



# Arabian Fly

SPORT FISHING

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## Tagging in Oman

*Clare King, Arabian Fly Sport Fishing*

Setting up a business in Oman has been one of the most challenging yet rewarding experiences. It seems light years since we first stepped foot into this beautiful country. Many hours of blood, sweat and tears have gone in to setting up a sustainable tourism business that caters to the avid angler. One of the most important issues for us when starting our business was what can we give back to the community and how can we aid in the protection of this beautiful place we now call home.

Fishing has long sustained generations of Omanis, it is their heritage and runs through their veins. Their majestic Dhows and bright blue local fishing boats can be seen scattered along the coast, occupying every rocky cove and deserted beach. Fishing is part of life here and the technique of hand lining is a highly effective weapon when it comes to fishing. It is not for the faint of heart either! These local boats can travel far out to sea, with no shade and only just enough petrol to return to shore. Working all day in the boiling sun, chasing down huge Yellow fin Tuna and wrestling them by hand, it's a wonder to be seen.



When we started Arabian Fly Sport fishing we wanted to be sure we were helping to protect this precious fishery. With both inshore and offshore fishing available to us we picked two important species that we wanted to learn more about and decided to run a tagging project to gather information. For those who don't know what this means, a tag is a small plastic bar that is inserted into the back of the fish. Each tag has a unique number and also our contact details printed onto it. The length, weight (where possible), date, place and other information is then recorded before the fish is released. This way if this fish is recaptured then we can compare the data and see how much it has grown, if it has moved and also know if the release was successful.

One of the most exciting prospects for us when we set up was that Oman has a species of fish called a permit (well it actually has 3 of these species). The permit is what the salt water fly fishing community call the 'holy grail of fly fishing'. This is because the permit is highly sought after, it is a tricky fish to catch as they are wise and have fantastic eye sight. Fishers travel all over the world and dedicate entire weeks or months to chasing these fish. There were 3 main subspecies of permit (or more correctly names *Trachinotus*) that were considered as worthy, the *T. Falcatus* (original Permit) found in American, *T. Blochii* (Indo Pacific) and *T. Anak* (Australia). We knew that Oman had the *T. Blochii* and but there was little known about their second species, the *T. Africanus*. Although this is found in other destinations across the world, it was not a

species that could be targeted on fly. Fly fishers like to be able to see what they are fishing for (sight fishing). The thrill of stalking a fish that is slowly feeding in the shallows, casting the right fly and enticing that fish to eat is an adrenaline filled experience for even the most calm of characters.



It was during one of our first weeks that we came across what looked like 10 silver tails waving at us. Closer inspection revealed a school of furiously feeding Africanus....it felt like we hit the jackpot. The next weeks and months were spent trying to figure these fish out, how do they eat, what do they eat, how could we catch one, what would they do when hooked etc etc etc. It was exciting yet highly frustrating. I won't bore you with the details but endless to say we did figure it out and we have landed, tagged and released many of these fish. It has added a new species to the saltwater fly world and a 4th species of permit to chase. In the market these fish are worth a few rials per kilo but in the water they are worth hundreds of rials. It is important to us to try and protect them, their habitat and feeding grounds so that generations may enjoy seeing this spectacular sight. Our tagging project for these permit is a fairly new venture. It will take years to collect the data and educate the locals on what we are doing so that they may give us information on any tagged fish that they catch. But it is exciting to know that we will have insight into a species that there is little to no data on or knowledge of their movements and growth rates.

The second species that we have added to our tagging projects is Marlin. Oman has 3 types of Marlin, Blue, Black and Stripped. They have little to no value in the fish market and are generally caught by accident when the locals are targeting the Yellow Fin Tuna or bottom fishing in the deep. The interesting thing about Marlin is that they are not resident fish (or not to our knowledge). They travel very far and follow the bait as they go. Before we started to target these huge beasts, no one in Oman was concentrating on them and the numbers of Marlin were unknown. It was very exciting when we started to spend some proper time searching for and purposefully fishing for these beautiful billfish. Almost every trip we were raising, hooking and catching which brought light to a whole new area of this fantastic fishery. So far what we have seen is a very seasonal movement of these fish, with large numbers during October/November and February to June.



We teamed up with The Billfish Foundation and had tags made up specifically for these fish. The tags are larger than the permit tags we have but still the same information recorded. Our hopes are that we will come across fish that are tagged in different seasons so we can gain knowledge of the growth rates and also if these fish return and if so, when during the season. It would be even more exciting if we recaptured a fish that has been tagged off the coast of Africa. We know that this is a possibility and that they are very likely to move up the African coast and along Yemen to the drop off of Salah.

Lets see what the next few years bring in terms of data. We hope that we can aid in the protection of this beautiful fishery for many generations to come.

