

TILLER LIFE • LOUISIANA REDS • TEXAS SURF • STRIPERS ON TOP

SHALLOW WATER ANGLER

THE HEART OF INSHORE SALTWATER FISHING

FIND YOUR ESCAPE

TACTICS, TACKLE
& INSPIRATION TO
TRANSFORM
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POLE POSITION



Poling requires careful study of the surroundings. Guides must consider and compensate for factors such as wind, tide, sun angle, and flat layout.



PLAN AHEAD TO GIVE YOUR ANGLER THE BEST SHOT AT WARY REDFISH AND OTHER FLATS TARGETS.

BY CAPT. HUNTER BACH

SPOT-AND-STALK SIGHT FISHING is a team sport. Success is feasible in a solo scenario, but the team unit is far more effective at handling adversity. The position you may find yourself in, perched atop the poling platform, pushpole in hand, is due as much reverence as the angler has in the bow. If the target is not within casting distance, or spooked the moment it is, the game is over before the fish even sees a bait.

On the surface, the task is a simple one, yet the sensitivity of a fish's lateral line is one of the most overlooked aspects of flats fishing. For many anglers suspecting a fly or lure, leader size, or length of lead to be the problem, the fish, while apparently not alarmed, is well aware of your presence and just isn't yet at the threshold of flight. While it is the angler's job to seal the deal, it is the poler's job to maneuver the boat with stealth and forethought so the angler is in range and the fish is unaware.

Approaching fish via pushpole is a reactionary stalk. Note what the fish are allowing and what they're alerted to. You may find you can get very close from upwind, or you have to move so slowly to get in range

that you have to pole into the wind to better control your speed. When a fish is spotted at a distance, it is easy to let your excitement get the better of you and rush into range. Redfish, bones, and other tailing species are finicky as all get out but this often manifests itself in the phrase: "Man, they tail like crazy till we're in range." Although it is very true that the fish simply have an uncanny sense for nearby anglers, much of the time it is the man on the pole taking for granted the fish's sensitivity to pressure waves. The speed of approach, wind/current, casting angle, glare line, and stopping point need to be accounted for to ensure the highest chance for success.

FINDING YOUR STEALTH SPEED

Every skiff is going to pole a little differently. The first thing you want to address on any skiff you are poling is the speed at which you can maintain your inertia consistently while moving with the absence of any wake. Poling in as straight of a line as possible, when covering ground, is most effective. This speed is best for looking for fish but in

many modern skiffs, may be too quick to present your angler effective shots. Keep in mind the distance and time it will take your boat to dissipate its inertia naturally. Stopping the boat with your pole is a last resort and often shortens the window of time to make a shot before your target spooks. It is the acceleration or deceleration of your skiff that alerts fish to your presence.

If you imagine the cockpit of your skiff filled with 6 inches of water as you stop, accelerate, or turn, then you would see what the fish feel. If the adjustments are too quick, that water will slosh to one side of the boat, or rush forward. As you pole, the water around your skiff reacts the same way thus necessitating smooth action. Unlike the imaginary water in your skiff's cockpit, the water atop the flats is not contained. Turning the boat, although slow enough to not create a visible push of water, is still noticeable to the alert fish of pressured Florida waters. If a fish can feel the small legs of a shrimp tickling the water four feet away, you can imagine the impact minute movements a skiff would have even at 60 feet.

THE APPROACH

You want to aim your skiff directly at your stopping point. The imaginary point is not necessarily when your boat stops, but when the inputs you have introduced terminate. The wind or current may still be moving your skiff, but to a fish, it is now equivalent to driftwood instead of a potential predator with directional capabilities.

Whether poling or drifting, many people make the mistake of aiming right for the fish. This shortens the window for casting as you end up right on top of the fish if the first cast isn't quick and effective.

If the fish is laid up, you'll want to reach that point where your inertia terminates within range of the fish, and if the fish is moving, you'll want to come to a stopping point out of casting range and allow the fish to come to you. Stopping while out of range gives you a better chance to make a correction in boat placement if the fish's angle of approach changes before he is close enough for a shot.

If a fish gets past you, don't chase. Poling at right angles to the fish, out and around, can be feasible if it is moving slow enough but poling after a fish in its own wake is essentially impossible without spooking the fish. With wind and current, you may pass your target before getting a good shot. It is best to allow yourself to drift out of range before making any adjustments for another approach.

ADJUSTMENTS

The fewer corrections the better, but the elements or the fish's change in direction can necessitate them. Wind and current can be used to your advantage most of the time. Poling into the elements allows for the utmost skiff control and near-silent stops. However at times, the angle of the sun or glare may make this direction of travel

unsuitable for sight fishing. As mentioned, the inputs you create with the pushpole are much more alerting to a fish than a drifting boat. Poling gently upcurrent or windward of your target, while being wary of where the water you push is heading, and drifting with the elements to a suitable range is very effective. If you pass the fish without getting a good shot and need to turn back, the wind/current will be pulling your pressure waves away from the fish. When you are turning the skiff, in this situation or any other, placing the pole's end ahead of the boat to simultaneously stop and turn the boat works best when the fish is ahead of you (stopping creates pressure behind you) and pushing the boat from an angle astern is best when you have passed the fish (as you push most of the pressure away from your target).

The closer to the bow you place the pole when making an adjustment, the less the skiff will swing when stopping but the sooner the gunnel will make contact with the pole and necessitate another adjustment. Stopping or turning this way is best for close-range shots that have a short clock on them due to proximity. The farther back from the bow you place the pole, the more the skiff will swing and push water. Swinging the boat away from your target when stopping or wiping off some speed keeps the pressure waves away from the fish. Once you've stopped, you can make the minor directional adjustments more delicately and begin your approach.

EXISTING WITH THEM

When you find yourself constantly bumping fish or getting to an area you know has a good population density of spooky fish, the strategy of existing with them can be very effective. For those that also deer hunt, the tactic may be more familiar to you with the term still hunting. The objective is to bring your skiff to a stop or as slow of a speed as can be managed in the wind or current. If you don't see a fish after a minute or so, move around a boat length with a gentle push, drifting to the next stopping point. If you can see the fish, by existing with them, motionless, you take advantage of the shots that present themselves rather than running one down.

In this way you manage the area better, keeping most fish that aren't hooked happy and unaware. This tactic has proven to work especially well

with the redfish of Tampa Bay and Mosquito Lagoon where angler interaction has created particularly cunning fish. Take the time not to "pressure" the fish with your skiff before pressuring the fish with a presentation and your bite ratio is guaranteed to go up. [SWA](#)

About the Writer: Captain Hunter Bach is a professional fishing guide and outdoors writer who focuses on Mosquito Lagoon and the intracoastal waters of New Smyrna Beach, FL. He specializes in fly and light tackle fishing for redfish, seatrout and snook.



Redfish aren't as spooky as permit, but necessitate a tactical approach.