

CAPE YORK PERMIT

Peter Morse travels to Australia's premier permit location and provides a wealth of information on how to successfully target this elusive species.

The Cotterell River is just one of the river mouths along Cape York's west coast where permit can be found.



Left: When the bite happens on the turn of the tide every fly in the water can get bitten. Note the ratty fins on these fish and the worn gill plate edges. I see these as a consequence of their 'moonie' behaviour and the large amounts of coarse sand they pump through their mouths as they root around in the substrate for bivalves. In between laying the crab pots and tending the vessel, skipper Phil Edwards has become a very experienced permit fly fisherman. Right: Guide Al Simson with a big Cape York permit caught during a rising tide, the best time to fish for them.





THERE'S a lot of fish we easily forget over the years and it's a measure of the esteem a particular species might hold in our lives that a decade later we can still recall every detail of a capture. It's an even greater measure when we can recall the details of every capture of that particular species. We might remember individual exchanges with some fish that were really outstanding such as a monster of a particular species, a furiously tailing big goldie, a bonefish that really tested us, our biggest barra and so on, but not every one. Permit captures however, seem to be especially tattooed into our memories - every last one of them.

It may have been all the attention paid to Del Brown's capture of 500 permit, but everyone I know who chases these fish keeps a count of them and I bet most could recall each capture down to the finest detail. These become stories we love to retell to anyone who'll listen, but we also like to savour the triumph in our own minds. Greg Bethune told

me the story of the capture of his first Indo Pacific permit as though it happened just yesterday.

I was drifting out the mouth of the Jackson River catching goldens on my own in the eleven foot 'chase boat' that I used for crabbing and for keeping an eye on the self drive clients I had back when I wasn't being the sole guide. I was using a shooting head and amnesia running line that 'forgot' that it shouldn't get tangled. I had a bad knot in the striping guide and was picking it out with my teeth and slowly drifting with the outgoing tide.

Just as I untangled the line it came up tight. I was using a Peter Haynes (Cairns based fly tyer) grey over white 2/0 clouser. I even videoed the whole thing myself, with a commentary along the lines that it was the hardest fighting golden I'd ever caught and then after another twenty minutes that it might even be one of those permits I'd been seeing.

It was a permit and an entirely new

chapter in Australian fly fishing history began. It even caused ripples on the world wide fly fishing pond. A year or so later when Alan Philliskirk caught his first permit in the Hinchinbrook Channel I alerted US Fly Fishing in Saltwaters magazine to the capture.

Amongst the correspondence I received from those wanting to know more was a derisive letter from Jack Samson accusing me of misleading US fly fishers with stories of permit in Australia. Since then many vastly experienced fly fishermen (including the late Del Brown) have travelled to Australia to pursue this particular permit species with nary a question of their authenticity. There's a lot of excitement attached to these fish and there's also a lot of passion. Greg's gone on to capture "somewhere in the vicinity of 160" of them.

These days Greg doesn't go to sea much, preferring to leave the day to day running of his new mother ship 'Tropic Paradise' in

When you're looking for permit and sight fishing along the beaches you come across all sorts of fish schools. A mass of slow moving grey shapes turned out to be a school of bigger tarpon. That's when it pays to have a second rod rigged with a clouser.

the immensely capable hands of skipper Phil Edwards. In so doing he's created another permit hunting monster as Phil has rapidly taken his tally well into double figures. More impressive are the captures by clients and very few trips pass without at least a few of these enigmatic fish being caught. Best trip was 22 landed from 29 hookups and a single angler caught 7 in a week. In 2005 they caught them on every trip between April and December. These are the sort of numbers and consistency that have experienced international fly fishermen declaring this to be the best permit fishery in the world.

Nowadays Greg prefers to take to the air in his 172 Cessna to cruise the western beaches of the Cape York coastline. He looks for schools of baitfish and predators for 'Tropic Paradise' as she steams below but says, "I reckon I can pick out the

permit schools now, although as you'll see for yourself from up here there's so many other bloody things cruising the coast it's difficult to single them out." We took off into a strong southeasterly from the gravel strip at Mapoon to fly north to Bamaga along that very coast.

