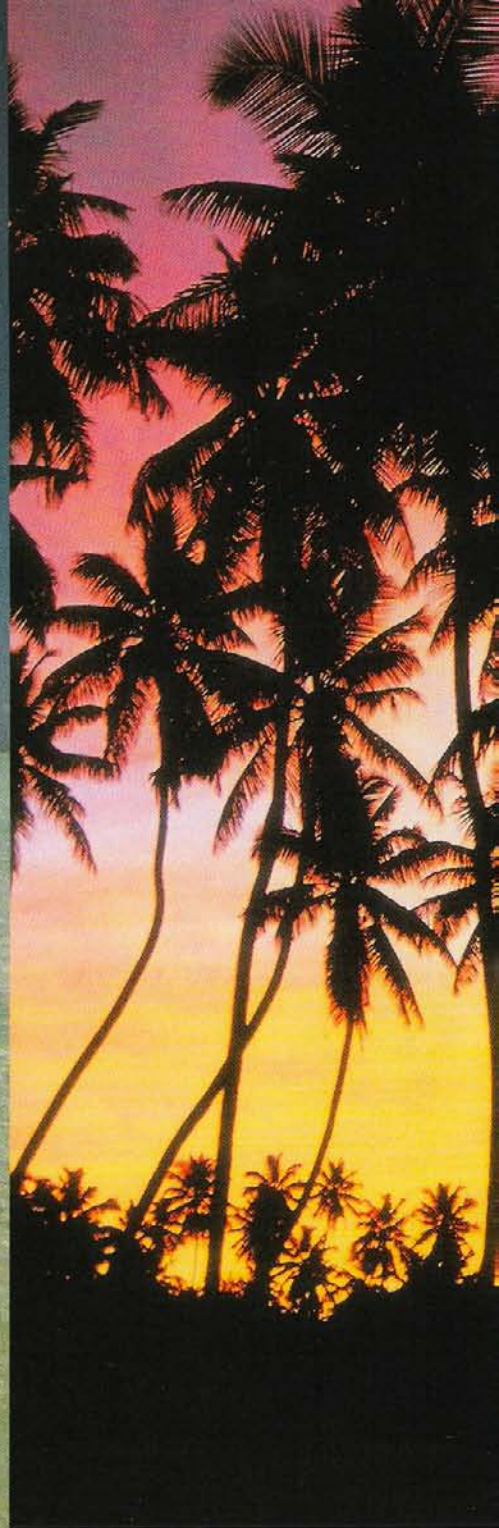


Chasing Bones

PART II

by Graeme Field



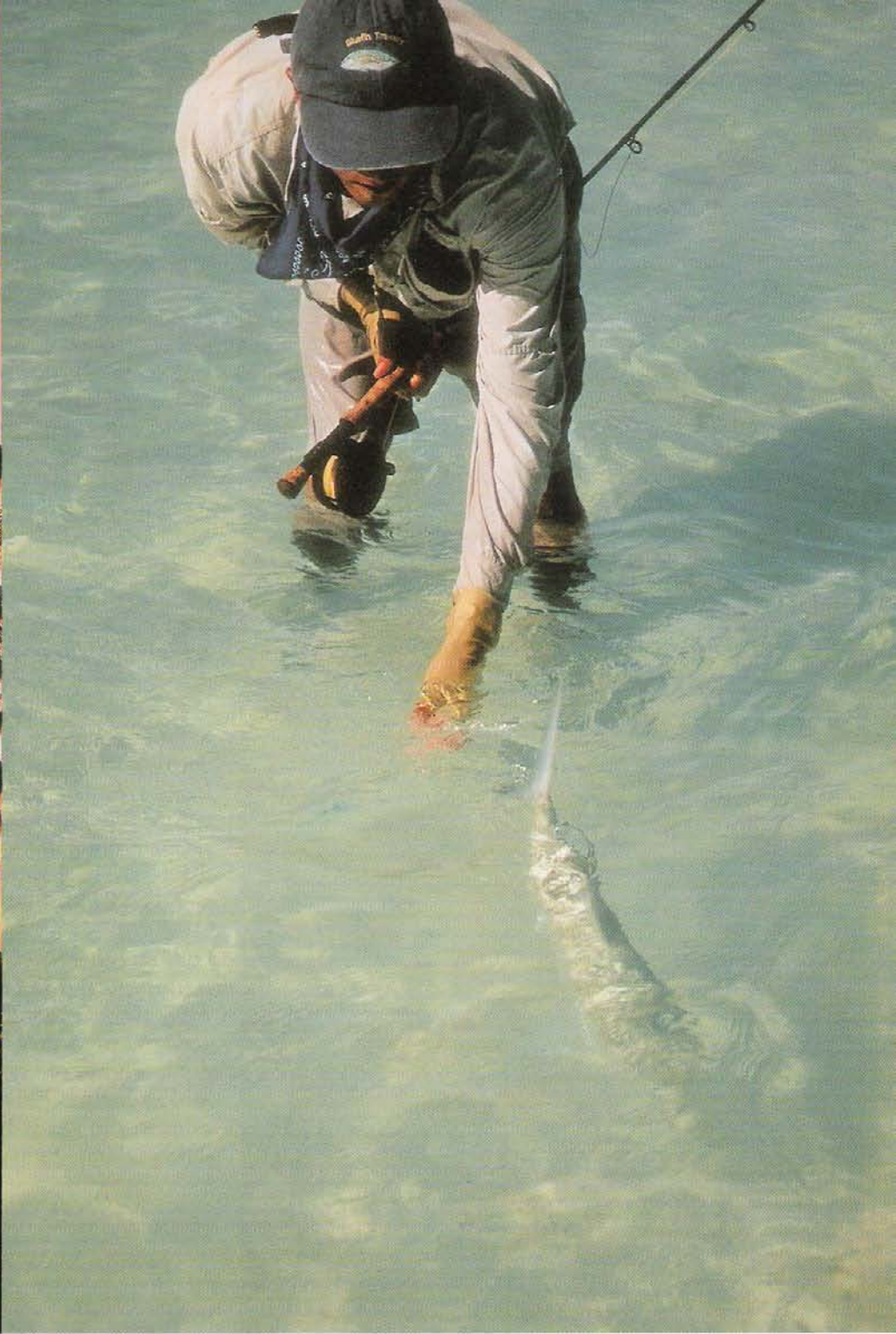
Tackle and Tactics

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SALLY NORCROSS AND GRAEME FIELD

Fishing the flats for the first time can be extremely daunting and confusing. Initially they can seem like a wet desert, lifeless and stretching on forever. Not knowing how they work and how to fish them, can quickly lead to disillusionment and frustration. However, by following a few simple guidelines you will soon have a better understanding of how and where to find fish. Bonefish in particular can be difficult to find and see, and you could spend hours looking for them in the wrong areas. Having previously done most of my bonefishing on the flats of a handful of quieter, lesser-known islands in the Caribbean, I am now working as a guide on Alphonse and St Francois Islands in the Seychelles. I will therefore concentrate on the bonefishing in these two areas as they fall within the scope of my experiences.

FINDING THE FLATS

Finding a decent and productive flat is of paramount importance. Fortunately flats are relatively easy to find, as long as you know what to look for. Flats are home to a variety of organisms that form the staple diet of many predators, including bonefish. There are several types of flats with different bottom substrate, all of which will hold fish. The perception of most anglers is that flats are huge expanses of shallow, clear water and glistening white sand, always calf deep. This is not entirely true as many flats are going to be small areas of varying depths and substrate, sometimes so small that they are often overlooked. There are coral flats, pancake flats, transition flats, finger flats, reef flats, outer flats or inner flats which may consist of sand, grass, mud, mangroves, or a combination of these, and may be dark, light or mottled in colour. Look for areas of relatively



consistent shallow depth that often have little or no water on them at low tide. Flats thrive in a somewhat gentle type of environment and they will usually be found in low lying areas where they are protected from excessive wind and wave action. They are commonly found in areas such as the lee of an island, inside a coral reef, or in areas containing mangroves. Many flats will extend outwards from a protected beach area, but some smaller, isolated flats may be found just off the shoreline across a small channel. These are referred to as pancake flats. Finger flats are narrow fringes of coral and sand that criss-cross a lagoon and can be extremely productive – especially on a low tide when the main sand flats are already high and dry. Basically any shallow, protected area where there is a build-up of substrate will be home to a multitude of organisms on which bonefish feed. Flats with easy access to deeper water are generally more productive.

