



The Challenge of Bonefishing

MARK SOSIN

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IF YOU'VE EVER TRIED to present a fly to a bonefish, you know the problems. Unlike a trout or salmon, which maintains a specific lie, the "gray ghost of the flats" never stops swimming. With a seemingly neurotic twist, this highly prized fly-rod target seldom seems to follow a straight line. Instead, it swings in wide circles, tips up its tail to root a crustacean out of the bottom, and changes direction the instant you make the forward cast and release the line.

But once you get the fly in front of it, and it sees it, the bonefish is easy to hook. It's not a fussy feeder like the wily brown trout, and about all you must do is to get a tempting tidbit within its cone of vision. Every angler has his own theories about the patterns that will work. Some fishermen will speak with reverence of a particular fly pattern that can't miss. But bonefish have been taken on a wide variety of patterns, and it's easy to overcomplicate the approach.

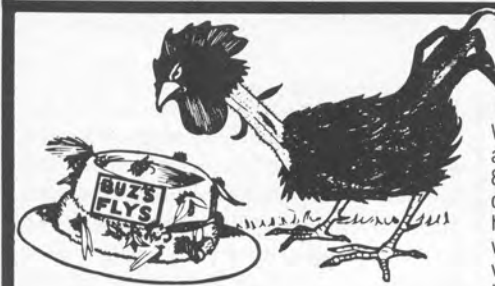
Although exceptions to any rule can always be found, you'll discover that the close-mouthed veterans ignore the flies tied on 1/0 hooks that some writers tout, choosing instead flies dressed on #6 hooks. These

Releasing a fly-caught bonefish in the Florida Keys. Pierre Affre photo.

smaller flies account for some of the largest bonefish taken and plenty of average-size fish as well. The advantage, of course, is that you can cast the small fly close to the fish without spooking it. When it comes to color, white or yellow flies are good, as are brown or black ones. Try the light colors first, and if they don't work, change to the darker ones. You can get more sophisticated later, but you won't be far off with light and dark.

Flies should be cast well in front of the fish and beyond it, so that the retrieve will bring the offering into view. Experienced bonefishermen know that bonefish usually feed into the tide, so they try to cast up-current and let the fly sweep down to the fish. When the fly is where you think the bonefish can see it, resist the temptation to use a fast or even a medium-fast retrieve. Instead, simply "tick" the fly repeatedly, so that it remains in one small area but has a bit of movement.

Bonefish are particularly skittish and will spook from a glimpse of fly



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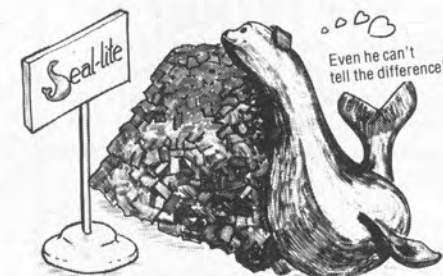
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Bonefishing . . .

line in the air or an offering landing too close. One of the major crimes in bonefishing is to line a fish or let the fly line fall over another school member. When one bonefish flees, the whole school erupts. Try using a gray fly line, or another one of the muted shades, and be sure to spot all the fish in the school before you cast. When a body of fish is moving toward you, the fly must be dropped well short of the target. It's easy to forget that the fish are moving all the time, and you can frighten them with a fly placed too close. Let the bonefish move in on the fly if they are approaching in a straight line. If the fish change course, don't waste time stripping in for another cast. Pick up the entire length of fly line, and try to get the fly back on target.

The strike is not spectacular. You'll feel the fish pick up the fly or at least see the line start to tighten. There's plenty of time to set the hook. Let the fish turn away, and, as the line straightens out, lift the fly rod. It does not require a great deal of force to plant the barb.

Water temperatures and tides are the keys to finding bonefish. Although leading guides can find bonefish in water as low in temperature as the mid-60's, you'll be hard-pressed to be successful unless the water temperature reaches at least 68 degrees, and preferably 70 degrees or better. When temperatures are marginal, fish the deeper portions of the flats. Too many visiting anglers feel that they can go south at any time of the year and catch all the bonefish they want. They're disappointed to discover their error.

In the summer months when water temperatures reach the other extreme, the best bonefishing is early in the morning and in the late afternoon. Visibility becomes a problem at those times of day, so the trick is to work tailing fish and spot the schools by the wake or by the tails tipping above the surface.

The general pattern indicates that bonefish work up on the flats as the tide begins to flood, and that they drop back to deeper water on the ebb. You'll find the fish less skittish on incoming water than on outgoing. However, some flats produce on all stages of the tide, while others are only good

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at a particular stage. If you're there at the wrong time, you'll see nothing. Check the tides and make sure you're in the right spot when the water level is perfect.

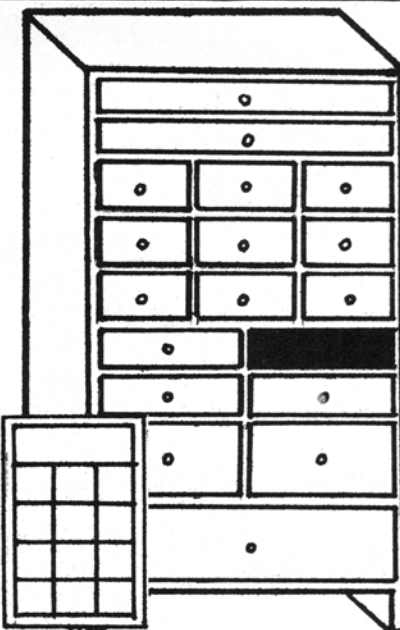
Without polarized sunglasses, you simply will not see bonefish under water. They are easy to spot as they cross a white sand bottom, and many beginners work these regions because they can see the fish. Spotting a bonefish on a flat covered with turtle grass can tax the skills of a seasoned bonefisherman.

When you work a flat, you should be looking through the surface of the water trying to spot the fish. In extremely shallow water, however, it makes more sense to scan the surface for the telltale wakes made by moving fish. You might also catch a glimpse of tails flashing in the sunlight as the fish dip for food.

In THE UNITED STATES, Biscayne Bay, separating Miami from Miami Beach, is the northernmost area for consistently catching bonefish. In fact, some of the largest specimens come from the lower bay. On the Atlantic side of the Florida Keys, fishing is good as far as Coupon Bight and Big Pine Key. After that, it starts to taper off. On the Gulf of Mexico side of the Keys, there is good bonefishing from the Snipe Keys and Barracudas up to Nine Mile Bank. Shell Key near Islamorada produces exceptionally large bonefish, particularly in the spring. Bimini, in the Bahamas, has a run of big fish in the winter if water temperatures are cooperative.

The waters of the Bahamas hold large schools of bonefish, and you'll find plenty of smaller fish in Mexico's Yucatan south to Belize and the Turneffe Islands. There are other spots in the tropical Atlantic for bonefishing, but facilities are often lacking. If you've heard about big bonefish in Hawaii and Africa, you might not realize that these fish are taken in deep water and hardly can be considered a target for the fly fisherman.

The bonefish provides an exciting saltwater fly-fishing opportunity, because it must be stalked and hunted before the delicate presentation can be made. Tackle can be relatively light, but you need plenty of backing to withstand the long runs of this glamorous gamefish. And the one-on-one situation between you and the fish will make this one of angling's supreme challenges.



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