

*Permit,
tarpon, and
Mexico's untapped
mangrove jungle*



ROSS PURNELL PHOTO



YUCATAN NORTH



GEOFF MUELLER



MAYANS RULED the Yucatan Peninsula more than 3,000 years ago. Today, in places like Cancun, it's a land tramped by *turistas*—hordes of beachgoers in flip-flops and thong bikinis basking in the sun and living the good life one round of tequila at a time.



What most people fail to recognize, however, is that 30 minutes north of Cancun lie 60 square miles of flats (many wadable) that are loaded with permit and jungle tarpon all along the edges. And farther north, at the end of the Maya white road, large migratory tarpon fin in football stadium-size schools as prayers are suddenly answered from the pulpit of an 18-foot panga.

Yucatan Geography

MEXICO'S YUCATAN PENINSULA is divided into three states: *Yucatan* to the north, *Campeche* to the southwest, and *Quintana Roo* to the southeast. Sandwiched between the Gulf of Mexico to the north and the Caribbean Sea to the south and east, the region is flat. Because of its dry, level nature, the Yucatan is mostly devoid of rivers, except during the wet season.



Near Cancun, in places like Isla Blanca, you'll find abundant flats (many wadable) that are loaded with permit (left), and mangrove lagoons with baby tarpon (above). Shots at larger migratory tarpon (top) are available at San Felipe's Tarpon Cay Lodge. John Sherman photos

In the northern Yucatan there are three types of fishing: mangrove estuary fishing for 5- to 15-pound immature tarpon and snook up to 12 pounds; flats fishing on marl and white-sand flats (some soft, some wadable) with large numbers of juvenile (school) permit as well as flats tarpon, larger permit, and snook; and fishing for seasonal schools of migratory mature tarpon from 40 to 100 pounds in search of bait attracted to the rocky shoals of the Yucatan coastline.

Isla Blanca

ISLA BLANCA, located just north of Cancun, has miles of mangrove channels, interlagoons, and sand and grass flats. The area spans the southern flats of Chacmuhuc Lagoon, reaches north to Cayo Ratón, Punta Iglesias, and Cabo Catoche (Holbox Island), and extends east to Contoy Island. This fly-fishing sphere has long been overshadowed by well-known saltwater hotspots south of Cancun and into Belize.

Permit (*palometa*) outnumber resident bonefish on Isla Blanca flats by 20:1 or more. Among four anglers, we hooked 14 and boated 9 permit in two and a half days of fishing in June 2007. Keith Kaneko, who books trips to Isla Blanca and has fished the area extensively, says you will see dozens of permit in a day and have multiple shots during the prime spring and summer seasons, with time left over to chase snook and tarpon. The permit are mostly small schooling fish, averaging about 3 pounds.

Permit fishing is never a gimme, but usually a matter of wind, fly choice, tide, long and accurate casts, soft presentations, and luck. Even when you've done everything right, you can fail. Permit have excellent eyesight, a keen sense of smell, and are extremely wary in the shallows. The shadow of a fly line, the splashdown of a fly, or even the slap of a wave against the hull of the panga can send a school scurrying.

The best permit retrieves are long—about 2 to 3 feet—slow, and steady, with the fly in constant motion. In the knee-deep water, you see the follow. When the fish takes, use a strip-set, raise the rod, and clear your line.

The best shots at Isla Blanca's schooling permit come in the morning, with a slight riffle scuffing the water's surface, and on incoming or high tides. In these condi-

RECIPE

SAN FELIPE SPECIAL



HANS WELLMANN PHOTO

HOOK: #2/0 Gamakatsu SC15 or Mustad 34007.

THREAD: Orange Danville's Flymaster Plus.

TAIL: Brown bucktail wrapped around 8 to 12 strands of copper Krystal Flash; covered on each side with two orange hackles and two shorter grizzly hackles, splayed outward.

COLLAR: Natural deer hair.

HACKLE: One orange and one grizzly hackle palmered through the deer-hair head.

BODY: Deer hair spun and clipped tight.



NOTE: Capt. Marco Ruz developed this pattern specifically for the mangrove creeks and the baby tarpon at San Felipe. The fly swims near the surface, and the hackle wing kicks like a frog on the retrieve.

tions you can spot schools of 3 to 50 fish, with skiff and wading opportunities depending on the specific flat.