FINDING THE FISH

Once you find a fishable flat, you will need to understand how the flat works, how the tide and wind affect it and where the bonefish are most likely to be. Fish can be found on all types of flats and over all types of substrate, but only at certain times. Much the same as the shallow mud banks in many of our estuaries in South Africa, they are very tide dependent and are markedly more productive at certain times of day and state of tide. Using small channels or cuts as access, bonefish enter these flats to feed when the tide allows them to, and exit them again once the falling tide forces them into deeper water. On the low tide bonefish will gather in deeper water near a channel or cut, then, when the tide pushes, will stream up onto the flat and spread out to feed. These small channels and cuts are narrow areas of greater depth than the surrounding flat and are normally adjacent to deep water.

OF TACKLE AND TACTICS

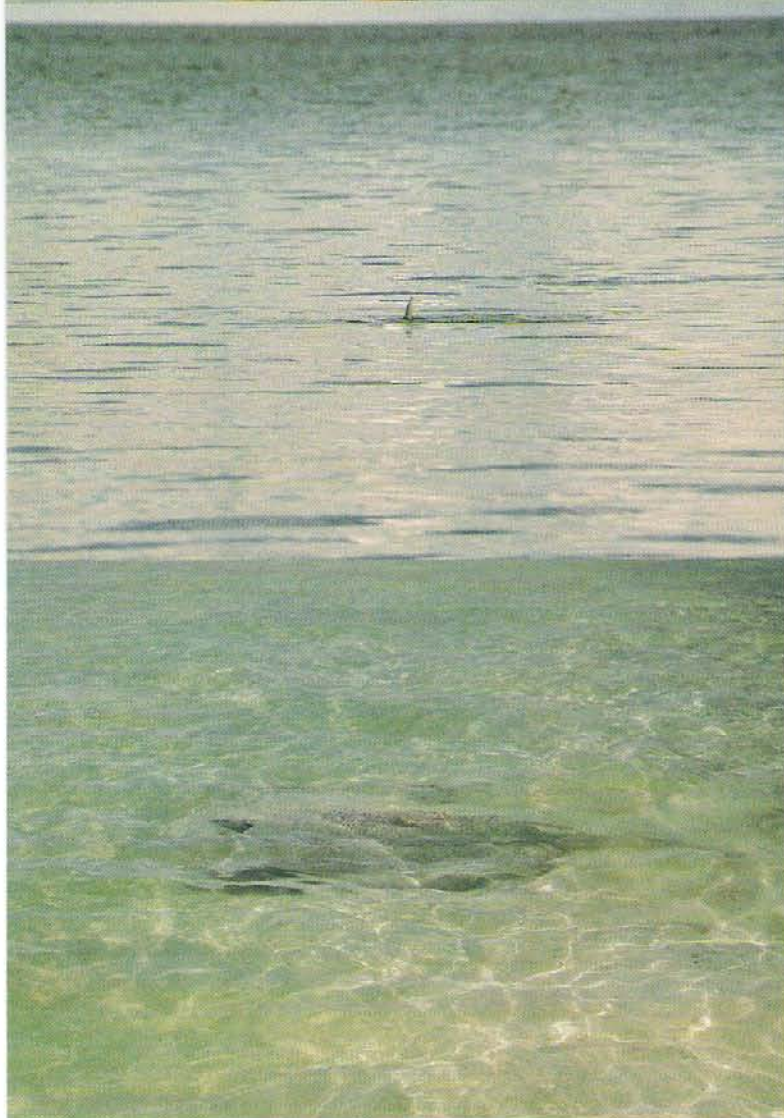
When bonefish are feeding in such shallow waters they are vulnerable to predators and are seldom far from a small channel or cut which they can use as an escape route if threatened. Fish may also hold in the surf on a reef, and in this instance, any cut or sandy area forming a break in the coral reef will act as an access channel onto the flats. Concentrating on these areas at the beginning of the push and again at the end of the dropping tide will often prove productive. Remember that the fish will move with the tide, so that as the tide floods the flats, the fish will move higher and higher, following the water up the flat. The above applies more to the Seychelles where there is a large tidal range and fish seem to be more tide dependent. If in doubt, concentrate on searching water that is between calf and knee deep, as this is the depth fish are most likely to be feeding in.

