

From FlyLife
Number 94
Summer 2018/19



Preparation is the key – these saltwater fish are often fast moving.

MANY TROUT FLY FISHERS ARE
INTIMIDATED BY THE PROSPECT OF
TAKING ON THEIR FIRST GUIDED
SALT FLY EXPERIENCE...

Trout to Salt

Brett Wolf offers advice for those tempted to make the transition.

I have been a full time fly fishing guide for over 20 years. I started guiding on the big sea-run brown trout on the southeastern estuaries of Tasmania, then for ten years or so for wild brown trout in the Central Highlands – seven of those seasons from the luxury lodge we built on the shores of Arthurs Lake.

On a holiday to escape the inhospitable winter weather and closed season at Arthurs, we uncovered mainland Australia's first recognised fishery for bonefish, and later realised the potential for permit, big GT and many other

species at Ningaloo Reef and Exmouth Gulf. Then I suddenly morphed from trout guide to saltwater fly guide and I've been doing that full time now for over 11 years. I was scared when I started out as a trout guide, but was totally intimidated when I became a saltwater fly fishing guide.

Moving from a lake with only brown trout and a few platypus to an ocean full of all sorts of different scary speedsters and nasty predators was a very difficult adjustment. I suddenly had to contend with tides that could leave you stranded high and dry on

a draining flat, boggy beach launches and boat ramps that changed with the weather and tides, and suspicious locals that saw me as the trout guide that came lately.

Similarly, many trout fly fishers are intimidated by the prospect of taking on their first guided salt fly experience. I also remember being in that position as a raw recruit on my first serious expedition to Weipa. Alan (Fish) Philliskirk was the guide and Rob Sloane my boat partner. Previous to this trip, the last time I'd seen Fish Philliskirk was catching an Aus-

sie permit with Peter Morse on the WildFish series on national TV. Both were total legends to me and to many other fly fishers new to the saltwater fly scene.

On that first day, after watching some poor casting produce my first barramundi on fly, in his nonchalant way Fish commented that I didn't double haul (I more than likely trout-struck it too). I explained that I never really needed to double haul with my 5-weight trout rod and 6-weight fly-line, casting mostly 20–40 feet for trout. About ten years later, Fish was on my boat at Exmouth chasing Indo-Pacific permit. My double hauling was still pretty much non-existent, but my pointing at permit and working out how to catch them passed the test.

LET'S NOT GET TOO TECHNICAL

For those who've learnt their trade on the mayfly lakes, you will already have developed an ability to cast with speed and accuracy, especially, if like me, you served your apprenticeship fishing with the editor of this magazine. If I wasn't very fast and accurate the editor already had the trout attached to his fly line!

Add a nice long cast with speed and accuracy and you are sorted for the saltwater scene. Even more so if you can transfer that talent to a 10-weight fly rod and intermediate fly line. Great fish spotting skills will also come in handy, or a good guide to assist with this skill...

A bonefish, permit and GT all on the same day – the smile says it all.



For those more accustomed to catching river fish that are generally holding position, you might be in for a bit of a shock at the pace at which some of these saltwater fish move. You will need to speed up your reaction time and casting when crossing over to the salt. This is not difficult.

The main consideration when switching from trout to serious saltwater speedsters is not to be intimidated by the salt guys. It really is a simple transition. I have always maintained that the best fly anglers for permit, bonefish and GT on the shallow flats are trouties who can throw a long line with speed and accuracy, because they understand the impor-

tance of presentation. A lot of salties will water-haul and bash the living daylights out of anything in the water while delivering the fly to where the fish used to be.

The only drawback with a mayfly fishing background is the temptation to always put the fly right in front and dead on track as a fish approaches. Perfect for trout, but if you are throwing a heavy crab fly to a fussy permit you have to allow for the trajectory and time taken for the fly to sink, taking tidal current and depth of water into account. This often means casting further in front and a little beyond the line of the approaching fish so the fly ends up on the bottom, right in front of its nose.

MORE ON FLY CASTING

Even now, living in serious salt country, I only double haul when I really have to – which is not very often – as I am not very good at it. My preference is to shoot fly line on the forward and back casts, with a big single haul to deliver the fly. But I'm definitely not a tournament fly caster. In my job I can see what can go wrong when the fly cast is overthought, especially in the excitement of me telling a client there's a fish in front of them. My client's best casts are always delivered when I say, "Cover those mullet over there just to make sure they are mullet!"

Despite what people might be telling you, don't let an attempt to double haul totally screw up the timing that would otherwise allow you to deliver a nice simple cast with a well matched rod and line. A single haul is much



The ultimate in salt water – a permit sight cast on fly in crystal clear water.

Markus Muller and Christine Breuker with a double hookup.



Trout to Salt . . . continued



You have to be tough to be a saltwater guide.

easier to time for those not familiar with the double haul, especially on the release of the fly line for the final delivery shot.

Lefty Kreh promoted a few basic principles of fly-casting. I believe one of the most important of these is to forget about the 10 o'clock to 2 o'clock rod tip arc taught at wristy trout fly-casting schools. To honour Lefty's legacy, in crossing to the salt you need to make your rod tip travel as far as possible, with full arm movement, in one plane. Make sure the rod tip is stabbed upwards on the back cast to prevent windscreen wiper action. Get out on the oval and try this; the results will surprise you.

