

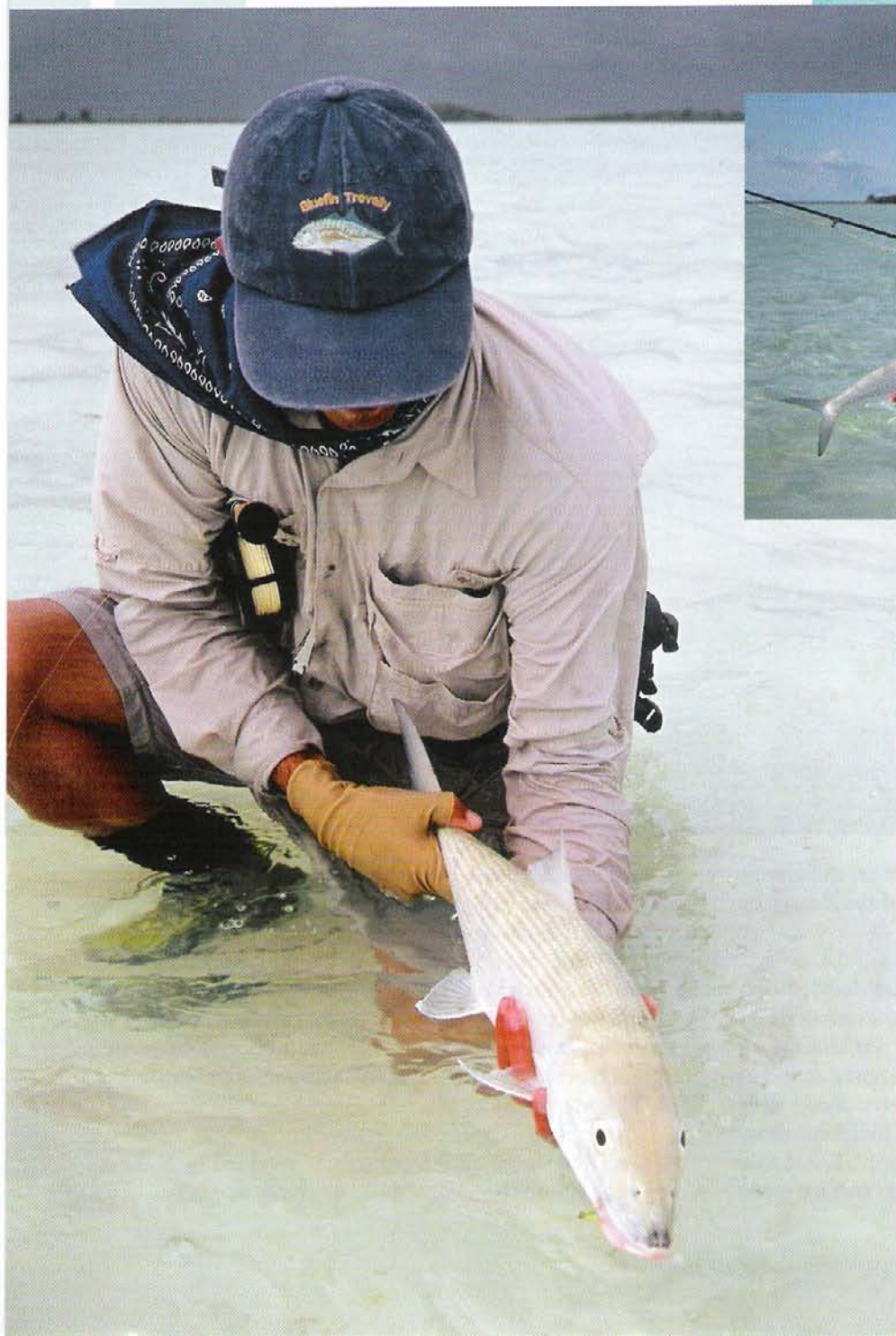
# Chasing Bones

## PART I

by Graeme Field

*"There is a perception amongst South African anglers that bonefishing is out of the reach of the average angler, and that all bonefishing locations are only available to those with almost limitless financial resources.*

*This is only partly true, as there are plenty of other ways of doing it, and with a bit of determination, research and an adventurous spirit, you can make these trips a reality."*



