

Capt. Joe Gonzalez tirelessly pursues a pack of bones, as he pols Jason Robinson into casting range while Peter readies himself for a shot.

PRIZE OF THE FLATS

What makes fishing for bonefish and permit such an unforgettable experience? Well, it might be the surroundings - poling along emerald flats, casting to grey, fleeting shadows. Or, it might be the hookup; followed by a screaming drag with a feeling of disbelief at how hard these powerful creatures pull. Whatever the reason, this type of fishing is addictive to anyone with a fishing pulse.

Bonefish and permit are considered by many to be the ultimate game fish, and for good reason. Not only are they incredibly challenging to tempt into striking a fly or lure, but they can also be finicky with live bait. Stalking permit and bonefish on the flats can be a frustrating, yet ultimately, highly rewarding endeavor.

For tackle, a good combo may include a 7'6" light-to-medium spinning rod, a size 4,000 reel with 10- to 20-pound braided line, and a 3-foot, 20-pound fluorocarbon leader. Both permit and bonefish will strike a correctly rigged, perfectly placed crab, with the latter preferring a smaller offering. Generally, you'll want to keep your bait deep and in the strike zone, as these fish root around the bottom searching for crustaceans. If your offering buries itself in a grass bed, you'll

"A RECENT STUDY CONDUCTED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI FOUND THAT A SINGLE FLORIDA BONEFISH OR PERMIT IS WORTH \$3,500 EACH YEAR, OR NEARLY \$75,000 OVER ITS LIFETIME"

want to pull it out and skip the crab on the surface. A surface-skipping crab may result in an aggressive, often epic, surface bite. For the fly fisherman, a 9-weight is a great all-around rod, and will have the backbone needed to get the fish boat side. A nature-mimicking crab-patterned fly is an excellent weapon of choice.

When targeting these species, precision is the name of the game. On any given day, wind, tide, boat movement, and natural light levels all have an appreciable impact on hookup ratios. Bonefish and permit are notoriously nervous and wary, as both have hyperactive sensory organs. The chance to fool a perfectly designed predator leaves us wanting more, and that is what drives fishermen back year after year. If you find yourself in the right place at the right time, you may have a shot at landing one of these trophy fish... but, even with an impeccable cast and the perfect bait or

by Peter Miller

Peter hoists the reward for persistence: a 9-pound bonefish from south Biscayne Bay.



inches in length, and grow to around 36 inches and 15 pounds. They spend most of their lives inhabiting tropical inshore shallow areas, like sand or mud flats, as well as, sea grass beds. Although a predominantly inshore species, we do know that bonefish migrate to offshore waters to breed. So the question remains: are local bonefish, in fact, local... or do specific schools migrate to different areas throughout the Atlantic and Caribbean during their lifespan?

Permit (*trachinotus falcatus*) have a similar lifecycle and environmental preference as bonefish. Permit are thought to sexually mature at 2 to 3 years of age, approximately 22 inches long for females and 19 inches for males. Schools of permit can also be caught in deep channels and offshore waters. The offshore fish, found on deep-water wrecks and structure, presumably migrate to these grounds in order to breed. Unfortunately, these migration patterns are not well understood, but research efforts are underway to help preserve this important sport fishery.

Recreational fishing plays an important role in Florida's economy. Fishing provides jobs for more than 80,000 individuals and generates over \$500 million in state and local revenue. Total angler expenditures in Florida are close to \$5 billion. A recent study conducted by the University of Miami found that a single Florida bonefish is worth \$3,500 each year, nearly \$75,000 over a fish's lifetime. The same applies for permit; the economic importance of these fish to Florida is significant. In order to understand behavior and how to best conserve and utilize fishery stocks, relevant up-to-date research is critical.

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lure, sometimes bonefish and permit will simply ignore your offering. It's moments like this that keep you yearning for your next shot.

CONSERVATION

Given that these game fish species are so highly sought, it is our responsibility as anglers to encourage their conservation, ensuring future generations of anglers the same opportunities enjoyed today. There are several organizations currently conducting valuable research aimed at conserving bonefish and permit stocks.

Despite being such popular game fish, bonefish and permit behavioral habits are still relatively unknown. Our common bonefish (*albula vulpines*), affectionately known as "gray ghosts," are thought to sexually mature at 3 to 4 years of age, approximately 17 to 18



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grade classes.

Then, finally the Legionnaires will unite openly at the public library for newsletter photo ops. But the first rule of the Clandestine Legionnaires of the Baby Turtle Protectorate is that you don't talk about the Clandestine... I've already said too much.

Join us! These waters are just roiling with big rogue fish that play by their own turtle-eating rules. But I'm not rubber-banding hooks to red ear slider turtles to get in there. I'm through puppy-fishing. I'm ordering the soft plastics. I'm thinking either "cooter" or "junebug."

* * *

Cooter and Junebug made it (the lures, not my cousins). They look okay I guess, but the Legionnaires forgot my wax-sealed invitation letter. I'm sure it'll come. In the meantime, I'll tear into the turtle-murdering bass on Lady Bird Lake.

