

THE ART OF FLY FISHING

WRITTEN BY Anna Jones • PHOTOS BY Mark and Lisa Staff

“LOOK OVER THERE! THEY’RE COMING TOWARD US!” FUZZY EXCLAIMED AS I WHIPPED MY HEAD AROUND TOWARD HIS POINTED FINGER AND TRIED NOT TO GET TANGLED IN THE YARDS OF FLY FISHING LINE AT MY FEET. “SEE THAT V? THAT’S A PUSH. THAT’S WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT!”

I squinted my eyes at the glassy blue waters of Skull Creek, a tributary of the Calibogue Sound and a little sister of the May River, and noticed the water ripple in a shallow v-shape. I looked over at Fuzzy, and he was about jump out of his skin with excitement. He deftly arranged the fishing line, took it in his left hand, and then quickly extended his right arm slightly behind his shoulder, swiftly casting the fly rod backward and then forward so that the line made a beautiful, graceful arch as it flew through the air and softly landed in the water. “Now, we wait,” Fuzzy said.

When I pitched the idea of doing a “beginner’s guide to fly fishing” as a story for *The Bluff*, I never thought it would be so confusing or so difficult. I’m not a natural sportswoman by any stretch of the imagination, but I can usually follow directions at least. But what happens when directions are not enough? How do you learn something that you have to feel to know how to do? How do you learn a skill that, when honed over time and done correctly, is the equivalent of an artist at work? How do you learn an art? That, I quickly learned, is both the beauty and frustration of fly fishing.

DAY ONE

If you don’t know of him already, Fuzzy Davis is a bit of an institution in these parts. Although he originally hails from Tennessee, he is as synonymous with the Lowcountry outdoors as pluff mud and good, salty oysters. Fuzzy has fished the waters in and around the Bluff for over 25 years, and he intimately understands the abundant marine wildlife unique to the Lowcountry. He’s as salty as, if not saltier than, those good May River oysters.

Fuzzy was thrilled when I asked him to show me the fly fishing ropes around the Bluff, and we set a date to traverse the saltwater and freshwater fisheries in the area. Our first outing was on Skull Creek, a great place to catch redfish in the winter, according to Fuzzy. In lower tide, the redfish congregate for protection against the bottlenose dolphin, staying in shallow water so they can quickly escape the pesky dolphin. What they can’t escape, hoped Fuzzy, is our strategically-cast fly.

After we reached the cozy little cove selected by Fuzzy for its teeming wildlife, Fuzzy picked up a fly rod, attached a brown, fuzzy fly to the end of the line, and then stepped to the bow of the boat. “Learning how to cast is similar to learning to drive. Just remember, ‘10 and 2,’” Fuzzy said. “Imagine a big clock in front of you. You will cast the rod forward at ‘10,’ and backward at ‘2.’ ‘10 and 2,’ ‘10 and 2,’” he said as he masterfully cast the rod forward and back, making the delicate line fly overhead in an elongated S-shape. He let the line extend its full length backward one more time before forcefully, yet gently, casting the line forward and letting the fly land softly on the surface of the water.

Fuzzy made it look so easy.





“All right, you’re up!” he exclaimed, as he and his eyes smiled at the same time. I joined him on the bow, took the rod, and froze.

This rod is pretty heavy, I thought to myself. And, more importantly, *how on earth do I get the line to fly so smoothly and swiftly through the air without getting it hooked on my head?* My mind continued to buzz with questions, but Fuzzy’s good nature comforted me enough to give it a try.

Fuzzy said we would practice a roll cast first, to help me get the fly and line out of the water by rolling the line forward. With the pole in hand, Fuzzy guided my arm backward and then forward very quickly and vigorously, which caused the fly on the line to roll forward with a fast flick. We did it again, and then I saw what he meant about getting the line going; it was suddenly airborne.

“Now remember,” Fuzzy excitedly instructed. “10 and 2! 10 and 2!” I fumbled with the rod, awkwardly whipping it to and fro in a semblance of what I thought was ‘10 o’clock’ and ‘2 o’clock.’ The fly flopped sadly in the water, and Fuzzy and I both began to laugh. “Don’t worry,” Fuzzy

said kindly. “I’ve never gotten out here and had someone new to this cast a perfect cast.”

I continued to practice casting, repeating “10 and 2,” “10 and 2,” over and over to myself. My arm was getting tired, and the misty weather closed in on us. But then I began to feel it; the slight snap of the line when it extended fully at ‘2 o’clock,’ and the same subtle catch of the line when it straightened completely forward. “That’s it! That’s it!” Fuzzy was practically jumping, so pleased with my progress. I looked around at the white blanket of fog covering the murky Lowcountry marsh and thought to myself, *Well, this is kind of fun.*

DAY TWO

Armed with the information from my first fly fishing lesson and the thirst to learn more, I set out with Fuzzy on another excursion, this time in the sparkling blue waters of Palmetto Bluff’s inland waterway system. Fuzzy’s smile was wider than ever as we cruised in the electric boat from Cove Park in the River Road neighborhood towards a series of quiet coves.

