

# TIDE

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# Into the WILDERNESS

*The Biloxi Marsh is a remote fishing paradise that rewards anglers who make the journey.*

Text and Photos by Al Rogers



*The redfish are plentiful year-round. Speckled trout fishing seems to peak in the spring and summer, and the fishing is generally phenomenal whenever weather permits.*



**T**HE INTERIORS OF THE BILOXI MARSH are a place of solitude. There are no signs that man has ever been here. Any developments or signs of civilization are strictly not allowed. Within the dense vegetation and under every surface are living, breathing kingdoms. Although they are rarely seen, their presence is well established by their noises. There is intermittent buzzing of

We boarded one of the skiffs, fired up the 20-horsepower outboard, and headed down Bayou Biloxi, a main artery near the perimeter of the marsh.

this place is overwhelming. It can bring deep feelings of isolation, insignificance and indifference. This place can consume you.

From the aft deck of the 72-foot yacht *Southern Way*, I stood next to Bob Wilkins, a Hattiesburg, Mississippi cardiologist and one of three partners who run Southern Way Charters which offers unique expeditions into the Marsh.

"This place still amazes me every time," Wilkins said. "This is just like it was when I was here with my father a long time ago."

At the stern of the stately mother-ship was a fleet of six 14-foot, custom fiberglass skiffs. From the live-wells to the storage compartments, even the ice chests, everything was downsized to max out the available space. Anticipating a duck hunt on the last two days of our stay, the crew brought along a mud boat, a go-devil, a flats boat, a 19-foot bay boat, and of course, Casey, Wilkins' beloved black Lab.

We boarded one of the skiffs, fired up the 20-horsepower outboard, and

of this place. And we knew that so many people are missing it."

Our guide was Capt. Brian Gagnon, of Gulfport. Gagnon, who multi-tasks as chef, skipper and guide, is one of the few who know the Biloxi Marsh, the barrier islands, and everything in between. He said the commute to the Biloxi Marsh should be a big consideration for anyone contemplating a trip to the region.

"Unless you're coming by a float plane, you have to cross areas of big, open water," he said. "Lake Borgne, the Breton, Chandeleur, and Mississippi sounds are all capable of causing mischief."

And that, he said, is only where the potential for adventure begins.

#### MORE TO COME

Unexplored, difficult to reach, and even harder to navigate, the Biloxi Marsh ensures the continuance of a healthy fisheries on parts of the Mississippi and Louisiana coasts. Shrimp, juvenile fish and crustaceans



inspects, an occasional chirping of birds, the pop of gamefish crashing the surface, the low-frequency groans of reptiles and other indigenous animals. This symphony of sounds fills the night.

Much like the sea, the enormity of

headed down Bayou Biloxi, a main artery near the perimeter of the marsh.

"All of us fished here at one time or another," said Raymond Whitehead, a partner and orthopedic surgeon, also of Hattiesburg. "We knew the potential

enjoy better odds of survival under the cover of grass and root systems, shelves and oyster shell banks.

Our skiff navigated turns and bends, across duck ponds and through trenasses so narrow we barely made it





school of panicked bait fish scrambling for their lives.

Their wish list was simple but specific — it had to have diverse terrain capable of supporting multiple ecosystems, particularly an area with many shallow duck ponds.

through. We stopped at the mouth of a channel, where fish would become bottle-necked and forced through on the falling tide. With the anchor set, it was time to fish.

Gagnon tossed a simple weedless spoon while Whitehead selected a plastic, bouncing it slowly over the mud and shell bottom. The captain aimed straight at the mouth and fired a per-

fect shot. He raised, then lowered his rod tip, allowing the gold spoon to flutter naturally on its fall.

The big redfish was waiting, probably thinking of all the luck that had just fallen his way. The strike was followed by an eruption of white water about 15 yards from the boat. The captain's rod was tested to the limit as the fish managed to get into the channel, sending a

"I think it's a keeper," he deadpanned as the fish continued taking line.

When it finally came to the surface, the sun bounced off the golden side of a beautiful red drum. The tops of his dorsal fin and tail protruded from the water, and by judging the distance between the two it was easily a 20-pound fish. But as it made a final bid for freedom, the line was cut by a razor sharp oyster shell.

The captain was clearly displeased



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— no one likes to lose a fish like that — but not overly so. He knew there would be more.

