

If I am brutally honest with myself – and with you, for that matter – there isn't another fish that I have crossed watery paths with that possesses the ability to get my blood boiling and my knees wobbling like the pompano, *Trachinotus blochii*. Sleek, spooky, powerful and downright gorgeous, it has rightfully earned its title as king of the flats, most notably on the magnificent flats of the outer Seychelles atolls. Bones and GTs are quickly forgotten when a sizeable pompano comes sneaking onto the flats to feed, presenting what is for many anglers the chance of a lifetime. These fish tend to have such a profound effect that sometimes fly fishing etiquette is all but forgotten as anglers clamber over each other to have a shot



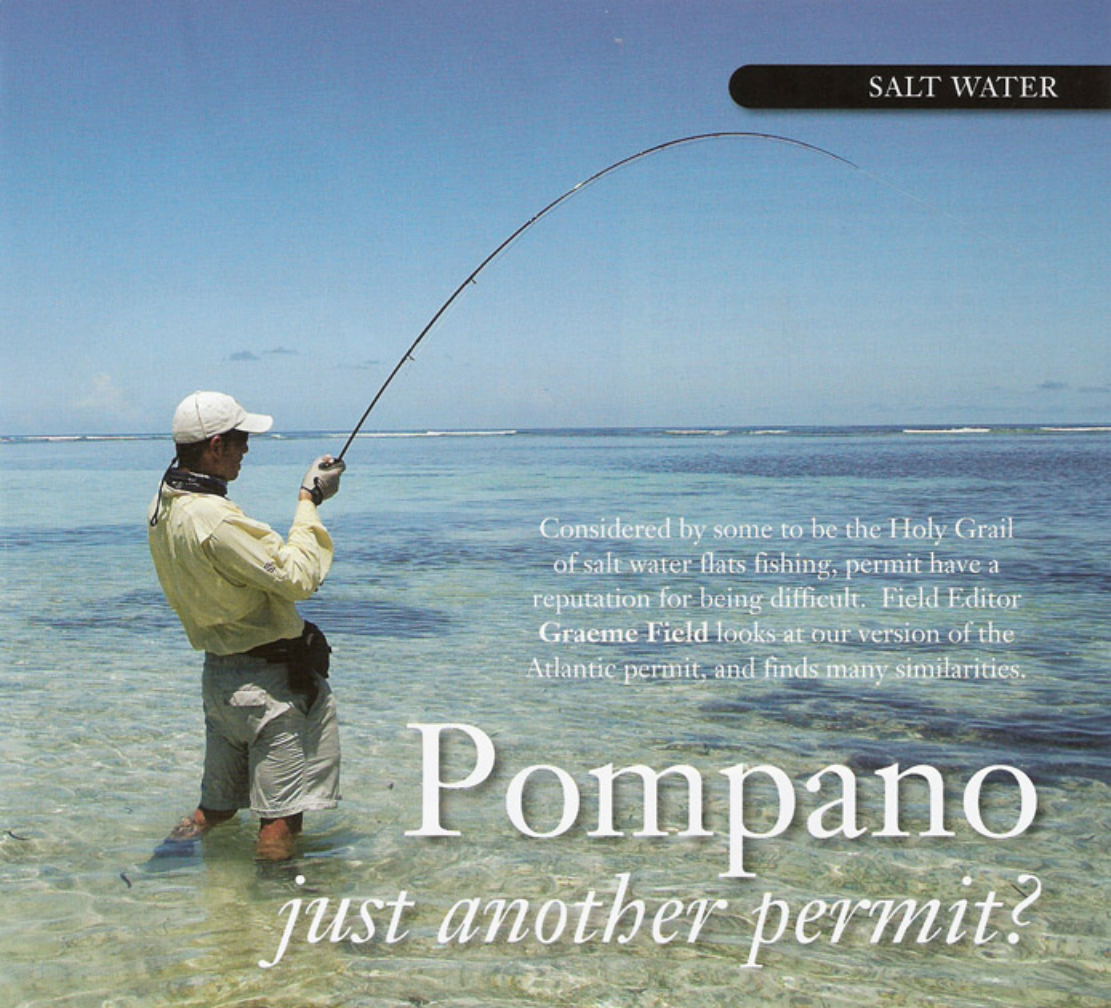
**"SLEEK, SPOOKY, POWERFUL AND
DOWNRIGHT GORGEOUS, IT HAS
RIGHTFULLY EARNED ITS TITLE AS KING OF THE FLATS."**



