



Special Report: Permit Trip Extraordinaire



(Trip Report Primer: To appreciate what makes the trip report below so extraordinary, you must begin by understanding that the permit is the most difficult fish to take on a fly.....period. We have clients who've been trying for years to get their first permit and are still searching for it. Additionally, this wary, finned creature provides the most exciting shallow water fly rod stalking experience, the best of "hunting with a fly rod." If you've never fished for permit on the flats, you might wonder what makes them so challenging. For those who are interested in the answer to that question, see the article below the trip report.)



Beginning in 2004, a merry band of six anglers began fishing Belize using a mothership as their base of operations. All of their previous annual trips have been in the northern portion of Belize and were focused on the variety fishery that Belize is known for – i.e., bonefish, tarpon, snook, jacks, barracuda, and the occasional permit. During those trips, three of the four guys had taken a total, collectively, of six permit while casting flies on the flats of Belize – the fourth guy had yet to take his first. And yet, these four guys (William Owens, Michael Berard, Jeff Aldridge, and Ray Styons) decided to commit their entire late September trip on the mothership *Rising Tide* to permit fishing. This would be the first time they had ever ventured more than 15 miles south of Belize City.

The finest permit flats on the globe begin about 15 miles southeast of Belize City and extend southward, inside the shelter of the barrier reef, for approximately 50 miles, ending near the town of Placencia (the barrier reef is the second largest in the world and parallels the entire coast of Belize – visible on map).



One of the downsides to committing a mothership trip to this southern course is that there are only a few places where tarpon are frequently found and very few bonefish available– i.e., you are committing to fishing almost exclusively for permit. The upside, for the fisherman who is ready to dedicate a week to the often frustrating concept of getting a permit to eat your fly, it is exactly what he's looking for. Permit fishing is "scored" not by fish taken, but by the excitement of fish stalked and decent shots obtained, and there is no other place that offers up as many solid permit shots as these waters. Using a comfortable mothership as your base gives you access to virtually every flat in that stretch of water.



This foursome are salt water fly rod veterans and if the "fishing gods" guaranteed them at the outset of their trip that they would average one permit released a day collectively, they would have recognized that guarantee as making for a very successful trip. For whatever reason, the "fishing gods" showered them with love and allowed them to release 17 fish on their eight night trip making it the most successful permit mothership trip we know of.

Ray (at right) not only released his first permit, he took five fish during the trip. He relates the thrill associated with the first one: "I am ecstatic to finally get that first permit. After 3 previous trips, to finally have permit success was a bit surreal. It was our first morning during our first hour of fishing. Jeff and I were fishing with Dean and we spotted permit near the boat which disappeared after their initial appearance.....we saw a group of fish about 200 yards away and Dean did a great job of getting us in position quickly. I started my backcast about 60-70 feet out and dropped it in front of what appeared to be 6 to 8 feeding fish, probably 40-45 feet in front of the skiff. I slow-stripped twice to get the slack out of the line and Bam! at the end of the second strip.....he was on and



ran like hell. At first I was surprised that he actually ate my fly and was hooked, then my heart started pounding and was probably beating at 160 beats per minute until we could finally get the leader and land that first one."



At times, the action was intense as related by William (at left) in this experience: "The very first morning I landed one on the Hinkley raghead fly. That permit had swallowed it deep. While the guide was removing the fly, I climbed out of the boat, grabbed the other rod, and went wading after another permit still tailing in the same area where the first one was hooked. Within 10 minutes I was hooked up again only to have the fish come unhooked after a 75 yard run."

(Note: the Hinckley crab pattern was created by Art Hinckley, the mothership permit specialist who has taken over 60 permit. It is similar to the standard commercial raghead pattern with some modifications for the Belize flats.)

The most productive permit flats have deep water channels adjoining them providing a safe haven for permit who venture onto the shallow flat to pursue their dinner. The three flats below are typical of that structure.



