

turned into open bays. This could certainly affect the productivity of the fishery. Sheltered ponds obviously hold more forage for "slot" reds, in terms of grass shrimp and mud crabs, and the overall habitat is better.

The future of the Louisiana red drum fishery, however, may not be bleak. Once again, the fishery has never experienced a storm quite like Katrina, so we don't know what the long-term effects will be, and past hurricanes that hit the region, which were somewhat comparable to Katrina, did not significantly affect the fishery for good or for bad. Right now, the marshes are producing good catch rates, and recreational and commercial fishing pressure is very low. Yes, the marsh has gone through a major remodeling session, but the effect may not be bad, at least regarding the hardy redfish. For now, the marsh is still producing.

### A Personal Perspective

For anglers familiar with the famous redfish marshes off Highway 23 that have not been to the region since Katrina made landfall, the scene cannot be described. In early February, I was able to join Wal-Mart FLW Redfish Series angler Ray Reiser of Gretna, La. — a suburb of New Orleans — for a trip to the Venice area for a look at the destruction and a tour of the marsh. Reiser also owns a construction company and has surveyed more damage than most. In fact, he had already been down to

FLW Redfish Series pro Ray Reiser says the south Louisiana marshes are still producing a lot of healthy redfish.



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Venice once to assess the devastation left behind by Katrina.

As we drove south down Highway 23 out of Belle Chase, Reiser told me of some of the effects the hurricane had on each community we passed through. The scene, however, did most of the talking. The destruction was catastrophic. Other than what has already been mentioned, I won't even try to explain what I saw in terms of destruction to houses and other structures.

There were, however, a few interesting observations worth noting. A few houses remained intact, with the only visible damage from the outside being lost shingles. "See that house?" Reiser asked while pointing to one such house that sat right at the base of the Mississippi River levee. "That house is standing because the surge beat the strongest winds to this point and the house was covered with water by the time the most destructive winds got here. The surge didn't wash the house away and then preserved it from the wind, but it's obviously all gutted and will be torn down."

While I had never heard of something like that happening, the damage to woodlots along the highway more or less proved Reiser's description of the scene. Nearly every tree was broken off about 15 feet above the ground. That 15-foot mark was where the water line was when the strongest winds hit.

As we approached Empire, the four-lane highway got rougher and rougher. "The highway buckled because of the weight of the water on top of it," Reiser explained. "Fifteen feet of water is heavy."

While we continued south, both of us just looking at the damage, Reiser suddenly said, "The surge reached 20 feet right here."

All along the road, construction crews drove up and down the Mississippi River levee, piling dirt in areas where the levee was blown out.

Near Empire, Highway 23 was repaved in a short section. "The river levee was blown out here," Reiser said, "and a new channel was cut across the highway and into the marsh on the east side of the road. The Mississippi River, as a result of the surge, almost cut a new channel."

Shortly thereafter, a police barricade checked every vehicle. They inquired on everyone's business for traveling through the destroyed area. They are currently letting anglers pass through. But make sure you have your boat registration with you, or they won't let you bring your boat back out. To prevent people from simply going down to Venice and loading a boat found washed up on land and taking it home, proof of boat ownership must be shown.

We launched at Joshua's Marina in Buras, La. The marina, once a hot destination for saltwater anglers of all types, held a store and hotel. Also, prior to the hurricane, boat owners docked their vessels at Joshua's, thinking the marina offered protection from the storm. Virtually nothing survived. Following the storm, boats, even big boats and barges, were scattered for miles and miles in the marsh, on levees or on the highway. While launching the boat, Reiser had to be careful not to hit a sunken boat.

We ran south about 10 to 15 miles down the Buras Dredge, fishing a few spots on the way. The water was chilly, frigid to a redfish, and the fishing was slow, but we were primarily checking out the marsh.

Immediately, Reiser noted, "the dredge channel is shallower. It used to be almost 20 feet deep right here, and now it's only 12." We found areas where Reiser estimated 10 feet of sediment had filled in the channel.

We saw reds busting baitfish along a bank and stopped to check it out. "This bank used to extend out there," Reiser said while pointing 40 yards back toward the channel. "This place looks completely different." While we eased down the bank, we passed an upside-down bunk bed, probably belonging to a child that used to live in a house five miles away.

A few fish hit that day, and we saw quite a few big reds tailing in creeks. It was clear that, although the marsh was significantly rearranged, the redfish were still there and there in good numbers. The region's outstanding redfish population survived major hurricanes in the past. Let's hope the effects on the marsh from this storm don't adversely affect the long-term health of the most productive marsh region in the nation. ■

Many marsh areas in the Mississippi River Delta were significantly changed by Katrina. While redfishing is good, at least for the short term, anglers familiar with the region will not recognize many places.



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