

PRISTINE PARADISE

Fishing Deep in the Biloxi Marsh

Unexplored, difficult to reach and even harder to navigate, the interior of the Biloxi Marsh is believed to be a major factor in the success of fisheries from the lower Mississippi River Delta, to Lake Pontchartrain, to the Chandeleur Islands.

Capt. Brian Gagnon looked out over the pristine wilderness and inhaled deeply. It was nearly March, a clear afternoon and this was a long awaited breath of fresh spring air. Seated at the stern of a 14-foot skiff, Gagnon could not have been happier. This was just exactly where the Bay St. Louis, Mississippi native wanted to be. As far from civilization as he could get.

"It's hard to believe we haven't seen or heard another boat or motor in three days," he said. "Three days. When was the last time you could say that?"

I silently pondered the question but couldn't respond. I couldn't remember. This was unlike anything I'd ever seen. This was a paradise, as isolated and backcountry as anything on earth. Many an adventurous angler has harbored dreams of finding such an area. But finding such a region in today's world is a rare thing.

Vast schools of fish moved through a twisted maze of wetlands, gorging on a buffet of shrimp, crab and baitfish. The bayous meandered aimlessly, with each twist and turn creating ambush points for

trout and redfish. The pristine waterways ran through countless passes and into interior bays before eventually spilling into even larger nearby bodies of open water.

Spring was in the air. The chill I recalled a week earlier was gone. Longer days warmed the water, driving the speckled trout and redfish to the surface. In a nearby bay off Bayou Biloxi several screeching seagulls hovered over a disturbance on the water. In the middle bays, specks fed aggressively while redfish plowed through the shallows and along grass lines.

Gagnon reached for his chrome MirrOlure She Dog. Although well worn, with deep slashes from recent battles with toothy predators, it was a choice of confidence. Gagnon hit the kill switch, silencing the 15-hp Yamaha and we glided toward a point just ahead. He took aim and launched the walking plug just off of the ambush point.

I watched and listened to the rhythmic snaps of the shiny plug. The lure bobbed back and forth as he worked his rod tip. After a few snaps and pops the She Dog disappeared in a frothy boil of white water and Gagnon held on tightly. He attempted to turn the handle of his baitcaster but to no avail. The bronze monster continued to take 14-pound test, nearly emptying his spool.



"What'd I tell you?" he asked. "Paradise, isn't it? Just don't tell anybody."

"Hold on, I'm an outdoors writer," I reminded him. "This is my job."

Okay. I assured him I'd tell no one. **The Biloxi Marsh**

Here we were in the Biloxi Marsh, certainly not an exclusive or secret fishery. Due south of Pass Christian, MS and some 45 miles east of New Orleans, the Biloxi Marsh has been regarded by generations of anglers as a productive fishery. A fair number of anglers from

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Fishing deep in the Biloxi Marsh - Upper: Capts. Brian Gagnon and Drew Dekle of Southern Way Charters with a pair of marsh reds. Lower: Capt. Gagnon with the Southern Way in the background.

Photos by author

The Biloxi Marsh

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Mississippi and Louisiana do fish the perimeter of the Biloxi Marsh. But not many make it into the heart of the region that includes some 120,000 acres.

"Not many people get up into it this far," he explained. "There're good reasons why they don't."

Gagnon glided a fantastic 30-inch redfish into his landing net. As he removed the hooks he explained just why such a productive region has escaped pressure from thousands of anglers from Louisiana and Mississippi. Perhaps the biggest reason, he said, is that getting here often means a rough trudge across open waters. So most people remain on the outside.

"And the fishing is so good that there's really no reason to venture in any further," Gagnon said as he released the redfish.

He took a push pole and nudged the skiff forward. Eyeballing another disturbance in the water he threw the Mirrolure with the accuracy of a pro quarterback. As it hit the surface he twitched it again and let the plug come to rest.

"Look at that fish right behind it," he said. "Check this out."

On his next twitch a large fish slapped the silver lure nearly two feet in the air.

"That was a trout," he said. "A big one."

The trout didn't come back for another look but we managed to catch five reds, keeping two in the 20-inch range and releasing three others, two that were pushing 30 inches.