I've spent some time in this area but have never had a view like this - it was as spectacular as it was revealing. On a spring tide low all the flats were exposed and the huge land and seascape of Cape York was spread out before me. Greg was a most helpful pilot as he took the plane lower and circled schools of fish patrolling the beaches or cruising the gutters of the golden sand flats. He knows this coast intimately and threw the plane into tight circles over his favourite places - the 'golden triangle' was closely surveyed from 500 feet with the propeller just ticking over but it held

no fish on this day.

Seisia and Bamaga are the principle towns of the northern tip of our continent. Seisia is on the coast and Bamaga inland amongst the forested hills of this wetter ultimate end of the Cape. Greg bases his operation out of here and 'Tropic Paradise' was tied up to the famous Seisia wharf. It's famous as a fishing location as many species move in on the hordes of sardines and herrings that live amongst the pylons. I met the guides, Al Simson, Pete Hearnden and George Price. Conversations revolved almost entirely around permit and the tides were going to be great for the first three days. That was our window and we steamed south overnight scratching through fly boxes, comparing a multitude of crab and shrimp patterns and exchanging various knots.

I fished with Pete the following



When the fish is close the heat is on. Pete nets a permit for the author who broke in his new Sage TCR 10 weight on a permit, and that's like being born lucky.

morning; he'd done a few trips as a client with Greg over the years and had eventually returned to the Cape to work as a guide. He's a recent convert to the long wand and the obsession was really taking hold. We searched areas where he'd seen big schools a few weeks earlier. The tide was too high at this stage but was falling and fish schools I'd seen from the air the day before turned

out to be milkfish or huge blue tailed mullet. It's pretty well recognised by the guides that regularly work this coast that the main body of permit moves constantly from river to river. Where there are fish one week does not necessarily mean they'll be there on a similar tide two weeks later. Stragglers will definitely appear at any time along this coast as singles

and pairs but the main body seems to move constantly. A week earlier while photographing birds and turtles along the coast south of Janie Creek I'd come across a large single permit cruising with its dorsal and tail out of the water. Several times its big orange tail was thrust into the air as it worked over some morsel. Of course, I didn't have a rod with me. There are five major river

systems of varying sizes that 'Tropic Paradise' visits and the permit rotate their foraging between these. They are the Cottrell, Doughboy, McDonald, Jackson, and Scardon. At any time they can be concentrated around any one of these rivers, or even scattered amongst them. Often they can be found feeding or cruising along the beaches between the rivers. They

can be around the mouth or up the river on the flats - and sometimes they just disappear altogether. When you can't find them in one spot you look elsewhere. Permit have many different ways in which they reveal themselves, with 'mooning' being the best indication of permit schools. Many fish species 'moon' or flash on their sides; milkfish, mullet, whiting, and

even golden trevally, but permit have it down to the point where it is their single greatest weakness. On a sunny day a flashing permit can be seen from a long way off. Big schools flash repeatedly and their broad silver flanks do much more than just wink at you, the progress of a school can be easily followed. Once they move into shallower water you'll detect the darker



The mouth drools! Check out the amazing flats at the McDonald River.



Al Simson with a beautiful permit he pulled from a school we'd been following for an hour or so. Was it the change of tide that bought the bite, or a change to an orange legged merkin? We'll never know, but I'm reasonably convinced the fly change had a good deal to do with it.



This fish was caught in very shallow water. There were scattered fish on the rim of a deeper gutter and they were tailing steadily in only 50 cms of water and it pounced on a suspender crab.

moving mass of the school without relying on the mooning.

One of the traditional culinary highlights of a week on 'Tropical Paradise' is a mud crab feast. Part of skipper Phil Edwards' role is to collect the muddies which means heading off in the skiff 'Del Brown' to his favourite mud crab creeks. Of course, he takes a fly rod loaded with a crab pattern. The man is obsessed with permit. As we searched known permit gutters, sand bars and beaches a call came in on the radio from Phil - "I'm hooked up, I've got permit everywhere!" We were on our way.

