

Aussie bonefish

Bonefishing Down Under? You better believe it! Brett Wolf tells more about a recently discovered bonefish nirvana off the coast of North West Australia.



It's difficult to tell which is bigger – the smile or the fish?

The late Jack Samson, well-known American fly fishing author, confidently wrote the following in his popular book *Fly Fishing for Permit*: “For decades, the few American salt water fly fishermen who travelled to Australia returned with glowing reports about the excellent fishing they had for trevally and barramundi, and with equally certain pronouncements that there were no permit or bonefish Down Under. Although it is true that bonefish have not yet been found in any numbers along the coast of Australia, those Yankee anglers were flat wrong about permit.”

Putting permit fishing aside for a moment, many Australians and international experts have devoted a lot of time – unsuccessfully – to finding bonefish in Australian waters. Peter Morse, one of Australia’s best-known salt water fly fishing authors,

wrote in *Saltwater Fly Fishing* that “The lack of bonefish on the flats means Crazy Charlies are not essential in Northern Australia.” Subsequently, a fly fishing group in Western Australia was formed with the goal of finding Aussie bonefish. The “Boneheads” sponsored Morse to help them in their quest to uncover Australia’s first bonefishery. In disappointment, the Boneheads mostly ended up on international flights to some distant, already discovered bonefish destinations. Their group did manage to fluke one juvenile bonefish off the coast of North Western Australia, but this was a feat they could not repeat.

EXPLORING THE SANDFLATS OF EXMOUTH

In the winter of 2004, we travelled to Exmouth in Western Australia from our trout fishing base at Blue Lake Lodge in the snowy highlands of Tasmania. Our main aim was to explore the potential of Exmouth as a winter fly fishing destination for our fishing-starved guests of the Tasmanian summer. Several of our best Blue Lake Lodge guests volunteered to join us for some of this exploratory fishing. My good mate Rob Sloane, Editor

of *FlyLife* magazine, was one of the first to join me in this exploration, which truly was exploratory since the ample Exmouth sandflats were almost devoid of anglers – and totally lacking in fly fishers. Despite being a well-known fishing destination, most of the pressure at Exmouth was on the water outside the reef for table fish, not on the virtually untouched flats on the inside which we were exploring. Rob was with me when we stumbled upon a trophy golden trevally haunt. Soon after, he returned home to icy Tasmania.

It was former Exmouth local, Ali Barber, who fished the same flat with me when I pointed out a school of fish to which he made a cast. After clearing a tangle from his shooting line and finally making contact with his Chartreuse and White Thing, everything went really tight! He started skull dragging what he thought was a solid golden trevally. When we finally caught sight of the hooked fish, Ali wasn't sure what it was. I had caught big bonefish before in New Caledonia and quickly suggested that it might be just that – a big bonefish. Ali had lived in and fly fished Exmouth for 16 years and had been

involved with the Bonehead group, so he knew what this meant. He went weak at the knees, backed the drag off and carefully played the fish. After a nervous battle, I slipped my landing net under Ali's first ever Australian bonefish – a great specimen of around 8lb! Like the other (few) known bonefish captures on fly in Australian waters up to that point, Ali's bonefish was a bit of a fluke. The challenge now was to prove that bonefish could be targeted and captured on fly on a regular basis.

