the permit project

by brian irwin

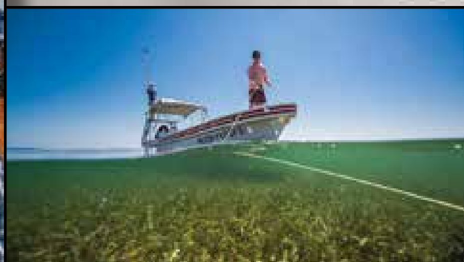
Punta Gorda, Belize is a captivating town. Off the radar of most anglers, this small community used to be a tourist destination for the British military, back when Belize was a territory known as British Honduras. But back when wasn't long ago; Belize was granted independence in 1981 and with the elopement of the military, this hamlet rapidly reverted to its native roots. It's a fishing community, where locals still hand-line snapper and barracuda, work in the nearby citrus groves or organic farms and rely on the sea for their bounty. Punta Gorda has a well-kept secret, however. It's one of the most productive permit fisheries in the world.

I've been chasing permit for years, never coming closer than one prick in the keys years ago. Punta Gorda, colloquially known as P.G., claims to be the permit capital, or so says the sign affront the Garbutt brothers fishing lodge. It was with their guides that I hoped would break my losing streak.

The Garbutts grew up in Punta Negra, just north of P.G. Like most Belizean families theirs is large and cohesive. Four brothers and one sister run their lodge and fly-fishing guide business, which has become known in inner circles as the single most well studied group of permit guides in Central America. Dennis Garbutt, 41 years old, is the business brains of their operation. In the early 2000s he spotted a waterfront plot of land for sale in P.G. and scooped it up. In 2005, after erecting a lodge complete with a series of stilted cabanas capable of accommodating 10 anglers, he opened to the public.

Garbutt couldn't have done it alone, nor would he want to have tried. He was saddled with his three brothers, Scully (real name Thomas, age 40), Oliver (38) and Eworth (35). His sister Elizabeth (37) joined the effort as the lodge chef, something she does with fervor and excellence. Among the family members, they've built a guiding business that brings anglers from all over the world. But that's not the impressive part. What's striking about the Garbutts is not only their skill at guiding, but also their commitment to sustainable tourism and angling.

In their youth, the Garbutts would harvest fish from the sea and take them to market. Dennis Garbutt quickly realized that their way of life was depleting the region's resources. "We would find that there was no way to expect that every finfish we caught and took to the market would sell; this was wasteful. Extremely wasteful. Overfishing was obvious."



When Dennis was 13 the entire family relocated to P.G. so that the children could attend high school, as there was no such opportunity in Punta Negra. Secondary education isn't completely free in Belize. While the Garbutt children's parents helped foot the bill, the kids continued to work in the fishing industry to pay for their education. Even though they were practicing gillnetting and hand lining, the family always had one eye on the environmental pie.

"We always released small fish," stated Garbutt. "We'd move around so we wouldn't deplete one area. We've always practiced a sustainable fishing practice. We knew the sea was always there for us and we've been practicing conservation from the get-go."

When the Garbutts transitioned to the fly-fishing industry in 2005 they began to generate connections to the most ardent environmental organizations in that sphere. From the Bonefish and Tarpon Trust to National Geographic, they worked to, and frankly facilitated, promotion of conservation research, catch-and-release practices and responsible eco-tourism that gradually made them some of the most important, but unrecognized environmental ambassadors in the region. Today, all of Belize is catch-and-release, a relatively new law that does indeed affect local fishermen and their product in the marketplace, but undeniably protects the resources of the area they call home.

Punta Gorda is flanked by the Port Honduras Marine Reserve, a patch of water thronged with mangrove islands and pancake flats. Permit roam them in favorable conditions, lacing the coral heads and turtle grass with their marvelous scissor tails and lipstick-pink lips. To the northwest lays the Paynes Creek National Park. This area is a complex lagoon system of channels, back lakes and mazes of mangroves. Here, on windy days, the Garbutts and their guides roam for tails in the skinny water, rolling tarpon in the channels and everything in between. Bonefish are common here, thanks to a reintroduction program that rectified the impact of overfishing for these ghosts of the flats.

