



# Chaos...

## a fishing story

Field Editor **Graeme Field** returns to the Seychelles seeking that Holy Grail of fly fishing species – the ever elusive Indo-Pacific permit.

**T**he final day of a long but successful trip to the Seychelles was slipping slowly into a lazy tropical afternoon. We were onboard the motor yacht, MV Illusions, lying peacefully at anchor just off the reef of the exquisite atoll of St Joseph, the group of fishermen I was guiding having decided to spend the rest of the day relaxing after a hot morning's fishing. Knowing it was going to be a while before I saw the glistening flats of this fly fisherman's paradise again, I decided to take the opportunity to head out on my own for a couple of hours of solitary fishing.

St Jo's is renowned as a superb bonefish destination – the small and quaint interlinked sandflats and islands providing the perfect habitat for these shallow water speedsters – and we had enjoyed hours of awesome bonefishing in the preceding days of the trip. Having spent years guiding on the flats in the Seychelles, I had long since learnt the advantage of always carrying a 12-wt rod

Beautiful, strong, powerful and incredibly difficult to catch, these fish have earned their reputation as the most challenging and rewarding target in the tropics. Naturally wary and spooky, they will scrutinise your fly and tear off for deep water if it is deemed even marginally unrealistic. For the group of mostly first-time salt water anglers I was accompanying on this particular trip, pompano were considered too tricky to catch, and the focus had remained on the abundant bonefish. Walking back to the boat on one hot, still morning earlier in the week, we had come across a small pod of pompano feeding on the turtle grass flats that border the edges of the reef. Given the opportunity to have a shot at them, I took my chance and was pleasantly surprised when everything went according to plan and I landed a lovely 14lb specimen. Other than that single fish, the pompano and GTs had remained frustratingly elusive, so it was these fish I had in mind when I headed for the flats on my own that last afternoon.

any GTs all week, and wanting to be as unrestricted as possible for stalking pompano with the lighter rod, I elected to leave it onboard.

It started almost immediately. In fact, I was just sliding off the bow of the inflatable tender boat onto the flats when I saw the shoal of yellowdot trevally cruising towards me, their electric blue colouring showing up like disco lights over the dark turtle grass. All I did was unhook my #2 crab pattern and flick it at them, and immediately I was into a good 5lb fish. These are a soft-mouthed kingfish species that forage for crustaceans, and cannot resist the sight of a hapless crab floundering in the water. Good start, but my carefully tied permit crab was no longer in such great condition. I replaced it and began a slow walk along the grass flats, slipping into "the zone" and scanning the water for that telltale knee-weakening, sickle-shaped fin breaking the surface that signals a feeding pompano.



Left: The trophy pompano. Above left: MV Illusions. Above right: A yellowdot trevally.

in anticipation of bumping into one of the big Seychelles GTs that always seem to appear when you least expect them. For the entire trip I had been carrying an additional rod clipped to my belt, pre-rigged with a big streamer or stripping crab imitation on an 80lb leader. But in all the time of that week at St Jo's I had yet to see a sign of one of these brutes, and the rod had thus far remained unused. What I had seen though, were significant numbers of Indo-Pacific pompano (permit), widely regarded as the "Holy Grail" of fly fishing.

Being rather low on flies at this stage of the week, I spent the few hours after lunch frantically tying some crab patterns that have proved so successful on other atolls in the Seychelles. These are not easy nor are they quick to tie, and I only managed to churn out a limited number of acceptable-looking patterns by the time the tender boat was ready to ferry me the short distance to the reef's edge. Standing on the aft deck, pompano rod rigged and ready, I toyed with the idea of again carrying my 12-wt rod with me. But having not seen

Nothing happened for a while, but the tide was just starting to flood the turtle grass edges and I knew they would soon appear. Then, directly ahead of me a big fin broke the surface as a fish foraged for something in a depression on the flats – except, that fin was white, stubby and curved, and was attached to a GT of at least 40lb! I absolutely cursed myself – my unused GT rod was back on the boat and this fish was a sitting duck. With no coral around and no other option available to me, I threw caution to the wind and



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cast the suddenly minute-looking permit crab imitation in front of this beast's nose. I swear that fish had never seen a fly or an angler before, because it just exploded out of the hole and charged after the fly with typical kingfish aggression. It got so excited (damn, I would have nailed that fish on a 6/0 stripping crab!) that it missed the fly on its first attempt, before almost leaping clear of the water to devour it on its second go. That huge mouth sucked in gulps of air, water, half a kilo of turtle grass and my fly, and suddenly I was connected... on an 8-wt, #2 fly and a 12lb tippet! The odds were certainly not in my favour.