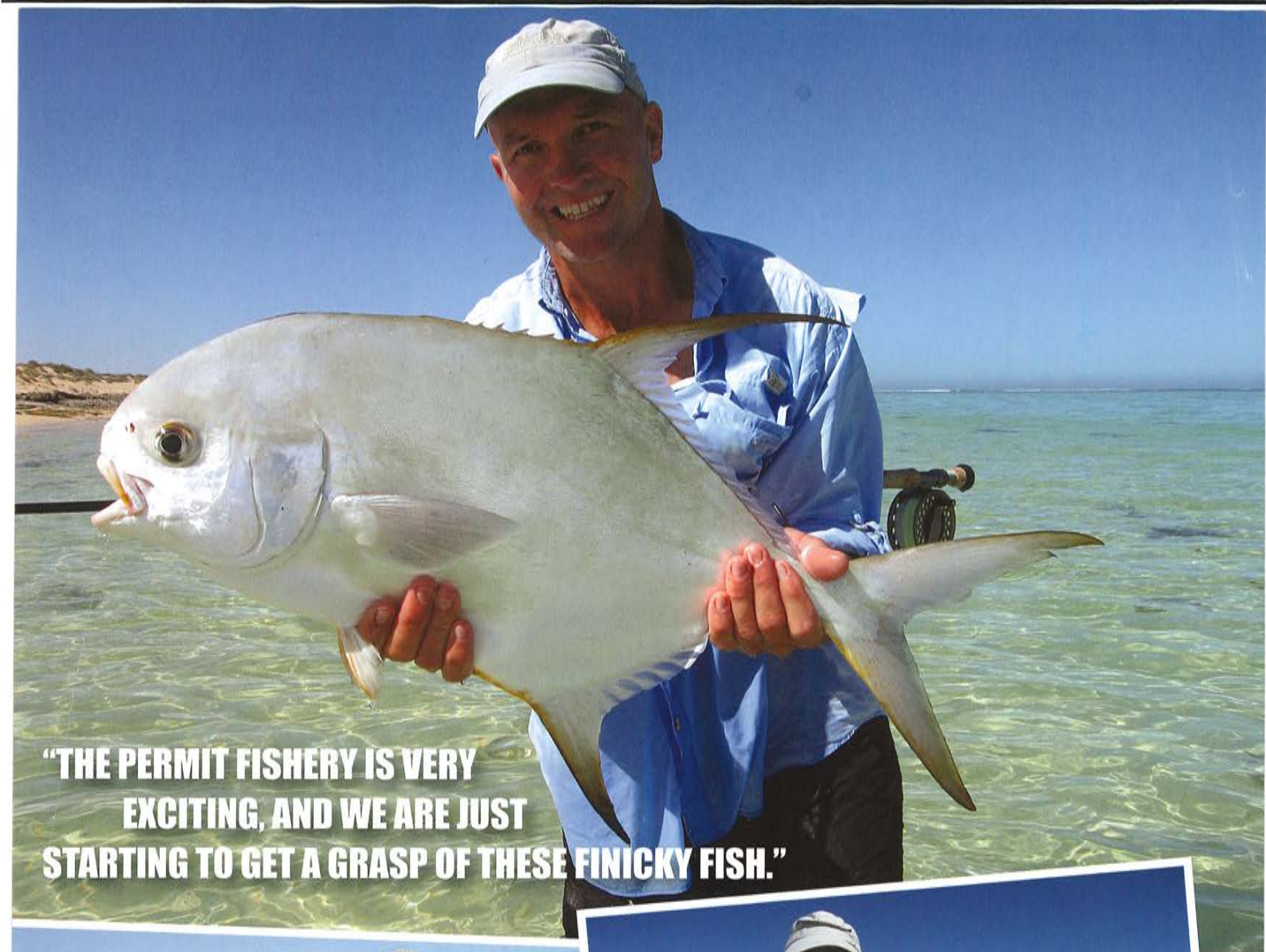
A BOUNTY OF BONEFISH

A few weeks later Pete Murray, a client that Rob had introduced to us, was fishing with me late in the day when we spotted a big plume of disturbed silt on the flat. We were all set to travel back to the boat ramp, but we (including Pete's friend Andy Penn) agreed that it was worth a few casts. I positioned the boat upwind of the spot and we could make out a grey/blue mass, so I suggested to Pete and Andy that they sink their flies into that area. They dropped their Clousers perfectly in the plume and both lines went tight simultaneously. Unfortunately Andy soon lost his fish, but Pete stayed connected and we landed a bonefish of about 8lb. We were simply ecstatic! The bonefish-disturbed mud was still hanging in the area, so after a few quick photos we were back on the job. I positioned the boat upwind of the mud again and the boys made perfect casts. As before, both lines went tight – except this time Pete dropped his and Andy stayed connected. Soon after we landed a smaller bonefish of 4lb. With fresh mud still coming off the flat, we went for it again and another double hookup followed – this time it was Pete who got lucky while Andy dropped his. Nearing the end of a torrid battle, we agreed that my knotted mesh net was doing damage to the scales of the bonefish and that we would try and bring the fish to the side of the boat so I could land it by hand. I tried several times unsuccessfully, and after the fourth attempt to grab hold of the bonefish the barbless hook dropped out of what we estimated to be a fish of easily 10lb. I also realised then that my hands were sharing the water with a very large tiger shark – scary! However, to this day and hundreds of fly-caught bonefish later, we have not had a single hooked or released bonefish sharked in our presence.

Matt Gates from Exmouth was the first angler who caught two permit and one large bonefish in one day in Australian waters.

A man wearing a dark cap with a logo and a light-colored shirt is smiling and holding a large, silver bonefish horizontally in front of him. He is standing in shallow, clear water with a rocky and sandy shoreline in the background under a clear blue sky. The fish has a shimmering, silvery scale pattern and a prominent dorsal fin.