An Enigmatic Estuary

The interior of the Biloxi marsh is a unique area. At some point during our extended stay I realized differences in the hundreds, perhaps thousands of fish that I saw moving through. The demeanor of the fish within this area was bold, curious, or perhaps naive.

It didn't occur to me until later that few of the fish here have ever encountered another boat or human before. And they probably have never even seen an artificial lure like the topwaters, spoons and soft plastics we relentlessly chunked in their direction.

Great fisheries are blessed with great features. And the Biloxi Marsh has more than its share. Like inland real estate, location is a major factor here. Its proximity between Lake Borgne and a legendary chain of barrier islands make it a vital sanctuary - a prolific nursing ground for hundreds of marine species.

Yet the interiors remain notoriously underfished. Wherever you're launching from, be prepared for a considerable run.

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Introduction to Wells Daily Fishing Forecast

Tidal Currents are the horizontal movement of tide waters. This horizontal movement is the most vital factor in marine life. Because currents control the movement of fish food, they are the only advance predictable factor in the movement of our gamefish. All the other minor factors which effect the movement of fish can only be determined on a day-to-day basis. It can be determined when and where the most fish movement will occur on any given day. You can decide whether to fish the deeper reefs, the close to shore feeding areas or the passes from the Gulf.

The "why" it works is known to thousands of fishermen who have depended on the Fishing Forecast for 50 years. This explanation is mostly for new (to the Forecast) fishermen but regular users can benefit by reviewing information.

It is essential to understand that fish and their food start moving IN and OUT as soon as a tidal current has gained enough horizontal speed to force them in the direction of its flow.

The time required for a tidal current to build up to a horizontal speed of at least three tenths of a knot (forcing speed) can be from minutes to several hours. For this reason times given in the column, "Starts", can never be correlated to the time of High Tide or Low Tide as given in sections of this book.

The Forecast, therefore, starts with the time when a tidal current has reached necessary speed or Forcing Power to start a movement in the direction indicated, either IN or OUT. The second time figure represents the end of the Forcing Power as the current slows down to slack water time.

Analyzing the two time figures, we start with the first column, the time when movement starts. This time figure compared with the last time on the previous line tells you the length of time since the current moved the fish. If the previous current moved IN, then the fish will still be IN until after starting time on this line. If they were moved OUT on the previous current, then they won't start IN until after this first time figure.

The starting time represents the time when a tidal current has gained speed and force to start movement in the direction indicated. This time figure represents the beginning of a period when you do not have to hunt for your fish. By just being stationed on a known and proven reef or channel leading to or from shallow water, the tidal current will bring the fish to you. (See no. 3 - next column.)

These periods of movement will generally provide the best and fastest action of the day because the schools of fish will be concentrated and will always be

feeding on their moving and exposed food.

Because the best fishing usually occurs each day following the time shown in this starting column, the variations involved are worth studying.

First, a study of flooding or incoming currents shows that the IN movement of fish will be slower and more gradual than the OUT movement on an ebbing current. Fishing will be slower with fairly long intervals between schools of fish feeding their way into the shallow water areas. However, the continuing action should hold you at your fishing spot until this movement has ended.

On the other hand, when a strong current begins to ebb or go OUT, it will move everything in a short period of time. Except when a tide is rated Weak or Very Weak, all the gamefish will be out of shallow water well before the time shown when movement is predicted to end.

The column of Current Speed Ratings designates each current by its strongest speed. Each of these ratings represents a definite speed range. These speed ranges are Very Weak; Weak; Moderate; Good; Strong; Very Strong; and, Extra Strong. A current rated Good, for instance, will always have the same strength and speed range regardless of when it occurs, either ebbing or flooding.

It is very important to adjust the times as shown in the Fishing Forecasts to the area where you are fishing. The times given are for approximately the center of the various bays. Areas nearer the Gulf passes have movements starting earlier so subtract time from that shown. Fishing areas further into the Bays will have movements starting later than the times given.

