

# S I R E N S O N G

CHASING PERMIT WITH THE  
GARBUIT BROTHERS

HILARY HUTCHESON

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NICK KELLEY, JIM KLUG, ORVIS,  
& COPAL TREE LODGE



*The Sapodilla Cayes is a long string of uninhabited islands and shallows in the Toledo District of Belize. They are part of the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef System that stretches along the coasts of four countries: Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, and Honduras.*

**I**N THE PAST, IT WASN'T UNTIL I RETURNED HOME TO MONTANA AFTER A DESTINATION FLY-FISHING TRIP THAT I FELT THE FULL WEIGHT OF A MISSED CULTURAL OPPORTUNITY.

It's common to be picked up at the airport by a lodge shuttle and whisked away to an insulated oasis where I could expect food with which I'm familiar, air-conditioned rooms, and the comforts of home plus a few cushy extras. The trips were typically wonderful. But, afterward, the download to friends and family often left me grasping, as they'd ask things like, "What kinds of spices do the locals use?" and "What kind of music do the kids listen to there?" and "What kinds of animals did you see besides fish?"

Times seem to be changing, with a number of lodges infusing essences beyond the bell-to-bell angling experience. Among these, and standing out for its focus on sustainability, is Copal Tree Lodge in southernmost Belize. The luxury, all-inclusive jungle resort includes a 3,000-acre farm—one of the first organic farms in the entire country of Belize—and is surrounded by 22,000 acres of rainforest preserve within Punta Gorda's Maya Mountains.

As Punta Gorda is celebrated as one of the world's top permit fishing destinations, with most of the catching done on national parks and marine preserves, it's no wonder I'd go into the trip desiring little more than fair shots at black tails. But, on arrival at

Copal Tree Lodge, my friends Maddie Brenneman and Nick Kelley and I immediately made a pact to get off the water each day with enough time to hike around the vast grounds, where guests can participate in bean-to-bar chocolate making, organic coffee cupping, and a rum mixology class. The cacao, coffee beans, and sugar cane for the rum are all grown, harvested, and processed at the Copal Tree farm. Damien Nurre, who manages the fly fishing at Copal Tree, says, "This is important because all of the community benefits from the supplies for the lodge and the marketplace for the rum and chocolate products produced on the property. And the community feels good about this operation because the team at Copal Tree is very active in supporting conservation on both land and sea in the region."

While we could have spent every day canoodling with the baby lambs, chickens, horses, howler monkeys, and toucans we saw on the property, we also took note of the many off-site activities. For example, the culinary adventure package includes a snorkeling outing with a local chef who then prepares a meal on the boat. The cultural immersion package encourages guests to get to know the real Belize through authentic excursions, including a hike through a 5th century A.D. Mayan site. Guests can cliff dive over a waterfall into the jungle river, and visit the Punta Gorda town market. Each package includes the use of the lodge's hiking trails, river kayaks, gym, and mountain bikes.

The land where the lodge stands is rich in Mayan history, dating to  
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# LEGENDARY GUIDES

JIM KLUG  
YELLOW DOG FLY FISHING

Punta Gorda, the southernmost town in Belize, is the capital of Belize's Toledo District. Small, quiet, and almost completely untouched by tourism and resort marketing, this sleepy fishing village offers a rare look at the Belize of old—a marked contrast to the crowds of tourists and development projects farther to the north. With its cool breezes and a friendly, laid-back attitude, little has changed in Punta Gorda; the pace of life is relaxed, traffic is minimal, and no one ever seems to be in a hurry.

The waters that surround Punta Gorda boast more permit than just about any place I've ever seen. When the conditions are right, a single day of fishing the area's flats might yield dozens of shots. From throwing floating crabs to large, single fish in the back lagoons, to casting small crab patterns into schools of 5- to 15-pound fish, the fishery is a permit angler's dream. Since the fishing in these southern Belize waters focuses so heavily on permit, it's best for patient anglers willing to take on a challenge. It requires the right attitude paired with an awareness that not catching fish is likely and therefore must be acceptable. Even on the very best days—when shots are plentiful and the permit are happy—a lot of pieces need to both come together and fall into place. Most importantly, you must have a great guide.