"HE WENT WEAK AT THE KNEES, BACKED THE DRAG OFF AND CAREFULLY PLAYED THE FISH. AFTER A NERVOUS BATTLE, I SLIPPED MY LANDING NET UNDER ALI'S FIRST EVER AUSTRALIAN BONEFISH – A GREAT SPECIMEN OF AROUND 8LB!"



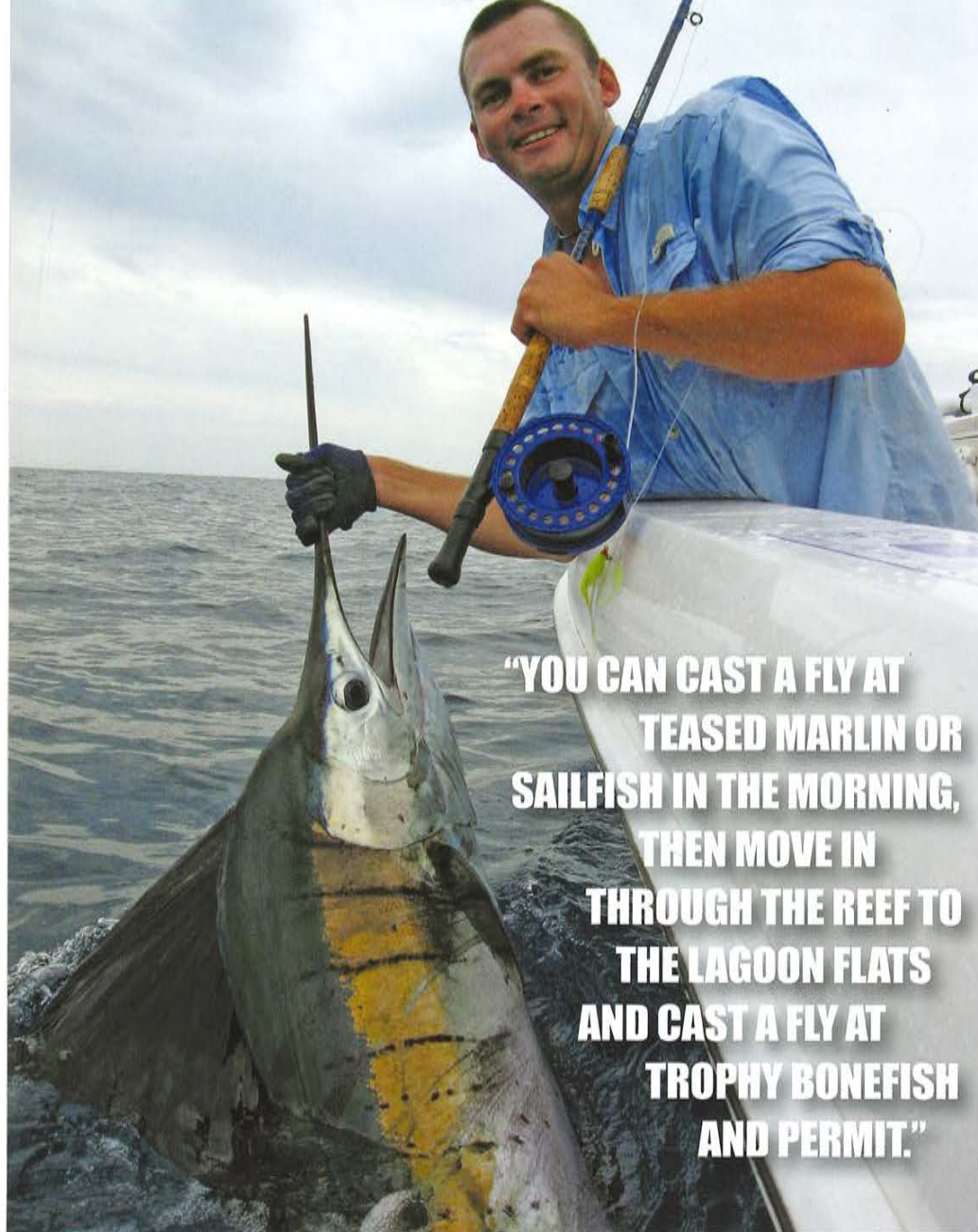
"THE PERMIT FISHERY IS VERY EXCITING, AND WE ARE JUST STARTING TO GET A GRASP OF THESE FINICKY FISH."