The tide had fallen far enough to reveal a complex series of deeper holes and it was close to where I'd caught my first permit a few years earlier. We searched the water outside the outermost sandbars and I was itching to get into the gutters

on the inside. We finally motored in and immediately saw permit both cruising and mooning. They were up in the shallows sitting on the pressure wave at the lip of the gutter, noses into the current and the tips of their tails visible out of the water, tilting and shifting as they fed in the flow of the tide that had just begun to push out of the gutter and onto the flats. We could see their bright orange tails and dorsal fins breaking the surface.

Tailing is another way of spotting these fish but there are two forms of tailing. One is the full on tailing that happens when a fish tilts head down in shallow water and its tail breaks the surface; the other occurs when a school of fish is cruising, and their tails and dorsal fins break the surface. This often happens when a pod is circling or milling over a mussel bed in a metre or two

of water, spiraling round and round with tails breaking the surface. It can also happen when they're simply cruising from area to area.

Felty's suspender crab is a beauty of a fly and the concept is ingenious. Its based on a Florida pattern and the set up allows you to float the crab just above the bottom. We'd come across the first of these tailing fish suddenly and had alerted them so we anchored the boat and waded. I could see mooning fish seventy metres away and moved slowly toward them. A single came cruising along the lip of the gutter, Pete pointed it out but it diverted away from the fly back into the deeper water.

Another fish mooned and tailed thirty metres away and I waded to it, blood pounding in my ears. This is always the toughest part, getting the weighted fly into the



Carrying a variety of merkins with different coloured legs and weights is an important approach to fishing for permit. Some prefer to focus on presentation and tide change, others prefer to rack through the fly changes.

right spot without spooking the fish. This is particularly important in the shallows. The rule of thumb is that the more vigorously a fish is tailing the closer you can land the fly to it. The cast was good - half a rod length in front of the tailing fish and a barely audible 'plip' from the sinker. There was none of that 'longest silence' crap, just a bow wave as it charged the fly and the line snapped tight; simple as that.

Permit have a great take. As you're usually fishing a static fly and as takes are so infrequent, when the line does tighten it's always a wonderful surprise. It tightens hard and fast and there's rarely a need to strike. This fish didn't make it to the backing; I like to fight permit like I would fight any other fish. They are determined and strong but because they're in shallow water you can use a repertoire of angles to mess them up and hurt them very quickly. It turned out this one was hooked deep and bleeding from the gills. Our efforts to revive it failed. It wouldn't be wasted and when we returned to the mothership for lunch it was pinned out on a board to dry in the sun and that night Al made a gyotaku print for me.

The following day I fished with



Del Brown's merkin pattern is undoubtedly a very successful fly for these fish. Guide Al Simson recommends them in a range of leg colours. This orange legged version worked after countless refusals of other patterns.



Al's simple floating crab is made from foam discs. Tiewell sell pre-cut foam in good crab shapes. Note the eggs sac addition - he thinks it's important and anything that improves your confidence has to help.

Al and insisted that he fish as well. He already had a few permit on his scorecard. On the falling tide we found the fish in their hundreds in an area of marl type bottom. These fish were in pods and feeding hard,

circling and swirling over patches of bottom that held exactly whatever it was that they wanted to feed on. The water depth varied from one to one and a half metres. A column of around twenty or thirty fish would

spiral round and round a patch of bottom and a plume of silt indicated that there was some pretty serious digging going on.

Phil had told me the day before that he likes suspender crabs in

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The closing stages are always fraught with nervousness. It pays to work these fish over using constant angle changes.



This free swimming permit was spotted cruising the beach between the Pennfather River and Janies Creek. At first we thought it was a shark then when I went to take pics through the long lens I saw immediately that it was a permit. I'd set out that morning on a

We fished flies dead and with a slow retrieve through the mass. We fished crabs and we fished shrimps. We fished with flies that had worked in the past and we tried outrageous looking things more in hope than anything else.





As permit are such a prized capture anglers tend to go a little softer on these fish which perhaps exaggerates their fighting prowess. Treat them like you'd treat a golden trevally or any other fish and try to land them quickly. They are however a very stubborn fighter.

the shallows and merkins in the deeper water. We rattled through the changes, going to longer finer fluorocarbon tippets and different patterns. We fished flies dead and with a slow retrieve through the mass. We fished crabs and we fished shrimps. We fished with flies that had worked in the past and we tried outrageous looking things more in hope than anything else. We had several possible touches on mid water shrimps and that was it. We moved amongst the dozen or so schools of fish and tried everything through that falling tide. Then right as the first of the new tide began to push Al hooked up on one of his own suspender crab patterns and twenty minutes later landed a permit.

