



Fine Tuning

A series of changes saves the day for Peter Morse on the Exmouth permit flats.

Exmouth can offer up a lot of memories in a short amount of time. On a calm day a few years ago, with friends Tony Ong and Steve Bradbury, we waded an Exmouth Gulf flat spiked with permit tails. An hour or so earlier on another flat I had hurdled a two-metre bull shark that charged me — we felt a little safer with three of us in the water and stayed reasonably close together.

On this particular day we were confronted by a few dozen tailing fish that for once in my experience weren't rushing to be somewhere else in that usual permitish way. They were feeding harder than I have seen 'blochii'

permit feeding before or since. It was a slow outgoing tide about three quarters down, leaving water around knee deep. I eventually hooked a permit and had it close for landing when a bull shark erupted from nowhere, and from a cloud of stirred up sand and blood stained water I extracted half a permit. We got out of the water fairly quickly that day.

Brett Wolf detests the sharks of Exmouth, especially the whalers and bulls that get up on the flats. He carries a stash of fist sized beach rocks that he hurls at them the moment they come into range, but he hurls with extra ferocity when someone has

a permit hooked up. They don't like that and usually clear out.

One day with Brett and Alan 'Fish' Philliskirk, in just a few feet of water, we watched a medium sized hammerhead hunt down a stingray and finish it off right in front of the boat.

On the same day that the shark ate my permit, Fish had gone for a wander on another nearby flat and had beaten a quick and silent retreat back to the boat when a big tiger shark moved in on the flat and zig-zagged its way up his scent trail. There are a lot of turtles and stingrays in the area and hammers and tigers like to eat them.

You need to really keep your wits about you when wading these flats.



BRETT WOLF

Fine Tuning... continued



Gulf prawns and Tassie beer.

GUIDE'S DAY OFF

I fished with Brett again recently. He had a day off and the forecast was for a bit of wind in the morning, then windless with a blue desert-sky day for the afternoon. "GTs on the reef side, or will we look in the Gulf for something?" he offered. We mulled about for a while and at the main road I said, "The Gulf," and we turned right.

Wolfie admitted the tides weren't great for this side with a high at midday, "but we'll see what the falling tide brings out of the mangroves this afternoon." We rigged rods for GT and

After the turn, the tide fell quickly at first and in the outflow off one rocky mangrove point we found giant herring. It's hard not to throw flies at these and I can tell you that they have no problem eating fast-stripped crabs.

With a hard substrate, the water on this point was clean. The windy morning had eased and on the change of the tide the Gulf slowly became a sheet of glazed porcelain. We mooched along the point looking for signs of life. Two hundred metres away several scattered groups of wakes in V formations were coming right at us. "Probably permit," said Wolfie as he manoeuvred the boat into position and hit the 'spot lock' on the Minn Kota — "You'll need to cast long and well ahead of them."

I waited for the first group to get closer so I could eye-ball them but they spooked 80 feet out, long before they were visible through the sheen. They saw us standing high on the boat before we could see them. "Definitely permit" said Wolfie.

I had a shot at another small group of wakes and got low this time but they spooked before I even managed to get the fly down. "Probably blue-tailed mullet," he said, "spooky as hell."

DEALING WITH WAKES

All is not what it seems with schools of waking fish on the flats. The wakes can be metres behind where the fish are, and like a trout rising in flowing water, the disturbance is not where the fish is, it's where it was. In this case, throw to the disturbance of the wake and you'll probably land the fly in the middle of a school, or if it's a single wake, behind the fish.

The next wake was clearly a big single fish; the cast was long and the fly landed well in front of it. As the wake approached I gave the fly a small



Losing fish to sharks is not a pleasant experience.

Blochiis produce sudden, almost violent changes of direction in the closing stages of a fight. Keeping a high rod at this stage will help avoid pulled hooks and broken tippets.

GETTING THE FLY IN FRONT OF THESE FISH WITHOUT SPOOKING THEM WAS AN ISSUE...



Most permit boxes are dominated by crab patterns, and Scott Sparnon's generally do the trick.

shuffling strip; there was a swirl, a confusion of water, and the fish was gone.

We talked retrieves and we talked permit tactics as the next collection of wakes approached some 200 metres away. I recalled the glassy calm day I'd hooked the fish that the shark ate and we agreed that wading was the best option on a day like this.

The bottom was hard with plenty of sharp bits so I slipped my feet into my thongs — the only form of shoes I had on board — slid into the water and manoeuvred to the side of the path of the approaching school so I could get a quartering cast to the front. Wolfie

dropped the boat down-current by 20 metres. It was a school of smaller permit, the cast was good and I led them by plenty — they scattered the moment I moved the fly.