CURRENT MOVEMENT

DAY	DIR	STARTS	ENDS	STRENGTH
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
TUE	I	05:30am	09:50am	Good
	1 O	01:15pm	02:35pm	Very Weak
	O	10:20pm	04:20am*	V Strong
GOOD TO MID-MORNING (6)				
WED	I	06:35am	11:15am	Strong
	2 O	11:15pm	05:25am*	V Strong2
MORNING VERY GOOD				

1. Day and Date
2. Direction of current. (I) Incoming or Flooding. (O) Outgoing or Ebbing.
3. Approximate time that current will exceed 3 knot
4. Approximate time that current will slow below 3 knot.
5. Prediction of current strength.
6. Forecast of overall prospect for the day.
7. A "1" following the strength rating indicates a lower low tide than usual; a "2" indicates a higher high.
8. *. Current starts the previous day.

FLORIDA GULF

Apalachicola Bay to Captiva Pass

Forecast Adjustment Times

Florida Reefs to Midnight Pass

Point Ybel (0.4 mi. nw)	-1:00
Captiva Pass	-1:20
Gasparilla Pass	-1:45
Venice Inlet	-2:20
Midnight Past (ent.)	-1:50

Sarasota Bay

Big Sarasota Pass	-2:10
New Pass	-3:00
Longboat Pass	-2:55
Cortez (N. of bridge)	-1:25

Tampa Bay

Tampa Bay Ent.	Same
Mullet Key Channel (ent.)	-0:15
Passage Key Inlet	-1:15
Bunces Pass	-1:00

Tampa Bay (cont'd)

Cats Point	-2:55
Sunshine Skyway Bridge	-0:15
Joe Island (1.8 mi. NW)	-0:20
Pinellas Pt. (0.5 mile SE)	-1:30
Ross Island	+1:10
Courtney Campbell Pkwy	+0:45
Catfish Point (1.3 mi. east)	+0:30

Boca Ciega Bay

Pass-a-Grille Channel	-55
Blind Pass (north end)	-1:40
Johns Pass	-1:45
The Narrows	-1:00

Apalachee Bay

St. Marks River	-1:00
Four Mile Pt.	-0:40
St. Marks	+0:50

To adjust for your fishing area, add (+) or subtract (-) hours and minutes shown above for the area you plan to fish from the Forecast time. No attempt should be made to compare the time of high or low tide, shown below, to the times of current presented in the Fishing Forecast.

Tide Table Adjustment Times

	HIGH	LOW
Cape Romano	-1:22	-1:06
Naples (outer coast)	-2:04	-2:07
Estero Bay		
Little Hickory I.	-0:58	-1:05
Carlos Pt.	-1:08	-1:28
Matanzas Pass	-1:10	-1:34
San Carlos Bay		
Point Ybel	-1:50	-1:12
Punta Rassa	-1:01	-1:19
Caloosahatchee River		
Iona Shores	+1:08	+1:40
Cape Coral Bridge	+1:15	+2:02
Fort Myers	+2:08	+2:44
St. James City, Pine I.	-0:30	-0:44
Captive Island (outside)	-2:20	-2:28
Captive Island (P. I. Sd)	-0:46	-0:20
Redfish Pass	-0:55	-1:14
Matlacha Pass	+0:43	+1:28
Punta Gorda		
Charlotte Harbor	+1:06	+1:27
Shell Pt.-Peace River	+1:52	+2:30
Englewood, Lemon Bay	-0:57	-0:40
Venice Inlet	-2:02	-1:38
Sarasota Bay		
Sarasota	-1:38	-0:58
Cortez	-2:00	-1:25

	HIGH	LOW
Tampa Bay		
Egmont Key (channel)	-2:27	-2:24
Anna Maria	-2:07	-2:31
Bradenton, Manatee.	-1:24	-0:55
Redfish Point	-0:30	+0:14
Mullet Key Channel	-2:22	-1:58
Shell Point	+0:08	+0:17
Point Pinellas	-0:22	-0:29
St. Petersburg	Same	
Hillsborough Bay	+0:07	+0:26
Boca Ciega Bay		
Pass-A-Grille Beach	-1:34	-1:30
Gulfport	-1:32	-1:05
John's Pass	-2:14	-2:04
Clearwater	-1:50	-1:35
Anclote Keys, Sound	-1:47	-1:46
Tarpon Springs	-0:50	-0:41
St. George Sound		
Dog Island (west end)	+0:07	+0:06
Carrabelle River	+0:35	+0:31
St. George Island (east)	-0:15	+0:06
Apalachicola Bay		
Cat Point	+1:20	+1:27
Apalachicola	+2:00	+2:44
Lower Anchorage	+1:43	+2:09
West Pass	+1:33	+2:17

The daily tide tables are to be used only as a depth of water guide and have no correlation to the maximum times of current. To adjust for your fishing area, add (+) hours/minutes or deduct (-) hours/minutes shown above to the times of high or low as indicated by the tide tables.

