it should be as close to the bottom as possible as fish like to trap the shrimp/bait against the bottom when they attack it. Fish with the spinning reel in free line mode. When the cork goes under you engage the reel and either set the hook or reel in quickly (he prefers the latter method for his customers as it is less prone to error and almost just as effective). If your cork is not moving with the current, you are on bottom, adjust your cork accordingly. Use a lighter leader than your main line as that way if you tear off, you will only lose the leader and hook. Neither guide uses a circle hook. For live shrimp use the lightest hook possible-a #4 thru #1 wide gap or a kahle hook (this is mainly for trout and redfish--move to larger hooks depending on your target fish)-, hook the shrimp in the horn/head area. Use a split shot ~ 5 inches from the hook to keep the shrimp near the bottom. Jeff showed us a nice stopper knot (basically a nail knot tied with the tie-fast device) which slides up and down the line and acts as a stop for the cork so you can adjust the depth. TC fished the outside of the dock with a float rig and the 1st 2-3 pillars of the dock with a bottom rig.

Bottom Fishing:

Interesting, TC seemed to label backwater fishing depth of say 3-4 feet as shallow and 10 feet as deep. While a Carolina type, standard, sinker, bead, swivel, leader, hook rig is fine, JJ only fishes the bottom with a jig. He uses a live bait jig (flatter jig head and shorter shank hook) and hooks the shrimp either through the horn area or from the tail forward (the method TC uses whether fishing with a jig or just a hook). Come up from the tail and expose the hook above the back of the shrimp. JJ will also cut off the shrimp head and hook through the head area back to the tail. Use a jig and mud minnow (TC does not fish with mud minnows but says if you do, use a jig head and reel in slowly) or finger mullet for trout, redfish and flounder. Use mainly a ¼ ounce jig. When fishing with a jig and moving the bait, twitch it and when your rod tip is high, reel in and lower the rod and twitch again. Once the bait is out of the productive area, reel it in and cast on either side of the previous cast. When free lining (JJ's favorite method) leave the bail open and let the shrimp swim,

Jimmy's favorite method for using live shrimp is free lining. No weight, or a light split shot, thrown next to the bank is a preferred method. At low tide, he fishes bottom. At high tide, he uses a cork. He likes to fish oyster beds.

When fishing for Sheepshead, use an 8" leader and only fish vertically-no casting. TC generally doesn't fish for Sheepshead). For a fiddler crab, use a 2/0 long shank hook with the barb through the bottom of the shell. Raise and lower the bait and if you feel some weight, set the hook or reel in quickly.

Jigs:

JJ's soft plastic color preferences are: flounder-christmas tree color, redfish-white or motor oil, trout-chartreuse. He prefers Coty red, white or black jig heads with contender plastics or Berkley gulp. TC favors Berkley gulp, 3/8' new penny shrimp and twin tails.

Hard Lures:

JJ loves topwater but it must be 1st thing in the morning and not much after sun up. He uses a popper (skitterbug) or a walk the dog lure (Zara spook). He said a redfish will not hit a popper but will hit a walk the dog lure. Red head and white body is good. After sun up, he switches to a just below the surface, suspending lure such as the mirrolure Catch2000. Later, he moves to a sinking lure. Vary your retrieve and when you get a bite, remember what retrieve you were using and try that again. He likes daybreak and high tide for fishing over oyster beds.

TC says use a topwater anytime you see bait fish moving—not just early. He prefers red/white, chrome with blue and chartreuse. He uses a loop knot for hard baits and says these lures catch bigger fish than live bait and bigger lures catch bigger fish than small lures. His favorite crankbait colors are orange and black along with those previously mentioned. He talked about a strong preference for using a countdown and fishing it down a sloping bank or area. He only uses gold spoons and checks the hook to make sure it is sharp. He sharpens it by moving the file from the back of the hook to the front. Frequently, he will use a ¾ oz. spoon as a fishfinder, moving along and if he gets a bite, will stop and switch to live bait.

Where:

TC uses his GPS at low tide and puts it on “trail mode” to locate fishy areas and be able to navigate the area at higher tides. Looks for an ambush point and unusual structure—say not just a straight line of oyster beds but rather an oyster bed that extends out a little. He requires a moving current. He makes drifts and uses lures to locate fish. After he locates them he will stop and may use just live bait. When fishing the flats for redfish he prefers a crab pattern and to throw the lure about 5’ in front of the redfish in a hole that he expects the redfish to feed in. You should wade behind them rather than try and intercept them.