Left and above left: Pompano or permit? They look the same, act the same, and both are frustratingly difficult to catch on fly. Above: Sickle tails sticking out of the water are a dead giveaway.

at these prized trophies. Although pompano are clearly held in high esteem in our waters, how do they compare to the fish that worldwide is regarded as the Holy Grail of salt water fly fishing – the Atlantic permit? Pretty damn close, I say!

Other than the fact that it doesn't attain as large a size as its Atlantic cousin, the pompano certainly possesses all the attributes that make any permit species respected, challenging and tricky to take on fly. Pompano will enthral and enrage even the best anglers, and the sight of a rusty-golden sickle tail waving around on the flats will reduce the most hardened fly angler to a trembling mess. They are just as spooky, elusive and difficult to catch as true permit – and just as rewarding when you get it right! They aren't



Considered by some to be the Holy Grail of salt water flats fishing, permit have a reputation for being difficult. Field Editor Graeme Field looks at our version of the Atlantic permit, and finds many similarities.

Pompano

just another permit?

around in substantial numbers and, as with Atlantic permit, you aren't going to get many shots at a trophy fish – so you need to make your chances count. Successfully stalking, hooking and landing a big pompano on the flats will certainly give you bragging rights in the bar for many an evening.

DISTRIBUTION

Found along the east coast of Africa, throughout the Indian Ocean islands and as far across as Australia, pompano are a highly sought-after flats species. Although their preferred habitat is flats, mangroves, shallow creeks and waterways, they are also found in deeper water and around offshore reefs. However, they are difficult to target on fly unless feeding in shallows where anglers are able to sight-cast at them. Bait fishermen still catch them from the shore from KwaZulu-Natal northwards, but due to horrific overfishing in countries such as Mozambique and Tanzania, miles and miles of perfectly formed permit flats lie barren, the fish netted to within an inch of their lives by overzealous locals. Fly anglers are now all but forced to head for the hallowed waters of the Seychelles for the opportunity to sight-cast to pompano on the flats.

A FLY ROD QUARRY

They can be found cruising on the glistening white sand, tailing around the edges of turtle grass flats, and sneaking up the deeper channels and cuts that create access and exit points to and from the main flats. They are particularly abundant on atolls such as St Joseph and Astove, where they move in with the tides along clearly defined paths. But even in these prime locations they remain elusive and challenging, and live up to the reputation shaped by the Atlantic permit. Perhaps it is because there aren't great numbers of them, or that anglers get so few good shots at them, or that they possess such a large, all-seeing eye (that normally spots you before you spot them) – but whatever the reason, they remain one of the most challenging fish to take on fly.

So you've mortgaged your house, sold your car and finally find yourself calf-deep in gin-clear water watching a big pompano feeding on the flats ahead of you. Now you've just got to pick the right fly, present it, hook, fight and land the fish of a lifetime. You may have gathered from the preceding paragraphs that this might be easier said than done. I've had

the privilege of guiding in the Seychelles for a number of years, and have been fortunate to witness permit feeding in different conditions. I've seen them caught and (more often) have seen chances squandered. I would like to share with you some of the tactics that have proved successful for me. They are by no means foolproof, but they have produced results, so are worth considering should you wish to target a pompano on fly. Obviously, fishing for these extremely finicky and wary fish differs from place to place, so my advice is to listen to your guide, since he will know the best methods and flies for the area.

FISHING TACTICS

The first thing to remember is that you have more time than you think. People tend to get buck fever when confronted with a feeding pompano, and start attacking the fish in a great hurry since they believe their window of opportunity is really small. However, pompano can be stalked for ages if you are patient and careful. They are extremely shy and spooky fish, and the worst thing you can do is to cast too close to them – they will bolt for safety immediately! Once spooked, they stay spooked (you will seldom, if ever, get another chance at a frightened permit or pompano), so take your time the first time.



