

Flip Pallot

○ A spiritual guide to the importance of the last 40 feet

▲ SARAH GRIGG

A FLORIDA TARPON GUIDE, a Montana cowboy, and a Native American beauty queen walk into a bank on the Crow Reservation for a blood drive on a Friday. It's not the setup for a joke; it's just another day in Flip Pallot's life.

We sat amid flaming red porch posts at Abaco Lodge, looking east to the labyrinthine mangroves of the Marls. Flip had just observed his 74th birthday here, his ninth such celebration at the lodge owned by his protégé, Oliver White. It was just before mosquitos swarmed, the yellow-pink dreamtime hovering over still water, occasionally and barely broken by silver flecks of skipping baitfish. The hum of boats returning to dock wove through our conversation. Palm leaves crossed ragged, rasping fingers in the light breeze. This is Flip's natural habitat. But in spite of his status as a legendary saltwater angler, he spent years as a hunting and fishing guide in Montana during the Florida off-season.

"So, one season in Montana, I fell in love with a Sioux girl who had no idea I existed," Flip remembered. "She had long black hair that brushed the floor. She worked at the donut shop. I ate so many donuts I thought I was gonna die. I went into a bank where I had my account, and she went in there to give blood. They do stuff like that in Montana, let you do your banking and give blood all in the same place. I tried to impress her. There was a cowboy behind me in line and we started talking."

As it turned out, the cowboy was a fly fisher and dreamed of landing a tarpon in the Florida Keys. He struck a deal with Flip: He would build a private boat ramp on his ranch, which was deeded inside the reservation and adjacent to the Bighorn River. In exchange, Flip would take him tarpon fishing.

"He took a dozer and leveled a spot where I could take out my boat five miles below the last spot where everyone else had to get off the river. That cowboy and I traded for years. He visited me and fished for tarpon. I still go out there every year and wander around throwing flies at big trout. All of this because of that girl with long, black hair. After six years, she still wouldn't pay attention to me."

"The return of all things" is one of Flip's mantras. Like this annual birthday trip or his consistent pilgrimage to Montana. He views the synchronistic arcs of life like legendary fish with distinct markings—a ragged fin, an aberrant spot—that you catch every three years or so, and say, "Hey, I know you," as you find yourselves connected by the same line time and again.

"It's all accidental and incidental and becomes the epoxy that forms your outlook," Flip said. "I think more than anything else, more than luck, fortune, I believe in karma. I like to think that it comes to visit everyone. I like to think that I'm ready for karma to arrive."

Photo Adam Barker

► Often pigeonholed as a saltwater angling legend, Flip Pallot is a dynamic freshwater angler, hunter, and has a deep understanding of the many challenges our fly fishing culture faces today.



Karma is not a traditional Southern belief, but his is deeply rooted in superstitious observance to other traditions.

“I have never, ever gone without a pocket knife. I can cut myself out of any situation that I need to,” he says, pulling one from his pocket for demonstration. “Neither have I put on a pair of pants without having a buckeye in my pocket for luck in the woods and on the water, which is one of the most antiquated Southern traditions of all.”

Miami born and bred, Flip witnessed the landscape shift from rural South to contemporary urban landscape. He was 16 in 1958 and at that time, his father, a WWII veteran, lost his fortune in a mining investment in revolutionary Cuba.

“We had lived a comfortable, middle class life and we lost our home. We moved into a very small apartment. Our diet changed. We ate hot dogs . . . ‘tube steaks,’ they called them back then. But my parents were undaunted by the financial reversals. It was just a hand of cards,” Flip said. “There was always the expectation of being dealt another and playing it differently and better. They made it seem like a speed bump.”

It was at this time that Flip, already an avid angler, forged some formative friendships. Through talking to the

people in his life, I’ve learned Flip doesn’t make friends. He makes family.

“My dad always said, ‘The measure of a man is the number of old friends that he has. Not the number of friends he has, or people who call him friends, but old friends . . . friends for decades,’” Flip said. It was in Miami in 1959 that he met Chico Fernandez at the only bait and tackle shop in town, shortly after Chico’s family fled Cuba. The two followed similar trajectories, fishing the Florida backcountry, graduating from high school and college together, both marrying flight attendants, both heading into finance—Chico as a budget director for Burger King and Flip as a loan officer for Royal Trust Bank. Ultimately, they both simply walked away from it all, lured by the siren of fishing.

“My dream was somewhere else and I wasn’t getting any closer to it. It wasn’t as easy as you might think,” Flip said. “You have to give up 401k, paid vacation, the status of being the loan officer in the bank, and the security of medical care. The tradeoff is not simple. Before you can make your spirit soar every day, you have to give up a lot of other things. The question is: Is the view worth the climb? For me, it certainly has been.”

Flip was a classic case of being in the right place at the right time.

American artists, the literati, sex, drugs, rock n’ roll, and raw creativity met in Florida’s feral era to produce the Greenwich Village of saltwater fly fishing.

