

OUTDOORS

Redfish plentiful this time of year

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When a kayaker blows a whistle, it's usually a signal for help.

When Lynette Brown tooted hers recently from across a shallow-water bay, it was a proclamation that she'd just caught the largest redfish of her life.

The Cape Coral paddler typically fishes alone from one of her kayaks, and she rarely has a camera along. She's pretty much a catch-and-release type anyway. In fact, her hubby, kids and grandbabies may tally most of her post-trip descriptions as fish tales.

No more. Brown caught and released a 31-incher recently and John Paeno, who was on the water with his business Calusa Ghost Tours, snapped a photo.

A lot of photos could be taken lately of people hauling in reds, which legally have to be 18 to 27 inches to keep. Red drum (aka redfish) appear to be everywhere lately, even when the weather has been cloudy, foggy or cool.

Even if you're not fishing for them, they're a cool fish to spot.

You can, indeed, spot them.

They literally have a spot or several spots on or near their tails. Their coppery bodies look Manhattan chic.

You see the spots because the fish like to eat in shallow water with their heads down and their derrieres up, exposing that cool

eye-like marking.

When we were out on our powerboat in mid-Pine Island Sound recently, some houseguests from Maine saw the redfish "tailing," as the feeding habit is called. Their response was equivalent to, "What is that?!"

Many a skiff in Southwest Florida has a poling platform or tower so that anglers can spy tales at a distance and sneak up on the fish, casting to them while they chew up goodies on the bottom. Yes, you can call them bottom feeders among shallow grass flats and potholes.

Red drum are aggressive and opportunistic feeders and the result is evident in their growth rate. Their first birthday puts them at about a foot long. By age 2, they're just shy of doubling that. Guess that's what a diet of blue crabs, shrimp and fish will get you.

Anglers don't just like to catch redfish because of their cool looks and odd behavior, though.

Their firm white flesh tastes darn good. So good they became overfished after blackened redfish became a rage in restaurants, thanks to Louisiana-based chef Paul Prudhomme, who introduced Cajun specialty dishes to the masses.

Federal waters off the Gulf of Mexico have been closed to both commercial and recreational harvest of redfish since 1986, according to a National Marine Fisheries Service history of management of the species. Many states have designated it as a gamefish for as long or longer. That prevents their commercial harvest and sale in



PHOTO COURTESY JOHN PAENO

Lynette Brown of Cape Coral caught this 31-inch redfish while kayak fishing in Bokeelia's inshore waters.

state waters.

Then last year, President Bush — more known for his hunting and ranching than his fishing, but from an angling family nonetheless — signed an executive order permanently banning the commercial harvest and sale of red drum in federal waters of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico.

So, a sought-after gamefish they are and remain.

Which is fine with many anglers, including Brown.

She's a certified kayak instructor, so her inclination is to use her "noise-making

device," as water cops refer to a whistle, only when she needs help.

But really, she did need some recently. She needed someone to take a photo of her bronze-skinned beautiful trophy before she released it.

Hey, so far there are no regulations against getting revved up over a great catch. A redfish is worth it. ■

— Betsy Clayton is a freelancer based on Pine Island and also is Lee County Parks & Recreation's waterways coordinator. Contact her at boatingbybetsy@yahoo.com.



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