Schooling permit compete for your fly, which makes them more aggressive than larger solitary permit, but if you spook one permit in a school you spook them all. Stealthy presentations, with long leaders and dime-size flies—lightly weighted with rubber legs or deer hair for soft landings—are important. Most of the water is knee-deep, and the fishing differs from Florida Keys permit

Continued on page 63

San Felipe, located on the northern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula, is home to seasonal runs of migratory tarpon (below) but is best known for its consistent mangrove baby tarpon fishing. Ross Purnell photo



AREA ALLURE

RIO LAGARTOS National Wildlife Refuge near San Felipe is home to the largest nesting population of flamingos in North America. The 118,000-acre park was established in 1979 and includes everything from coastal dunes and mangrove swamps to tropical jungles. In addition to flamingos, it's inhabited by more than 200 other species of birds—snowy egret, red egret, white ibis, blue heron, cormorant, brown pelican—as well as iguanas, sea turtles, jaguars, and crocodiles.

Thousands of flamingos nest in Rio Lagartos from April to August, building conical mud mounds in the shallows, each containing one egg. Flamingos can be viewed throughout San Felipe's best fishing months. They inhabit several of the local islands and flats, and your guides can put you within viewing distance from a panga, or take you on walking tours around the nesting grounds for excellent views of these exotic birds and their habitat. Eco-tours are also available.

On top of wildlife, the Yucatan is also famous for its Mayan ruins. Chichen Itza (named in 2007 as one of the new Seven Wonders of the World) is located about two hours south of San Felipe, between Cancun and Merida. The ancient city was a focal point of the vast Mayan empire that once spanned more than 2,000 square miles. If you enjoyed the movie *Apocalypto*, don't miss the Castle of Kukulcan, which rises 100 feet from the earth and was the site of numerous human sacrifices.

Good snorkeling opportunities are also available near Isla Blanca, in Cancun, and at San Felipe, where basic equipment—masks and snorkels—is available to patrons of Tarpon Cay Lodge. Adjacent to the lodge is an island with white sand beaches, a perfect drop-off point for afternoon diving followed by a siesta and beer on the beach. 🐡

The Rio Lagartos National Wildlife Refuge boasts North America's largest nesting population of flamingos (above). Thousands of flamingos occupy the area April through August.



YUCATAN NORTH . . .

Continued from page 28

fishing, where patterns are larger and heavily weighted for deeper flats. [See flyfisherman.com/videos for footage of spotting, casting to, and catching Isla Blanca permit. THE EDITOR.]

Spring and summer is the best time to target Isla Blanca permit. But fall brings larger deep-water fish onto the flats, with 15- to 20-pound catches more common in September and October.

Besides targeting schools, some of the best permit shots come with solo fish following rays. The rays provide dinner-plate

or in the mangroves. Backcasts are often restricted, and accuracy is important. Sidearm, underhand, and skip casts keep the line low and under overhanging brush, and flies tied on bendback hooks with weedguards allow you to retrieve them from the mangrove limbs and roots repeatedly without losing fishing time to stop and unhook.

Tarpon days at Isla Blanca can include six or more jumped fish. Mangrove tarpon weigh from 6 to 10 pounds, but 15- to 30-pound fish are possible. Sight-casting to baby tarpon involves leading

may linger in the deeper pockets, the low water sends larger fish onto the flats. Isla Blanca has no migratory tarpon population, but the tidal movement provides skill-honing opportunities for beginner to intermediate fly fishers who want to learn flats fishing: how to sight and lead tarpon with accurate 50- to 80-foot casts.

Bonefish. Many Yucatan flats (Ascension Bay for example) have large schools of bonefish with occasional shots at permit, but Isla Blanca is an exception. Expect to see permit throughout a single tide but only rare shots at 2- to 5-pound bonefish and then with long casts at spooky fish on shallow, often weedy, flats. (Small, weedless, unweighted shrimp imitations work best.) The local guides say that the best bonefishing months are May and August during the lowest tides.

San Felipe

TARPON CAY LODGE is located on the northern tip of the Yucatan Peninsula—a relatively unfished frontier four hours northwest of Cancun. The mangroves surrounding the fishing village of San Felipe are havens for baby tarpon. The numbers of fish are a testament to successful government and local efforts to maintain the fishery in perpetuity.

When the prevailing spring and summer winds blow in from the southeast, the mangroves are the best—and often the only—fishing option, but when the wind dies, fly fishers venture offshore in search of migratory tarpon weighing from 40 to more than 100 pounds.