The following day I was back with Pete. He was so determined to catch a permit I thought he was going to explode with tension. We had a later start because of the tide but planned to look for

permit straight away. The previous day I'd been telling Al about dolphins predated on permit in the Weipa waters and we'd seen some dolphins this morning. It wasn't something Al had seen before. It didn't take long before we found the permit and there were plenty of them moving between gutters.

There are several different approaches to getting a bite from these recalcitrant fish. One is to tie on a favourite fly and to stick to it in the hope that a permit will eventually eat it and that is my approach. With twenty or so fish in a school there has to be a dumb one somewhere. Sometimes it can take a lot of casts (I like casting) but usually on the bottom of the tide, or on the first of the run in something will happen. Another approach is to change flies constantly in the belief that sooner or later you're going to find what they want to eat. The discovery of the right fly more often than not coincides with the bottom

of the tide and the first of the run in as well.

A call came in over the radio - Phil and Al were fishing together and they'd found a dolphin predated on permit. The area was alive with them this morning and I chose to stick with Felty's suspender crab but reduced my tippet from 15 to 12 lb fluorocarbon. I was using the new Rio Tropical Outbound intermediate, which also has a clear 10-foot tip giving an effective overall leader length of 20 feet. These fish were in deeper water and it was murky as well. A high sheen of thin cloud made observation very difficult but occasional dull flashes and the yellow tips of tails provided a visual link to the barely perceptible school of slow moving fish. On one occasion the school moved into slightly shallower water and I was hooked up the instant the fly had settled. A call came in on the radio - Phil was hooked up as well. His fish was in beautiful

condition whereas mine had ratty fins and gill plates, something that's fairly common amongst these fish.

The next day the tides were not as good but we had a window in the early afternoon and I was back with Al. Permit will use channels in the flats as highways to move in and out of rivers. I suspect that's because of their cruising and schooling nature. A few big things like to predate on them and these shallow channels are a safety zone. One slightly deeper and considerably prominent channel had a rubbly substrate and the permit were thick in here and feeding hard. Phil was on 'Del Brown' nearby and the permit worked over any area they were obviously finding a lot of food in. I noticed that Phil used a steady retrieve, Al used a slow strip to just move the crab and catch the fish's eye and both my fish had come with no retrieve. It is unbearably difficult to not impart some movement into the fly and ultimately, after watching these guys I don't think it matters; you need to try all sorts of things from dead still to a reasonably fast strip.

Cloud is the enemy of all flats fishing and on this day we had it coming through in great puffy clumps of cumulus, leaving only brief windows of blue sky. Ever notice how the cloud seems to build as the tide falls? If you haven't before you sure will when you go permit fishing. Al was adopting his preferred method of constantly changing fly patterns and I persisted with the suspender. He was a fury of knot tying and fly changing as he scratched through his fly selection looking for something they hadn't seen yet. It paid off for him when he sank a bright orange legged merkin in front of a pod that had already passed my suspended crab.

We landed six permit for the week and that was about an average trip. Some of Seafaris trips to this region have been spectacular, especially when a crab hatch has come out of the mangroves and the permit are lined up in the current sipping them off the surface. I was shown the extraordinary footage of this event and it's something I have to see before I die. A palolo worm hatch has also been recorded by the crew and again every permit in the gulf seemed to congregate along these rivers.

It's difficult to define why these fish become so special, but what ever it is I think it's at the core of the challenge of fly fishing. We get over 'easy' fish eventually. Seems it's the guys who've been around waving fly rods longest that really get a kick out of catching these. They have had plenty of guys new to the sport who have caught one and just said "OK, let's get back to those queenfish now." Whatever we want to call them they're here as a vitally integral link in our fly fishing world. They're complex, they're challenging and every one is memorable.