This group always livens up their mothership trips with a self-funded tournament. When they take a "variety trip," they assign a point value to each of the different species with the total points determining the winner (both guide and angler). It does add spice to each day and makes every fish count. However, on this permit trip, the rules were simple – whoever releases the most permit wins. The winner was Michael (below) and he relayed the following story as his highlight of the trip: "The guide spotted a group of tall black tails on the flat 100 yards from the skiff. The 15 or so happy permit were rooting and moving at a brisk pace coming right for us. I eased into the knee deep water and worked my way into position as the guide followed behind poling the skiff. The first cast was too short and the second too long...the fish spooked off the flat into the deep adjoining channel. My disappointment was quickly forgotten as we saw them come back on the flat. This began an epic stalk and chase that lasted almost an hour. The fish would eat, a few seconds with black forks in the air, and continue to move down the flat. I got close (maybe 100 feet) a couple of times but they stayed just out of range. This pursuit endured for half a mile and only reached a finale at the end of the flat. The hungry permit stopped and chowed down with tails up. I made a 60 foot cast and the Raghead landed perfectly in the middle of the feeding frenzy. I stripped slowly...had a couple of bumps...stripped again and set...zzzzzzzzzzzzzz.



The guide yelled to get in the boat as the fish ripped off line and dove deep off the edge of the flat. I was well into my backing as I climbed on the bow and Dean started the Yamaha. zzzzzzzzzzz...and then slack. I retrieved the line and fly with no hook.....my hook had broken off. I was completely exhausted...but far from disappointed. The 'one that got away' provided the most exciting fly rod battle that I have ever encountered. There's no greater rush than stalking a large tailing permit."



Jeff (at right) is approaching double figures in the number of Belize mothership trips he's taken and sums up his view of the experience like this: "The *Rising Tide* (above left) is like a floating resort condominium. It has all the comforts of home. It is always located in the best spots. And even better, it comes stocked with beer and a fantastic cook! This first class mothership is definitely the best way to fish the vast expanse of saltwater flats in Belize."



Obviously, on a trip such as this, the crew is a vital component. Left to right below is Jeff's "fantastic cook," Carol, guides Noel and Eddy, and Captain Dean.



Some facts and details from the trip:

- They used three different anchorages and took fish at each. The furthest anchorage south was Blue Ground and they used this area as a headquarters to access the southern flats – from Blue Ground, they could use the skiffs if they wanted to reach the areas near Placencia. Before the Placencia area became crowded with permit anglers, the boats used to anchor further south. But in the last few years, with all the skiffs and anglers running around in that area creating spooky fish, they anchor north of there and only fish that far south if the conditions are right.
- They saw only one other skiff the entire trip.....in part a function of their timing. Even though conditions can be desirable in August, September, and October, there are few anglers in Belize at that time.
- Most of the fish were taken while wading. As you move south from Belize City, the flats firm up and provide easy wading in many areas (most of the flats north of Belize City are a soft marl bottom and can't be waded). The stalk would begin by using the skiff because they cover more water and provide easier spotting from a higher angle. When a fish was spotted, and if it was far enough away, they waded for the final stage of the stalk.
- Weather: the first five days provided ideal conditions and most of the fish were taken then. The last three days saw a low pressure system move in and the fish were not so cooperative. Their trip was bracketed by two tropical storms, but they missed the worst of each weather system.
- They averaged about 8 to 10 shots per angler per day (a shot being defined as getting a decent opportunity to place the fly in front of a different permit – i.e., five casts to one fish is just one shot).
- Average size was approximately 12 pounds.
- These guides just may be the best permit guides in Belize – certainly among the best there are! They are experts at guiding fly fishers to their first permit.



Website for Belize motherships *Meca* and *Rising Tide*: www.flyfishbelize.com

WHY IS PERMIT FISHING SO CHALLENGING?