In the Caribbean there is a much smaller tidal range, even on spring tides, and slightly different tactics are required as the fish have more time on the flats and therefore are more spread out. They tend to feed into whatever current and wind is prevailing at the time (much like a trout in a stream), so try to fish with the current and wind, as you are more likely then to find fish moving towards you. In the early morning or late evening when light levels are low, fish can sometimes be found tailing in shallow water. Look for pointed, translucent tails protruding above the surface and sometimes waving and slapping the water as they feed head down. On a low tide, fishing the deeper water around the mouths of channels and cuts with a long leader and heavier fly often produces fish.

One almost certain way to locate fish when nothing else is happening, is to find a stingray that is feeding on the flats. They are very easy to spot as they churn up a stream of mud and sand when they flap their wings to feed. This movement exposes heaps of organisms and the bonefish will gather and feed strongly in the cloudy water around them. The ray will often stay in one spot for ages and it is possible to take half a dozen fish off one ray if it doesn't move position.

SPOTTING AND STALKING FISH

Bonefish are notoriously difficult to spot, making your first bonefishing outing seem quite daunting. They are covered by numerous translucent, silvery scales all arranged at different angles, which serves to break up the image of the fish. The fish also change colour slightly to blend in more with their environment, becoming pale in colour over a light bottom and darker over a dark bottom. The easiest way to spot a bonefish is if it's coming directly towards you, as you will then be looking down the length of its darker back. The most important thing when looking for bonefish is to be able to see into the water, and for this you need good light. Try to position yourself so that the sun is up behind you, giving you optimum vision into the water. Sunlight also causes bonefish to cast a shadow, and it is this shadow that you will most likely see first. They swim close to the bottom and very seldom stop moving, so you will be looking for an elongated, pale shape moving steadily near the bottom with only a small gap of light between its body and the shadow on the sand. This is why they are known as "the grey ghosts of the flats."





Main photo: A large shoal of bonefish can be seen milling about behind the author. **Insert:** The spoils of a stealthy approach.

A golden rule for stalking bones is to **SLOW DOWN!** Take your time, walk slowly and carefully, and make as little movement and noise as possible. Scan the water continuously left and right, close and far. You will be surprised at how a bonefish can suddenly materialise only a rod's length away from you. Keep enough line out of the tip guide to load the rod quickly, but not so much that it gets tangled around your feet. Pinch the fly between thumb and forefinger in your rod hand – this makes it easy to release and load the rod when you need to make a quick cast. You are going to encounter wind when fishing in the tropics, but this isn't necessarily a bad thing as a breeze breaks up the surface glare and often makes it easier to see into the water. It also muffles your approach and makes it more difficult for the fish to detect you, so use it to your advantage. Try to fish with the wind behind your back, as it will make spotting easier and will assist rather than hamper your casting. You may sometimes encounter dead still, or calm but cloudy conditions, when it is all but impossible to see beneath the surface glare. In these conditions, try to concentrate on shallower water where the fish are more likely to disturb the surface when feeding. Look for protruding tails, V-wakes and nervous water – even if you aren't sure that what you are seeing is a bonefish, cast!

CASTING AND PRESENTING THE FLY / HOOK-UP

Once you have spotted a fish, crouch down to lower your profile, but don't take your eyes off the fish for one instant – they disappear! Don't start casting immediately, rather watch the fish, gauge its movement and direction and try to get into a good casting position before making that first cast. Accuracy in presentation is by far the most important aspect of fishing successfully for bonefish. Distance can be beneficial in some situations, but most of the time you will be making relatively short casts to visible fish. You want to place the fly as gently and with as few false casts as possible a few feet ahead of the fish and

in its anticipated path of travel. The distance ahead of the fish will depend on water and wind movement, water depth and the speed at which the fish is moving. Basically, you want the fly to land far enough away so as not to alarm and spook the fish when it lands, and to give it enough time to sink to the bottom before the fish arrives. Bonefish are bottom feeders and will seldom rise to take a fly. They do, however, also swim in a slow zigzag pattern, and you don't want to cast too far ahead of the fish, as it is likely to change direction slightly and can then miss seeing the fly.

