



On The Bite

In search of the Holy Grail

Bonefish are held in awe by many fly fishers around the world. ET travels to Exmouth, WA, to investigate ...

By Andrew 'ET'
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*Fly fishing is all about technique
and presentation*



One of Australia's premier fishing destinations is Exmouth in the northern region of WA.

I have been there a couple of times before and on both trips I have been blown away by the amazing fishing options available for bluewater anglers. My most recent trip was going to be something very different, as my co-fishing presenter on *Escape with ET*, Michael Guest was joining me to try and chase bonefish on fly with guide, Brett Wolf.

I had met Brett before, but in a very different setting. Brett was a keen fly fishing guide running Blue Lake Lodge in Tasmania. I had previously fished with him chasing brown trout on dry fly and nymphs and had a lot of fun. It turns out that after our excursion, Brett visited Exmouth and became hooked on its amazing saltwater fly fishing. In fact, he had such a good time he sold-up and moved the family to the WA town a couple of years ago – and hasn't looked back since.

Bonefish are like the Holy Grail to most fly fishers. They are often referred to as the 'white ghosts of the flats'. There are a handful of really great bonefish fisheries around the world and to have a world-class area here in Australia is amazing. After finding the bones in good numbers, Brett started up Trueblue Bonefish and has been guiding people onto this elusive species for the last few years – and with great success, I might add.

I had heard many stories from highly experienced fly fishermen about how difficult bonefish are to catch, so I was anxious to see if two average fly fishermen had any chance at all.

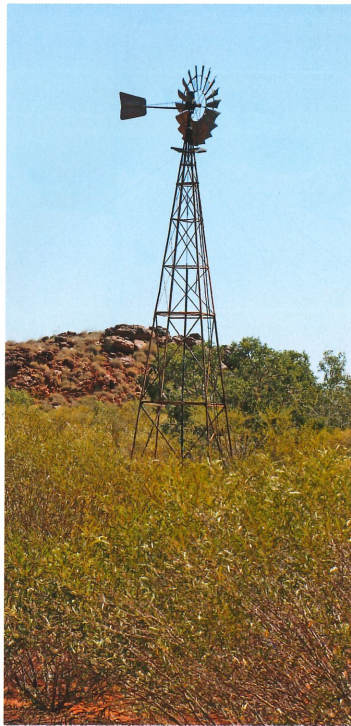
WEAPONS OF CHOICE

Fly fishing is all about technique and presentation – both areas in which I must confess to being a complete novice. But we were in great hands and I was sure Brett could sort us out. Nine-weight saltwater fly rods were the weapons of choice for the week, with weight-forward, sinking fly lines and 20lb fluorocarbon leaders. A mixture of Clousers and crab pattern flies was deemed the way to go.

We stayed at the wonderful Novotel Ningaloo Resort in Exmouth (left), located right on the water. Exmouth is really going ahead, with a massive marina development providing waterfront home sites for residents and holidaymakers. The fishing options are superb, with the continental shelf only a few kilometres offshore. Breaks in the reef allow trailerboats and large game boats access to the

Far right: Vlaming Head lighthouse has guided vessels entering Exmouth since 1912.

Below: Pristine coastline as far as the eye can see.



ocean and anglers can be catching marlin, sailfish, wahoo and tuna within minutes of setting out.

Even more impressive is the incredible Ningaloo Reef. This is a simply breathtaking sight to behold. It runs 260km along the length of North West Cape, with warm tropical waters bathing a brilliant white sandy lagoon. Some 500 species of fish and an abundance of marine life call the reef and lagoon home.

Large pockets of sanctuary (no fishing) zones dot the length of the reef and act as insurance to keep the reef and its species pristine. And with sustainability a major priority, fly fishing with Brett is all about catch and release. Snorkelling and diving are popular activities too, and with the warm crystal-clear water, the underwater aquatic scenery is magnificent. In fact, it's hard not to be

it's hard not to be overawed by the remarkable surroundings



overawed by the remarkable surroundings in this spectacular part of Australia.

