



My wife, Marte, has a passion for snorkeling. Her desire to find the world's finest snorkeling, coupled with my passion to fish the salt flats, have led us to tack a tropical destination on to the back of our annual New Zealand trip for the past several years. This year, following our stay in New Zealand, we opted for an Australian visit. The map of Australia shows a peninsula extending northward from its northwest corner. This approximately 75 mile long peninsula is known as the North West Cape and is home to the town of Exmouth and the Ningaloo Reef.

The spectacularly clear waters of the Indian Ocean lap upon the shoreline of this isolated and remote outback desert coastline. The rich marine life here has recently made this area a popular tourism destination. Indeed, the marine life of the Ningaloo Reef is becoming world famous and, in our experience, is only rivaled by the Seychelles pristine atolls of Alphonse and St. Francois. Coincidentally, an equally outstanding shallow water fishery has been discovered headlined by Indo-Pacific Permit, Bonefish, Giant Trevally, and Golden Trevally.

This fishery has two distinctly different aspects. On the western coast of the cape, are the crystal clear, tourquiose waters of the Indian Ocean and the Ningaloo Reef. On the eastern side, is the Exmouth Gulf, a totally different marine environment. The waters on both sides of the cape provide an outstanding number of shallow water, sight casting opportunities. I split my six days fishing equally between both sides of the cape.

Based upon my research before departure, my objectives were to take as many of the multi-species that were available with a primary focus on Indo-Pacific Permit, a big GT, and attempting to take my largest bonefish ever (my best to date was only seven pounds).



Permit: Permit seemed plentiful and we had several good shots each day at this most difficult to take of all the fly rod pursuits. I was fortunate enough to take both species of Indo-Pacific permit, *Trachinotus Blochii* (at left above) and *Trachinotus Anak* (next to Kangaroo above). Those two species added to our common Caribbean permit gave me what is termed "the Permit Trifecta" – capturing all three species of this difficult angling demon, an extra thrill for this aging fly rodder who's been refused by these devils for almost 30 years! The launch photo above was a beach-launch near a likely permit hangout. Winds and tidal changes can make this a challenging endeavor.



Above: my personal record 8 pound bone – bonefishing was tough on the three days we spent some time pursuing them.....deeper bonefish flats than I'm used to and difficult to see them. Actually, on one day when we

spent about two hours trying to get a large bone, we were constantly interrupted by sighted permit – quite a distraction! Right of bonefish, beautiful shallow flats extending from the Ningaloo Reef to the shoreline – note the cut in the reef, great spot for stalking GT’s.

A few observations on my experience with the Indo-Pacific permit (right above):

- I did not notice any difference in behavior between the Aussie permit and Caribbean permit. I think I got the same percentage of rejections (a lot!) in both places and thought the fish behaved similarly.
- on average, on this trip, I would say I saw as many permit per day as provided by any of my previous salt water trips. I believe a lot of seeing more fish while searching for permit (similar to Belize or anywhere else) is based on the experience, talent, and eyes of your guide – in other words, success is guide-driven and my guide was excellent – I graded him a solid A.
- One difference – at the North West Cape, we saw a lot more permit on the backs of rays than Belize or anywhere else I’ve fished. I felt a fish on the back of a feeding ray creates a more “catchable situation” than a free swimming fish. Although only one of my four fish came off of a ray, I feel when I go back, I will score much better casting to fish on rays after the learning experiences I had on my first trip.
- Although I did not take a large permit, I did have several shots at fish over 20#.....missed due to either poor casts or rejections.
- I did catch, in shallow water, a few smaller fish that looked very much like baby (very small) permit; however, they were “Spotted Darts” (above, left) and another pompano species.
- We used exclusively a heavy crab pattern fished on or near the sandy bottoms.



One way to measure the richness of a marine flats environment is by the number of rays, sharks, and sea turtles you find in the shallows. It was normal to see 15 – 20 sea turtles each day and at least five species of sharks were a constant. We didn’t lose any fish to them – our guide was efficient at protecting our hooked fish. Three species of the world’s sea turtles (Green, Loggerhead, and Hawksbill) use these beaches for their nesting. While we were there, nesting was taking place and some hatchlings were scrambling to get off the beach. At left above, the Golden Trevally grow to world record size here – fish over 20 pounds are taken. At right, that is my “trophy” Giant Trevally for this trip.....I had several decent shots at GT’s over 40 pounds, some of them on very shallow flats. I had one fish of about 50# eat my fly, but couldn’t hold on to him – left that for next trip!



Above left, powerful Mac Tuna were found in large schools crashing bait on the surface in the deeper gulf waters.....easy to find, just watch for the diving birds. If you choose to, you could wear your arms out taking them all day. Right, the Gold Spotted Trevally was another trevally species available. There were a few places to stay that were worth recommending.....some good dining options in Exmouth.

Angling traffic – I did not see one other inshore angler the entire time. My guess is that as the notoriety of this fishery grows, that statement may not hold true in future years. Outside the reef, there is a good number of billfish (sailfish and three species of marlin) and we did see boats coming in during the afternoon. While we were there, someone boated an 800 pound marlin. Most of the fly fishing guides are equipped for the billfish if that is on your agenda. Regarding fly fishing guides, at this time, there are only three guides who bill themselves as “fly fishing guides.” I would rate them as A, B, and C in order of the quality of fly fishing experience they provided. The guy I spent most of my time with was definitely the “A guy.”



Marte used a local snorkeling guide almost daily to show her the best areas.....he also was very good with his underwater camera capturing the photos above – l to r: Butterflyfish, Grouper, snorkeler, Queen Angelfish, and Picasso Triggerfish. She rated the snorkeling as “world class.”

An annual migration of Humpback Whales and Whale Sharks (below, left) make their temporary homes in the Ningaloo sanctuary. Marine wildlife enthusiasts come from around the world to view them. The Shovelnose Shark (center) is a harmless variety of shark that roots in the sand for its food, sometimes found with a permit hovering over it to see what it stirs up. Right, a “Spotted Dart.”



A detailed day-by-day fishing diary is available in word doc format. If you'd like to see a copy, hit reply and ask.

Either phone or drop us an e-mail if you have questions or would like more information about any of our destinations.

An enthusiastic traveling fly fisherman,

Don Muelrath

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