



The Marquesas Keys



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After you've caught your share of "easy" fish on a fly in the Florida Keys, like bonefish, tarpon and sharks, your guide will probably say, how would you like to fish for permit? The first three are the gateway drugs of flats fishing.

This happened to me about fifteen years ago after fishing for several years with Captain Bruce Chard of Big Pine Key, Florida. With Chardy's playful enthusiasm he told me it's the ultimate fishing and that the fish itself is extremely elusive and magnificent to see close-up. He said, the whole object was to drop a crab fly with in three feet of a tailing permit and don't move it! If he rejects it and moves on, ya might get another shot. He warned me to be prepared for failure even though we could be doing everything right.

Permit mainly eat crustaceans such as crabs and shrimp. My first encounter with permit was in 1990 while wading off Money Key using a crab fly I tied using blue rubber bands for legs. Suddenly I noticed two permit about a rod length away, made a roll cast and was able to watch their reaction. They moved on the fly every time I twitched it but never ate. Another time, I staked my Maverick skiff on a tarpon run in a few feet of water and dropped a bow anchor for positioning. Within seconds a few permit raced up to the puff of sediment made by the anchor to see if it contained a meal. They didn't seem threatened by boats in that popular Oceanside spot.

In my later observations of Florida permit, I've seen them behave differently in the depths, versus the flats. I think it's mainly because of bull sharks that like to eat them. I've almost hand fed crab parts to permit we were chumming-up over a freshwater spring 65 miles out in the Gulf of Mexico! They came right up with their rubbery white lips begging for more.

On the flats, they don't lose their cool. To the permit, everything that makes a splash or movement could be a shark and they take off in underwater flight when they detect danger! Their skin is mirror-like and will seem invisible by reflecting the color and patterns of the bottom they swim over. You could be poling along concentrating on spotting fish and one will explode right next to the boat in two feet of water! Here's how my journey to permit enlightenment on the flats happened.

Bruce told me he would share his world of permit with me and it existed on the Marquesas Keys, 32nm west of Key West. (Not to be confused with the one in French Polynesia.) The islands themselves are uninhabited and part of the Key West National Wildlife Refuge.

After launching at Garrison Bight in the glow before dawn, we motored around an island and a docked cruise ship, crossed the main channel and headed west toward our destination. Most of the trip was through shallow water in the lee of small islands and shoals except for the last leg across Boca Grande Channel, which is about 10nm to cross and can be quite choppy. Bruce's favorite skiff was a sixteen-foot Dolphin Super Skiff. It was very quite poling, yet could take the waves on the big crossing without soaking us on most days. We've made about twenty five trips their together. You can usually spot the trees on the Marquesas on a clear morning about ten nautical miles out.

I was overwhelmed with the sight of the Marquesas Keys, wild and unspoiled compared to the middle and upper Keys; no radar balloons, airports or Home Depots or buildings. It's illegal to even step on the fragile islands. You might see a couple of skiffs and an occasional sponge boat. I've heard stories of illegal landings of Cuban refugees.

The Marquesas is shaped like a horseshoe with an interior flat averaging 3 feet deep, called Mooney Harbor. Most of the more extensive flats vary and uncover at low tide. When you enter this world you can see why it's worth the trip. Nesting birds like Man O War are everywhere on the palm tree

covered islands. On most days the only fish you see are permit and rays!

The permit come up out of the deep water through little emerald colored rivers that run through the flats during the tide changes pulling water from either the Gulf on the north or the Atlantic on the south of the small group of islands, depending on the tide. The fish come onto the flats to root around for their favorite foods. Once in a while you will see an invasion of bull sharks and you won't see a single permit anywhere. Other times you might run into strings of tarpon or a school of naïve bonefish. In general though, when you see the big groups of permit move on, they act like they own the Marquesas. It is their home. And if you've planned well you'll be there too like Bruce and me. But that doesn't guarantee successful fishing.

When you arrive early, the angle of the sun is low and you can't really spot the bodies of the fish due to the glare. You hope to see the protruding tails of fish tipped-up and feeding, or tailing. Bruce liked my trick of getting low on bow early and spotting tails instead of trying to get up high to spot fish. In general, you hope to see feeding and not cruising fish. Fish that are cruising through seldom bite, but I've had it happen.

Later in the day when we can see well, we look for pushes of water made by groups of permit, sometimes containing forty or more fish. We also look for individual fish or small groups by scanning for the dark color of the back of the permit, or the shadow cast underneath on the bottom. My favorite glasses for seeing this have a little red in it and are fairly dense to cut brightness and prevent eyestrain. Some of the best fishing conditions are windy days that make it harder for the permit to see you. It also makes it harder for you to see them and make good casts. But your casts need not be long.

On the first few trips we made, I was frustrated by the permit's reaction to my Del's Merkin Crab fly and variations. Del Brown, the famous late permit specialist first created this fly. Its name, *Merkin, was taken from a despicable medieval deception. The carapace of the crab is imitated by a similarly shaped piece of carpet. It seemed I either spooked the fish by dropping the fly too close, or the fish ignored it because I dropped the fly too far away. It's a delicate balance between too close or too far. You have to let each fish decide.

I caught my biggest permit on the flats with Bruce on a fly about the size of your pinky nail! I've caught others on a small fly too. I think we earlier used

flies that were too big and landed too hard. As I've heard guides say, real crabs don't drop from the sky. This big fish was aggressive and moved-in for the kill. I set the hook and cleared the line without incident. This fish made wonderfully long runs and pulled hard. Not long after I released this one we estimated at 28 lbs. or 12.5kgs, I caught another smaller permit on the same fly. It reminded me of muskie fishing when all fish seemingly do the same thing at the same time. You could have follows all day without a bite, then catch three in a row. With these more challenging fish, catching them is often feast or famine.

**The Merkin got its name from the pubic wig of the same name from Medieval England. After authorities forced prostitutes with venereal diseases to shave down there as a warning, the ladies of the night used the Merkin to fool potential customers.*