

**A**s a fly fisher, when you think of flats fishing you visualise bonefish cruising in clear turquoise water in some exotic location like the Carribbean or Christmas Island. Up until very recently Australia was considered completely bereft of any flats bonefish potential.

But that all changed when I took my family on a holiday to northern WA. Here's how it happened ...

Blue Lake Lodge was the name of the trout fishing resort my wife Simone and I built on the shores of Arthurs Lake, a thousand metres above sea level in the highlands of Tasmania, back in 2000. After our fifth very busy summer catering for guests, all we wanted to do in the off season was escape to somewhere warm.

A friend suggested a visit to Exmouth in WA. So in the winter of 2005 I towed one of my guide boats up the long WA coast. While hunting the Ningaloo flats for big golden trevally, we stumbled onto some



Permit patrol the flats around Exmouth, especially in the Gulf. These notoriously fickle fish are a real challenge on the fly!

# Flats Fishing Aussie Style!

A lucky discovery during a family holiday resulted in **BRETT WOLF** pioneering and developing world-class fly-fishing opportunities around Exmouth in WA.

The crystal clear waters inside WA's Ningaloo Reef offer exemplary sight fishing for a number of species but most notably our very own Aussie bones, many of which are trophy specimens.





**ABOVE:** Now that's a bonefish! Exmouth's resident bones are on average way bigger than the fish you'll find in other fisheries around the world.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** A solid Exmouth permit is released back to its flat. The expansive shallows around this remote WA town are filled with all sorts of great sportfish.

trophy bonefish. It was absolutely mind blowing - we were getting multiple fly captures of big bonefish, many of them upwards of 10 pounds!

To put that in perspective, a 10-pound bonefish is like a 10-pound trout, a dream catch. Even in the bonefish heartland of the Florida Keys, bones of this size are rare captures.



It was obvious that this area offered unique SWF opportunities for Aussie bones, as well as a variety of other sportfish species.

Initially, I didn't want to reveal this discovery to the fly-fishing public. Australia's first bonefish fishery and they were untouched trophy sized fish. Amazing! These bonefish had never been chased by anglers, only dolphins, barracuda and sharks. I was nervous that wannabe guides and anglers would appear

**“After we fluked a few permit captures we got more serious about trying to target these notoriously finicky flats-dwelling sportfish.”**

out of the woodwork and tow their boats from the East Coast to cash in on this stupendous fishery.

First thing I did was to get myself a licence to guide in Western Australia and then we put Blue Lake Lodge on the market. As well as the bonefish, it has to be said that the pleasantly warm climate at Exmouth was appealing to both Simone and I. We'd spent way too long freezing in Tasmania...

I wanted to keep the Exmouth flats fishery a secret but understandably had



The Exmouth bones are a different species, *Albula oligolepis*, than the *A. vulpes* variety commonly targeted in other parts of the world.

pressure to reveal all. After all, you can't promote a new fishery for trophy bonefish and fill a guide boat without telling anyone, can you? My mate Rob Sloane from *FlyLife* magazine, a dedicated Australian fly-fishing title, leaned on me for a scoop and I spilled the beans. The rest, as they say, is history.

Since then Exmouth's bonefish have

received significant national and international exposure. These fish aren't just a flash in the pan or an incidental capture - this is a viable home grown flats fishery.

Our bones are notable because they're big. An average fish is about 6-7 pounds. Compare that to the 2-3 pounders common in bonefish hotspots like Christmas Island and you begin to get a perspective on how

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You can imagine how happy Alan "Fish" Philliskirk and Peter Morse, both well known as important Aussie fly-fishing identities, were when Exmouth's permit fishery was discovered!

**THIS PIC AND BELOW:** Apart from bones and permit, other fish to target on fly around Exmouth include giant trevally and sailfish.



special this fishery is. Our Aussie bones are also a different species, *Albula oligolepis*, than the *Albula vulpes* variety most fly fishers have caught before. Since launching True Blue Bonefish we have had anglers travel from all around the world to fish with us for our XOS bones.

But these clear, warm waters don't just harbour bonefish. When we first discovered the bones we also spotted a lot of permit cruising and feeding on the same flats. Amazing as it sounds, we mostly dismissed them as too hard to catch and ignored them. After we fluked a few permit captures we got more serious about trying to target these notoriously finicky flats-dwelling sportfish.

For those who aren't serious fly fishers, our local permit, *Trachinotus blochii*, are also known as snub-nosed dart. Further north from here the most common permit is *T. anak*. Apart from big tarpon, the permit family is the most prestigious SWF target. Fly anglers will travel from all around the world to target these fussy eaters.

I've guided international anglers who've travelled to all of the best permit fishing destinations on the planet. They arrive in Exmouth hoping to catch their first permit, and then catch three on the first morning. That sort of result makes this a very special fishery.

Fly-fishing for bonefish and permit is similar to targeting trout. These saltwater species require perfect presentations because they are often nervous and very cautious about what is happening around them, just like a cunning old brownie. You can't bash the fly on the water or rip a bad cast noisily off the water to recast. Do that and you'll either spook the fish, or they'll get



nervous and won't eat the fly. I reckon the best trout sight fishermen are always going to be the best bonefish and permit anglers – so long as they can cast a long line.

Bonefish and permit sneak around the flats eating shrimps, crabs, clams, snails and small baitfish. In order to avoid becoming prey for the various predators also hunting on the flats, the bonefish and permit are ultra cautious. They're aware of everything in their vicinity and react to even the slightest hint of danger with almost unbelievable speed. To have a chance at catching them you need to be able to present a fly that looks like food without the fish becoming aware of anything suspicious. This is much easier said than done ...

Apart from bonefish and permit, there are many more great fish species that cruise the flats of Exmouth Gulf and Ningaloo. You can expect monster GTs, hordes of golden trevally, metre plus queenfish, giant herring, spangled emperor and cobia.

Then just a mile or so from the bonefish

## FACT BOX

### Fishing Exmouth

THE town of Exmouth is a 13-hour drive, or a two-hour plane flight, from Perth, WA. There's a variety of accommodation options available ranging from luxury resorts, budget motels, self-contained units and holiday houses. Camping in the Cape Range National Park is popular with DIY travellers. Check out [exmouthwa.com.au](http://exmouthwa.com.au) for full tourism details. Apart from the flats fishing, Exmouth is probably best known for its game and sportfishing opportunities. Several top class guides and charter skippers target marlin, sailfish, mackerel, GTs and reef fish. Ask Brett Wolf to recommend the best local charter operators if you want to head offshore after your flats fishing adventures. The town itself features all the amenities you'd expect in a smallish regional centre including supermarkets and the usual retail outlets, plus decent restaurants and bars. Blue Water Exmouth (08 9949 1315, [exmouth@bluewater.net.au](mailto:exmouth@bluewater.net.au)) provides a full range of tackle. Apart from fishing, other attractions include world-class diving and snorkelling, whale watching, surfing and bushwalking.

By Fisho staff writers



flats you can be casting at busting up tuna or teasing sailfish or marlin.

There really are quite amazing opportunities here in Exmouth – who would have thought a family holiday to escape the cold in Tassie would have resulted in so much exciting fishing?

*Editor's note: Brett Wolf runs True Blue Bonefish with his wife Simone. Find out more at [www.truebluebonefish.com.au](http://www.truebluebonefish.com.au).*