San Felipe's baby tarpon fishery is situated within the larger Rio Lagartos National Preserve—a 118,000-acre national park—and includes about 8 miles of mangrove and flats habitat protected from commercial harvest.

San Felipe's tarpon life cycle begins in the fall. Female tarpon produce millions of eggs that are fertilized by males in the open ocean and hatch at sea. The eggs transform into eel-like larvae and drift inshore, where they find protection among the vast mangrove ecosystems. These 2- to 3-inch fish double in size over the winter. But by the time the dry season hits, typically from January through May, many are mortally stranded as the waterways connecting the wetland lagoons to the ocean are sucked dry.

To counteract this annual mortality, Marco Ruz, co-owner of Tarpon Cay Lodge in San Felipe, and his guides, use live-bait nets to capture and move these

Continued on page 64



JOHN SIEMMAN PHOTO

When the wind is calm, migratory tarpon from 40 to 80 pounds become easy targets for experienced anglers. The hard part is landing the fish.

targets at which to aim Raghead or Merkin crab offerings. Land your fly as close to the permit as possible, on or just behind the ray, start your retrieve, and watch for follows. On a take, strip-strike by pulling with your line hand, simultaneously striking parallel with your rod. Flats snook occasionally follow the rays, so it pays to have a snook rod with a 30-pound bite tippet ready.

Mangrove tarpon. Isla Blanca's prolific mangroves provide good sight-fishing for baby tarpon in clear water, with enough elbow room in places to launch pinpoint 20- to 40-foot casts to rolling fish. The mangroves fish best on incoming or high tides, when 5- to 15-pound tarpon feed on needlefish, mullet, and other mangrove foods. The interwoven channels and river estuaries also provide shots at snook, which can be taken with similar tarpon flies and techniques, and barracuda, pompano, and snapper.

Isla Blanca guides are experts at searching the labyrinthine mangroves while locating specific holes that fish frequent. Casts are short, but must be under

the fish—landing your fly anywhere from 3 to 5 feet in front of their snouts. Use short, fast retrieves—strip, strip, pause—with the rod tip pointed down and into the water. Set the hook by aiming your rod at the fish and stripping fast with your line hand, bow to the jumping fish, then strip-set again. Hard.

Fighting mangrove tarpon is chaotic. Expect the unexpected. Like their larger migratory brethren, these fish have a penchant for air. In these tight confines, you should fight them down and dirty (with the rod held parallel to the water) with quick line-hand strips, as opposed to fighting the fish on your reel. Be prepared to lose flies to roots, sharp bony mouths, and the many other mangrove obstructions. [See flyfisherman.com/videos to see an Isla Blanca mangrove tarpon jump into the boat—and hit the cameraman. THE EDITOR.]

Outgoing and low tides have a tendency to drain fish from the mangroves where you can get at them, while high tides can push them far back into rooty, food-rich habitat. Although smaller babies

YUCATAN NORTH . . .

Continued from page 63

doomed tarpon into areas that hold water all year. The new lease on life allows the juveniles to grow in size and strength, reaching maturity at six or seven years old. They add more than a pound a year, pushing weights from 5 to 20 pounds before they venture into the open ocean.

Ruz says the baby-tarpon program has increased the overall numbers of juvenile fish in the 5- to 20-pound range. In addition, the lodge enforces strict limits of no more than eight anglers per week during the prime June through August window to keep fishing pressure low and catch rates high.

Unlike Isla Blanca, San Felipe's baby tarpon fishery is less a sight-and-cast game due to its tannin-stained waters. When tarpon are rolling, however, they are easy to catch, and when they're not, the guides know which channels and holes hold willing fish.

The tarpon at this end of the peninsula take subsurface and topwater presentations, including Surf Candies, Deceivers, Clousers, Dahlberg Divers, and foam poppers. The top two producing flies at Tarpon Cay Lodge are Seaducers (red/white and red/yellow) and Puglisi Tarpon Streamers (orange/yellow and Mangrove Special).

San Felipe's mangrove estuaries are also home to snook—a highly sought local commercial species—and good numbers of small but scrappy jack crevalle. But it's the migratory tarpon fishery that stands above the rest as a rare, weather-dependent adventure.

The best time to beat the wind is June through September, when calm mornings allow the guides to find large schools of surface-feeding tarpon. When the wind blows, finding the big ocean fish is hopeless, so these days are spent fishing the sheltered mangrove lagoons.

