



DEAN'S SECRET SPOT

At breakfast during my wife, Marte, and I's recent December Rising Tide trip, Captain Dean relates a story I had not heard in the 17 years we have fished together. When he was a boy growing up in the village of Manatee, about 25 miles south of Belize City, his father had a secret snook spot. When the winds were right (i.e., out of the west or northwest), he would take Dean fishing there. Their version of snook fishing did not involve rods and reels, but spears. The shallow bottom in this area was hard-packed sand and could easily be waded. There was a concentration of snook with many large fish and they would wade/stalk them throwing spears to take snook for the table. In the 40+ years since his father took him fishing there, he had gone back alone occasionally and found it unchanged. Apparently, this snook hotspot had gone undiscovered. The downside to this area was it was a 35 minute boat ride from where we were anchored.



decent shot.....so in for breakfast we went and heard the childhood story from Captain Dean.

Dean said the wind direction was right and, if I was up for a boat ride south, we'd go check out his childhood snook area. Over the 30 years I have fished Belize, I have developed a growing passion for the snook fishing.....the challenge of casting to spots on the mangrove edges and the intense fly rod thrill of trying to keep a healthy sized snook out of the roots after he'd been hooked. Of course I was up for a visit to Dean's secret spot.....and, knowing my interest in large snook, he knew I would be.

As Dean slowed the outboard, we noticed several birds diving on baitfish, about 20 yards off the shore, just inside a sandbar which sheltered this mangrove-lined coastline. We were a little early, the low tide wouldn't be until 12:30 and it was just 10:30. The bottom was as Dean had explained – it was hard packed sand and would make for easy wading; however, since I was just sampling this for the first time, I opted to fish from the panga to allow us to cover more water and have a better spotting angle. Almost immediately, we began spotting fish moving in the roots. With the tide still up, the snook were staying far back under the roots and were hard to get a fly in front of.....although we kept trying. Every once in a while, the fly would land perfectly and we had a chance. We did manage to get a few to follow the fly and one six-pounder to eat and pose for a photo at the boat before the tide began to ebb.

When low tide approached, many more fish were visible on the edge and some small schools of 4 to 8 fish would occasionally wander out on the sand flat, away from the roots. The fish were finicky; we had several follows without eating although we did get a 4.5# and 5.5# snook to the net. While



all the sighted fish provided a lot of excitement, I really wanted one of the many big boys that were in the mix. We easily saw over 100 snook, most in the 4 to 8# range, with many double digit fish and a few that may have approached 20#.

For the last hour before low tide, we had observed a heavy black cloud moving slowly toward us from the east. As the tide went slack, the wind became strong from the east as the storm front pushed onto shore. Within ten minutes, the wind gusts and accompanying wave action turned the clearwater shoreline we had been fishing into chocolate brown with zero visibility. We changed to a large black fly with the hope it would be easier to see in the muddy water. We had three more eats including a hook-up with one of the large fish who pulled free in a frantic charge for the roots.



Rain began falling and strikes were few. Dean guesstimated I had made about 200+ casts for the three fish we released.....felt like we should have had more fish to the net? Oh well.....It was intense sight fishing with the accompanying high level of excitement and frustration. With the incoming tide and clear skies to the north, Dean suggested we began heading back and stop at Robinson to look for permit. Off we went.

The first flat we visited at Robinson had a school of about five fish milling around. They would push water and then disappear. Dean was able to

track their subtle movement and the fourth time they showed, two tails popped up about 60 feet away. One cast, a hook-up, and 15 minutes later, the permit at left posing for the photo. Go figure!!! 200+ casts for three snook landed and one cast at permit and one fish landed. For another hour, we checked out a few more flats, but no fish were visible. The water was slick as we headed for a 4:15 lunch that was waiting for us back at the Rising Tide. We finished off our day after the late lunch with an hour of stalking a few permit tails at the reef, without a decent shot. The reef was a spectacular scene (right) as there was no wind and the rollers coming over the reef were almost non-existent. Add in a brilliant sunset to the west and it was not necessary to catch fish to appreciate just being there.



The next morning, brimming with confidence from the “one cast – one fish” experience of the previous day, we opted to focus entirely on permit. We decided to have breakfast a little late, bring lunch with us, and move south to Middle Long Cay to begin. With a lead gray sky and a strong outgoing tide, we began with the flats at the south end of Middle Long Cay. We found two small schools tailing there and had one follow, but no eat. Over the next four hours, we were almost constantly stalking sighted permit tails. We worked our way down the west side of Bluefield Cays and to Alligator. Every flat, except one, had at least one permit tailing. We calculated we had seen over 60 permit, a few singles, but mostly schools of 3 to 8 fish. We had nine good

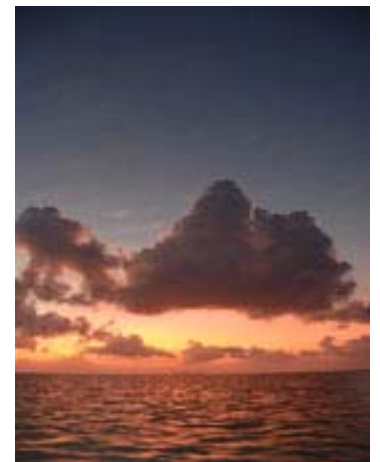
shots.....six times we had a permit follow the crab fly, but only one ate.....and he came unbuttoned within 10 seconds. The permit gods giveth and the permit gods taketh away – they got even for my “one for one” experience the day before.

We ate lunch through a change of the tides and spent the next few hours working the incoming without seeing a fish. A heavy rainstorm settled in so we returned to the Rising Tide with all the tails from the morning session imbedded in my memory banks.

For the trip, my wife, Marte had good snorkeling sessions guided by Noel and I had as many sighted fish in one trip as I can recall. Overall, a good trip without encountering another angler or any “tourist” snorkelers.

WHY?

Why did Dean’s “Secret Spot” exist and how it remained unchanged for some many years? I’m not a marine biologist, but there were some things that were fairly evident.



1. it was located far off the beaten path and was not going to be easily accessed. It may have some native Belizeans who occasionally fished (or speared) it for food, but obviously it was not pressured.
2. the sand bar about 30-40 yards off the shoreline provided a protected zone inside the bar. This structure extended at least 1/2 mile down that coastline.
3. inside and protected by the sandbar was a trough. Inside that trough were giant schools of glass minnows and small sardines.....maybe millions of baitfish.
4. due to the protection of the sand bar, these fish were protected from most large predators, the exception being the abundant birds in the area and the snook from the shoreline roots.
5. the depth of the trough slowly rose to meet the shoreline which had the perfect “snook friendly” mangrove roots as well as depth of water for snook habitat.

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