The Biloxi Marsh

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Louisiana anglers will generally launch from Slidell or Hopedale. From Slidell it's a rough 15-mile ride across Lake Borgne. This relatively shallow water body that links Lake Pontchartrain to the Gulf of Mexico can be brutal with bow busting cross chops.

LDWF biologist Brian Lezin said a handful of Biloxi Marsh veterans take a protected interior run by launching from Hopedale, crossing the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet (MRGO), then entering the western edge of the marsh. However, anyone entering the maze from the west end needs to be intimately familiar with the area.

"You've got to know the area," he said. "It is like a maze and one can get lost very easily."

Anglers must be prepared with a marine radio because cell phone service is spotty, at best. They should also have all required safety equipment, a post-Katrina map and, of course, a push pole.

Moving Out

Gagnon has spent much of his life learning the diverse environs and the myriad variables that drive fish. As a teenager he covered the Jourdan and Pearl River systems, their tributaries and passes, to the back bays and marsh interiors. By the age of 25 he was working on charter boats that made multi-day excursions to the barrier islands. By the time he was 30, he earned a position with one of the most prestigious fishing fleets on the northern Gulf Coast - Southern Way Charters.

He considers the Biloxi Marsh as one of the last great, undiscovered regions on the Gulf Coast.

In March, as days become longer and water temps rise, trout migrate from the marsh interiors. Inherently driven by a need to procreate, they head to more saline environs, where their reproductive odds are highest. In general, sexually mature speckled trout will move out of the marshes as water temps near 70 degrees. Spawning typically occurs late afternoon to midnight with a peak around sunset.

Harry Blanchet, with the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries (LDWF), said spawning peaks around the full moon and the new moon of March and April, which happens to be the periods of greatest tidal flow. Fertilized eggs are carried back into the sanctuary of the marshes where a fortunate few will develop into post-larval creatures and ultimately juvenile fish. Their parents seem to somehow know that a strong tidal flow increases their offspring's chances of survival.

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The Biloxi Marsh

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But the burning question among anglers is where exactly do these fish go to spawn?

Gagnon believes Biloxi Marsh trout move to the mouths of major passes and will then travel considerable distances to open water, even making a trek of some 20 miles to the barrier islands, if necessary. Meanwhile, Capt. Drew Deckle believes the vast majority of the trout here remain in the Biloxi Marsh, moving into the interior bays to reproduce.

Interesting theories, but who is right?

It's difficult to say because fisheries science is influenced by so many variables. Biologists contend that Gagnon and Deckle could both be right. The distances that trout will move, in general, is dictated by the amount of rainfall the region has had in the late winter. Anglers fishing the marshes in spring should keep this in mind. A greater influx of fresh water will drive the fish further out. With less rainfall, trout are more likely to remain within the interiors of the marsh.

"One thing is sure," Blanchet said. "They won't go any further than they need to."

It's also interesting to note that male trout tend to spawn more often than females. Female are capable of spawning every few days. Between spawns, the fish, particularly big females, will re-enter the marsh or estuary to fatten up for their next spawning opportunity.

"There have been days when winds have kept us off the islands so we fish back in the marsh," Dekle said. "We've caught some monsters coming inside to feed between the spawns."

Biloxi Marsh redfish are much easier to figure out. The place is literally teeming with redfish under 27 inches. Reds will usually remain within the confines of the marsh until they are over the 27-inch mark. The big spawners then head offshore to join their peers for the love fest.

"The reds within the marsh are driven mostly by food," Blanchet said. "You really don't have as much of the sex thing going on (with smaller redfish)."

Mastering the Marshes

Gagnon recalled some of his earliest trips here in bay boats, watching huge speckled trout and redfish feed back in the shallows, but he was unable to access the areas.