When JJ fishes the jetties, he is primarily deep jigging with maybe a ½ ounce jig. This method loses more tackle than others but is very productive. He prefers the last of the outgoing tide. JC says stay 40’ away from the jetties and fish parallel to them using your trolling motor to maintain your position. Try and tick the rocks/bottom but not get hung up—yeah ok. Go outside the jetties when you don’t have any luck inside. Another tactic is to fish a low spot in the jetties where water is washing over them.

If fishing a dock, he will use a cork on the outside of the dock and bottom fish towards the inside of a dock. TC will fish the front of the dock back to the 2nd or 3rd pillar depending on the tide. The lower the tide the more to the outside of the dock—the higher the tide the more towards the land side of the dock and along the grassy areas near docks.

If you see a lot of crab traps, wading birds or porpoises--fish in that area.

Specific Locations:

Shave bridge for bottom fishing at low tide.

The “Lanceford Creek” dock by the yellow house—there is a creek somewhere towards the north of these docks (?) that attract the baitfish and the predators. Fish near the grass with a float for trout and redfish.

Shaker house at RockTen. Fish the pilings out to about 10’ of water as long as the tide is running.

The entrance to tiger basin.

In the ICW area across from the marker just north of the Yacht Basin, try fishing when the tide begins to fall. Also, cast net the mouth of that creek for bait.

Pelican Bank on the north side of the St. Mary’s inlet. You can even wade fish there.

The 1st dock entering into Marsh Lakes—either the outside of the dock or East of the dock at high to low between the oyster beds (I fished there with Ben—TC’s son in law—guide.

Technique:

When using braid and a spinning reel, always close the bail with your hand rather than cranking the handle as this will help avoid twists/tangles in the line. Try and feather the spin cast (ie place your hand lightly on the spool) to slow down the cast and allow it to make a smaller splash. Use a relatively loose drag when fighting the fish and if necessary to keep the fish from running away use your forefinger on the spool to tighten the pressure on the line. When that big redfish is running away from you and you want to turn him, pull so that his head is turning away from the direction he is going.

Other Miscellaneous:

Use a live pogy, hook in mouth and cut the tail for cobia and redfish.

Keep electric motor on one speed.

Use Frabill insulated bait bucket/aerator—even on your boat—it's easier.

Use short strokes with push pole.

Throw a top water or 1 foot diver over oyster beds as they start to flood.

Stick the net in the water and bring the fish near the net to capture it.

You can go down to a 10lb fluoro leader for trout and 20lb for redfish. A 20lb is a good all around leader. No need to buy the leader stuff—just fluoro line is fine.

Keep rod tip low and straight—not to the side.

Dead sticking—when bites are slow—just throw the jig and shrimp and let them sit there. Drag a little and let it sit there again.

With redfish bite, reel in the slack, count to 3, then set the hook.

Put procure scent on your jigs.

Mainly use the ¼ oz jig with 1/8 and 3/8 at times. Use bigger jigs if you are at the jetties or in faster moving current.

If a redfish is tailing—you can move. If it is not tailing and you move, you will spook them. Don't cast unless the redfish is tailing.

When casting, don't break your wrist on the backswing-load phase. That will deteriorate your loading of the rod.

V shape wake is a mullet. U shape wake is a redfish.

Try the "swimmin image" crankbait.

Find how the water runs off a flat to locate the fish.

Cast netting for bait is mainly in March-October. TC casts for mainly finger mullet and buys his shrimp. You can get plenty of bait shrimp around low tide in creeks and mouths of creeks—one specific location TC mentioned was the mouth of the creek just north of the old Downunder.

Pack your line on the reel tight and use your hand to close the bail—both will help prevent line twists and bird nests.

Look for clearer water, vs dirtier water and ambush points.

Cobia come in beginning around May. Bull reds on the jetties in the fall. Prefers last 3 hrs. of outgoing and 1st 2-3 of incoming. Try and tick the rocks with your lure using the trolling motor to move slowly along. If no luck, go to the outside of the jetties.

TC's favorite fly is the black clouser pattern.

Flats near Fernandina Beach are bountiful

By [Bob McNally](#) Sat, Apr 26, 2014 @ 8:59 pm | updated Sat, Apr 26, 2014 @ 9:41 pm



Photo provided

Fly-rod angler Bob McNally reels in a redfish near broad, mostly pristine tidal flats near Fernandina Beach. The region has exceptional tidal marsh fishing, especially for red drum.