On calm days you can fish from a mile to 1½ miles offshore, in water ranging from 10 to 30 feet deep. When the water is flat, the guides can spot large schools of rolling and jumping tarpon from a long distance, and intercept them for head-on shots at one cruising school after another, enticing follows and hook-ups anywhere from 20 to 60 feet from the boat. The water is too deep to target individual fish, but where one fish is rolling there may be dozens nearby, hidden just under the surface.

San Felipe migratory tarpon corral bait-fish like schooling tuna and dorado, hammering sardines, ballyhoo, and mullet. Unlike tight-lipped tarpon in the Florida

Keys, these fish are aggressive and often attack the fly. After your baby-tarpon training in the mangroves, your strip-strike should be sharp.

You'll spot the tarpon follow as a flash of silver: Don't lift your rod and pull the fly away! Keep stripping until you feel the hook firmly embedded in the fish's jaw. Let the fish turn, then strike sideways, driving the hook home. Then be prepared to drop your rod tip instantly and thrust your rod toward the jumping fish.



Isla Blanca permit flats (above) are extensive, with many opportunities to wade and cast for a stealthier approach.

Prepare correctly before you cast your fly and set your reel drag high. Tarpon usually run and jump after the hookup. Let the fish fly, then begin to fight it using the rod butt. Keep the rod angle at 45 degrees and pull back on the butt—reversing the angle of the rod from side to side, opposite the direction of pull taken by the fish. (Fish goes left, you pull right; fish goes right, you pull left.)

When the game gets short (20 feet of line and leader out), pull the tarpon backward or turn it over. Never let it gain control of the fight. You should be able land these mid-size migratory cruisers in 15 to 30 minutes, but small mistakes can amplify into epic battles and tire you and the fish needlessly.

Larger tarpon that sound in deeper water must be hoisted inch by inch to the surface. This requires a heavier 10-

weight rod (at least) with maximum reserve power in the butt.

Seasons

THE YUCATAN'S prime season runs from April through November. June, July, and August are the peak months for migratory tarpon at San Felipe, while April-May and September-October are best for landing Isla Blanca's larger permit. Smaller school permit remain on the flats throughout the summer months and into September.

Baby tarpon and snook are available year-round, but cold fronts can hurt your fishing from December through March. August through November is hurricane season, and while the weather is often good for fishing, a tropical storm or hurricane can ruin an entire week. Trip insurance allows you to obtain a refund of trip expenses when a covered incident occurs.

Gear Guide

RODS SHOULD INCLUDE a 7- or 8-weight for bonefish and small permit, a 9- or 10-weight for large permit, and a 10- or 11-weight for migratory tarpon, with matching saltwater reels (150 yards of 20- or 30-pound backing) and tropical floating lines. Extra rods serve as spares in the event of breakage, and allow you to fish multiple set-ups with different flies. If you can take only two rods, an 8- and 10-weight cover everything from mangroves and flats fishing to San Felipe's larger migratory tarpon.

We sampled Sage's new Smallmouth (290 grain) and Largemouth (330 grain) rods for baby tarpon and snook. The powerful 7'11" rods, with matching weight-forward lines, helped deliver casts into tight mangrove pockets. The Largemouth rod had enough backbone to turn large fish and firmly embed hooks.

Tropical saltwater floating lines cover most Yucatan fishing needs. These lines, which are available from Scientific Anglers, RIO, and Sage, have stiff cores and hot-weather coatings and perform well in the heat when fishing shallow turtle grass flats, mangroves, and lagoons. Sinking-tip or intermediate lines are rarely needed.

Leaders. Rio and Scientific Anglers manufacture tarpon leaders with 16-pound or 20-pound class tippets and shock/bite sections (40- and 50-pound for baby tarpon and 80-pound for migratory tarpon).