Scully. Oliver. Eworth. These are familiar names to the most ardent of permit anglers. In a region of the Caribbean known for legendary guides, these three Garbutt brothers and their extended clan have no doubt earned the title of "first family" of permit fishing in Belize. The Garbutts have established a track record of putting more clients on permit—in a fun, relaxed, and positive manner—than anyone in the game.

In 2010, while shooting photos for my first book, *Fly Fishing Belize* (2014), I spent several weeks with Scully, Eworth, and Oliver Garbutt, fishing throughout the southern waters and focusing on the offshore cayes and outer reef islands that run from Glover's Atoll all the way south to the Sapodilla Cayes. On one trip, I brought along my then seven-year-old daughter to camp, fish, and

photograph the Sapodillas. Scully and my daughter Carson swam with manatees, snorkeled over a sunken pirate ship, and worked on her casting on the flats of tiny Lime Caye. A photo of Scully and my daughter—smiling broadly and proudly holding her first bonefish—still hangs on my office wall to this day.

I first met the Garbutt family in the late 1990s, when Punta Gorda was a largely unknown part of Belize with few tourists and even fewer anglers. At the time, the Garbutt brothers had recently made the transition from commercial fishing to sport fishing, and anglers wishing to book day trips had to stay at one of the town's small hotels or guest houses, as fishing lodges and jungle resorts had yet to find their way to Punta Gorda. In the years that followed, the Garbutts developed a collective reputation for having an incredible work ethic, for delivering long days on the water, and for being fishy as hell.

In 2009, they opened their own lodge to complement their outfitting operations, and today the family still oversees the majority of all guide operations and flats fishing in this part of Belize. Scully and Oliver Garbutt are responsible for the guiding at the nearby Copal Tree Lodge, where guests can enjoy luxury accommodations and fine dining. Eworth Garbutt now operates primarily out of Placencia and oversees what has grown into the largest outfitting operation in that area. A fourth brother, Dennis Garbutt, is not a guide, but managed the family lodge for years, and has also spearheaded a number of conservation and enforcement projects in the Port Honduras Marine Reserve. Numerous cousins and uncles also guide the waters of Punta Gorda, and even their mother Sandra has played an integral role in the family business.

For those who are serious about chasing permit and want to do so with some of the finest guides in the world of saltwater flats fishing, spending time with the Garbutts to fish Punta Gorda and the surrounding waters of the Port Honduras Reserve is the real deal. A consistently strong number of fish in the area, combined with this team of talented guides, no doubt maximize your chance to hook and land a permit on the fly.

From left to right: Eworth, Oliver, and Scully Garbutt have legendary status as the most experienced permit guides in southern Belize. Scully and Oliver run all the fly-fishing trips for Copal Tree Lodge. Eworth has moved away from the family business in Punta Gorda and is now a head guide in the Placencia area.



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600 A.D., when Mayans used the Rio Grande as a thoroughfare to the ocean. Confederates from Alabama and Texas showed up there in the 1860s to produce sugar cane and rum, and to raise cattle.

Knowing that fly fishers tend to get “permit fever,” a special tunnel vision that prevents a big-picture immersion in the destination’s culture and cuisine, Maddie and Nick and I made arrangements to fish the early mornings, and be off the water by 2 P.M. in order to take in the other experiences. “Initially that was tough to do,” said Nick. “Because the Garbutt brothers are legendary guides, and we wanted all the time with them we could get.”

The Garbutt brothers are Scully and Oliver Garbutt, the Punta Gorda fishing guides who run the fly-fishing trips at Copal Tree Lodge. Their brother Eworth is a guide farther north in the Placencia area. The Garbutt brothers are so popular and well-respected globally that, upon meeting Scully and Oliver, we spent the first half hour talking about all the people we knew who had previously fished with them. It’s not just fly fishing in Belize that’s on anglers’ bucket lists, it’s fly fishing with one of the Garbutt brothers.