FERNANDINA BEACH | The tidal marsh flats north and west of Fernandina Beach sprawl intermittently for many miles and are loaded with fish because of their close proximity to several of key fish-appealing ingredients.

For one, Fernandina Inlet is located just east of the flats, so quick access to the sea for bait and gamefish is available. Another plus for Fernandina flats is there is much deep water found through them. The nearby Amelia River has depths dropping to 30 feet.

The Jolly River, Bells River and Lanceford Creek course through salt marshes near flats and have holes falling to 40 feet.

This is important for big fish that move onto flats because deep water runs are major access routes, especially during low tides.

The most prominent flats fish caught near Fernandina Beach are red drum or redfish. At times, good fishing for flounder and even sheepshead is found on flats. Sea trout are available, and some black drum, ladyfish, bluefish and even tarpon are caught on some flats. But for practical purposes, redfish are the primary target of flats hounds.

There are basic two schools of flats fishing in Northeast Florida, and they both can be followed at Fernandina, often during the same day. One flats angling school advises fishing low, running tide phases; the other school chooses high, moving tides. Productive fishing can be had following either school, and some flats produce better at low tides while others draw fish at high tides. Fortunately, you can work some “flats” during a low tide and others during the high, which affords a full day on the water at Fernandina.

Low-tide flats anglers believe fish are most easily spotted in very shallow basins, the upper ends of salt creeks, and on mud bars that almost completely drain when the water recedes. Such places usually are found far back in creeks and bays, and when conditions are right, even small fish “push” a good wake and are easily seen.

The problem with low-tide fishing, however, is that sometimes fish are so far back up creeks, and the water is so low and bottom so muddy that you can't reach them, even in a good flats skiff. Wading is out of the question because the mud is deep and soft. Kayaks are about the only practical mode of fishing transportation for such water.

High tide flats fishermen like strong, clear ocean water that swells well up into marsh grass. With the flooding water come big fish to feed on crabs, shrimp and other goodies that sportfish otherwise can't get to. High tides allow anglers and fish to work through vast marsh areas that usually are inaccessible. Such places might be a solid-ground island, often near a creek or river mouth.

The downside to high tide flats angling, though, is that gamefish scatter widely, and can be more difficult to spot than at low tide. Sometimes fish push wakes, but more often redfish, sheepshead and black drum are seen “tailing” or swirling the surface. “Searching” type lures like weedless spoons and spinner-baits produce best.

In recent years I've done exceptionally well with weedless-rigged soft plastic jerk baits, in pearl, silver or yellow. Rigged weedless with a large Eagle Claw HP hook, this lure casts a country mile, and can be fished shallow, deep, slow, or fast, and reds, trout and flounder love it.

Fly-fishing also is productive. Weedless epoxy flies (Spoon Flies are excellent) and small bent-back bucktail streamers that imitate crabs are favorites. Muted colors such as brown, black, dirty orange, green and dark red produce best.

No matter which “school” of flats-fishing thought is pursued, there's little question that the best action is found during very low, and/or, very high tides. Thus, full and new

moon phases are preferred. Also, strong winds, either east or west, can produce very low or high tides, and resulting good flats fishing. Watch for storms passing by offshore. Resulting high water can produce outstanding flats action.

If you're new to the Fernandina flats area, it's good to look things over at low tide. Launch your boat in downtown Fernandina at the "city dock" marina. Straight across (northwest) is the entrance to the Bells River and Lanceford Creek. The Bells is particularly good, and take special note of large mud and oyster bar flats that extend well out from marsh grass, especially around Little Tiger Island (east side of the Bells River).

The Tiger Island area (located farther north) also is good and is most accessible from the Jolly River, which feeds into Cumberland Sound. Access to the Jolly River is available by running north out the Amelia River into Cumberland Sound, then skirting north and slightly west toward Georgia. The first large river on the west shore is the Jolly River. There also are some small creeks along the west shore feeding Cumberland Sound that have good flats. Access into them is difficult at very low tides, but they draw lots of redfish and some heavy flounder.

Joseph Creek feeds the Amelia River south of Cumberland Sound and north of the entrance into the Bells River. This little creek can hold redfish and flounder, and I've had excellent sea trout fishing at its mouth. Tarpon can be caught there, too, during falling tides. Tarpon rarely are caught on Fernandina flats, however. Instead, they're found in deep holes adjacent to flats. Sometimes they'll hit jigs and plugs, but dead or live menhaden and/or mullet are most productive for tarpon when they're here — which will be in a couple months