Photos: Brent Mannix



Pompano come in varying sizes, but are always worthy opponents.

The second important thing to remember with pompano is that they feed quite erratically – i.e. they generally do not feed in one direction that allows you to anticipate where they will move to. For instance, a bonefish will feed in a slow zigzag pattern, and it is quite simple to guess where it is going to be, allowing you to present the fly ahead of the fish in its projected path. A pompano will turn without warning, feed in one direction for a few moments and then turn 90 degrees and head the other way – it just depends on what mood it's in and how settled it has become in its feeding area. You therefore want to keep the fish within casting distance, but reserve your actual casts for when you feel the fish is going to move in a specific direction – then place your fly quite a way ahead of the fish. Don't cast unless you have a good shot. The fish will become alert to danger if you keep flogging the water.

PRESENTATION

Something to remember is that the slower and more methodically the fish is feeding, the better your chances are of a hookup. I like to work the periphery of the fish's feeding area and leave the fly lying on the bottom for it to find. If it doesn't see the fly or react to it, wait until you are sure the fish is well clear before lifting the fly out for your next cast. Keep stalking it, dropping the fly 10ft - 15ft away from the fish, and its feeding pattern will eventually intercept your cast.

Ideally you want the fish to catch its first glimpse of the fly as it sinks to the bottom. Remember, you are trying to imitate a crab or crustacean that has just dived for cover as it senses the impending danger.

Too close and the fish will spook when the fly hits the surface, so rather cast too far away and leave the fly lying on the bottom. Pompano have incredible eyesight and will pick up the fly easily. They will, however, pick you up as well,

TACKLE AND FLIES

I was chatting to some other Seychelles guides a few weeks ago, and I believe anglers are having great success with pompano on normal bonefish patterns (such as a tan Gotcha) stripped really fast. Apparently the pompano are pouncing on these speedily retrieved shrimp imitations with great gusto. I've not



"POMPANO CAN BE STALKED FOR AGES IF YOU ARE PATIENT AND CAREFUL."



Careful presentation and patience in your approach are key when targeting pompano on the flats.

so keep a low profile at all times and continue dropping the fly up ahead of where you think the fish may move to.

Then – possibly the most important aspect of fishing for permit – do not strip! Leave that fly lying dead still on the bottom. I like to make a cast far enough ahead of the fish so that if it does see the fly on the drop, it only catches a glimpse of it as it reaches the bottom. I then immediately take up any slack line and just keep the line taut enough to maintain contact with the fly. Generally (there are no fixed rules here), forcefully stripping a crab fly will spook a permit. You might think that the fly is lying motionless and lifeless on the bottom, but there is always a tiny bit of current or wind, or even line drag which causes the fly to slowly creep along the bottom. This is much more like a real live crab and pompano love this. So just make your cast, take up your slack and hold on!

That big eye sees everything!

tried this method so cannot comment on it – I personally find it difficult to experiment too much when one has so few opportunities at these fish, so I tend to stick to my tried-and-tested patterns and methods. But I believe this new method does work, so by all means, give it a go! As far as tackle goes, I prefer a fast-action 9-wt rod with a weight forward floating line. I use a leader of about 10ft - 12ft, tapered to 12lb or 14lb. I like to use Velcro Crab patterns in #2 - #2/0 and generally light tan in colour, but your guide should tell you

what is best for the area you are fishing.

Get out there and go for it. Keep a low profile, wade as quietly as possible, and keep putting your fly in the zone. Don't get despondent – permit and pompano can be the most frustrating fish in the world. They will often spook for no apparent reason, and sometimes even swim right over your fly without batting an eyelid (so to speak). A big, fat pompano may tail right next to your fly and eat a live crab inches from where it is lying as if your fake crab does not even exist. You will try and try and try once more, curse and cringe, but eventually when you least expect it you will make a good cast and it will all come together. When that magnificent fish casually noses down and sucks in your fly and your line pulls tight, all the frustration is forgotten in an instant and you will never be the same again!