The permit, when it ventures onto a shallow flat in pursuit of its favorite prey, is very vulnerable. Sharks and 'Cuda consider them a delicacy and there is also a threat from the skies. While they are naturally skittish, even in deeper water, when on the flats their alarm systems are ratcheted up to the highest level. That is the backdrop for understanding why permit fishing with a fly rod on the flats is difficult. Now, how 'bout the many ways they can frustrate a stalking angler:



- I often make lousy casts, especially early in a trip.
- The winds are "down," the water slick and the fish spook from the shadow of

- the fly line in the air; plus, with the smooth surface, they seem to sense the skiff from 100 feet away.
- Winds are “up” and the slap of the chop on the hull of the skiff spooks the fish..... and making accurate casts in this wind is a challenge.
- The set up is perfect, 4 tailing fish in two feet of water at 60 feet.....now headed for the deep water, spooked by a large ray sharing their feeding ground.
- The tide’s too low and there’s an approaching weather front - haven’t seen a fish in four hours.
- The cast was perfect, but while it was in the air, the permit switched directions and the fly landed 10 feet behind him – darn fish usually swim erratically and seldom in a straight line.
- The cast was perfect, but while in the air, the fish sped up and the fly landed behind him and the fly line spooked him.
- They look, they follow, they come back and look again....but they don’t eat. Don’t think I’ll ever catch another – maybe I’ll try a live crab??
- Panic set in as one of the two tailing fish we were stalking saw the shadow of the other, bolted for the deep, scaring the hell out of his partner who follows him.
- It’s difficult for me to turn the fly over accurately from 60 feet with a 20 mph crosswind.
- The set up is perfect, 4 tailing fish at 60 feet.....now headed for the depths due to the shadow of a circling frigate bird 500 feet above us.
- Crosswinds are heavy – fish just 50 feet away and feeding. Know I can make this cast. What is this crab fly doing stuck in my arse?
- Perfect set up – school of about 20 permit “floating near the surface” with fins out of the water on a deep flat. Cast is carefully made to the edge of the school creating a massive permit explosion with fish scattering in all directions. Why couldn’t I see the submerged fish on the edge of the school that were spooked by my fly line???
- I know the fish is using that big eye to measure the length of the crab legs on my fly and finds them half a millimeter shorter than he prefers.
- That black tail waving above the surface is so BIG.....“buck fever.”
- If we’d have seen that fish 2 seconds earlier, we would have had a good chance at it.
- For half a mile, we’ve stalked this school of slowly moving, feeding fish down the flat as they stayed just ten feet out of casting distance. We will soon catch them and get an opportunity any second.....but where did they go? The flat ended and they swam off the end of the flat into deep water.
- The cast is perfect and lands a few feet in front of the slowly cruising permit who charges forward. The hook strikes home.....where did that yellow tail snapper come from?
- “He ate it,” the guide yelled.....but I never felt a thing. Did the guide really see the fish eat my crab fly? Upon retrieving the fly, we note the body of the fly turned on the shank of the hook...was definitely eaten, but inhaled and spit so quick that I never felt a tick.
- Finally, an eat and a hook-up.....drag screaming, fish running, andslack line. The permit found some coral to wrap the leader around!!!!



Art Hinckley with his 50th permit – his current count is at 61



Why would someone go through the frustration of permit fishing? There is a very small chance of success with the most challenging casting situations and a quarry that is notorious for ignoring the cast fly – even if well presented.....fish all week to catch one fish and call it a successful week? Why, why? If you have to ask, I guess you’ve never seen that big black tail waving above the water. And, the spectacular environment you find them in, with shallow coral flats dropping off into indigo depths, provides a great backdrop in which to fail!

Don Muelrath
 Fly Fishing Adventures
www.flyfishingadventures.org
 888-347-4896

Photo credits: William Owens, Jeff Aldridge, Michael Berard, Ray Styons, Scooter Walters, Art Hinckley, and Adam Barker