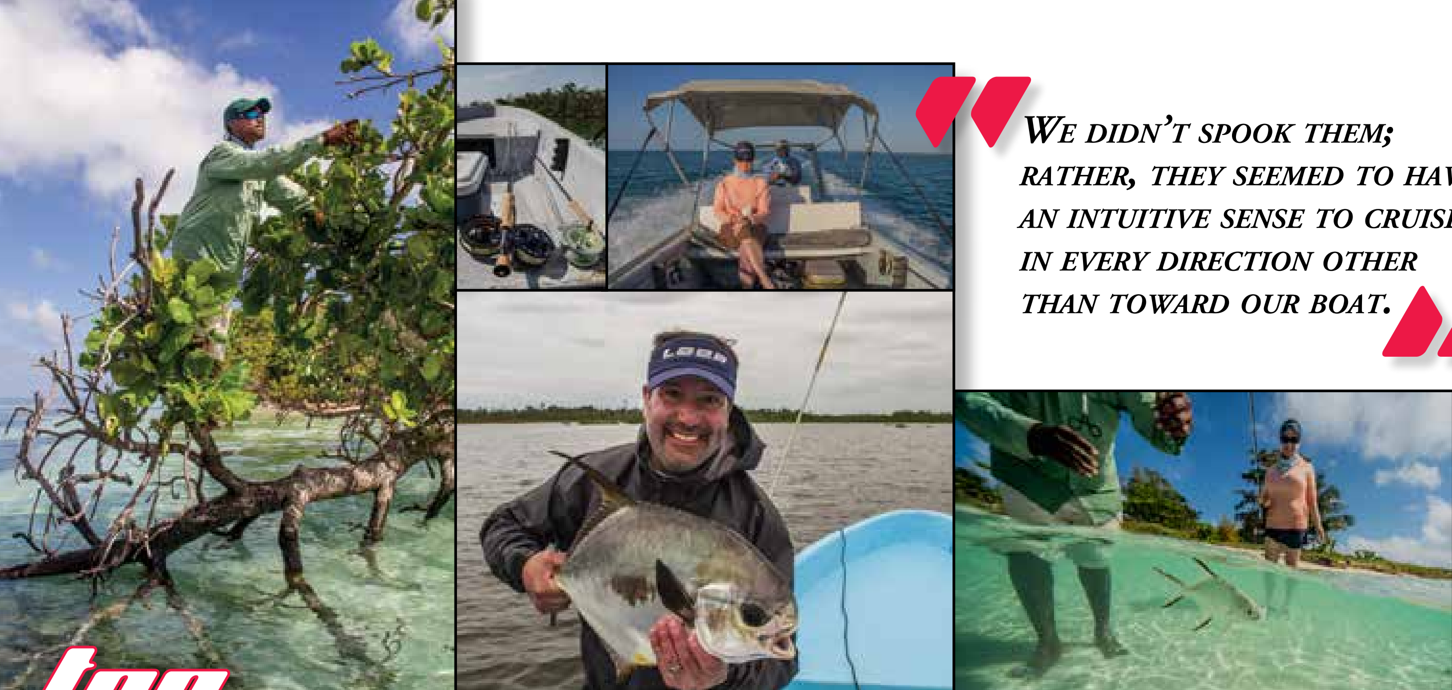
My first day fishing was with George Lford. Thirty-three years old, Lford works for the Garbutts. He's half Belizean, half Honduran. He described himself as "kind of like rice and beans." He's been guiding for eleven years and with winds high and the flats quiet, we headed to the Punta Ycacos Lagoon in search of permit, bones and tarpon.

The morning was slow. We saw a few permit in the mangroves, but not until we were so close that we sent them running for cover. After a few hours we pulled into a shallow cove where the milky water looked quiet, but promising. Two tarpon drifted from under the protective cover of the mangrove awning. I fired a black death, perhaps the most venerable of all tarpon flies, in front of the pair. Three strips and my line became as tight as a piano wire as a 30-pound tarpon ejected from the water. After a twenty minute battle the fish came to the boat. A few shutter snaps and he was off for the mangrove roots, to rest and avoid predation. The skunk was washed away.

OVER RUM PUNCH, TALES OF FABULOUS PERMIT, GIANT BONES AND SVELTE LADY ANGLERS SWIRLED BEFORE WE HEADED TO BED FOR ANOTHER DAY OF THE SAME—TO FIND A HUNGRY PERMIT.

That evening we retired to the Garbutt's lodge. Elizabeth (known in close circles as Betty) served up fresh snapper salad from the local market, prefaced by a few Belkin beers and some fresh conch ceviche. Their lodge was booked solid, as it usually is, this time with a fleet of high-profile anglers from Ontario, Canada. Over rum punch, tales of fabulous permit, giant bones and svelte lady anglers swirled before we headed to bed for another day of the same—to find a hungry permit.

It didn't happen the next day. The weather was uncooperative, so Lford headed back to the lagoon where we saw two permit on the run, no more. This day's lousy conditions, like so many in flats fishing, shut every boat down on the flats. And so we poled, along the mangroves once again, looking for wakes, nervous water or any sign of piscatorial life. Baitfish occasionally scatted, suggesting that the fish were there, but not showing themselves to us. Abruptly a silver slab rolled to the surface behind us. It was a tarpon.