**I**t first appears as a tiny flicker of movement; a subtle change in colour and then it is gone. There's just the slightest suggestion of something out of place, a ghostly shadow of movement on the shimmering white flat, but you suddenly find yourself on instant alert, acutely aware of its presence but not sure enough of its exact position. You crouch low, fly rod and line at the ready, scanning the water as you search for the fish. It suddenly appears again, closer this time, the milky grey outline of its back visible just long enough for you to gauge its position and direction. It moves within range, and, anticipating where the fish will travel, you



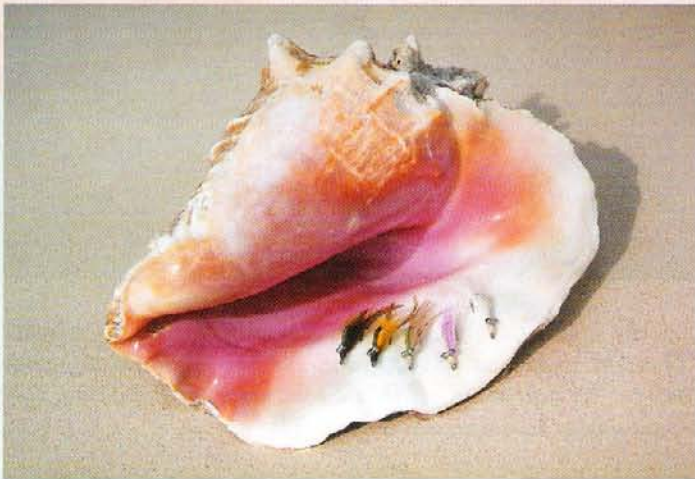
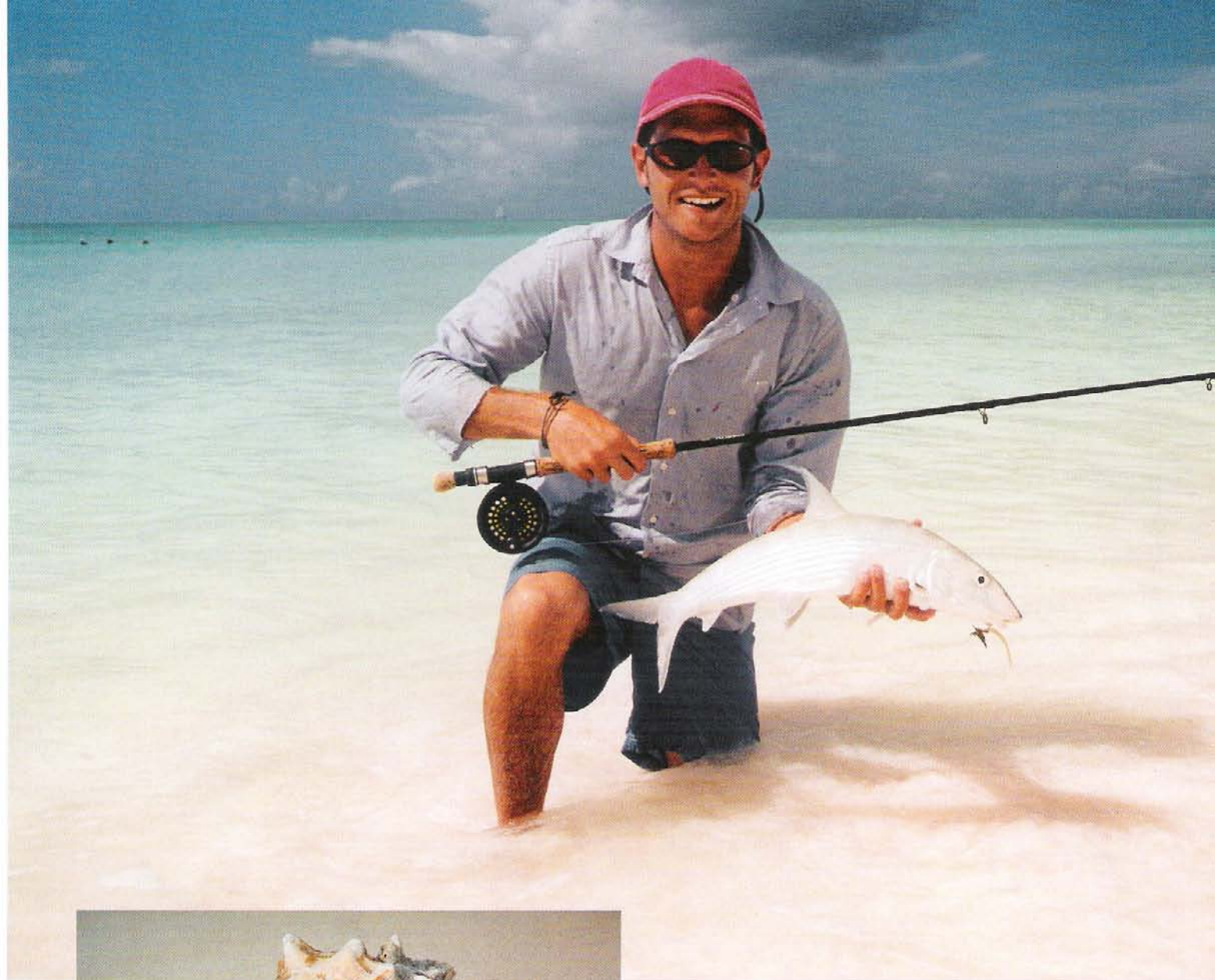
# *the lure of the grey ghosts*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SALLY NORCROSS AND GRAEME FIELD