“When I got out of the army in 1967, McGuane, Gil Drake, Guy de la Valdene, Jim Harrison, Stu Apte, Steve Huff, all the people that I grew up with were there—some as contemporaries, some as idols, some as mentors. But those were the very years in which I came to know the Keys and the Everglades backcountry at an intimate level, in ways the Seminoles never dreamed of knowing these places,” Flip said.

“Those were the years that people became pirates in South Florida. Those were the drug years, when things fell from the sky, things were thrown over from ships and washed ashore and people became set for life overnight,” he explained. “Guides who knew the backcountry were in huge demand. And at the same time, saltwater fly fishing was in its infancy and being pioneered by a very small, dedicated cadre of people who weren’t in it to become part of a lifestyle. They were developing a lifestyle. They were setting the boundaries and the bar.”

Compared to the carefully controlled marketing and sponsorship that now often accompanies outdoor celebrity status, Flip had the freedom to do and say whatever the hell he wanted. There was no one asking him to pose for ads. No one recording his every word. No overwrought outdoorsy selfies.

“We were doing the thing we were passionate about. The lifestyle sprang from the fertile soil that we dredged up from the marl of the Florida Keys,” he shrugged. “So, I just by happy accident of birth was able to get swept up, caught in the vacuum of all of that. It was thrilling.”

And it was, undoubtedly, a wild time, a time to cast a line into unknown territory and see what it hooked into, whether you were reeling on hard stuff or stone-cold sober and focused on every scampering shadow below the water’s surface.

“Feral, I love that. It implies that we weren’t doing those things to impress anybody, or get your name on the label. We were pioneering. Being a pioneer isn’t a function of who you are so much as when you are,” Flip emphasizes.



► Flip was mentored by Lefty Kreh, Stu Apte, and others. He has also been a mentor to younger generations of fly fishers like Abaco Lodge owner Oliver White.

Photo: Oliver White

“We all realized, ‘Something’s happening here.’ There was a level of freedom here, a horizon that you can’t see from the road. And we were willing to get off the road. We followed the long silver fish.”

Flip speaks with a tone somewhat akin to Gordon Lightfoot, a slow, rich tenor like the engine of his Harley-Davidson Deuce, which he rode to the Sturgis Rally every year on his way West, but now trailers and hauls along for the journey. It’s clear why he made for such a magnetic television personality on the *Walker’s Cay Chronicles*—the tone of his voice is one that you want to simply listen to.

Flip is a passionate creature, but not histrionic, deeply sincere without stepping into unsavory obsequiousness, whether speaking of the best way to grill a slab of meat or how he met his wife of 30 years, Diane. She hired him as her fishing guide and the rest, well, you can figure it out. He describes her in what should be the lyrics for an outlaw country song:

“She stood on the front of the boat. I could smell her like a bird dog, and was shot through with love.”

Flip says things with an open heart. I witness him nearly cry twice in two days: describing the day Jose Wejebé died in a plane crash, recalling the time Lefty Kreh drove from Maryland to Miami 24 hours after Hurricane Andrew to deliver \$25,000 in a sack to help Flip and Diane rebuild their leveled home.

“It’s the sort of friendship that’s not just a friendship. Anybody might lend you \$100 or \$1,000. But to show up with a bag of 25k and say ‘You don’t have to pay me back,’ what do you even say to that?” Flip asked. “To say Lefty’s my friend, no. That relationship has no bound.”

“I’ve known Flip for more than 50 years,” Lefty said. “We learn from each other. There’s no question about that. There’s never been one cross word between us. I treasure his friendship and he treasures mine. It’s very beautiful. We enjoy being together.

We both love the outdoors and enjoy being out there together.”

Just as Edward Abbey is a renegade totem for Utah, Flip might well be the same for Florida. Many fly fishers today cover continents in constant pursuit of the next exotic species. Flip’s a traveled man, but more than anything, he’s a product of and advocate for his home waters.

“Everything that the natural world has to teach you is cumulative, and it’s impossible to divorce one thing from the other. There’s an unbreakable connection between everything that happens in the natural world, and the only flaw in that is our inability to recognize it,” Flip said.

“The poor stewardship of Florida has been insidious. It was just suddenly there—algae blooms, red tides, brown tides, seagrass die-offs, and fish kills. There was tremendous confusion about what to do. And if you tried to find a common denominator, it was dollars. So, our enemy turned out to be dollars. It’s the hardest thing



► Flip Pallot has recently turned his attention toward Florida’s troubled waterways and is now a spokesman for captainsforcleanwater.org.

Photo: Adam Barker

to stand up and fight.”

Very few people have the benchmark for Florida’s natural landscape that Flip possesses. Today, with pythons and other invasive species taking over ecosystems, combined with water contamination and management issues, Flip’s memory of the landscape is critical to preventing generational amnesia.

“I’m sorry that we did such a shit job of protecting what is clearly now, in the rearview mirror, irreplaceable,” Flip said. “At the same time, I feel we’re turning these treasures, albeit neglected, over to a generation that has no touchstones to the natural world, a generation of kids who, if I took them 80 yards into the woods behind my house, spun them around three times, walked away and left them, they would likely perish when all around them was everything they needed to have a wonderful life on their own planet. I’m not blaming them. It’s just what they’ve become.”