NO TROUT STRIKES!

This is a big one for the trouties to overcome (look back in the *FlyLife* archives to 'Don't call me Trouty' by Jon Clewlow — FL#22). It is so difficult to replace reflex with discipline. Years of lifting the rod when a trout eats your fly is mostly going to end up with your lightly-hooked fish falling off shortly after the bite in the salt. Big hooks and hard mouths require a

serious strip-strike to set the hook. I always tell first time trout clients that I accept they are going to trout-strike a fish, and when they do, I am going to tell them nicely they have done a trout strike. After that we implement a backup plan to set the hook properly, especially if it is a double figure Ningaloo bonefish or their first ever permit.

For a good hook set after feeling the bite, keep the tip of the fly rod pointing right at the fish biting the fly — or more importantly point the rod tip

right down the body of the main fly line — and strip faster and harder until you think the tippet is about to break, and then finally lift the rod and clear any loose fly line. If it is a good fish it will take you to the reel very quickly.

Do not keep a tight fist with your line hand when clearing the remainder of loose fly line. An open loop between index finger and thumb, held well away from the fly rod and reel, will assist against having a knotted-up fly line rattling up through your rod guides or catching around the rod butt and/or reel. These big saltwater speedsters can make backing disappear off your reel in the blink of an eye and you need to be ready to cope with the consequences. If your fly line does knot up when trying to clear it, just forget about it and accept the cards you have been dealt, point the rod at the fish and let the knot rattle out through the guides and hope that it doesn't remove the top section of your fly rod on the way. My clients have caught and landed many, many

We were supposed to be catching GT on fly but this massive barracuda proved irresistible.



nothing to be intimidated about. The few knots we use are simple and easy to tie. We have tested them on *very serious* fish, and mostly succeed! All of these knots are available online, and it is best to practise them at home before entering the saltwater arena.

It is important to fully test all knots immediately after tying them — some of my knots still fail when tested. It is much better for knots to fail in your hands than on a great fish. Then again, if you hire a good guide you shouldn't need to worry about knots — hopefully!

You don't have to spend a fortune to enter the saltwater scene. For our fishery at Ningaloo Reef and Exmouth a 10-weight fly outfit with intermediate fly line is the best all-rounder. A fly reel with 200 metres of 50-pound

gel spun braid and an okay drag will be adequate for most of the species, especially on the flats. If you are on a budget, most brands will do the job nicely. If you don't have a 12-weight, scrounge one from your guide. A 12-weight on hand can open up some incredible opportunities — see 'Covering all Bases' (FL#86).

If you have a bit of extra cash, it is great to splurge out and get the more expensive big name outfits.

For those readers who have never experienced fly fishing in salt water, get out there and give it a go. When you hook your first serious fish in the salt you will be amazed by their sheer brute strength and incredible speed. I still get a massive smile on my face when I watch dedicated trouties enjoy the full power of a saltwater speedster for the first time. **FL**



A beautiful permit for Don Muelrath.

saltwater speedsters with knots in their fly lines.

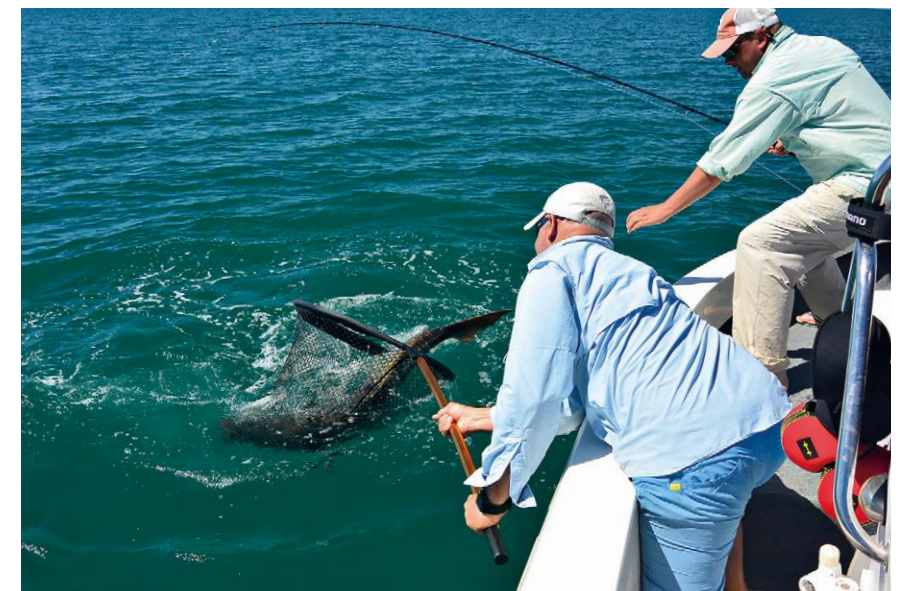
There are exceptions to most rules. If you see a saltwater fish eat your fly and you can't strip-strike fast enough to set the hook, then you will need to give a massive trout strike. Then, after you have made serious contact, strip the fly line in fast enough to point the rod at the hooked fish again and set the hook.

GEARING UP

Saltwater fly fishers will always try to scare the trouties when talking about knots. Bimini twists, loop knots to flies, double uni-knot, bimini with double surgeons to backing... again,



Markus and Christine with their pair of golden trevally.



These saltwater fish can be way too big for any landing net.