Top: The author with a Ningaloo permit – a very popular fly rod species around the Australian coast. Above: Pete Murray with (another) good-sized bone. Left: Tarpon (oxeye) acrobatics!

That night I rang Rob to report that we had landed three bonefish that day, and that his old mate Pete Murray was involved. Rob was over the moon. The word soon spread and all of our fellow explorers wanted to catch bonefish – and they did! We celebrated each time, but then our (my) expectations grew. Suddenly only one 7lb bonefish became a bad day. (Amazing how a guide can influence his clients' expectations.) Pete was probably the first angler to catch more than one bonefish a day in mainland Australian waters. Soon after, he became the second angler to catch a bonefish and a permit on the same day in Australian waters. He was later beaten by my mate Matt Gates (owner of Bluewater Tackle in Exmouth) who landed two

permit and a large bonefish in one day. I was exploring new flats and the bonefish were there as well. We started seeing huge schools of bonefish. For every six landed at least one was a 10-pounder, and many were much bigger. The best individual effort in one day is seven bonefish to Michael Rice from Queensland, with two of these easily going 10lb.



**"YOU CAN CAST A FLY AT
TEASED MARLIN OR
SAILFISH IN THE MORNING,
THEN MOVE IN
THROUGH THE REEF TO
THE LAGOON FLATS
AND CAST A FLY AT
TROPHY BONEFISH
AND PERMIT."**

The offshore opportunities are boundless and include sailfish such as this fly-caught one.

A SURFEIT OF RICHES

Trophy bonefish are just the tip of the iceberg in the waters of North West Cape. Only recently (since we have overcome our bonefish addiction) have we started to seriously target some of the other fly rod species on our flats. Like most of the best bonefish fisheries across this planet, there are so many great species sharing their productive waters. The permit fishery is very exciting, and we are just starting to get a grasp of these finicky fish. Most of our clients who book a week of fishing are going home with a permit capture under their belts (or at least many encounters). Nowhere else in Australia can you cast to permit and trophy bonefish on the same flats and expect to catch both. The milkfish population is also out of control – in some areas there are hundreds of 15lb - 40lb milkies just begging to have a suitable fly

drifted down their feeding zone. The GTs are massive and scary and demand a serious fly rod, a big fly, and plenty of backing. The golden trevally are bigger than anywhere else and will also punish the most experienced angler. The metre-long giant herring (ladyfish) will snap you off on 20lb tippet on their initial surge – otherwise they will take 200m of backing while jumping along the way!

The winter fly fishing around North West Cape is great. However, when the temperature warms up from October onwards and all of my trout fishing clients head to Tasmania and New Zealand to target brown and rainbow trout, the fly fishing around North West Cape gets really hot. The water on the flats warms to above 24°C, more big bonefish move in to feed in the shallows, the permit schools are prolific, the GTs get aggressive, and

FAST FACTS

Ningaloo Reef

Ningaloo Reef is Australia's largest fringing coral reef, and runs 260km along the length of the North West Cape. It's a virtually untouched barrier reef protecting a shallow, sandy lagoon of clear tropical water. The warm waters of Ningaloo Marine Park have an abundance of marine life including 220 species of soft and hard corals, manta rays, sea snakes, whales, turtles, sharks and over 500 species of tropical fish. The reef lies anything from a few hundred metres to a few kilometres offshore – thus forming a giant lagoon with extensive shallow sandflats and crystal clear water. There are no big tidal movements.

The Ningaloo Reef meets the beach of the North West Cape, one of the rare places on earth where you are able to walk from the beach straight onto a coral reef. Best access to this part of Australia's Coral Coast is from Exmouth in the north and Coral Bay in the south of the North West Cape. Exmouth lies 1270km north of Perth (by road) on the Exmouth Gulf, and Coral Bay marks the southern extreme of the teeming reef. Exmouth was established in 1967 as a joint US/Australian communication base and submarine re-fuelling station due to its proximity to the Southeast Asian waters. Skywest Airways offers a daily morning and afternoon flight from Perth to Exmouth/Learmonth; Learmonth airport is a 30-minute drive from Exmouth (www.skywest.com.au).

For further information, visit www.truebluebonefish.com.au, or e-mail brett@truebluebonefish.com.au

big baitballs can be seen everywhere. Sailfish, marlin and large tuna are abundant in deeper water. It becomes very difficult to decide where and what to fish for. Imagine a lovely summer's day where you can cast a fly at teased marlin or sailfish in the morning, then move in through the reef to the lagoon flats and cast a fly at trophy bonefish and permit. Take it from me, it is possible at Ningaloo!