Flip finds himself in a Florida, in an America, hardly recognizable to him, a place in which the ability to interpret basic environmental cues has been lost and that which was formerly wild increasingly resembles the European Old World—manicured and devoid of predators, stripped of intact forests and connected waterways, humans lacking the skills required to interact with wildlife and everyday environs.

“I’ve taken incredible survival courses and combined that knowledge with what I know on my own. Being lost or isolated, those things don’t mean anything to me, because I’m at home everywhere,” he said.

“But this generation and the generations to come don’t have that confidence. We’re turning over national parks, wildlife refuges, seashores, to this generation that can’t know what these places are.”

Florida’s environmental challenges are further complicated by seasonal population trends. Flip highlights the complications that arise with amenity migration. Amenity migration is the human migratory phenomenon by which people move to places for desirable climate, views that are perceived as “pristine,” and access to recreational resources.

While appreciating the weather and views, these migrants often fail to invest in the communities to which they seasonally relocate. It’s a trend increasingly impacting mountain and coastal communities across the U.S.

Along with the changing natural landscape, Flip described the shifting social landscape: “South Florida is now inhabited by people who are from somewhere else. There are virtually no Florida values left. People wake up in February in Palm Beach and it’s 70 degrees. Where they came from in New York, it’s 20 below. You try to talk to them about the water problems or alligators . . . they don’t care, so long as they’re warm. Or they’re from Nicaragua and can’t read the paper. Any problem is harder to deal with when the populace is unconcerned.”

Flip has mulled this over a long time and can’t find the answer. How to bridge these painful gaps? How do you show these people his version of Florida? As one small step, he actively educates his 10-year-old granddaughter on the natural world, but wonders what he’s up against. An imagined natural world in which nature is sterilized, in which harsh realities are severely censored is the greatest danger of all.

“Her generation is taught about death in school, taught that a dying deer lies down on a bed of moss, a raccoon comes to visit, they all snuggle, and a wise old owl comes and tells them it’s all the great cycle of life. What they don’t understand is that in real life, when a deer dies, it’s usually of starvation or predation. There’s a coyote chewing on the deer’s ass while it’s dying,” he illustrated. “That’s what happens in nature. But they have no notion of that. This perception skews their entire reality. Sorry. You probably wanted some happy little bonefish tailing story. This is very pessimistic.”

Screw the bonefish grip-and-grin tale. How do we get people to understand the brutality and beauty of nature, to value it and to mobilize? How can we bridge the gap between the primitive and the over-domesticated?

As the light washed into a purple and silver horizon, I wondered if Flip planned his soliloquy or if he talks like this every night at supper? Either way, there’s a lesson here.

“Life in my world comes down to the last 40 feet,” he concluded. “If there’s anything left for me to do, it’s to make people aware that life, and most particularly this lifestyle, is tied to the natural world and not to a credit card. Many anglers have amassed wealth that gives them the opportunity to make a fishing trip. They go to their local pro shop and buy all the

right clothes, rods, reels, lines, and flies. They present their credit card. They arrive at the lodge, also paid by credit card. They step onto a skiff, resplendent with all the right clothing and tackle. The guide poles them within 40 feet of a tailing bonefish. Sadly, their credit card won’t take them that last 40 feet.

“They’ve come all the way from Cleveland to Abaco, but with that last 40 to the bonefish, their credit card is worthless. They’ve forgotten to bring the skills they need, because they didn’t invest the time to develop them. They were busy with their job, kids, the Internet. They neglected to bring the skills to get them that last step to the bonefish. So, they either figure out how to have a good time, or not. But it all comes down to that last 40 feet. Life has just made it too complicated for them to understand the value of that last 40 feet.”

He ended here, sitting back against oversized lounge pillows, sipping a Barritts Ginger Beer, contemplating his next thought or maybe nothing. I waited. He sipped. I shuffled my notes around. He took another sip.

“What exactly lies within that last 40 feet, Flip?” I asked.

Frogs chirped and people shuffled across gravel pathways, shouting to one another as they headed to the main lodge for dinner. He set down the green can, leaned forward with his chin propped on folded hands, and said, “Everything’s there. It’s not just the distance to the bonefish or permit. The last 40 feet is the barometer of what you’ve been willing to invest. If you’re just here for the gentle breezes and the boat ride, that’s okay. But when you step onto the front of that skiff and there’s a very serious, committed person on the other end who’s trying to get you that last stretch and you don’t care enough about it to have prepared yourself, you’re being untrue to yourself and unfair to the person at the other end of the boat. That’s a hard view of the last 40 feet, but I think it’s a significant view of commitment. To the rest of us who live this lifestyle, it’s all about the last 40 feet. Because a lot of us don’t have the credit card. We crawl to make it here.” 

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Sarah Grigg (sarah-grigg.com) is a writer and editor based in Bozeman, Montana. This is her second profile column in an ongoing series titled “Rising Tides.”