

ESPN OUTDOORS SALTWATER

Spring 2009

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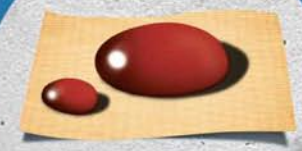
ON THE COVER
If you hope for an encounter with a bonefish, you have to have a very keen sense of observation and fantastic eyesight. Read how the ghost hunters of Bimini found success (page 6).
Cover photo by Gary Tramontina



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Saltwater Transfusion

THE SALT ON MY LIPS at some point made it to the blood coursing through my veins. That seems to happen to most anglers when they get their first taste of saltwater fishing. For me it was five years ago — and a redfish was the conduit.

I was kayaking the Intracoastal Waterway near Florida's Cape Canaveral using some bass fishing tackle: a low-profile baitcaster, 20-pound mono and a Zara Spook. I figured I could cast the bait a mile and surely something would be willing to eat an injured baitfish on the surface. A spinnerbait was packed in my small tacklebag for back-up.

The plan was pretty basic and unassuming. I would paddle around a bit for some exercise, cast every now and then so I could qualify my endeavor as fishing, and work on my tan. After all, I had just moved to Florida and couldn't imagine walking around with alabaster skin.

The day was stunning. The sunrise lit the flats subtly, uncovering wakes from mullet and other baitfish. Dolphins materialized beside the kayak, following me for hundreds of yards as if leashed to my boat. And enormous manatees rolled, snorted and cuddled with one another near the surface before sinking from visibility in the green waters of the Intracoastal.

My fourth cast to the edge of a mangrove-lined bank resulted in my awakening. The Spook was assaulted (this word hardly does the happening justice) by a redfish. The little beast (it ended up weighing only 5 pounds) dragged me around the shallows until he tired. Once I had him boatside, he erupted again, earning 10 more yards of line and spraying me with seawater from hat to lap.

I eventually reeled back the line and belly-hoisted the red high enough above the water's surface to remove the topwater's troubles. He swam away and I wiped the ocean spray from my face.

The salt remained, though.

As far as I can tell, barring a transfusion, there's no getting rid of it now.

James Hall

Editor's note: This is the premier issue of ESPN Outdoors *Saltwater* Magazine. As a BASS member living in a coastal state, you are receiving the publication as a gift. We hope the images and stories contained within these pages will inspire you to find the ocean, and all the angling adventures it has to offer. For more stories on saltwater fishing, log on to ESPNOutdoors.com.



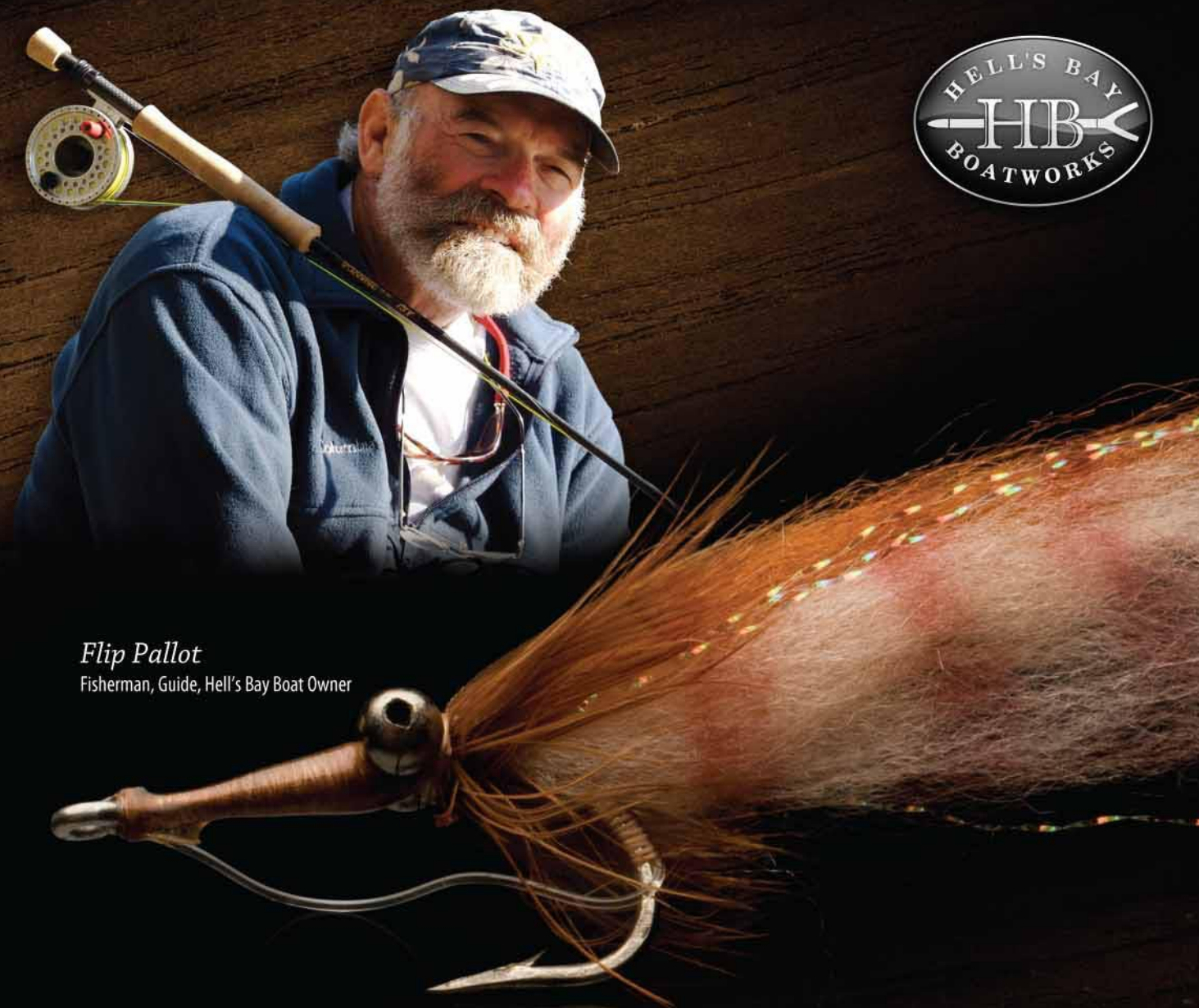
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Tension