begin aerialising the fly line and try placing the fly gently a few feet in front of the feeding bonefish. Allowing the fly a couple of seconds to sink to the bottom, you watch as the fish cruises slowly towards the area where your fly landed, stopping every few seconds to root some small prey out of the sand. As it nears the position of your fly, you take up the slack and prepare to give the fly a twitch, but frustratingly the fish changes direction and angles away from you. Swiftly, using the pull of the water to load the rod, you pick up the line, and with one smooth false cast, drop the fly back in the fish's path. This time the big bonefish holds its line, and when it is only a foot or so away from the fly, you give it a short strip causing the fly to puff up out of the sand, just as a small crab would do when threatened by an approaching predator. The fish immediately shoots forward and pounces on the fly, head down and tail in the air. You pause for an instant, and closely watching the fish's body movements, allow it to inhale the fly before you instinctively tighten up and with a short, smooth strip strike,

set the small barbless hook in its tough, rubbery mouth. There is an instant of confusion and the slightest of pauses before the fish tears off in a panic across the shallow flat, ripping your line through the water behind it.

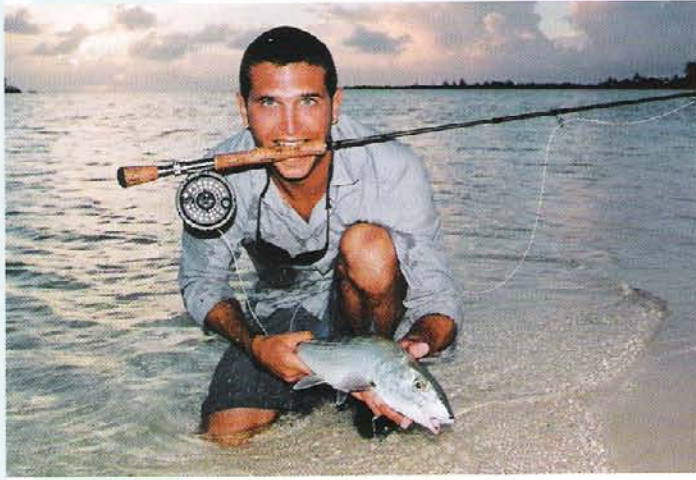
Concentrating on clearing the rapidly disappearing loose line, you find yourself amazed yet again at the ridiculously disproportional speed and power of a hooked bonefish. You watch as the backing melts off the wildly spinning reel. A bonefish can easily run over 100 metres in one go on that first burst, especially if it is a big fish in very shallow water, so you keep the rod held high and the line away from any sharp coral heads or mangrove shoots that can slice through a fly line or leader in an instant. Eventually the fish slows and turns, and you start reeling frantically as it heads straight back towards you. It keeps coming and you keep reeling madly until the fish spots you and takes off on another blistering dash that runs you well into the backing once more.



Again the fish turns and comes back towards you, then makes a few shorter runs as it gradually tires. Once you have it on a short line, the fish thrashes around in the shallows at your feet, but you keep the rod high and soon you lift its head and are able to slip your hand under the muscled, streamlined body. Slipping the barbless hook out of its mouth, you admire the pure beauty of a flats' bonefish – the silvery mirror-like scales, the pitch black eye and the cute little dusty spots on its nose. You gently

revive it, then watch as it swims slowly away across the flat, its grey back melting into nothingness as it merges with its surroundings and slips out of sight. That is bonefishing at its best.