SIGHT FISHING

Most angling is of the sight fishing variety, with the main target species including bonefish, permit, golden trevally, and triple tail. Brett also catches spangled emperor and giant trevally at times, with queenfish, longtail tuna and a mixture of other tropical species found in the sheltered bay to the north.

Sight fishing requires a clear blue sky and with the weather overcast on our first day, we decided to head into the bay to get our fly-casting skills up to spec. It was flat calm as we launched the boat from the beach and soon we were cruising along with the local marine life in escort. Dolphins, turtles a pair of humpback whales and a dugong all popped their heads up as we headed down the bay.

Diving terns were the first indication of feeding fish and as we approached we could see a school of longtail tuna gorging themselves on pilchards.

We quickly got our fly rods ready and stripped 30m of line on the floor. Thin, long flies were chosen that closely resembled the baitfish school and we sent them shooting through the air as Brett positioned the boat as close to the feeding fish as possible. Three long strips into the retrieve, I got crunched by a powerful longtail that stretched the nine-weight rod as the tuna raced off at high speed before retreating to the depths. A good 10 minutes later saw tuna number one slip into the net.

We caught and released a few more before trying our luck at some coral trout and golden trevally. It was a fun day, culminating in a squid session, which came out of the blue. As Michael was retrieving his fly, a solid squid followed it right to the boat. We quickly grabbed our spin rods and, after tying on jigs, we caught around a dozen more large squid.

Back at the Novotel that night, the resident chef prepared the most amazing trio of squid dishes we had ever had. Mouth-watering to the last piece, we were sure glad that squid turned up when it did!

FLY FIRSTS

The next few days were magnificent as we launched the boat in the lagoon and fly-fished



Longtail tuna (above), golden trevally (left) and good-sized squid (below) are just some of the options on offer at Exmouth.



Right and below: The reason for the trip. ET and Michael Guest finally got onto a school of elusive bonefish.



to our hearts' content. We spooked hundreds of fish with our sloppy casts, but each day we boated a number of 'firsts' on fly. We saw plenty of golden trevally cruising in the shallows and had a ball hooking and landing quite a few. Permit seemed to be everywhere and many came to inspect our crab fly presentation before turning away. We tried every twitch in the book, but I guess the permit were wise to our unconvincing technique. We landed some spangled emperor, which put up a spirited fight, but the bonefish eluded us.

The cloud cover washed in and out for the first two days and made it a little difficult to sight fish at times. Without my polarised Mako sunglasses, I would not have been able to see a thing. These are the first things I pack before heading away. My new Signature range has the most advanced technology available, with a lens

second to none. Even in the low light conditions, I was able to cast to fish and enjoy great results.

Just as another cloud moved away and the sun appeared, a large school of around 30 bonefish finally materialised a short cast away. Brett had told us the best technique was to get the cast out in front of the fish and wait until the fly hit the bottom before stripping back. My cast flew from the rod and jolted in my hand as the line met the reel. It was the best cast I had laid out over the water and the school was a few metres away and approaching.

Michael put his cast a short distance from the front of the boat and we waited until our flies reached the strike zone. Suddenly, a school of mullet darted amongst the bones, causing the school to spook away from my fly. But Michael's fly now lay right in their path and within two strips he was on. The bonefish made several long runs

The bonefish made several long runs before finally coming to the net

before finally coming to the net. At around 4kg, it was an impressive sight. Slender like a bullet, with a muscled body and long fins, it looked just like the white ghost I imagined. It was almost the same colour as the sand, with its downward-pointing snout resembling that of a whiting.

Wow, the Holy Grail at last! Michael was understandably elated at his catch.

Brett Wolf has put many fly anglers onto their first bonefish and, rest assured, I'll be back next year to hopefully add this trophy to my catch list.

For more information, check out: www.truebluebonefish.com.au. 