For Yucatan permit and bonefish, use 10-foot, 13- to 17-pound-test saltwater

Continued on page 70



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FLY FISHERMAN magazine (ISSN 0015-4741) is published six times a year in March, May, July, September, December and February by InterMedia Outdoors, Inc., 6420 Wilshire Blvd., 14th Floor, Los Angeles, CA 90048-5515. Periodicals postage paid at Los Angeles, CA and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Please send any address changes to FLY FISHERMAN magazine, P.O. Box 420235, Palm Coast, FL 32142-0235. Canada Publications Mail Agreement No. 105030. Return undeliverable Canadian addresses to P.O. Box 4446, STN Industrial Park, Markham, ON L3R 6G9 Canada. One year (6 issues) subscription rates: \$24 U.S., \$30 Canada (credit card or money order in U.S. funds, includes GST tax), and \$30 Foreign (credit card or money order in U.S. funds). For subscription inquiries (U.S. and Canada), phone 1 (800) 829-3340. Outside the U.S., phone (386) 447-6318. All editorial correspondence should be sent to FLY FISHERMAN magazine, 6385 Flank Drive, Suite 800, Harrisburg, PA 17112. Telephone (717) 695-8076, Fax: (717) 545-2527. Editorial contributions must be accompanied by return postage and will be handled with reasonable care; however, the publisher assumes no responsibility for return or safety of artwork, photographs, or manuscripts. Potential contributors should send for "Notes to Contributors." REPRINTS: Contact Wright's Reprints to purchase quality custom reprints or e-prints of articles appearing in this publication at 877-652-5295 (281-419-5725 outside the U.S. and Canada).

YUCATAN NORTH . . .

Continued from page 64

leaders. Tippets from 10- to 13-pound-test allow you to lengthen your leader if conditions dictate. Use a nonslip mono loop knot (see flyfisherman.com/knots for details) for attaching your fly to the tippet—loop knots allow your fly to move more naturally—and use a Homer Rhode knot for securing your shock tippet.

Flies. Most Yucatan angling is done with floating lines in shallow water. Neutrally buoyant or slow-sinking tarpon flies stay in the feeding zone when retrieved. For juvenile tarpon in the mangroves, use #1/0 and #2/0 Seaducers (red/white, red/yellow, Cockroach style, and red/black), Tarpon Paradise (black, white, and yellow/red), Puglisi tarpon streamers such as Everglades Specials (brown/tan, yellow/orange), and Surf Candies (chartreuse/white).

For topwater tarpon, try #4-1/0 Crease Flies (black/silver, olive/silver, brown/gold), #2/0 Puglisi Floating (Everglades Special, chartreuse/white, red/yellow), Haskins Neutralizers, and #2/0 Slideballs (prawn pattern, tan/flesh, yellow, and white).

Permit flies here are smaller and lightly weighted compared to standard offerings—dime-size as opposed to nickel- and quarter-size. Use tan Raghead and Merkin

crabs, and the tan Puglisi EP Crab. Yucatan bonefish flies should include #4-8 tan Gotchas and #4-8 pink and tan Crazy Charleys.

Clothing. Yucatan weather is hot and humid: The best shirts are vented, long-sleeve, and made with quick-dry fabric. They provide protection from sun exposure and insect bites. Tropical flats-style pants from makers such as Patagonia, ExOfficio, Simms, and Redington also help protect from sun and bugs.

Hats should have a large brim (with a dark underside) to shade your eyes and face and protect your ears and neck. Bandanas also help keep sun off your face and neck and can be soaked in water or wrapped in ice to cool you.

Bring two pairs of polarized sunglasses with high-quality optics in gray or reflective blue (for deep water) and amber or copper (for the shallows) for spotting fish and protecting your eyes from the sun and errant hooks. Also pack a lightweight, waterproof jacket to repel rain and wind. In addition, take a camera, SPF 45+ UVA and UVB sunscreen, bug spray, line clippers, pliers, hook sharpener, waterproof boat bag, and a small first-aid kit.

Where to Stay

ANGLING ON THE FLY offers several week-long Yucatan adventures, including a Grand Slam Tour, which splits its days

between Isla Blanca and San Felipe. Tarpon Cay Lodge at San Felipe is a full-service operation with comfortable rooms, authentic Mexican cuisine, and professional staff and services. There is limited Internet access and cellphone coverage in the northwestern sections of the Yucatan. Plan ahead by securing an international calling plan before you leave.

Angling on the Fly hosts its Isla Blanca (Grand Slam Adventures) guests outside Cancun's hotel zone at the Blue Bay Club resort, near Puerto Juarez. Rooms are clean and comfortable, and the food and alcoholic beverages are all-inclusive as part of a package deal. Prices depend on double or single boat, room rates, and number of nights and fishing days. Double boat and room and six days fishing—three at each locale—is approximately \$3,295 per angler. The trip can work well if you have a nonfishing companion who enjoys shopping and nightlife while you sample the world-class fishing. Isla Blanca has both.

For more information, contact Keith Kaneko at (916) 539-3474 or visit anglingonthefly.com.



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