

Fishing & Hunting

By Richard Seale



Drum beat

In several of our coastal estuaries, bull red drum fishing in August was unusually good. These fish come into the estuaries to spawn. One measurement estimate I have heard is that a mature red drum averages about one pound of weight for each inch of length. My personal history says that estimator is a bit on the high side of reality. Regardless of the estimators, these are big fish for estuary waters.

Young red drum are dubbed puppy drum. The species is regulated as a slot fish, and to keep one legally, it has to measure at least 18 inches but less than 27 inches. Puppy drum are great eating and a lot of fun to catch on light tackle. They are strong swimmers and put up exciting fights. Once above legal-keeping size, they are catch-and-release, but the catching part is very exciting.

Over-slot drum. I liken to hooking a submarine. They will just do what they want, and all you can do is just hang on and get back whenever the fish lets you. Eventually, they will wear down and can be brought to boat side for netting, assuming they don't throw the hook or break the line.

Fishing for big red drum can be a nighttime adventure with live or dead menhaden or mullet. This is a common effort in the Neuse River. Doing anything in a boat at night adds complexity to the fishing that few people have done enough to do well. There are an increasing number of guides who take folks night drum fishing. For safety as well as having a better chance for success, this is a good option for the novice.

Daytime fishing is certainly easier. Balloon rigs with suspended natural baits like crab, menhaden and mullet are good producers. There are special rig configuration rules that must be followed when using natural baits. The objective is to keep the fish from swallowing the bait to the point that removal damages its gills or throat.

Personally, I most enjoy daytime fishing with artificial lures, usually soft plastic rigs with a single 5/0 hook suspended below a popping cork. This adds continuing casting effort, which to me is better than sitting while waiting for a balloon to move off. The trick is to jerk the rod with an action that makes the float splash the water surface. This noise hopefully is sensed by a drum, which comes to investigate what is making the noise. The plastic lure and hook will have been pulled up in the water column with the jerk action but then sinks back down. A big bull drum that has come to the sound hopefully will see the sinking lure and believe it to be a worthy piece of food and strike it.

The strike of a big drum is really a set-the-hook-and-hang-on exercise. We set the drag at about 20 pounds of resistance, which preserves the 30-pound test line and lets the 30- to 50-pound fish pull line, but also uses energy. The fight can last from five minutes to as long as 20 minutes. Keeping the rod tip up so the flex of the rod can act as a shock absorber is important to successfully bringing the fish to the boat.

Important release tips. The longer the fight, the more worn out the fish will be. Once out of the water, the pressure builds to get the fish back into the water. You will want to be seated with the fish across your thighs for a photo. Releasing the fish takes effort. If you just drop it over the side, odds are it will be too tired



Roger Seale releasing a bull red drum properly.—Photos by Richard Seale

and disoriented to keep itself right side up. An upside-down fish will soon be a dead fish. The surest way to keep control of a fish being released is to drop it into a net at the water level, thus avoiding having it slip out of your grip and sink out of reach. You can then get a good hold on the body near the tail with one hand and, keeping it right side up, gently move it forward and backward, putting water through its gills. Usually after a minute or so, the fish will start to flap its pectoral fins and wag its tail, which indicates it is ready to swim off. As you lessen your grip, it will swim off right side up.

In sunlight, the fish's sides are copper gold. Photos show my granddaughter Lauren with her drum and my son Roger releasing one of his drum. Just my immediate family chalked up over 50 catch-and-release drum this year.



Lauren Seale with her bull red drum caught with a popping cork rig.