The amount of pressure needed to keep this fish hooked during the jump is minimal. Bow to this king, give him some slack and you may be richly rewarded. The tension the guide feels is much different. He may snap at any moment. Photo: Seigo Saito



Bimini's Ghost of the Flats

By KYLE RIMKUS

For edgy island life
and an encounter
with finny apparitions,
consider this little
Bahamian jewel

IT IS AT the end of a long day of fishing, in the cool Caribbean night breeze, that we learn most about our fishing captains.

“He had to fake his own death once,” explained a local islander.

Everyone put down their beers — or fruity umbrella drinks — and leaned in a little closer, straining to hear against the DJ’s loud reggae blasting across the restaurant deck.

“He stole a boat full of drugs from some Colombians,” he continued. “To get away with it, he had to fake his own death. They showed an obituary on TV; he had a casket in his living room. He even carved a gravestone.”

“Our bonefish guide from today?” one angler stammered in disbelief. “No way!”

“I wish we had known this before going out on the water with him.”

“So what happened to the Colombians? How is he still alive?” *(continued)*



Bonefish feed in schools, meaning two well-placed casts can yield a double. Traveling to Bimini’s flats is an adventure in itself.

Photos: ESPNOutdoors.com





Guide “Eagle Eyes” Fred Rolle stalks bonefish in the flats surrounding Bimini.
Photo: ESPNOutdoors.com

A simple shrug was all the islander could provide. Perhaps the drug cartel was wiped out. Or maybe they found religion and decided to renounce their illegal ways. Or perhaps the rum hadn’t inspired a proper ending to his fishy-sounding tale.

Over the years, some locals have been caught up in the illicit dealings, tempted by the chance to hit it big. Nowadays, the guide in question can be found cooking up dinner for guests at his small hotel. He even runs a Web site advertising his location. On the surface, it seems life has returned to normal. But that edgy undercurrent can be found throughout the islands, and it is reflected in the tricky fish these guides are paid to find.

The mangroves that ring most of the island provide habitat for many prized saltwater fish, including barracuda, permit and bonefish. And, the arrival of Ernest Hemingway in 1935 helped to popularize big game fishing in the deeper waters to the west. In fact, Hemingway’s *Islands in the Stream*, published posthumously, was partially based in Bimini.

But most local anglers aren’t after the prize marlins or sailfish. You can tell by the names of local boat captains: Bonefish Ansil, Bonefish Action Jackson, Eagle Eyes Fred. They grew up on the islands, and they have spent their entire lives fishing for the gray ghosts of the flats.

THE FIRST HAUNTING

The bonefish is, pound for pound, one of the strongest and fastest saltwater fish in the world. It is built for speed in order to evade predators such as sharks and

barracuda in shallow water.

As fishing guide “Eagle Eyes” Fred Rolle described, “Bonefish are designed to evade the small lemon sharks that come onto the flats. Sharks will chase bonefish, but they will never catch a healthy one.”

