

Aussie Bones



I CAUGHT my first bonefish on the fly about 10 years ago. It was a two-pounder and I had to travel to Andros Island in the Bahamas to get it.

The last one I caught was an Aussie – around six pounds – taken behind Ningaloo Reef off Exmouth, WA, in May this year.

Whatever its size, the first bonefish is a significant milestone in any fly angler's experience and until very recently there was Buckley's chance of having a shot at one unless you were prepared to travel halfway around the world. Now, thanks to a very talented Australian fishing guide, them bones are getting got in our waters.

The Exmouth-based fly fishing operation True Blue Bones, set up by renowned guide Brett Wolf and his wife Simone, has in the past couple of years firmly established a reliable mainland destination to target the legendary ghosts of the flats. You only have to check out their website (www.truebluebonefish.com.au) to understand the quality of the saltwater sight fishing opportunities for not just bonefish but all sorts of great species in their corner of the continent.

If the chance to catch your first bonefish on fly is uppermost on your list, a week with Wolf is a solid guarantee of earning those bragging rights. Back in May, I could only snatch a single day with him after I had finished working a charter, and as these things go, the tide was absolutely wrong and it was cloudy, making it bloody hard to see the fish (for me to see 'em, that is). Still, even in these less than fortuitous fishing conditions, I had plenty of chances and managed to catch one from maybe 20 presentations.

Anyone who's really into sight fishing knows there's a whole lot more to it than actually catching the fish. For me anyway, it's all about the challenge; the harder it is, the more I enjoy it. Once you see the fish, you have to make the right cast with the right fly, leading the fish the right distance so the fly lands in front of it without it knowing that you put it there. You have to maintain control of your stripped line and keep in contact with your fly without spoiling the presentation, and make the

right strips to get and keep the interest of the fish. Then, when the fish eats the fly, you can't strike too soon or too late or you'll lose it. If you get all this right, you then have to get the stripped line on the reel without tangling. And at last comes the easy bit – bringing the fish back to the boat.

It has been remarked that the newly discovered bonefish tracts in Exmouth don't offer what's known as "classic bonefishing". In the world's best-known bonefish hot spots, the procedure described above takes place in skinny water from ankle to shin deep – knee and thigh deep in a few places. It's mostly wading, and in many of the most famous places it's relatively easy, as long as you can make a 50-foot cast with a lightly weighted fly and place it somewhere near a roving school of bonefish. I'd be lying if I said that "classic bonefishing" wasn't my favourite type of fly fishing, and telling the truth when I say I balk at the considerable costs, travel and time needed to get amongst it. I hardly think I'm Robinson Crusoe in this department.

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What I learned and loved about the Exmouth bonefishing was that because these notoriously tough-to-spot fish are swimming in water from four to eight feet deep, every aspect of sight fishing was more difficult, and subsequently a hook-up became way more satisfying.

For the record, I never even saw the fish I caught and every shot I made was guided precisely by Brett Wolf. He did say conditions on the day were unusually tough, and he probably busted out a few tried and proven guide comments to keep me confident.

But I caught one nonetheless – my first



Dean with a 6lb Aussie bone, caught with guide Brett Wolf in Exmouth, WA.

Aussie bonefish and I owe it 100 per cent to Wolf's extraordinary guiding skill.

The art of actually seeing the fish is one of the most important and most difficult parts of sight casting and the skill that anglers can have difficulty mastering. Most of the time, I only ever saw the fish after Brett pointed them out. The schools were sometimes large, maybe 30 to 50 strong, and a few were as small as four or five. It took time for me to get used to seeing what he was looking at and I wish I'd had a second day to practice what I learned. Still, heading home along the magnificent Ningaloo Reef, I was pretty chuffed to have nailed just one and truly gobsmacked at how bloody good Wolf had been at his job.

Getting this good didn't happen overnight – it's all about experience and Wolf draws on plenty of it after many years in his previous life as a leading trout guide in Tassie.

In my opinion, his ability to see long and deep into the water to pick out shots for his clients is uncanny, and chief among many strong talents that have enabled him to develop this unique sight fishery. I take my hat off to him, knowing that many before him tried to find what he has discovered. Most thought it was all too hard and that it simply didn't exist, but it did all the while and they just couldn't see it. Brett Wolf saw it and made it happen.

You can fish Exmouth DIY, experience plenty of variety and easy shots and no doubt have a ball. But if you want to catch bonefish and learn how truly good you can be, I suggest you plan to spend a week on the water with Wolf. As well as having a great time catching all sorts of great Australian sportfish, including bones, I reckon you'll come away a better fly angler.