There are, in my opinion, two types of salt water fly anglers – those who have caught a bonefish and those who haven't. The difference between the two is not, however, one of greater experience or superior accomplishment, but rather a difference in desire, in yearning, in obsessing – created by the knowledge and understanding of what the purest salt water fly fishing experience is all about. Most anglers who haven't yet experienced the extraordinarily strong pull, the rooster tailing line and scream of the drag as the silver shadow streaks across the pristine white flats, probably experience a rational and sensible longing to someday sample a bit of the myth. But those fortunate anglers who have caught the esteemed bonefish and have tasted the pure adrenaline rush of hunting them on the flats, possess an intense, overwhelming and obsessive desire to catch their next one. This is the difference. Once you have stood on those endless, glimmering sand flats, calf deep in silky, gin clear tropical water watching as your fly line tears through the shallows, you have crossed a line and stepped up onto another level. Nothing will ever be the same again. You have tasted heaven, and everything else pales into insignificance.



although travelling this way may limit your fishing time somewhat, it's better than not being able to experience it at all. I hope that this article will inspire you to take the plunge and make that once-in-a-lifetime trip to some exotic destination to catch that elusive bonefish.

Bonefish are found in abundance throughout most tropical and subtropical waters across the globe. Although they are often found in deep water, it is the shallow flats areas that are of interest to the salt water fly fisher, thus the top bonefish destinations tend to be on low lying, coral or mangrove areas that boast extensive sand,

grass, mud or coral flats. The most popular and well-known areas are found in the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, Florida, the Bahamas, Seychelles and certain islands in the Indian and Pacific Oceans. There are in fact a number of different species of bonefish that exist world-wide, but the two most commonly encountered by the flats fisherman are *Albula vulpes* (Caribbean and Western Atlantic) and the Indo-Pacific bonefish, *Albula glossodonta* (Seychelles and Indian Ocean Islands). Although the physical differences between the two species are so slight that they are almost unnoticeable to the untrained eye, there are a number of subtle, but significant ecological and behavioural differences between them. It is these differences that directly affect and influence the methods, flies and techniques employed to successfully target bonefish in different regions.

## BONEFISH HABITAT

**B**onefish are primarily bottom feeders and possess an under-slung mouth enabling them to root around in the sand or mud for food. Their food consists mainly of various types of crustaceans, shrimps, crabs and small fish, which they often force out of their holes by blasting a jet of water through their mouths. Flats are nursery areas to many species of fish and crustaceans, and being such rich and dense living areas, are the primary feeding areas of bonefish... and the sought-after habitat for the shallow water bonefish angler. Fortunately, flats are relatively easy to find – if you know what to look for. Flats are continuous areas of fairly even depth



## OF FAR AND AWAY

**B**onefish possess all the natural attributes to make their capture extremely appealing; they are found in relatively large numbers, are caught in warm, shallow water and, when hooked, are unbelievably fast and strong fighters. The biggest drawback of fly fishing for bonefish is the visual aspect – it is hunting and stalking at its finest. These silvery, muscled fish are not easy to spot in their natural environment, can be extremely spooky at times, and require a great deal of stealth and casting accuracy to ensure success. It isn't, however, only about the fish, but the whole experience. The big bonus is that bonefish inhabit some of the most aesthetically beautiful places on our planet. Being out on those flats is like being in another world. It's a stunning, breathtaking environment and just being out there in those surreal surroundings is half the appeal of hunting these magnificent, shallow water sportfish.

One of the first sensations you experience out on the flats is a feeling almost of insignificance in the presence of such vast and awe-inspiring beauty. You have a sense

of standing on a massive, curved surface where the sky resembles an enormous overhead dome. The glimmering, sparkling flats stretch on forever, melting into the bright, clear sky. Sometimes, on perfectly still days, the only way to distinguish between sky and water is by the suspended, mirage-like effect of white water breaking on the outer reef. The colours and textures of this expansive wilderness are intoxicating and invigorating, making fly fishing the flats for bonefish a complete, out of this world, gob-smacking, and never-to-be-forgotten experience.