Regardless of location, the key to catching bonefish is to understand their natural patterns.

“They follow the tides,” Rolle said as he drove his shallow skiff farther up the flats. “They move in with the rising tide, staying in the shallow water. You just have to get in front of them and wait for them to come to you.”

The water on the flats was mostly crystal-clear, but an occasional muddy patch streaked below the surface.

“That is a sign of feeding fish,” Rolle explained. “Bonefish will kick up mud and silt as they dig for food along the bottom. They might just be small shad, but most likely those muddy patches are schools of bonefish.”

As the prop began to hit sand, Rolle switched off the motor and let the skiff coast to a stop. The motor had to be raised and a push pole used to go any farther. It was either that, or get out and wade in the soft sand.

After a few minutes, the water settled, erasing any traces of intruding man’s arrival.

“There! A hundred feet away, can you see that nervous water?”

All the water looked the same to untrained eyes. But soon, a flash of silver tail broke the surface. Then two, then four, then eight. (continued)

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Landing a bonefish off Bimini's shores is as picturesque as it is exciting.

Photo: ESPNOutdoors.com



Bonefish are known to school with dozens of like-sized individuals, but most often they will be found in small groups, with larger adults often feeding on their own or in pairs. And if the water is shallow enough, their sharp fins stick out of the water — a spectacular sight anglers call tailing.

"A pair is turning toward us," Rolle whispered as he pointed. "Quick, cast 60 feet at 1 o'clock."

The ocean wind turned 60 feet at 1 o'clock into 30 feet at 10 o'clock — a total failure when precision is needed.

"You have to cast a ways in front of the bonefish, and then it will find your bait as it feeds along the bottom," Rolle explained. "Cast a spinning reel sidearm; otherwise the bait hits the water too loudly."

That is one of the problems with bonefishing — by the time you can see them, they can hear you.

"Reel it in and try again; but this time, feel the weight of the bait come around in your cast," Rolle suggested.

It worked, as the bait landed much closer to the target. Unfortunately, it was too close, and the plunk sent bonefish scattering across the flats.

"As soon as they run, it is over. They are no longer feeding," Rolle explained.

SECOND CHANCE SCARE

Even while wading, away from the clanks and pings of a metal-hulled boat, noise is very much a factor. You find yourself trying to make your feet smaller, in a futile attempt to make cutting through the water quieter.

Walking barefoot in knee-high water, Rolle spotted a lone bonefish making its way along the sandy bottom.

"Get ready to cast," he hissed. "OK, aim for that dark patch of sea grass."

With a sudden splash and a bolt of speed, the bonefish was gone before the bait even hit the water. All that remained was the soft hum of Beechcraft propellers. It was, unluckily, 10:05 a.m. in Bimini — when the daily commercial flight from Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., passes overhead. Even the distant sound of a plane is enough to send bonefish skittering across the flats.

"Let's go back to the boat," Rolle suggested. "Maybe we'll have better luck closer to shore with a fly rod."

GHOST BUSTING

After nearly a mile of poling his 16-foot skiff, Rolle noticed more muddy patches.

With fish nearby, getting a drink of water becomes an experiment in how to close the cooler lid without making a sound. Bonefish may not be smarter than you, but they have a way of making you feel more stupid.

"All right, cast as far as you can, right off the bow," Rolle suggested, spotting a good-size fish. "Let the line drop quickly. Too many false casts can scare them."

"Good placement. Now, strip ... strip ... strip."

The bait appeared to cross right in front of the fish's face.

Suddenly, the line went taut. After a short pause, the rod doubled over and line ripped out of the reel against the whirring drag.

Bonefish notoriously run for hundreds of feet before tiring. And even after the fish stops sprinting, reeling it in is not an easy task.

"Hold the rod tip up," Rolle commanded.

Anglers have to be prepared to circle the boat because last-minute bursts of speed can tangle line around props and anchor lines. This sort of fishing might seem too involved for a casual vacationer. But it actually fits with an underlying truth of life on the island. There are sharks in these waters, and you have to best them, or be bested.

Once netted, the 5-pound bonefish endured the inevitable grip-and-grin photos. Afterward, it slipped back into the water, ready to continue its normal pattern, albeit a little more suspicious of tan colored food.

Now that the fight is over, how do you spend the rest of your time in paradise? Call it a successful day and have a daiquiri? To anglers like Rolle, the answer is obvious: Drift along the flats and wait patiently for the next fish to come in range.

"Hand me another shrimp, and I'll put it on your hook," he said.

"But this time, remember to close the cooler quietly." TSW

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