Catch of a lifetime

Guide’s quest for trophy trout leads to a monster redfish

By John Goodspeed
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS

Fishing guide Cliff Webb was doing what he does best, wade fishing in Baffin Bay to put anglers on catch-of-a-lifetime trophy trout.

But he was in for a surprise — a surprise of his lifetime.

He developed a passion for fishing growing up with an avid angler and a game warden for a father, Carl Webb, 87.

For 35 years, Webb has made a living specializing in catching large speckled trout with artificial lures from late December through spring, when the prized sport fish put on their heaviest body weight while preparing for the rigors of the spring spawn.

Winter trout angling can be challenging, Webb said. The big fish do not eat for several days before heading from cooler, deeper water to warm up in the muddy shallows and feast on large mullet.

This is a good season, though, with more big trout because last year’s extremely high tides of spring and summer flushed the system, pulling dead grass off the bottom and exposing sand pockets along shorelines and estuaries that make easy pickings of shrimp and crabs, Webb said.

With him were Rob Mersinger of Goldthwaite and three doctors — Chris Stutz of Nashville, Tennessee, and Shalar Craig and Tim Rudolph, both of Hamilton.

For about an hour on the morning of Jan. 19, they were reeling in and releasing plenty of trout on the high side of 20 inches, including one measuring 20 and weighing 8 pounds, at Tide Gauge Bar on the north.

Capt. Cliff Webb struggles to lift his largest redfish in a lifetime of fishing. It topped 50 inches and weighed at least 50 pounds and burst out of the water with “a big wake like a charging hippo.”
Casting a standard bone diamond Corky lure that walks the dog just below the surface, Webb twitched and reeled, slowly moving the bait that is so effective for trout in cold water, which was 59 degrees that day.

Webb felt a big thump and set the hook.

Instead of swimming toward him like most trout, the fish stirred up a huge, boiling, muddy wake and stripped off line while swimming in a half circle to deeper water and back to the shallows.

"It wasn't like I was going to turn the fish," said Webb, who lives in Corpus Christi. "It kept ripping off line. I had no idea what it was. There are no sharks in Baffin Bay in the winter. Most of the redfish are out in the Gulf of Mexico this time of year. And it was moving way too fast for a black drum."

He wanted to know what it was. But he worried about losing it.

After all, he was geared up for trout. He was using a light-weight Waterloo HP Slam Mag trout rod made for fishing Corkys and topwaters, a 20-pound-test monofilament leader and 20-pound green PowerPro line. The Shimano NP 100 reel held only 150 yards of it.

"I just lowered the rod tip and kept the pressure on him. I would have been so depressed if it got off," Webb said. "I would have wilted out there in the flats."

He lost track of time.

After 45 minutes or maybe an hour — while his clients kept catching trout including 10 topping 26 inches — Webb glimpsed the dorsal fin and tail.

"I couldn't believe it — it was a redfish as big as me," he said. Once near him in waist-deep water, it astounded Webb again.

"It threw up a big wake like a charging hippo. It was amazing," he said.

With no net big enough to land it and his clients about 75 yards away, he had to use his bare hands — but its tail end was too big around to grab.

"It was a wrestling match," he said, explaining he had to flip it over to disorient it before mastering the behemoth.

Mersinger brought a Boga-Grip and helped get the fish to the boat.

"I stuck my whole hand down its throat to get the Corky out," Webb said. "I've never stuck my whole hand in a redfish's mouth before. It was like a bucket."

"I've never seen a redfish like that, even in the surf."

Before that, his biggest red was 42 inches. He caught it when he was a kid.

But he will never know how big this one was.

It maxed the Boga-Grip's 50-pound scale. There were only 36 inches on the ruler in the boat.

While he could not estimate the enormous girth, Webb figured the fish weighed just more than 50 pounds and was right at 50 inches long.

The live well could not hold it. Death was certain if he returned to Marker 37 Marina to see if it busted the record. So he released it, reviving it briefly.

"It almost pulled my shoulders out of their sockets," Webb said. "It took off like a rocket."

When told that the state record red drum, caught in the Gulf of Mexico in 2000 by Artie Longron, weighed 59 ½ pounds and was 54 ½ inches long, Webb said, "Thank you, buddy. That eases my mind." The next day, Craig caught his trophy — a 31-inch, 9 ½-pound trout, the biggest he had ever landed — on a goldfish Bass Assassin.

All the big trout were released to spawn and fight another day. Webb wonders if he will ever hear about his big red again.

"She's still out there," he said, "getting ready to eat another wade fisherman."

John Goodspeed is a freelance outdoors writer. Email john@johngoodspeed.com.