



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALAN CLEMONS

Battle of the Bulls:

Big Reds

On



DIXIEY

BAR

By David Rainer, Outdoor Writer

Two reasons made it obvious when the tackle-wrecking, 25-pound red drum realized it was attached to the angler by a thin thread of monofilament line – the huge bow in the angler’s rod and the screaming of the drag on the reel.

When fighting these brutes, more commonly known as bull reds, a quality drag mechanism and the proper setting are crucial to success. If the drag catches or is too tight, the big bull wins every time. It’s patience and constant pressure that pays off for the angler. There’s no “horsing” one of these fish to the boat. The ability to dance around the gunwales of the boat is also an asset.

“We call it the Dixey Bar Shuffle,” laughed Capt. Bobby Abruscato of Mobile, who makes a habit of turning anglers on to these Gulf Coast behemoths.

Dixey Bar is THE place for bull reds. The shallow bar juts from Fort Morgan Point into the Gulf of Mexico for a couple of miles. It’s the perfect ambush spot for the mature redfish, which gorge on crustaceans and finfish that get washed out of Mobile Bay.

D-I-X-E-Y

People often misspell the bar, opting for the familiar Dixie. However, the bar’s name comes from tragic circumstances that occurred in September 1860 when the 165-foot clipper ship Robert H. Dixey tried to find safe haven from a hurricane in Mobile Bay. Unfortunately, the ship ran aground on the bar and broke up under the onslaught of hurricane-driven waves. The ship’s namesake captain and 18 sailors were lost in the storm.

Currently, Dixey Bar is well known but not for the site of the tragedy. As redfishing has become more popular, the word has spread about this outstanding asset on the Alabama coast.

“It’s so well known, when I’m out of town fishing a tournament, people ask about Dixey Bar,” said Abruscato, who runs A-Team Fishing Adventures. “It’s brought a lot of people back here for our guide business.

“The neatest thing about Dixey Bar is people are fishing with relatively light tackle, 10- to 12-pound line, and they’re catching trophy redfish, 15 to 30 pounds. People are awed by it. Every drift, you’re

hooking two, three, four fish. At times, they’re catching them at will. The most fun part is when we have multiple fish on and seeing two or three fishermen trying to get around each other on the boat. You’ve got to be really patient. You’re not just going to reel one of these in. I think a lot of times the fish doesn’t know it’s hooked. They’ll swim toward the boat. When they see the boat they take off and will burn off a half a spool of line in about two seconds. I have to change out my equipment regularly. I’ll have several drags ruined after I’ve been bull red fishing.”

Fishing the Bar

Abruscato has refined his tactics for the bull reds, which can be caught almost year-round when the wind allows – a hard south-southeast wind makes it difficult. The bar is a large cone-shaped shoal that runs

90 degrees off Fort Morgan and pinches down to its tip at Sand Island Lighthouse.

“What I do, as I get closer to the bar, I start looking for birds diving and/or slicks,” Abruscato said. “I try to drift to where I see activity. If I don’t see that, I go to the middle of the bar and start drifting. When I get to 12 feet or so, I shut down and start drifting the bar. It’s better on a falling tide, but you can catch them on an incoming. Some people throw anchor out and have luck, but the reds stay on the move so much, I have more success drifting. Plus, when you hook a fish that size, it allows you to move around to fight the fish because you’re fighting the current, too.”

When it comes to bait, Abruscato said the bull reds are not finicky eaters. He’ll take just about any kind of finfish – croakers, bull minnows, pinfish, sweet trout, menhaden (pogies) and small white trout.

“It’s not absolutely necessary to have live bait,” he said. “All it takes is something moving on the end of line. Soft plastics will work. I use Saltwater Gulps a lot when I’m drifting. A lot of times in winter I can’t get live bait, so I go to jigs. The reds will be pretty much toward the bottom, so I’ll use a curly tail or jerk shad bait. After you move it off the bottom, you want it to dart back down to the bottom. The cocahoe-shaped baits don’t get down quite as fast.

“I use half-ounce heads and throw it as far as can. There’s no finesse to it. I don’t



PHOTO COURTESY OF ALAN CLEMONS

Both live bait and artificial lures can be used to catch bull redfish.

throw much of anything with treble hooks because I don't want to hurt the fish. But I will throw some topwater baits at times. I take all but one hook off. If they're feeding on pogies and crabs, they'll hit a topwater bait. Watching redfish knocking the bait out of water to eat it is really cool.

That seems to happen a little more in late fall or early winter, I think maybe because the crabs are on the surface. You'll know when it happens because it looks like somebody dropped a five-gallon bucket in the water when they hit. Sometimes I'll throw spoons, like the Johnson Silver Minnow, when I see fish active on the surface."

When the bull reds are cruising around near the surface, Dixey Bar appears to have a bronze cloud moving around in the 7-foot-deep water. That usually occurs in late May and June when the fish are in a pre-spawn stage.

"They get bunched up when they're getting ready to go offshore," Abruscato said. "When they get there like that, you can throw your socks in there and they'll eat it. It gets wild then. But that's right before they go offshore to spawn. The only time I have hard time catching the fish is when it's really, really hot, like August and early September."

