A freakishly-early Cyclone Laurence passed wide of the Top End as the inaugural Arnhemland Fly Fishing Week got under way in early December 2009. Hosted by NAFA Fly Fishing Editor and undoubtedly Australia’s premier saltwater fly fisherman, Peter Morse, the fishing was still outstanding and a promise of the world-class fly fishing to expect in a normal year.
I had a memorable trip to the Arnhemland Barramudi Nature Lodge in 2008, in a week catching just a sniff of the fly fishing potential of the place with some superb days on the water. We travelled to the Blythe, fished the smaller creeks of the coast and also fished some billabongs that had probably not seen a fly fisherman before. I was in the lodge with a group of lure fishermen and they had some huge days with more than 100 barra being caught and released by several of the boats in one day. It was enough to convince Alex to set aside a fly fishing week at the Lodge some time in 2009. The tides he chose were very late in the year, only a few weeks before Christmas, and we would be the last group in. The rationale was that, most years conditions absolutely suit fly fishing as days are often dead calm with the occasional late afternoon build-up storm providing a dramatic back-drop.

“You’ll never get a cyclone that early in the season unless it’s a ridiculously early one” was Alex’s reassuring comment.

I arrived at the Lodge a few days early to get a feel for what was going on. Mick Eddy met me at Maningrida airport and we were gone fishin’ and had a barra in the boat even before the Air North plane had left for Milingimbi. Mick asked me what I would like to do in the few days before the fly fishermen arrived.

“Let’s look at those places you don’t normally go to with your lure fishermen and your hard core barra guys,” I responded.

Fishing the beaches was very much on the agenda for the week. Fly fishermen just love to get out of the boat and to have the independence of walking the beaches, especially in a place such as this where the beaches had never seen the footprint of a lure chucklet alone a fly fisherman.

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There are some stunning beaches on the north coast of Arnhem Land. The best are of pure white sand to rival the finest of Fraser Island or Broome, but add in zero fishing pressure, the small mangrove creeks that frequently feed onto these beaches, the flats and a maze of protective offshore reefs and, from a fly fisherman’s perspective, you have Utopia — some really stunning and exciting country. Additionally, I was keen to spend some time on some of the flats around the mouth of the smaller creeks that are mostly sand and consequently run clear on the bigger tides when the mouths of the larger rivers are invariably discoloured. Permit have been caught not far west of here (Croker Island) and not far east of here (Wessel Islands), and one was caught on a lure right near the mouth of the main Lodge river, the Liverpool, a couple of years ago, so there’s a more than strong possibility that at some stage they’re going to be in numbers along these beaches and around the river and creek mouths.

Mick and I caught a lot of fish over the next two days. The prevailing daily weather pattern, combined with the tides, was perfect. An offshore wind blew in the morning as the tide rose over the flats and, in the late morning, this swung to onshore as the tide fell, so that was time for the creeks. We piled into a big fingermark bite over some shallow reef and had a huge session at the mouth of Navy Landing Creek on an incoming tide when the brassy trevally and mid-sized queenfish came through in waves and each hook-up was accompanied by a horde of followers. In between all of this we got stuck into enough barra to not get bored with too much exploration.

We did some of the things we planned and found fish in places that would really excite the fly fishermen, but ominously the sky to the north had grown darker each day. Back at camp that night, Lodge Manager Dave Thomas warned us there was a cyclone brewing in the eastern Arafura Sea. It was heading west and, on its present track, it would pass to the north of Maningrida. Yep,
it was a ridiculously early one.

Graeme Williams of Insight Fly Fishing fame, and a good mate of Alex’s, was one of the guides for the week and he drove up from Darwin towing his boat. Graeme was also keen to get some time on the water before the fly fishermen arrived and we managed a day of exploration together. We swung into the first big beach west of Maningrida for a look along the shore. It was about a kilometre long, the water was a little discoloured from the previous afternoon’s onshore wind, but was certainly clean enough to allow plenty of fish spotting. We started at the eastern end, the sun was behind us and the huge wall of dense black cloud to the west gave us a reasonable view into the water. It was surprisingly deep right along the shore. Mid-sized queenfish and occasional trevally were scattered along this shore but, at this stage, our real target was to see some blue bastards. The water was a little deep and discoloured for that, and the light was marginal.

But we pretty quickly realised there was no shortage of fish along here. A couple of impressive wakes right in close materialised into huge GTs — the biggest probably pushing 60lb swam in water as shallow as its massive body would allow; from the shore you could have poked it in the eye with half a rod without getting your feet wet. Seeing those fish suddenly changed our perspective and the small white Clouser on the end of the 8 weight rod seemed just a little inadequate. We saw several more of these GTs, one appearing at precisely the moment I threw my fly to a couple of thin swimming shapes which metamorphosed into diamond trevally, a species that had eluded me and which became the 280th on my list.

