

Premature Dehookulation

A Condition Affecting Millions of Shallow-Water Redfish Anglers

By Captain Tommy Thompson

It's happened to most of us and it's nothing to be embarrassed about. It's an easily preventable affliction.

Imagine this situation:

It's daybreak and you've poled your boat up onto a rocky Gulf flat into about 2 feet of water. The wind is light and variable at 3kts and the tide is falling. The sun is still too low to see the redfish, but you know they're there, just waiting for an unlucky mullet to swim within reach. You're casting topwater plugs. Today it's a Corky Mullet, but it could easily be a Top Dog, a Yo-Zuri Crystal Minnow or a Chug Bug. As the tide falls, a few tails are showing up, but they're just out of your visual range. A few swirls in the water show that you've spooked a couple of nice 30" fish. They're there, and you're ready. Anticipation. Sweaty palms. Your vision sharpens. A tail flips up just inside your range and you make your cast. Perfect--just a few yards ahead of and beyond the fish. The plug lands quietly with a minimum of splash and you begin dragging it towards the path of the big red. As it passes, she makes a turn for the plug—first a big gulp, then a second swirl and that telltale 'hump' of wake...and you try to set the hook. But the fish's mouth is wide open and you've pulled the plug away from her, spooking her into the next county!

Oh, well, the story started pretty nicely, and I've got a few tips to make more happy endings while fishing for redfish in shallow water using topwater plugs.

To begin, think about how a redfish feeds on the flats. I don't think the fish are truly comfortable in less than about 18" of water and tend to move at that depth through an area as the tide falls. As the tide gets to it's low point, they stop moving offshore and mill around until the tide begins to rise and then head in on the rising tide. I think they move faster on the rising tide, heading for the shorelines and take less time to feed. Therefore, the falling tide is when redfish feed best on the shallow flats of the Gulf Coast. On the sand bars of the East Coast I think they feed on both rising and falling tides equally, as they seem to be traveling rather than foraging.

Redfish, like their cousins (yes, their cousins) the Sea Trout, don't really like to work too hard for their dinner.

Drifting lazily with the falling tide while snacking on crustaceans is easier than swimming to-and-fro, looking for a tasty mullet dinner to ambush. But they just can't resist the sight (and sound, particularly) of a mullet imitation as it comes past. That's why rattling, splashing plugs are so successful. Yes, there are those who rely heavily on Johnson Spoons and DOA Swimming Mullet, but give me that topwater strike any day! There's nothing quite like it.

But to make that topwater strike play into your hands (and cooler), you've got to calm down and take your time. It's almost like a slow-motion movie. You see the strike begin to happen—the swirl, the gulp, the first miss, the 'hump' of water and then you relax—and let that big red make another pass at your plug. You don't try to set the hook, you let her take that plug down to her crusher plates, close her mouth, and hook herself. If you're not sure about the hookup, now is the time to set the hook, but you've almost always got the fish solidly by now. That's why reds are such popular targets for fly fishermen—the fish just open their mouths and inhale the fly, and by doing so, it can't help from being hooked as the line is tightened. Also, according to my *Team Lucky Dog* partner, Rick Davidson, redfish hookups are harder on topwater plugs as their mouths are bottom-oriented (Trout hookups are easier as they tend to feed more towards the surface and have larger mouths.).

Good, solid topwater hookups on big redfish (and trout, as they are more fearless attackers of plugs) are what make inshore fishing exciting to me. The proper tools, such as Fluorocarbon leaders, light line, good rods and well-sharpened hooks, are important. Equally important is the proper frame of mind and understanding of the fish's feeding habits. If the bait doesn't move or look natural, they won't eat it. If it's too hard to get to, they won't eat it.

And if you dehookulate* (pull the hook out) prematurely be assured that you will go home embarrassed.

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* From *The Tommy Thompson Dictionary of Impressive Words Without Meaning*