Last year, when Scully’s seven-year-old son was diagnosed with a brain tumor, Scully’s clients rallied to send his family to the United States for his son’s treatment. The surgery was successful, and his son continues to recover. “My wife and I were blown away,” says Scully. “The fact that fly fishing brings people together like this means a lot to us. I hope I can help out other people the way we were shown such kindness.”

On the morning of our first fishing day, a cold front had us bundled in fleece and rain jackets, and apparently also pushed the permit off the flats and into deeper water. Scully and Oliver drove the 23-foot super pangas on a short run to a sheltered lagoon where, they explained, some permit often retreat on stormy days rather than into the deeper ocean.

Almost immediately, Scully and I saw the large, telltale V shape of three fish pushing away. I made a long cast, which landed in front of them and to the left. “Leave it . . .” said Scully. “Now little strip, strip, FOLLOW . . . strip . . . ugh.” The lead fish turned aggressively on the fly and followed for several feet before turning back to rejoin the other two, perhaps en route to a more authentic meal.

At almost the exact same time as my refusal, a cheer broke out from the other boat, where Maddie and Nick were cruising the bank of the same cove with Oliver. When we saw Nick’s bent rod, Scully trolled us over to watch the fight and join the ensuing celebration when Oliver tailed the fish. It was a small permit . . . but turned out to be the only one of our trip.

As the cold front let up, we enjoyed sunshine and clear water, but the famed fish in hearty numbers were slow to return to the flat. The Garbutts’ keen eyes zeroed in on the stragglers, giving us enough shots to keep our hearts pounding. In fact, my blood still boils from one botched shot in particular—my best chance of the trip.

Early in the morning of the third day, Nick and I went out with Oliver. We saw two large, black tips bobbing in the sunlight. The sunbeams shooting off the tails were silent, of course, but seemed to send music to our boat, like mythological sirens, distracting me

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from the task at hand. I should have reversed my fly line. Reversing the fly line is an important paver on the road to landing a permit. After peeling the line off the reel (and prior to spotting a target), you should cast the line all the way out, then strip it back onto the bow so the front of the fly line is stacked on top of the rear of the fly line. Otherwise, if the line has merely been peeled off the reel and stacked onto the bow, it will likely bunch up during a cast. I knew this. I almost always stack those coils properly. But this day . . . I’m shamelessly passing blame to the sirens that grew louder as Oliver poled us closer for what should have been, and could have been, a perfect shot. On my first cast, the line balled up at the first guide. We both freaked, groaning but saying nothing. I quickly cleared the mess and cast again, trying not to let frustration and embarrassment compete for headspace. My next shot landed exactly where we saw the black tails disappear a split second prior . . . but they never reappeared. Oliver coached me through a hopeful retrieve that I took as charity, knowing that he knew the two perfect permit had ghosted away.

When I recalled the mishap later for Maddie, she responded, “Yeah, after missing a shot like that, it’s crazy what starts going through your head. I am not a religious person, but when I’m running out of time to catch a permit, I’m praying to anything and everything . . . God, Mother Earth, the permit, my Nana and Gramps . . . one time I even started praying to Poseidon! I’m not even joking.” Maddie definitely has a way of making me feel better.

## ALTERNATE PURSUITS

When permit take their premature leave, it’s not uncommon in other fisheries across the country for fishers to move on to different species, at least for a half day, or until they get a satisfying hook-set on a bonefish, snook, or tarpon under their belts. And while these species are found seasonally in the rivers of Punta Gorda and the hundreds of world-class flats in the immediate area, it’s widely understood that the Punta Gorda fishing culture is focused heavily on permit. Damien Nurre says, “There are few other fisheries you can visit and have a realistic chance to catch

multiple permit in a day or week. This year's record so far is nine permit by one angler in one day!"