“This waterway is really a hidden gem,” Fuzzy remarked as he took in the scenery. “The way it was created has so much structure, perfect for fishing.” ‘Structure,’ I learned, is an important aspect of fishing. The fish are attracted to structure as opposed to open water, and the manner in which the Bluff’s inland waterway was created kept structure at the forefront of its development for that very reason.

We wound around a beautiful corner of land with two giant live oak trees, Spanish moss dangling from their branches, waving gently in the breeze as it so often does at Palmetto Bluff. “Yep, this cove is lookin’ real fishy to me,” Fuzzy said as he shut off the motor. Fuzzy got his fly rod, stepped to the bow of the boat and began casting.

He talked as he cast: “Imagine you have a paintbrush in your hand, and before you let the paint go onto the canvas, you flick your wrist like you are dotting the canvas. Like you are Jackson Pollock,” Fuzzy said. His arm movements were smooth, rhythmic, like a clock pendulum, back and forth, back and forth, the line swirling overhead, simply along for the ride.

When it was my turn to begin casting, he gave me a longer rod and a lighter fly than I had used on our first day. The longer rod was lighter and easier for me to maneuver, and according to Fuzzy, the bass in the waterway like lighter flies. I attempted two roll casts, and then mimicked Fuzzy’s artistic rod strokes and imagined I was Jackson Pollock, dotting my canvas in search of fish. My arm was getting tired again, but I was beginning to understand what felt right and what felt wrong. There isn’t much difference in what a good cast feels like versus what a bad cast feels like, but the difference in the results of a good cast versus a bad one is vast. I noticed Fuzzy ducked a few times.

Fuzzy repositioned the boat near the shade of one of the live oaks because fish prefer shady areas. “They don’t have eyelids!” laughed Fuzzy. I cast my line into the water, and then we practiced “stripping”

the line, luring the fish toward the line by drawing it in with small, quick jerks, until all of the line was almost out of the water and in a circle at my feet. Unlike spin-fishing or conventional fishing, the fly fisherman must strip the line in by hand. So much extra work, I thought to myself. But according to Fuzzy, that’s one of the best parts of fly fishing: by stripping the line by hand, you get to feel each bite. Several times while practicing stripping the line, Fuzzy exclaimed, “Did you

feel that? Did you feel it? I think that was a fish!” And while I felt nothing but the line in my hand, it was so extraordinary to me how intimate fly fishing is between the fisherman (or woman, in my case) and the fish itself.

I practiced casting a few more times, hoping for a bite or two from the waterway fish, but it seemed they smelled a beginner and refused to give in. I handed the rod back to Fuzzy, and let the master get to work. Cast after cast Fuzzy expertly maneuvered the rod back and forth, making the line and fly extend so far forward I couldn’t see the fly anymore. Every time he cast the line and began to strip it, he leaned forward intently, eagerly, waiting for the almost imperceptible bite of a fish on the fly. He turned to me and smiled, “Doesn’t matter if you do this all the time, you still get excited.”

Even though I didn’t catch a fish, I was able to catch a glimpse of some of the most beautiful parts of Palmetto Bluff’s inland waterway and the brackish marshland for which the Lowcountry is so well known. The art of fly fishing is certainly tricky and something that takes both practice and patience. But then

again, isn’t that also true of anything rewarding? If only we could ask Jackson Pollock.

As you know by now, Fuzzy Davis loves to take people fishing. To plan a fishing excursion with Captain Fuzzy, you can call him at 912.547.1464 or email him at FUZZYDAVIS@GMAIL.COM.

“ DOESN’T MATTER IF YOU DO THIS ALL THE TIME, YOU STILL GET EXCITED. ”



WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT LOWCOUNTRY FLY FISHING

WINTER ●

WHAT YOU CAN CATCH: Winter is the best time to fly fish for redfish inshore, with mid-December to mid-March being the prime months. Almost all fishing revolves around low tide. Water is very clear in the winter, so it is possible to sight-cast for redfish in less than two feet of water.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED: The best flies for catching redfish are weighted streamers that are brown and gold in color. Most flies imitate shrimp and crabs, and seven- to nine-weight fly outfits with floating line are ideal.

IDEAL WEATHER CONDITIONS: Light winds between 5 and 10 mph.

SPRING ●

SALTWATER

WHAT YOU CAN CATCH: Late-April and May are the best times to target cobia on the fly in saltwater. In slack tides anglers can sight-cast to cruising cobia, ranging in size from 15 to 50 pounds. Most of the fishing is done in the Broad River and on offshore wrecks and reel.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED: Ten- and 11-weight fly outfits with floating lines are preferred for this type of fishing. Larger yellow and orange streamers work well on cobia.

FRESHWATER

WHAT YOU CAN CATCH: Spring is the best time to target largemouth bass with a fly in freshwater. Largemouth bass at Palmetto Bluff average two pounds, and bass larger than seven pounds are common.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED: Seven- and eight-weight rods with floating lines are preferred. Top water poppers and black or purple streamers are the best choices.

IDEAL WEATHER CONDITIONS: Calm, overcast days are the best for catching largemouth bass.