But I hung on. The fly must have been in the corner of its mouth, the light line clear of those fearsome teeth, and I was connected. After at least 30 seconds I was beginning to feel the first glimmer of hope that

maybe I could win this, but the fish decided it had wasted enough time with this silly game and broke me off with a sudden powerful run for deep water. Let's just say that being the only person on the entire atoll at that point, I was rather vocal in letting that big fish know what I thought of the way I had been treated...

I found myself tying on my third crab pattern in as many minutes, hands trembling like a leaf, still cursing the

fish I tried to thread the tippet through the eye of the hook. Eventually I was ready to resume my fishing. I looked up and I couldn't believe my eyes. That very same GT had turned around and come back to its hole on the flats and had resumed feeding as if nothing had happened. "What the hell!" I thought, and cast at him again. With a memory like that of Dory in the movie *Finding Nemo*, that GT had already forgotten what had just happened, and it exploded out of its hole and devoured my fly again! And again the line held and I had my second chance at this trophy fish on ridiculously light gear. In a near perfect replay of the first scene, the fish let me hang on just long enough to get me thinking that I might be in with a shout, before powering off and snapping the leader yet again. This time I am sure that the guys back on the boat heard my cursing.

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Enter second last treasured permit crab pattern. Barely managing to thread the tippet through the hook, I took a deep breath and slowly looked up. Well, he hadn't come back for round three, but instead in almost the same spot were two really big pompano. Now everything was trembling as I ducked into a stealthy stance. Both these fish were feeding well, and in the ensuing minutes I managed numerous good shots at them. On a few occasions they were literally right on top of my fly and I was so sure the line was going to pull tight I almost struck prematurely. But pompano, being pompano, will lead you on for ages before mysteriously disappearing from sight for good. Which is precisely what these fish did, leaving me with my first

the tip of a tail breaking through the glare on the water's surface.

A big pompano, quite a distance from me, was feeding across my path so I had to move quickly to get into a casting position. I tracked it for ages, making numerous casts in the vicinity of the fish, but couldn't get a reaction. Pompano feed in an erratic pattern and, being so spooky, one cannot cast too close to the fish. The trick is to try and anticipate where it will move to, then drop your fly in that area and leave it lying there dead still. Stripping tends to frighten them, so just taking up the slack and keeping contact with your fly until the fish either eats the fly or moves off is the way to go. The slightest movement of water or wind over the flats will

my drag was singing as my trophy tore off across the flats! That was without a doubt the sweetest, most treasured moment in my years of fly fishing. Until then, my personal pinnacle had been the pure adrenaline rush when I landed my first sailfish on fly, but the painstaking effort, concentration and the difficult conditions made this the moment I will always remember, if I ever forget all others.

A long nerve-wracking fight ensued as pompano are powerful fish and many sharp obstacles dotted around the flats such as turtles and pieces of coral can quickly put a premature end to the battle. But I gently controlled the fight as I edged the fish towards the only bit of dry land – a small rocky island where I

chance to have a drink of water and reflect on the chaos that had just taken place.

I have always measured my enjoyment of fishing by how much I want a particular fish and how disappointed I am if I can't get it right. I have always said it is time to stop fishing when I don't care if a fish gets off my line. This either means that I have simply had enough, or there are so many fish around that I will just hook another one on my next cast. Not the case here – I wanted one of those big pompano. Badly. But by now the sun was low and had slipped behind some clouds. The breeze was up and the water was almost too deep for feeding fish to show their tails above the surface. I had walked almost as far as I could with the sun and wind behind my back, and was beginning to think that I had missed my chance, when I just made out

cause your fly to "crawl" along the bottom, much like a small crab moving over the grass. Fishing in this manner will give you many more shots at a fish than if you cast more aggressively at it.

After close on ten minutes, the pompano had done a wide circle around me and was now heading away into the breeze and setting sun. Forced to backcast due to the angle of the wind, things were getting progressively more difficult, especially with the fish disappearing for short periods in the ever-deepening water. It came to the point when I literally had one more shot. I put a long cast out into the wind, the fly landing a few feet ahead of the fish. I took up the slack and held on, watching in near disbelief as the pompano nonchalantly tailed right on the spot and just sucked in my fly. The line pulled tight, the water erupted and suddenly

could land it and prop up my camera. I landed that stunningly beautiful golden fish in the dying light, the self-timer on my camera enabling me to record that special moment before reviving and releasing the magnificent specimen. The Boga-Grip put the fish at 21lb, which, at 3lb over my previous best, just added to the pleasure of an already memorable catch.

As I made my way back to the pick-up point, I could see the telltale splashes of shoals of yellowdot trevally again and sacrificed the remainder of my now bedraggled fly collection to these feisty little fish. I caught and released a number of them in quick succession before the boat collected me. I headed back to Illusions – tired, elated and unbelievably satisfied with a truly great and unexpected end to ten blissful days in paradise.