Further along the beach, its nature changed as it began to shallow right out into proper flats. A school of fish on these flats turned out to be giant herring and a few hundred metres on in the corner of the beach where it met the rocks and was funnelled into a creek, the area teemed with better-than-average-sized brassy trevally and queenfish. A pack of half a dozen GTs, perhaps close to 50lb, had that creek mouth as their ambush point. Unfortunately, in the poor light, we were upon them too late to get a shot away, but it’s been stashed away in the memory banks.

We investigated another beach later that day but this was on a falling tide. It also teemed with fish, including giant herring and the ever-present brassies and queenfish. With similar tides the following morning, we certainly had an exciting plan for the arrival of the fishermen, but mother nature seems to take care of the best plans with plans of her own as Cyclone Laurence intensified but mercifully continued to move west a considerable distance to the north of us. Onshore winds and storms were the forecast for the week.

There were six anglers for the inaugural fly
Fishing deep over lumps of reef is not for everyone; it's blind fishing and it involves some pretty good management of sinking line techniques. It also requires some faith that there are fish down there and this can sometimes be well rewarded.
fishing week: Ross Italiano and Geoff Smith came from Western Australia, Craig Coleman, Lachlan McKenzie and Andre Agterhuis came from Ballarat, with local fly fishing legend and maestro of the fly scam Harey (Tony Hare) from Darwin more than making up the numbers on his own. The group had mixed fly fishing experience from very little to considerable. We planned to fish two anglers to a boat and to rotate each day giving the guides some relief from the incoming Clouser missiles launched by the less-experienced casters.

Laurence moved slowly west and stayed well offshore but the onshore winds it generated ended any chance of beach fishing — for those first few days anyway — so we took to the creeks and rivers when the tides were right and headed to the offshore reefs when possible.

Skirmish Point at the mouth of the Liverpool River is a complex of reefs and not far offshore is a series of deep lumps that are haunted by a variety of species that changes throughout the year. On a clear day, you can see the bottom and the water surrounding these lumps ripples with feeding oceanic queenfish. They’re near enough to the coast to attract plenty of inshore species as well. Using hookless poppers we teased up some huge queenfish that would not convert to the fly and we pulled coral trout and Spanish flag off the inshore bombies before moving to the wider deeper reefs.

Fishing deep over lumps of reef such as this is not for everyone; it’s blind fishing and it involves some pretty good management of sinking line techniques. It also requires some faith that there are fish down there and this can sometimes be well rewarded. But most complaints about this not being real fly fishing are usually over once the line burns begin to happen; it’s brutal stuff. I spent the better part of an afternoon out on those reefs with Ross and Craig. Ross is well used to fishing deep in saltwater and Craig is a member of the Australian fly fishing team so they quickly dialled into what was required.
I find one of the very best tactics for this kind of fishing is to have a jig in the water — hooked fish quickly stir up what might otherwise be a peaceful lump of reef but most importantly it lets us know there are fish there. Mick manned the jig rod and within seconds it was bent way over and a horde of middling-sized GTs followed their hooked mate to the surface. Ross had his fly in there in a blink but, instead of one of the GTs grabbing it, a respectable cobia of around 30lb shouldered its way through the pack to grab the fly right at the boat. Like they do in so many places, sharks have become an issue in this area and Ross played the fish relatively gently. Sometimes the harder you fight a fish the more ruckus it creates and the more likely it is that the sharks will move in. With the fish almost beaten, a small whaler moved in on it and in the ensuing battle to get it away from the shark and safely in the boat the leader popped and the cobia swam away. We weren’t so lucky with many of the other fish.

Craig was on a really steep learning curve with these very strong fish in deep water. His fast sinking line was being rapidly whittled away through repeated encounters with GTs, sharks and the reef — even a 40lb leader was not providing him with any advantage; the fish were giving this highly-experienced trout man a thrashing and his fly collection was also taking a pummelling. In the middle of the boat I had a line that just wouldn’t sink fast enough, a salutary lesson in preparation, while down the back of the boat Ross showed his considerable saltwater experience by landing a string of trevally of mixed species.

The offshore reefs provided us with plenty of entertainment and I would like to see them when they were really active. The massive giant herring that was hooked on a deep-fished fly and half took to the air before pulling the hook was enough to grab anyone’s attention and have you wondering at what might be when this place really fired.

Laurence stayed away to the north and was moving west at a good distance off the coast but the onshore winds prevailed and some mighty spectacular thunderstorms passed through the area. For those of us visiting from the savagely-drought-affected southern regions, these were really something to experience. The Liverpool River itself was quiet. There were numbers of smaller fish but nothing to match the 109cm fish caught by Barry Cougle on fly three years earlier. We fished Cougle’s Junction on much the same tide that had produced this great fish for Barry but to no avail. The smaller coastal creeks were where the barra action was happening and each day we headed off to different water.