Populations Look Good

Dr. Bob Shipp, head of the Marine Sciences Department at the University of South Alabama, has evidence those spawning aggregates have returned – thanks to the department's underwater camera equipment – after almost being wiped out by boats equipped with purse seines.

"We're starting to see the big aggregates again," Shipp said. "One of our employees at USA, Jason Smith, videoed a huge school. They were out trying to get red snapper footage and our video camera has sonar. He picks up structure. It's a moving mass and he flew a camera into it, and it turned out to be a massive school of big red drum. I don't know exactly how many fish were in the school, but it was thousands and they were from 10 to 20 pounds apiece.

"That video is very significant for two reasons. It's the first time since the moratorium on catching red drum in federal waters that we've had actual demonstrable proof that the aggregates are coming back. Also, that spot where the video was shot was almost exactly where the liquified natural gas facility was proposed."

Shipp said the fishing on Dixey Bar is an indication that the redfish stocks are in much better shape.

"It's obvious red drum stocks are

coming back," he said. "They are abundant on Dixey Bar. You almost never go out and not catch one. If the weather is halfway decent, you should have luck on Dixey Bar."

Alabama has a slot limit on redfish of 16 and 26 inches with a bag limit of three fish, one of which may be over 26 inches.

"Inshore populations along the five Gulf Coast states look very good," said Vernon Minton, Director of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources' Marine Resources Division. "The offshore population is still sort of a question. We haven't had the funds to do a study to characterize that population. Everybody assumes that with no harvest in federal waters the population should be in better shape. The population of fish seems to be good, but there's a big gap in populations. We had young fish and old fish. That's the reason we wanted more fish to enter offshore population. Now we are meeting or exceeding escapement rates.

"Overall, certainly the inshore population is a success story. But 15-20 years ago it wasn't a popular fish. Then came blackened redfish and now the tournament series. But I do think slot limits and bag limits are working."

Catch and Release the Big Ones

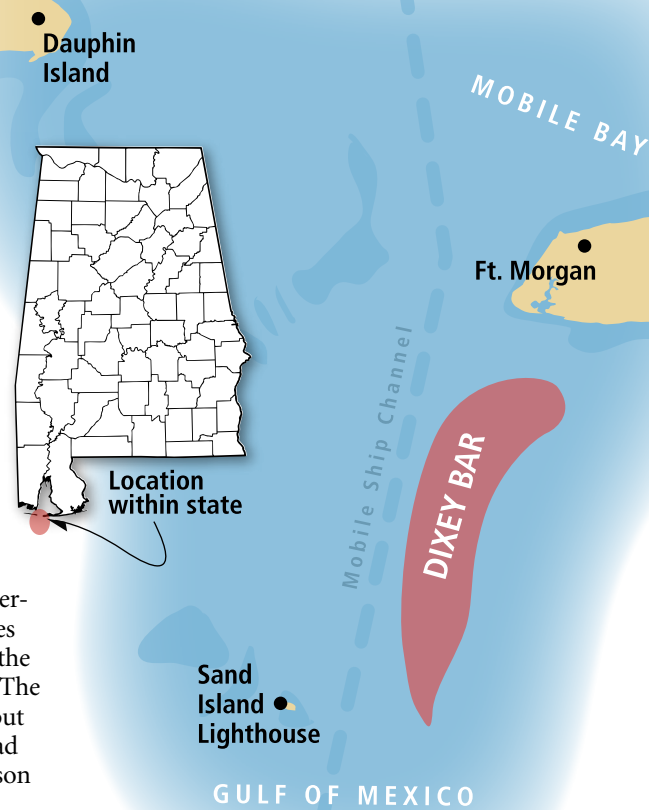
All three agree that the bull reds provide far better value as a fighting fish rather than as table fare.

"Large fish are not that good to eat," Minton said. "Hooking mortality is really not a factor, so it's a nice species to catch and release. These fish are extremely hardy. We've had the same fish tagged four or five times."

Abruscato said he doesn't allow any fish over 26 inches to be kept on his fleet of three inshore boats. "Even though you can legally keep one, they're not really food quality," Abruscato said. "Those fish are 10-30 years old. Those are the ones that make the babies. It's senseless to keep one. It's a great fishery, but it's not an endless resource.

"As legendary as Dixey Bar is, it kills me to see one killed. It takes at least 10 years to replace one of those fish. Hardy fish, but they need to be handled with care.

"I'd like to see Alabama go to something like they have with the tarpon tag – maybe a \$10 tag to keep one of the fish over 26



Bull reds can be caught almost year-round on Dixey Bar, a shallow area off the coast of Fort Morgan.

inches in case you break the state record (43 pounds)."

Shipp echoed: "There's not much food value when they get that big. The ones inside the slot limit are OK. The slot fish haven't gotten tough and fishy. Big ones are not worth cleaning. And they're just too much fun to fight. People are catching them on fly rods, regular bait, just about anything. With the problems we've got coming up with red snapper, it's nice to have another species to fill in the gap." **DA**

VIEW REDFISH VIDEO

Underwater video of redfish taken by the Marine Sciences Department at the University of South Alabama www.usouthal.edu/marinesciences/video.htm

SALTWATER FISHING

Learn more about Alabama's saltwater species, rules and regulations www.outdooralabama.com/fishing/saltwater