SUMMER ●

WHAT YOU CAN CATCH: There are quite a few species targeted on the fly during the summer. You can catch bluefish, Spanish mackerel, giant jack crevalle, seatrout, redfish, shark, and even tarpon on the fly during summer months. For freshwater outings, bluegill fish are very active in the summer months and are great for fly fishing as well.

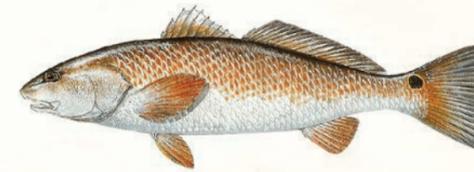
WHAT YOU'LL NEED: Most fish can be targeted with eight- and nine-weight outfits with floating line, but giant jacks and tarpon are fished for with 10- to 12-weight outfits. A wide variety of saltwater poppers and weighted streamers can be used.

KEEP IN MIND: It's important to take into consideration that most open-water casting involves wind. To overcome difficulties with casting into the wind, it is best to practice with headwinds and crosswinds to learn the double-haul casting technique. The double-haul will allow a fly-caster to cast 40 or 50 feet right into a headwind.

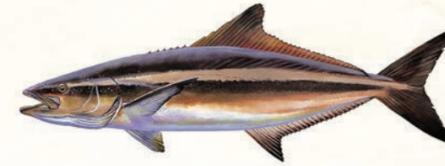
FALL ●

WHAT YOU CAN CATCH: The fall is a great time to target redfish and seatrout on the fly.

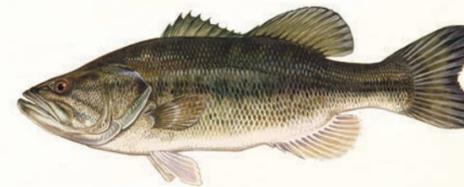
WHAT YOU'LL NEED: Seatrout can be fished with top water poppers as well as a number of saltwater streamers. Chartreuse and white are the best colors for a seatrout fly. Redfish will eat the chartreuse flies but prefer flies that are gold and brown in color. Eight- and nine-weight outfits are perfect for most fishing, but 10-weight outfits may be necessary if targeting bull redfish that can reach weights up to 40 pounds. Floating and sinking fly lines are used, but fast-sink lines should be used for bull redfish.



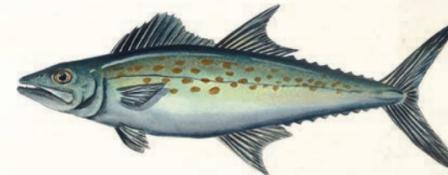
Redfish, *Sciaenops ocellatus* ●●●



Cobia, *Rachycentron canadum* ●



Largemouth bass, *Micropterus salmoides* ●



Spanish mackerel, *Scomberomorus maculatus* ●



Bluegill, *Lepomis macrochirus* ●



Spotted seatrout, *Cynoscion nebulosus* ●●●

PALMETTO BLUFF'S INLAND WATERWAY

By Jay Walea

At Palmetto Bluff we always pride ourselves on being a development that focuses on conservation. The Palmetto Bluff Conservancy believes in maximizing, but still utilizing, our land's natural resources, and we follow this standard from the land to the water.

Palmetto Bluff's inland waterway is monitored on a monthly basis to ensure the best possible water quality to sustain a healthy aquatic ecosystem for freshwater fish. Because of its ideal and clean environment, the inland waterway houses a variety of game fish species that can make for an action-packed day of fishing.

The two main species of freshwater fish living in the waterway are the largemouth bass and the bluegill. Largemouth bass can grow to lengths reaching into the high teens, with the Bluff's biggest largemouth bass weighing in at 12 pounds. Largemouth bass are extremely fun to catch and can be caught with an array of different tackle and methods, including fly-fishing. Bass make delicious table fare as well. The bluegill is considered a "panfish" and is of the sunfish family. This species of fish is a schooling fish and makes for loads of fun catching them on live bait (crickets and worms), small popper flies, and other lures. Fishing for bluegill is a great way to teach kids how to fish. Because bluegill gather in schools, if you can you catch one bluegill, you can usually catch many. This species of fish makes great table fare as well, and when a person is invited to a good old-fashioned Southern fish fry, this is generally the fish served.

With the onset of televised fishing shows starting back in the 1970s, catch-and-release became the norm in the sport of fishing. However, catch-and-release is one of the worst applications we can practice in the inland waterway at the Bluff. Historically, the inland waterway has been crowded with bass due to this procedure. Bass are voracious predators, and their main prey species in the inland waterway are bluegill. When a lagoon becomes overcrowded with bass, they target the bluegill population, which can destroy the intermediate- to small-fry representatives of the population, leaving only the very large bluegill. This is not healthy and can be controlled very easily by keeping the bass down to size classes from 14 inches and below.

Our inland waterway ecosystem is a healthy system that sustains an abundance of life, and the Palmetto Bluff Conservancy will make sure that this system is managed properly to ensure great freshwater outings for years to come.