The GTs came in all sizes and from any number of habitats, including inshore and offshore reefs, sandy beaches and mangrove creek mouths.
These Arnhemland fly-caught barra certainly knew how to churn up the water once hooked. They provided some thrilling moments.
trunks of a once-thriving mangrove system. But apart from the lack of shade, all it seems to have done is provide the barras with a few thousand more snags to spend their time in. It’s a perfect-sized creek for fly fishermen to really indulge themselves in some first-class barra fishing. With Graeme Williams guiding, Ross, Andre and myself just managed to sneak in on a falling tide and were trapped in the creek for the day. For anyone but a fisherman, being stuck in a mangrove creek for seven hours could be a vision of hell, but we thought we were in paradise. Graeme’s vast experience had us on fish for most of those seven hours as we fished mud banks, gutter mouths and snags. In the middle of the creek, tarpon boiled all day but the barras were so thick and willing we couldn’t leave them except to rack up a few tarpon for the growing species list. Along with jacks, cod, tarpon and fingermark, it had been a 40 barra day.

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All the crew were desperately keen to get some sight fishing on the beaches and the flats, but the onshore winds would not abate. On one day, all three boats headed west to some creek systems nearly two hours down the coast. On the way, we passed mile upon mile of white sand beaches in bays fringed with rocky headlands, reefs and mangroves. You know in your guts that the fishing on those beaches on the right tides could potentially match anything in the world — I couldn’t take my eyes off them and questioned Mick. “We camp there often on our days off between charters,” he said. “But we don’t fish in there; we’re focused on the barras.”

In the creeks the barras were thick, especially around the junctions of the many side creeks and gutters. We had a falling tide all day; it was perfect and, in the big boat,
with Mick’s knowledge of this system, Geoff, Andre and myself were rarely off the fish.

The more you fish for these wonderful fish, the more you realise just how acute their senses must be. In dark-stained water with at the very most 40cm of visibility, I saw a barra travel 2m from a bank-side snag to hit a Clouser that was perhaps 30cm under the surface — when they want them, they can really find them; I don’t think their not being able to find the fly is something we really have to worry about too much.

In another creek, Ross and Craig also killed the pig and, at the end of the day, all three boats had caught and released an estimated 90 barra. Ross had also landed the camp’s first fly rod grand slam with a 91 cm threadfin and a fingermark. It was a big day out for the fly boys and we were finishing the week on a high.

Finally, on our last day we had the break in the weather we were looking for. With a low at 1pm, we had an incoming tide on the beaches through the afternoon, the wind dropped off and, in spite of some impressive build-up storms in the area, we had plenty of blue sky. All three boats converged on an area of rocks and beach where we proceeded to lay into the local fish population. There were several species of trevally and queenfish, giant herring, finemarker and others caught. It was one of those frenetic sessions where you know the clock is running down on not only the day but the trip as well and fishing hard is the only way to attack it.

So was the inaugural fly week a success? We caught 32 species of fish including a grand slam. Geoff Smith won the Sage fly rod donated by JM Gillies for the most outstanding capture of the week, a 75cm barra which, although not huge, was nudged by plenty of others around that size.

Even considering the conditions, you are never going to run out of options in this part of the world. We didn’t fish the billabongs at all and had a clear view of the potential of the beaches and flats. With just a tad of clear weather on the right stage of the tide, I know this place would have shown its best, and that would be better than world class. Cyclone Laurence continued west down the Kimberly coast and then set off across the continent. We met again on Christmas day in Mudgee when its deluge broke the drought for much of NSW.

For information on the 2010 Arnhemland Fly Fishing Week, again to be hosted by Peter Morse, contact Roger Sinclair on 08 89831544, email roger@nafa.com.au or go to www.barralodge.com.au.

Peter Morse flew with Air North ex Darwin and return.

**Tackle Used**

Essentially a 9 weight is just about the most important rod you can carry in this part of the world. An 8 weight would be good on the beaches until the front-rowers turned up, and a 10-11 weight is required for the offshore reefs.

The line most used for 95% of their fishing here is a tropical saltwater intermediate. An intermediate tip line is a good option as is a fast-sinking tipped line or a full sinker Type 4 for the deeper holes in the creeks.

Offshore, fast-sinking lines are just about mandatory. Most fishing is done on the drift with a course set to take you over the bommie and you need to get a fly to 20m quickly.

Ideally, you want three set-ups rigged to go: a 9 weight with an intermediate line, a 10 weight with a fast sinker such as a T14 head and another rod with a floater or a clear sink tip.

Clousers are without question the most versatile fly in this part of the world. Carry them in a wide range of colours, sizes and weights and bring plenty of them. Things of various colour ranges work, as do Gustos (Fluffy Things), Fat Boys and Deceivers. Carry a range of flies; it’s best to not rely on someone else having them.

Bring hard 10kg tippet material and some 45lb shock tippet material as well as some 50lb single strand wire.

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**Fly-tying over a cold beer was a nightly ritual.**

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**Fact Box**

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