

SNOOK ON THE MANGROVE EDGES

Add this to your Saltwater “MUST EXPERIENCE” list:

* It was a beautiful tropical evening and the sun was just getting ready to disappear below the horizon on the third day of this early December Belize trip aboard the mothership Meca. We were poling along a glassy, sheltered mangrove edge and I was casting my fly as close as possible to the branches (and far too often, into the mangroves). Snook had been the primary focus of this trip as it occurred during their spawning period and the numbers of fish in many mangrove areas were stronger than any other time of the year. On this particular cast, the fly dropped right on the edge and as I gave it a strip, a large snook darted out and grabbed it. I struck the fish hard, stunning him momentarily and, capitalizing on the momentum of his aggressive charge, pulled him away from the tangled root system which could have ended the battle quickly. My experienced guide immediately began moving the skiff away from the shoreline. This all happened in a heart beat and the fish was momentarily disoriented and began swimming into open water, away from the security of the mangroves. For a few minutes, we were safe as the fish appeared to wonder aimlessly. The guide was the first to note a change of demeanor and yelled, “get ready, he’s going home.” Go’ in home he was and in a hurry – the fish had turned, and realizing he needed to find the security of the mangroves, had started a full out charge for the roots. Quickly, I took up the slack line and put a few wraps around my gloved hand. Experience had taught me that the moment of truth was coming – if he gained the sanctuary of the mangrove roots, he was free. I braced myself as the line tightened and my 9 wt rod bent to the pressure. The next few minutes were as intense as it gets. He had regained the brink and was only a yard from freedom. He repeatedly lunged for that yard, sometimes taking to the air with powerful head shakes, sending sunset enhanced spray in all directions. I held tight with all the strength I could muster, not giving an inch and hopping my five-foot, 40 pound leader section would hold and the rod didn’t shatter. If you have fly fished for stripers, this struggle compared to trying to hold a fresh, powerful 10 pound striper in one place when he had other designs – both fish have a similar “bulldog” mentality. After what seemed like ten minutes, but was probably only two or three, he relented and allowed me to drag him from the edge. A few more weakened charges were all he had left before we put him on the scale, took the requisite photos, revived him, and watched him disappear under the overhanging branches. A shade under ten pounds was the weight and fifty pounds of thrills!! This was a special fish for more reasons than one – he completed my grand slam for the day adding some treasured memories to my salt water fly fishing collection. This was the second largest snook we took for the week – a 12 pounder was taken on the open flats and didn’t supply the drama of the “mangrove mauler.”

The sensation of stalking a medium to large permit or watching a tarpon cartwheel across the surface is well known, but a good-sized snook on the edge of the roots provides a seldom recognized experience that is very special.

TRIP REPORT

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