"It was crazy. We'd get in as far as we could but our casts would always seem to fall short. It was frustrating," he said. "I'm sure a lot of people have experienced that."

Realizing the vast potential and the inherent problems, Gagnon and the Hattiesburg, Mississippi owners of

Southern Way Charters figured out a way to comfortably and safely put clients into this slice of unadulterated paradise. Based in Long Beach, they take a longer but safer ride, avoiding most of the problems with Lake Borgne. They dock the mothership, essentially a luxury floating condominium, and employ a fleet of custom shallow draft fiberglass skiffs to access the interiors.

"As the days get longer and the water temperatures get closer to that magic number, you can actually watch schools of fish move toward the passes," he said. "Most of the time the water is so clean in here you can see it happening." Gagnon said.

Determined to see it for myself I

decided to watch from the upper deck of the *Southern Way* if water conditions remained favorable.

The next day the water remained clear. So when the group left to fish, I climbed up to the upper deck and watched school after school of fish move out of the twisted maze of wetlands. After several hours I felt like I knew where they were headed and why.

It was the chance of a lifetime - a rare opportunity to witness the migratory behavior of trout and redfish. I'd written about this seasonal ritual for years, but never had the chance to look into the waters and see it with such clarity.

There's no doubt going deep into the marsh is well worth the extra effort. GCF

OFFSHORE FORECAST

On the scale, the figure 10 represents average speed and time duration of approximately three hours of movement. This movement is followed by a three hour period of diminishing current speed and feeding activity.

Each number above, or below the average number 10 represents an increase or decrease of 5 percent in strength of flow and fifteen minutes in additional or less time.

As examples, a speed rating of 15 shows a current flowing 25 percent stronger than average and lasting one hour and fifteen minutes longer than average currents. This 15 rating will have four hours and fifteen minutes

activity out of each six hour period of tidal cycle for that day. A speed rating of 6 shortens the time of activity by one hour and has 20 percent less strength than an average current.

The longer and stronger current action always indicates the better fishing days offshore because of increased bait movement.

There is no clearly defined line to indicate where the rotary currents become on-shore tidal currents. It is generally accepted that waters over 5 fathoms (30 feet deep) will have rotary currents.

For additional information visit this page on the Gulf Coast Fisherman website: www.gulffishing.com/rotary.html.

APRIL

DATE	DAY	SPEED
1	TUE	10
2	WED	10
3	THU	10
4	FRI	9
5	SAT	8
6	SUN	8
7	MON	11
8	TUE	12
9	WED	13
10	THU	14
11	FRI	13
12	SAT	12
13	SUN	11
14	MON	10
15	TUE	10
16	WED	9
17	THU	8
18	FRI	7
19	SAT	8
20	SUN	9
21	MON	10
22	TUE	10
23	WED	11
24	THU	11
25	FRI	11
26	SAT	10
27	SUN	10
28	MON	10
29	TUE	10
30	WED	10

MAY

DATE	DAY	SPEED
1	THU	9
2	FRI	8
3	SAT	8
4	SUN	9
5	MON	11
6	TUE	12
7	WED	13
8	THU	13
9	FRI	12
10	SAT	11
11	SUN	10
12	MON	9
13	TUE	9
14	WED	8
15	THU	7
16	FRI	8
17	SAT	9
18	SUN	10
19	MON	10
20	TUE	11
21	WED	11
22	THU	11
23	FRI	10
24	SAT	10
25	SUN	10
26	MON	10
27	TUE	9
28	WED	8
29	THU	7
30	FRI	7
31	SAT	8

JUNE

DATE	DAY	SPEED
1	SUN	9
2	MON	11
3	TUE	11
4	WED	12
5	THU	13
6	FRI	12
7	SAT	11
8	SUN	10
9	MON	10
10	TUE	8
11	WED	7
12	THU	6
13	FRI	6
14	SAT	7
15	SUN	8
16	MON	9
17	TUE	10
18	WED	11
19	THU	12
20	FRI	12
21	SAT	11
22	SUN	10
23	MON	10
24	TUE	10
25	WED	8
26	THU	7
27	FRI	8
28	SAT	9
29	SUN	9
30	MON	10