### NATURAL LABYRINTH

The Biloxi Marsh is a diverse estuary with many of the natural ingredients commonly found in world-class fishing destinations. Like the nearby barrier islands, these wetlands formed more than 2,000 years ago when the mouth of the Mississippi River was near present-day Hopedale, Louisiana. The marsh is essentially remnants of that ancient river delta.

Southern Way Charters has access to a considerable 5,702-acre tract of pristine wetlands. The redfish are plentiful year-round. Speckled trout fishing seems to peak in the spring and summer, and the fishing is generally phenomenal whenever weather permits. But many clients are drawn to it for the ducks and other waterfowl.

It wasn't by chance that Wilkins and Whitehead were able to acquire such a productive area for their business. Whitehead said much consideration and research was completed before they ultimately made their decision. Their wish list was simple but specific — it had to have diverse terrain capable of supporting multiple ecosystems, particularly an area with many shallow duck ponds.

"Areas like that facilitate grass, crustaceans and shrimp," he said. "Those are the key links in the chain as food sources for the ducks and fish."

It was also important to pick an area of good, navigable waterways to not only provide access, but also ensure healthy habitats for both the fish and waterfowl. But the one factor that cannot be overlooked is the lack of fishing pressure. After a day on the water, it seems like this entire region is your very own coastal fishing theme park.



"Sometimes you can stay out here for five days and not see a boat," said Gagnon. "It's hard to comprehend."

An often overlooked reason the Biloxi Marsh is so under-fished is because of the excellent fishing across the entire region. There are just so many areas much closer to the launches that offer exceptional fishing that people don't always see the motivation to make the trek into the Marsh.

"I mean, if you can catch fish there, there's no reason to come all the way out here," he said. "Making this trip is a big commitment."

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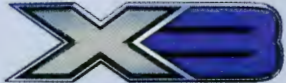
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The Biloxi Marsh is literally a natural labyrinth where many experienced anglers have become lost. First timers and weekenders are not advised to venture out alone or without a knowledgeable co-pilot until they are on very familiar terms with the area. Weather systems can form fast, and there is

boat and the smaller reds in the 5-pound class were destined for the grill that night. The catch was not unusual for this area of the coast, but the unique surroundings make every fish seem special. Wilkins could fish anywhere in the world, but he's never left the one place that holds his heart — the Biloxi



nowhere to hide to get out of a storm. "Old-fashioned" maps are unreliable for this area; GPS tracking and plotting units are highly recommended.

Winter fishing in general, can be tough, but a series of mild winters has had some positive impacts on the Biloxi Marsh region. This may be a factor in the huge numbers of baitfish, shrimp and crabs seen here in the last year.

By the end of our morning, we brought seven fantastic redfish to the

Marsh. After a trip to this beautiful and lonely region, it is easy to see why. ▶

*Al Rogers is an award-winning outdoors writer, photographer and columnist whose work has been published in numerous magazines, newspapers and websites in Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Florida. For information on Southern Way Charters, visit [southernwaycharters.com](http://southernwaycharters.com).*

## PREPARE FOR THE JOURNEY



**A** NGLERS can access the Biloxi Marsh from a number of points, including the Rigolets Marina in Slidell, Hopedale, Shell Beach, Delacroix, and a number of other launches on the east side of the Mississippi River. Southern Way Charters is based in Gulfport (Mississippi) Harbor and, according to managing partner Bart Haddad, plans are in the works for the company to build a floating lodge on site.

If you venture into the Marsh, it is crucial to plan carefully. Bring food and water, appropriate clothing, bug repellent, and waders in winter. Leave a specific float plan. Before you go, either be very familiar with the entire region or hire an experienced guide. Many anglers have gotten lost in the Marsh.

Tops on the list of must-have equipment is a reliable marine radio — do not trust cell phones as service is spotty at best. Make sure all electronics such as GPS or a trip plotter are working properly. These wetlands are basically a complicated maze that offers enticing, exceptional fishing which in turn draws in anglers and others who are unfamiliar with the wetlands complex, sometimes with disastrous results.

Weather systems can form fast, spawning wicked cross-chops in the open waters of Lake Borgne and the Mississippi Sound. If you are caught in one of Mother Nature's tantrums, there is no easy way to get out of the way.

"The Biloxi Marsh is a journey," says Raymond Whitehead of Southern Way Charters. "There is no shortcut in or out."

— Rogers