"Your leader needs changing," he said, "that Bimini and loop to loop connector system has to go." He tossed me a spool of 30 lb Asari fluorocarbon and I did a quick re-rig as another set of wakes approached. The loop to loop was removed, a section of 30 lb fc was tied to the 50 lb butt and then a 20 lb fc tippet to the business end, all joined with unobtrusive double blood knots.

The ruffle of wakes was close when I looked up. The water could not have been calmer, or the conditions more challenging — you could hear turtles taking a breath from hundreds of metres away, otherwise it was absolutely silent and still.

I got the fly well in front of these fish and began a twitching retrieve as the bow waves approached. This resulted in violent swirls as they scattered in all directions — "Those were permit." We both swore and Wolfie cracked another Boags — guide's day off. We were focused and relaxed, but in spite of the conditions remained confident and intent; the fish were here, that was what mattered most. We waited 10 minutes but that was the last of the fish coming out of that particular system, so we moved.

PROBLEM SOLVING

There were several problems as we could see it. Getting the fly in front of the fish without spooking them was an issue, but by getting in the water and leading them by plenty, that problem seemed to be mostly fixed. Then the fish were probably spooking from the leader. That had been addressed by a re-rig, but then they spooked on the movement of the fly. Whether that was because of the leader, or how the fly was moving, we could only guess.



Every one of these fish is a prize, but this one was particularly special.

Fine Tuning... continued

These fish were what I would call 'travellers' — they'd probably finished feeding and were vacating this rapidly shallowing bay — and they are always in a different mood to 'feeders'. The lead fish in a travelling school will be on full alert, the others just casually following on behind. Although permit will often feed on the falling tide, this depends on several things. Food availability is one, but also the speed of the falling tide, the size of the tide and the proximity to deeper water. In this part of the world deeper water also holds predators, so perhaps they were nervous — we'd seen a few dolphins earlier that day and I believe these are a major predator of permit.

We discussed retrieves as we moved to another area. Brett favours a small twitching retrieve, almost a shake of the stripping hand which makes the fly behave as though it's a crab trying to bury itself in the sand. I'd been doing that and mentioned the longer, single

slow strip that Alan Philliskirk and the Gulf of Carpentaria guides prefer. "Give it a go," he said.

The tide had slowed by now and we moved to an area where he'd seen a lot of tailing permit in recent weeks. "Fish on this flat are eating clams," he said. "The bottom is softish and wadeable and it's almost impossible to detect a bite; you need to strip strike on suspicion. I usually call it for my clients when I can see the fish, but I can't see anything today."

I figured that the full intermediate line and the constant tension of the slow strip would keep me well in touch with the fly, and I'd know when a fish had eaten.

The breeze stayed away, the water was slick and oily, and straight away we saw wakes and swirls. I changed to a smaller Sparwolf Crab (FL#87) and slipped into the water in bare feet — it was too soft for the Chinese wading boots. This was close to the flat where

the bull shark had eaten the permit a few years earlier and the water here was a little murkier. Stingrays also eat clams — we'd seen a few in the area and they stir the water up as they feed.

By now the sun was much lower in the sky and polaroiding was even more difficult. A school of big queenfish swam through to cause momentary chaos and other unseen creatures made wakes and swirls that also made it difficult to single out a target.

Among all of this we spotted a large single wake 100 metres away, coming right at us with the tide, and I positioned myself in its path. It didn't waver from its track and at 60 feet out the fly landed delicately (for a crab) just to one side and 10 feet in front of it. With the wake approaching where I judged the fly to be, I put in a long, slow single strip and had just started another strip when the wake stopped, there was a swirl, and the line snapped up tight.

"It's the right one," said Wolfie, and I got a glimpse of a sizeable blochii as it swirled on the surface. Blochii have a very sneaky fight with sudden and dramatic changes of direction that can catch you out if you're fishing a low and hard bent rod. You have to fish them with a higher rod to absorb those changes of direction, and they just don't give up. By the time the fish



Sometimes small and heavy will do the job.

was landed the tide had slowed, the breeze had come up, and the window had closed.

I suspect that the slightly dirtier water helped, but the combination of a series of changes — getting in the water, replacing the leader, using a smaller fly, adjusting the retrieve — all contributed. Leave one of them out and we probably would have blanked on these fish.

Just one permit can make your day, but under the circumstances, this one was especially satisfying. **FL**



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