There is also an option at Copal Tree to visit Sapodilla Cayes. These outer reef islands—accessible by an hour-long boat run from Punta Gorda—provide plenty of action for small to medium-sized bonefish.

Staying focused, or at least trying to recover from a loss of focus, is exhausting. Nick has photos of me on the run back to Copal Tree Lodge, sitting straight up in the boat, holding my beer, sound asleep, my head bobbing somewhat violently with the waves. In many other lodge situations, I'd be headed for a nap in my room, but this time my friends and I had bigger fish to fry.

From Garbutts' marina, a Copal Tree host drove us on a tour through the heart of Punta Gorda, where we purchased fresh fruit from family-run produce stands, and followed tips from locals to track down two jars of homemade *recado rojo*—a spice mixture including annato, oregano, cumin, clove, cinnamon, black pepper, allspice, garlic, and salt. It's used in traditional Belize cuisine, like the chicken stew we enjoyed at the lodge restaurant.

On the way back to the lodge, the host dropped us off at the Copal Tree Farm Center, where we let our noses lead us to an open-sided barn where fresh cocoa seeds were drying on large sheets. The seeds, we learned, would be made into the organic chocolate bars we later purchased at the lodge for souvenirs and after-dinner treats.

We walked through a field of tall sugar cane that would be harvested for use in the Copal Tree Distillery, which recently debuted a farm-to-flask initiative. Our favorite cocktail at the lodge bar was made with rum and cocoa seeds from this very spot.

We wandered through fruit orchards and vegetable gardens, coops with ducks and chickens, and pens with goats and lambs. "Most of the food we serve in our restaurant is organically produced on our 3,000-acre organic farm," says Nurre. "And we purchase seafood directly from local fishermen."

After our farm hike, we went to our rooms to shower, which we all agreed was an unexpected highlight of the trip because of the large, glass shower stalls in the bathrooms. The oversized, double-headed showers are tiled with small, beautiful stones, and nearly an entire wall is glass with a view of the deep jungle.

For me, each night of a destination fly-fishing trip ends with a ritual. I fall asleep counting shots at fish from that day that either floundered or triumphed. But at Copal Tree Lodge, I amended this liturgy. As the howler monkeys quieted their howls for the evening, I drifted off counting the new, enriching cultural experiences packed in and around those shots at black-tailed sirens. ~

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*Hilary Hutcheson started guiding fly-fishing trips as a teenager in West Glacier, Montana. Today she continues to guide the Flathead River system, and owns and operates her fly shop, Lary's Fly & Supply in Columbia Falls, Montana, where she lives with her daughters Ella and Delaney, her partner Ebon, and their three-legged Labrador Jolene. Her last story in FLY FISHERMAN was "Managing Menhaden" in the April-May 2021 issue.*

## BOOK YOUR DESTINATION

*Copal Tree Lodge is one of ten Belize operations in the Muy'Ono Resorts' (muyono.com) portfolio. They have other fly-fishing lodges including Blue Horizon Lodge on a private island near Hopkins Bay, as well as resorts specializing in scuba, yoga, and adventure activities including cave tubing and zip-lining.*

**Copal Tree Lodge** – [copaltreelodge.com](http://copaltreelodge.com)



## RECOMMENDED GEAR

Bring a variety of lightly and heavily weighted crab patterns that range in size from about the size of a nickel to a quarter. The Bauer Crab and EP Crab are southern Belize favorites. Also bring #4 or #6 Strong Arm Merkins. This Dave Skok fly has done exceptionally well in Florida permit tournaments in recent years.

**ORVIS** HELIOS 3D 9-FOOT 9-WEIGHT, \$950

**ORVIS** MIRAGE V REEL, \$730

**SCIENTIFIC ANGLERS** AMPLITUDE GRAND SLAM, \$130

**COSTA** PARGO GLASSES WITH 580G GREEN LENS, \$220

**PATAGONIA** RIVER SALT WADING BOOTS, \$300

**PATAGONIA** TROPIC COMFORT HOODY, \$70