If the Legionnaires are reading:

I'm ready. Dip cones and two-ply all around, my treat. I'll work my way through the ranks. Remember, I'm not squeamish. Birds, tourists, dogs — you name it. Just give me a chance and I'll be standing sentinel over Little Man and a thousand others. With Dad's Remington 1100 and a footlocker of #6 high brass shells, I'll be shooting straight and hollering "Run turtle run."

Natural selection be damned. 

PRIZE OF THE FLATS



PRIZE OF THE FLATS

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In August 2013, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) designated bonefish and tarpon exclusively catch-and-release fisheries, citing that the "economic and fishing value of these fish, greatly exceed their value as food fishes." In addition to regulation, research is being conducted that will

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aid resource managers in developing comprehensive, scientifically backed plans to protect fishery stocks both regionally and internationally. Scientists from the FWC's Fish and Wildlife Research Institute seek to determine behavioral patterns, such as migration, habitat, and population stock.

The University of Miami's Tarpon and Bonefish Research Center (TBRC), led by Dr. Jerry Ault, has conducted analysis that provides scientific insight into bonefish behavior, in order to influence policy and regulatory decision making. Teamwork with the Bonefish Tarpon Trust; a conglomerate of scientists, anglers and guides, has made significant strides with regards to understanding bonefish spawning habits and spatial patterns.

In 2010, Costa Sunglasses and the Bonefish Tarpon Trust, in collaboration with the FWC, developed an innovative research program called Project Permit. The idea is to work with local guides and lodges to gain an understanding of permit stock's migration, spawning habits, and other information necessary to regulate and ensure the conservation of the species. The program is active in South Florida, the Florida Keys, Mexico, and Belize. The 5-year tagging program is aimed at gaining a better understanding of this important recreational fishery.

One well-respected South Florida guide who has been an active participant in bonefish and permit tagging programs is my friend, Capt. Joe Gonzalez of Funny Bone Charters. Gonzalez has been at the forefront of conservation efforts in Biscayne Bay for more than 25 years. He has a good understanding of bonefish and permit behavior, and has a longstanding relationship with the University of Miami's Tarpon and Bonefish Research Program - having worked with Dr. Ault on an annual bonefish census that helps fishery managers analyze fish stocks and regulatory measures. During this program, Gonzalez helped tag over 5,000 bonefish for research purposes. One of these fish even completed a transatlantic (Gulf Stream) crossing! This bonefish, tagged in Key Biscayne, was recaptured 10 months later near Andros Island in the Bahamas, 187 miles away. I had an opportunity to speak with Capt. Gonzalez on recent developments. According to Gonzalez, he and David Bryan of the TBRC, placed the first satellite tag in a

permit this fall. This satellite tag will provide valuable information including depth, light, and temperature readings, allowing scientists to estimate location and migration patterns. When asked about the future of the bonefish and permit fishery, Gonzalez said awareness, research, gaining a better understanding of fish stocks and behavioral patterns, as well as, scientists and fisherman working together, will help ensure our recreational fishery will be thriving for years to come. 

BEYOND THE BREAKERS



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For tackle you want a stout 6000-8000 series reel and a solid 6'6" heavy rod. Your line weight will depend on whether you're trolling or jigging, and what species you're targeting. For trolling, use 30- to 50-pound braid or mono, and having some 40- to 80-pound fluoro leader to partner with that will be a stout pairing. For Jigging, it is much the same, but you want to up the ante on the main line to 50 to 100 pounds, because you never know what you'll hook into when jigging!

For baits, if you live in an area where bait pods are accessible, a light-tackle combo with a jig or a Sabiki rig will help you snag a few live ones, but if no live pods can be found, pre-rigged baits or deep-diving plugs always work well. A compact tackle box with extra wire leaders, circle hooks, a couple of big lures, some big buck tail jigs, and bait jigs should be all you'll need.

To round out your gear, it's nice to have a live well, and companies like Hobie make one that fits onto their kayaks like a glove! Make sure to bring the big-game gear too, such as a good knife, gaff, fish gloves, pliers, and a good-sized fish bag, as well.

Never ever forget to pack plenty of water, sunscreen, and light snacks to keep you energized, protected, and hydrated in the wide-open waters. For the hero shots, good camera mounts are always a nice add on, but until you're a seasoned offshore kayak angler, don't worry about the extras and keep it simple.

Offshore kayak angling is on all of our lists of things to conquer in our kayak angling lifetimes. With so many pelagic species out there ready for the battle, and no battle greater than the true test of man versus beast from a man-powered vessel, it's no wonder offshore kayak angling is growing at such a rapid rate. Whether it's targeting lingcod off the great coast of California, chasing roosters in Baja, or smoker kings off the coast of Florida, there's the ultimate sleigh ride out there waiting for you! After preparing yourself for battle, patiently awaiting your window of opportunity, being persistent on your hunt, and timing your offshore missions perfectly with the weather and swells, you now can head out with success under your belt as an offshore kayak angler, and one who has gone into battle Beyond The Breakers! 

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Rory Gregg is a Professional Kayak-Fishing guide in North Florida, a proud member of Hobie Kayaks Pro Fishing Team, Pro Staffer for MirrOlure, Slayer Inc., Daiwa, T. Allen Rods, Seaguar, EGO nets, Boomerang Tools, BoonDox and Watermans Applied Science. Contact Rory in Jacksonville, FL for your next kayak-angling adventure at www.chicopiibay.com

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