There is a perception amongst South African anglers that bonefishing is out of the reach of the average angler, and that all bonefishing locations are only available to those with almost limitless financial resources. This is only partly true, as there are plenty of other ways of doing it, and with a bit of determination, research and an adventurous spirit, you can make these trips a reality. There are many out of the way islands with wadeable flats where a boat is not required, and areas in which camping is a viable option. I have travelled to countless small islands armed only with a backpack, tent and fly rod, and have experienced some fantastic fishing and adventuring at a very low cost. When fishing on a package holiday booked with a lodge, boats and guides are included, and all you have to worry about is hooking the fish. When doing it on your own, you obviously have to consider more things such as finding fishable areas, finding a place to stay, transport etc. and thus will have less time to spend purely fishing. This does, however, make the fishing more exciting, rewarding and satisfying when you eventually get it right. Half the fun is in discovering what the places you explore have to offer, and





that may range from dry at low tide, to knee or even waist deep at high tide. Most coral islands and atolls are protected by a coral reef which serves to protect the inside areas from excessive wave action. You may find coral flats inside these reefs, and vast sand flats on the leeward side of the island where it is more protected from the elements. There are various types and sizes of flats, and many types of substrate covering them. Flats consist either of sand, coral, grass, mud, or a combination of these, known as "marl" flats. Each type of flat requires certain tactics and flies in order to be successful, and some are easier to fish than others, but most will hold bonefish under the right conditions. Either way, you will be fishing in shallow, clear water, sight-casting to visible fish and watching it all happen.

### INITIAL CONTACT

The feeling you experience when you find a flat, find a fish, and eventually feel that hook set into your first bonefish, is a feeling you won't forget in a hurry. They say that you never ever forget your first bonefish, and I know I will never forget mine, but it was my second fish that will remain more vividly etched in my memory as my favourite. It was a very windy day a few years ago on an island in the Caribbean. I had landed my first bonefish the evening before on a small coral flat just as the sun was setting, and I was feeling more confident that I'd be able to catch another bone. Conditions that day were far from perfect; the sun was out but there were big cumulus clouds blowing across the sky, leaving the flats in shadow every few minutes, and the wind was breaking up the surface, making it difficult to see into the water. We were fishing a sand flat across a shallow channel just off a mangrove-lined shoreline, and were fishing with the wind and the sun at our backs allowing us the best possible window for seeing fish.

Anchoring the boat on the top edge of the flat, we worked our way downwind and after two hours of wading, had only seen one fish which saw us first and disappeared in a flash. I was getting pretty disillusioned and was going to turn around and make my way back to the boat, but decided rather to cross the small channel and work my way back by fishing along the shoreline in amongst the mangroves. I was now heading straight into a very stiff breeze and had the sun at an angle in the corner of my eye. The bottom around the mangroves was very mottled in colour, which made spotting fish in the trying conditions even more difficult. I battled to concentrate but

forced myself to keep focussed. After about 15 minutes I thought I spotted something moving some 40 metres away. I stopped and stared hard, not taking my eyes off the spot. Suddenly I saw them – two dark shapes swimming steadily towards me, about 35 metres away. In the broken water, I only spotted them for a second before they disappeared over a darker patch, but it was long enough.

What followed was possibly the most satisfying moment in my fly fishing career. I made a good low, hard cast straight into the teeth of the wind and watched as about 60 feet of fly line shot out of the guides, the leader and fly

turning over perfectly, and the fly landing gently about six feet in front of where I had last seen the fish. I took up the slack and watched the dark patch. Suddenly they materialised over the lighter sand, and I used every bit of willpower not to strip too soon. I waited 'till I was sure they would see the fly, and with a trembling hand gave the fly a firm twitch. It all happened so fast. One of the fish shot off away from the fly, but the other one dashed forward and guzzled it down without hesitation. I struck and the fish tore off for deeper water. It put up one hell of a fight, at one stage nearly cutting me off on a barnacle-encrusted mangrove shoot, but I eventually managed to land an awesome 8lb bonefish. Such a big fish under those difficult conditions was one of my most satisfying achievements, and is certainly the one bonefish that will remain with me forever.

Wherever your search for bonefish takes you, whether it be somewhere in the Caribbean or out to Christmas Island, you are guaranteed to find yourself in a quiet and beautiful place. Even if you don't find the bones you are looking for, the beauty of the place and myriad other creatures living there will captivate you and make it all worthwhile. You will see and hear sights and sounds that you never thought existed – all of which will leave you enriched and enthralled by the experience. There are still many unexplored and uninhabited islands and atolls out there just begging to be discovered, all of which must hold huge populations of bonefish. Let's just hope that the discoverers are sensible, conservation-minded people who appreciate how special these places are, and that they are looked after and preserved for many years to come.

In Part II of this article I will examine the tackle and tactics needed to find, spot and catch the elusive grey ghosts of the flats.