> *We didn't spook them; rather, they seemed to have an intuitive sense to cruise in every direction other than toward our boat.*

My wife Lori—the self-entitled Aqua Geisha due to her role of passing me rods on cue to switch from bonefish to tarpon to permit quickly—handed me my 10-weight and I scrambled to launch the same productive fly from the prior day to the still-settling rings in the water. In a blink, line peeled and again an aerial show began. I fought the tarpon for 25 minutes before bringing its 35-pound body to the boat side.

We'd drifted a bit and were now close to the mangrove matrix on the shoreline. The fish made a last agonal push for the protection of the roots and I fought back, attempting to prevent the entanglement that could mean not only a lost fish, but a fish's life lost. He pulled, I pulled, and as if I were holding a firecracker in my hand my rod exploded into several pieces.

I was able to grab the leader and fortunately the fish was exhausted, allowing him to slide my way, remit to my hand, and allow the hook to be pulled from his bony jaw. At this point I was out of the boat, standing in the mud that swallowed my shins. I aerated the fish and let it slide back into the creamy lagoon.

Day three: rain, cold front. The Garbutts prefaced the day by emphasizing that the weather was ominous, the fish would flee the flats and I should prepare to get wet, discouraged and keep my chin up. This was accurate advice, as typically the flats are quiet during such weather patterns. Lyford was off duty, so I was guided by Dan Castellanos.

Castellanos is the 35 year-old cousin to the Garbutt tribe. His mother is a Garbutt, and after growing up in Monkey River Town he relocated to P.G. to guide. He's been doing it for 12 years and he, after providing me the disclaimer about the weather, headed again for the lagoon. This time however, we shot past the large belly of water that had produced two tarpon and navigated our way into a series of back lakes.

The water was skinny, perhaps two feet, and Castellanos poled valiantly looking for mud or tails. After an hour, we found wake. Then we saw a tail. Then another. There were permit all around us. But they were on the move. We'd see them in slick water in the distance, but after quietly poling to them we'd find they'd eased away from us. We didn't spook them; rather, they seemed to have an intuitive sense to cruise in every direction other than toward our boat.

And then I was offered the perfect shot. A tailing fish seventy feet out, low wind, decent light. Three pumps and my crab pattern landed one foot in front of the fish's nose. The water erupted as the terrified fish bolted toward safety. Thirty minutes later I was gifted another great shot. I did it again, scaring the fish with my proximity. And then, as if the permit gods were feeling charitable, three tails appeared fifty yards away in a shallow cove flanked by mangroves.

Castellanos silently approached them and I was able to drop my fly just short of the fish. All three tails turned, swarmed my fly like kid to candy and fought for the bite. A tug, a set, and I was hooked up with the first permit of my life.

He ran long and hard, which had me quite terrified, considering I only had 16 lb. tippet on the line and a broken rod in my suitcase. My heart pounded so hard that I sustained a headache, a reliable indicator that my blood pressure was through the clouds. I played the fish as gingerly as I could for thirty minutes, at which time I was able to grab the leader and make a formal land. Then he ran again, this time deep into my backing and straight into the mangroves.

You couldn't tangle a line to this degree in mangrove roots if you intentionally tried. Castellanos made a bold decision: jump in, knowing that the mud may be waist-deep, and try to save the catch. I suppose you could say, fortunately for him, it wasn't waist deep, only knee deep, but you'd never know as he waded effortlessly, unlacing the line from each and every root. My drag was wide open at this point, as the friction of the roots were enough to stop the fish's efforts. But one run and the fish would be a distant memory for me, one that would be sure to haunt.

After a battle with the mud, my fish came free and ran back out into the lagoon proper. Castellanos boarded the boat and guided me out to safer water. The fish still had endurance, and ran many times over what amounted to one hour before he finally relinquished himself to my guide's hand.

I've been fascinated with permit since I saw one on the cover of a fishing magazine when I was eight years old. It's been a life pursuit for me,] to land one of these fabulous creatures. I didn't know why they're so special, other than they're hard to catch. There's something captivating about permit, something addictive. Perhaps it's their human-like lips. Or their strength. Or their sheen. Whatever the allure is, this is the only uncooked fish that I've laid *my* lips on. And with a kiss on the nose, the fifteen pound fish jolted from my hand and off into the mangroves, with enough energy left to fight another battle as brilliant as the first. And if we did it again, I'd bet a 5-piece tarpon rod that he'd win.

Brian Irwin is a frequent contributor to *Fly Fish America*, and a fellow local here in New Hampshire's Mount Washington Valley (fetaured on page 56). In between great fishing trips, he goes by Dr. Brian Irwin—practicing in the North Conway area, and lending those skills as a team member to our local Mountain Rescue Service and White Mountain Swiftwater Rescue Team. —*Ed.*

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