Bonefish expect their prey to flee away from them, and your fly should do the same. Ensure that you get the fly ahead of the fish, in its path and at an angle that ensures the fly moves away from the oncoming fish when you strip it back. Strips should be no longer than a foot, and should follow a strip-pause pattern. Watch its body movements, and once the fish has inhaled the fly, make a slow, smooth strip – if you feel resistance, set the hook with a short strip-strike, only lifting the rod once the fish takes off. You get a better hook-set this way, but also, if you happen to miss the fish, you will not pull the fly away from the bone and it will often come after the fly again, sometimes more aggressively if it hasn't been pricked by the hook point. When casting at a shoal of fish, don't cast into the middle of the shoal, because if you spook one fish, they all spook. Rather try to single out the lead fish and cast ahead of it, or cast to the edges of the shoal.

LANDING / FIGHTING / RELEASING THE FISH

Once hooked, a bonefish is going to run – very fast! They will surprise you time and time again with their speed and power when hooked, as they are extremely strong for their size. At this point the most important thing is to watch your line and not the fish. Loose fly line will whip around and tangle around absolutely anything that it can, so you need to control it and keep it away



from your body until you can get the fish on the reel. Form a ring between thumb and forefinger of your stripping hand to control the line and guide it into the rod guides. A bonefish will usually make one long initial run, so keep the rod high if there are any sharp objects such as coral or mangrove shoots in the water. Let the reel do the work (set the drag to whatever breaking strain line you are using) and the fish will tire itself out. More often than not, after the first run the fish will turn and come straight back towards you, and you need to reel like crazy in order to keep a tight line on the fish (large arbor reels are invaluable in these situations). Allow the fish to run itself out and you will soon have it circling around you. Keep the rod high and hold it there until it tires and you are able to lift its head. Bonefish tend to keep still if you turn them upside down. So do this until you are ready for the photo, as this reduces stress to the fish. Do not handle the fish excessively and revive it as much as possible before gently releasing it.

GEAR & TACKLE

Flats are a harsh, hot environment, so be sure to protect yourself carefully. Sturdy boots with thick soles and good ankle support are essential to protect your feet from sharp, uneven coral and dangers such as stonefish and cone shells. Gravel guards over these stop sand from entering your boots, thus preventing blisters. Long sleeve shirts and lightweight trousers will keep you cool and comfortable. Sun gloves protect your hands and a hat and bandanna protect your head and face. Be sure to drink lots of water to prevent dehydration. Polarised sunglasses are a must, so buy the best you can afford. Coat yourself liberally with sunblock throughout the day. Don't overlook areas such as behind and on the tips of your ears, behind your knees and your hands. On the tackle side, rods should be between 7- and 10-weight, depending on conditions, with an 8-weight being ideal in most situations. A floating line is all you'll need, and you won't normally require a stripping basket.

Tapered leaders should be around 9 feet long, with tippet material of 8 - 20lbs breaking strain, depending on conditions and size of fish. A leader of 10 - 12 feet total length and tippet of 14lb is the norm, but use as heavy a tippet as you can get away with in order to land the fish as quickly as possible. Fly patterns vary tremendously from place to place, but there are some universally productive patterns such as Gotchas, Crazy Charlies, Pink Puffs and small Clouser Minnows that will be successful around the world. As a general rule, use a light fly over a light coloured bottom and darker fly over a dark bottom. Chartreuse is also an extremely productive colour over any coloured bottom. Other colours that work well are tan, light pink, white, orange and olive. Sizes range from #2 - 8 and I have found the larger, flashier flies more productive in the Caribbean and smaller, sparser flies more successful in the Seychelles. If you get a couple of definite refusals on one pattern, try scaling down the size of the fly, reducing the flash, or a different colour or pattern of fly - don't be afraid to experiment. Carry flies of different weights for different conditions. Your flies should be heavy enough to sink to the bottom within 2 - 3 seconds when sight-fishing, but should not be so bulky that they make a huge splash when they land. Flies with lead or bead chain eyes tied on top of the shank Crazy Charlie-style, prevent the hook from snagging the bottom and also increase the hooking potential in a bonefish's underslung mouth. When fishing around weeds or coral, a monofilament weedguard is preferable.

CONCLUSION

This may all sound rather technical and confusing at first, but you will find that everything falls into place and makes more sense once you're out on the flats. Obviously experience and practice make a difference, but if you try and stick to the basics mentioned here, you will find bonefishing exciting and exhilarating! Take the plunge and book that trip. When you get out there and make it happen, you will remember it for the rest of your life!