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PEELING IS FOR ORANGES

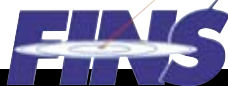
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FACT FILE

OPERATOR

Carpentaria Seafaris. Most of the information you will require is available from their web site: www.seafaris.com

OPERATIONS, CAPE YORK

Ph: (07) 40693254 Email: greg@seafaris.com.au

BOOKINGS AND ENQUIRIES

Ph: (07)40916688 Email: joseph@seafaris.com.au

The price for 8 days, 7 nights is \$4,990 AUD which includes the airfare from Cairns to Bamaga return. Seafaris takes care of the airline booking.

WHERE TO CATCH PERMIT

The west coast of Cape York is undoubtedly the Indo Pacific permit stronghold in Australia. Greg Bethune's operation is unsurpassed as an opportunity to chase permit in real style and comfort (let alone all the other fish species found along that coast.) They have also caught them on the sandcays of the outer northern Great Barrier Reef.

Further south in the gulf around Weipa, Alan Philliskirk, has plenty of permit to his credit. On the east coast they've been caught as far south as Fraser Island and the flats of the Hinchinbrook Channel is also a hot spot. Many of the river mouths of Queensland's east coast will hold them but they are migratory and weather along that coast is always an issue.

I've had close encounters with them in the Wessel Islands, seen them in the rivers of Bathurst Island, and they've been caught across the top of Arnhemland.

There are plenty of recorded captures from the Broome, Port Hedland and Karratha regions. Exmouth and the Ningaloo region is also a 'hot spot.'

SEASON

Prime permit time is through the dry season from April until December with the best months being August to October. Very few trips go past without some permit being caught. Specify when booking that you want permit tides, if these fish are your prime goal.

As an alternative to fishing down the west coast of Cape York, Carpentaria Seafaris also undertake trips to the eastern outer Barrier Reef from December to March.

OTHER SPECIES

The world's your oyster here. The best trips with a bunch of good fly fishermen can rack up in excess of fifty different species in a week. Queenfish are prolific, as are trevally and tuna. It's a fly fisherman's paradise.

TACKLE AND TACTICS

Bring your own fly tackle and flies. Eight, nine and ten weight rods with lines from floaters to fast sinking shooting heads can all get some action. The best all round rod weight for tackling permit is a nine and an intermediate line such as the Rio Outbound is ideal. Use tapered leaders out around 3+ metres long with 6-8 kg fluorocarbon tippetts. For all other fishing intermediates are also recommended unless you want to go deep. Vary leaders and flies according to situations and species.



and well maintained. The guides are rotated daily and are broadly experienced. They are passionate about permit. The vessel is fully set up with the latest communication and navigation equipment.

FOOD AND ALCOHOL

In spite of the long fishing days you are probably going to come home from a trip with these guys heavier than you were when you left. The food is outstanding and I really looked forward to dinner each night. The mud crab feast is always a highlight and the range and quality of sushi and sashimi available was outstanding. You can return for lunch each day or stay out on the water if the tides are good.

The bar runs on an honour system and every evening there are complimentary wines with dinner. Prices for additional bottles and spirits are very reasonable.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Anglers and partners might want to consider also spending some time at the accommodations at Punsand Bay. See: www.punsand.com.au It is located only five kilometres from the tip of Cape York and has available activities such as beachcombing, bird watching and fishing.

STAR RATING.

Travel ease	****
Mothership	****
Fishing boats	***
Crew and guides	****
Food	****
Fishing	****

You want a low tide during the day early in your trip so that the flats are reasonably exposed. You will also require bucket loads of persistence with dead and slow retrieves with the object being to get the fly in front of them and let them see it. Be prepared to experiment.

A wide variety of crabs such as suspenders and merkins in a wide variety of sizes, weights (don't forget the floaters) and colours. They also eat shrimps and have been known to eat clousers. Al told me he's also seen permit chasing garfish when there's been plenty of them about.

Carry a spray jacket through the dry season as the Cape can get windy. Add plenty of sunscreen and good polarised sunglasses.

THE VESSEL

Tropic Paradise is a luxury mothership with two self contained cabins and four double cabins. It has a large comfortable lounge and eating area and a bbq area on the back deck. Tackle is rigged and stored on the huge top deck. The tenders (fishing boats) are constructed of fibreglass