



The big snook below attacked the popper near the mangrove roots about five minutes earlier, but he didn't get hooked. Repeated casting brought the fish back again and the second time resulted in a solid hook-up on that same popper. That's an excited William Owens with his 16 pound snook. So began the early "shift" on our second day of our "exploratory Belize snook trip" using the mothership Rising Tide as our personal floating lodge, towing our skiffs behind.



Since the late '80's, we've been using a mothership to fish the shallows of Belize for the great variety of fish found in these waters. The primary species pursued had always been tarpon and permit with bonefish as a filler. During the last five years, I've begun spending more of my time casting on the mangrove edges for snook. The challenge of spot casting to holes in the mangroves and the occasional sighted fish on the edges has captured my attention.....and the excitement of hooking a large snook and battling to hold him out of the mangrove roots is one of fly fishing's great thrills. Over the years, the guides have been telling me that if I wanted to fish for snook, I should come in November, December, and January for that is their spawning time and there are more fish around. So William Owens, Paul Wilms, and I decided to give it a try the first week of December.

We've always liked the three shift approach of fishing from a mothership – first shift is from 6:00am until breakfast (usually around 9:00); second shift covers the part of the day when the angle of the sun is best for sight fishing the flats, from after breakfast until 2:00 or 3:00 when we come in for lunch; third shift is from about 4:30 until dark or later. When the third shift ends, we clean up, have a drink or two, dinner, and then off to bed to rest up for tomorrow. Living on the water near where you fish allows for this approach and fishing those warm, tropical evenings, when anglers who are staying at land based lodges have finished their fishing day hours earlier, has always been a most enjoyable part of the day. When the sun sets in the tropics, many finned predators accelerate their feeding.



Exploring rivers and creeks we've never fished previously (below, right-center) was part of the trip. Netting, at sunset, a good snook after moving him off the mangroves (center); popper hangs from snooks jaw (right).





Below: on two days, we ventured about 30 miles up the coastline, north of Belize City. We saw a lot of interesting water and flats (left, below) that we're sure get little or no angling pressure. We didn't have time to sample but a few small sections. Right center below is part of that amazing snook bush (referenced below in the "highlights") we encountered on one of those trips – the big bush in the middle was the centerpiece with a deep hole (3 to 4 feet deep) under the overhanging branches, and it extended another 20 yards or so to the right, beyond what the photo shows.



We did stay focused on snook for the entire week, never once tying on a bonefish, permit, or standard tarpon fly. Baby tarpon (above) ended up being a by-product of our search for snook. They often frequent the same environments as snook and we must have jumped over 30 "babies" during the week, landing nine. Other incidental fish taken (below) included (l to r) Jack Crevalle, snapper, catfish, and ladyfish. The jack was crashing bait on the edge of the mangroves and we thought we'd hooked a large snook....a real battle.



The short version of the highlights:

- We did get our flies into the mouths of two fish over 20 pounds and two others over 15. Neither of the two 20 pounders made the skiff for the camera. One never hooked up and the other separated my level 40# six foot Hard Mason leader while lunging to attain the safety of the roots (I theorize that he got the leader on the sharp edge of his gill plates during the struggle and cut it clean, but who knows – the pressure he

was applying with those frantic lunges was intense). The two 15+ pounders did make it to the skiff to pose for photos.

- This was intended to be an exploratory trip – we wanted to try and find some new areas to snook fish while also revisiting some our old favorites. It is no secret that there are certain areas of the mangroves that hold snook, while most other mangroves, seemingly the same structure and water depth, hold no fish. You can review several miles of mangrove edges and there may only be a few “snook bushes” – i.e., a short stretch of mangroves that is home to good numbers of snook. Those “snook bushes” don’t seem to change.....the same bushes where I found snook fifteen years ago often produce fish today. On this trip, we located the most amazing snook bush I’ve ever seen. It was near the coastline, several miles north of Belize City, in an area I’ve never fished in all my years. In a few hours, we released 20 snook and 3 baby tarpon from a length of mangrove edges about fifty yards long. And, we hooked at least twice that many snook (including one of the 20+ pound fish) and jumped 9 baby tarpon.
- Some days we fished hard for few fish boated and other days, we “hit it right.” Some areas we worked weren’t very productive and others were. It was similar to fishing for trophy fish anywhere on the globe, especially when the emphasis is on casting to sighted fish – you fish hard for what you actually land, but it’s about the quality of the experience, not the quantity.

**Weather:** the first day was mostly overcast with a few sprinkles; after that, we had the finest six day stretch of weather I’ve ever seen in Belize. The highs were in the low to mid 80’s with mostly clear skies, light winds, and low/medium humidity.

The Rising Tide (below, left), a 58’ Hatteras, was our comfortable, air conditioned, headquarters for the week. Left-center, an angler works a productive mangrove edge while the white dot on the right is the Rising Tide at anchor. Right-center, the master cabin has a queen sized bed. Our cook, Thelma (at right) did her usual magic in the kitchen to make meals a highlight.



**PHOTO CREDITS:** All from the cameras of William Owens and myself.

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