

by Brian M. Wiprud

Tactics

BONES FOR BEGINNERS

Turn a novice on to fly fishing the flats, and you'll have an eager partner for any trip.

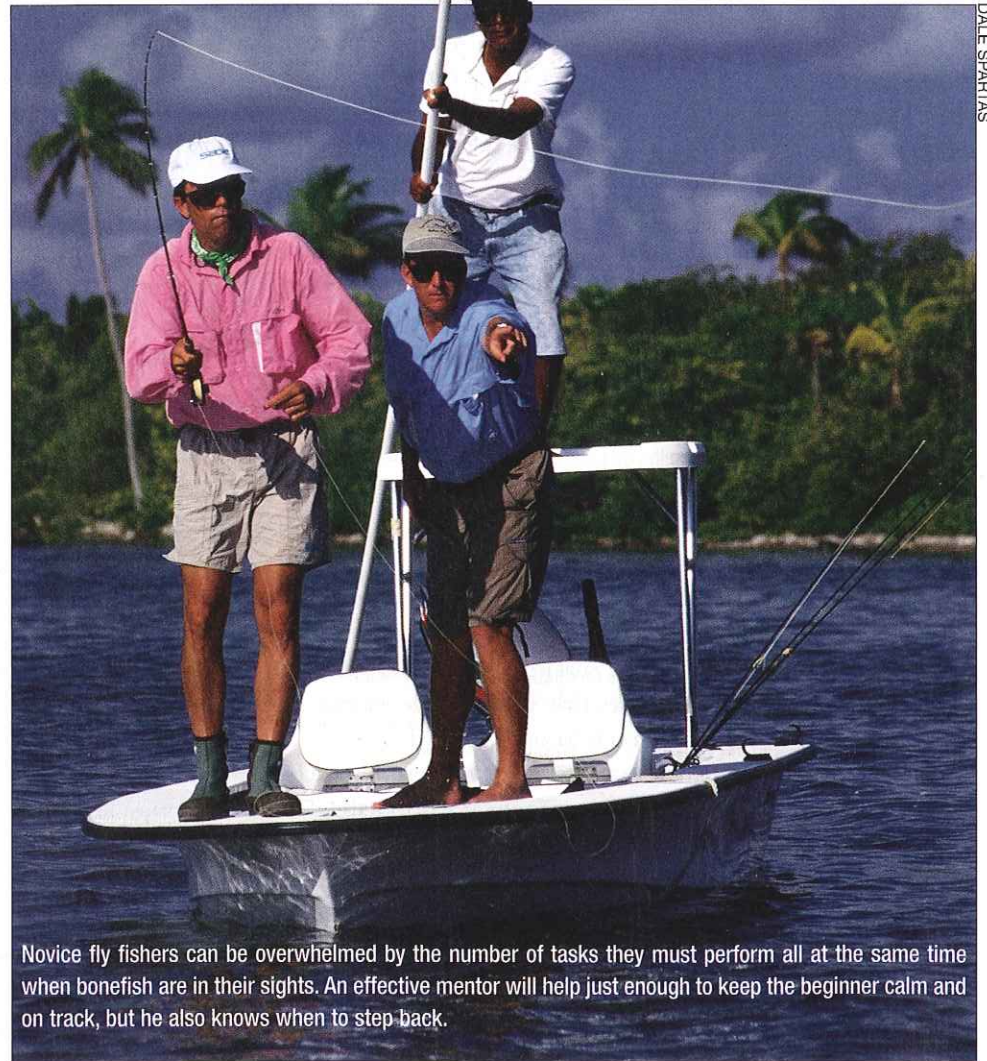
THOSE OF US WHO LOVE bonefishing sometimes find ourselves in the position of partnering with a beginner for an excursion to the tropics. Often, this is a significant other or spouse. Other times, it's a fellow angler whom we are eager to introduce to the sport. Both circumstances require planning to make sure the newcomer finds the experience as rewarding as we do. If nothing else, a good trip and lots of fish will mean this person is a potential companion on the next adventure. Because having someone to travel with can mean the difference between going and not going, it's in your own interest to put some thought into the best means of spreading the bonefish gospel.

Of course, planning an adventure is part of the fun, but designing a trip with beginners in mind has its own considerations. As you search the Web and consult your fishing travel agent, seek places with numbers of fish over sizes of fish. You want your friend to get hooked up often and with relative ease before tackling big, wary fish. So, as convenient as the awesome bonefish of Florida and Andros Island can be to the eastern USA, veterans with novices in tow should look farther south. For example, the out islands of the southern Bahamas are loaded with bonefish that don't see a lot of pressure, as are certain locations on the Yucatán Peninsula.

While going farther afield will in many cases increase the number of eager bones, keep in mind that your companion may not be up for an arduous journey. Dragging a

spouse halfway across the world to the Alphonse atolls might not be a good idea unless he or she is a veteran adventure traveler. And your trout-fishing buddy might not cotton to the expense and time of a cross-planetary jaunt for Aitutaki bones.

Husbands who are planning to take nonangling wives will do well to plot a course that offers a variety of activities. There are a number of bonefish destinations that are also top dive spots, such as Belize. Most offer all manner of amenities, including swimming pools, kayaks, local



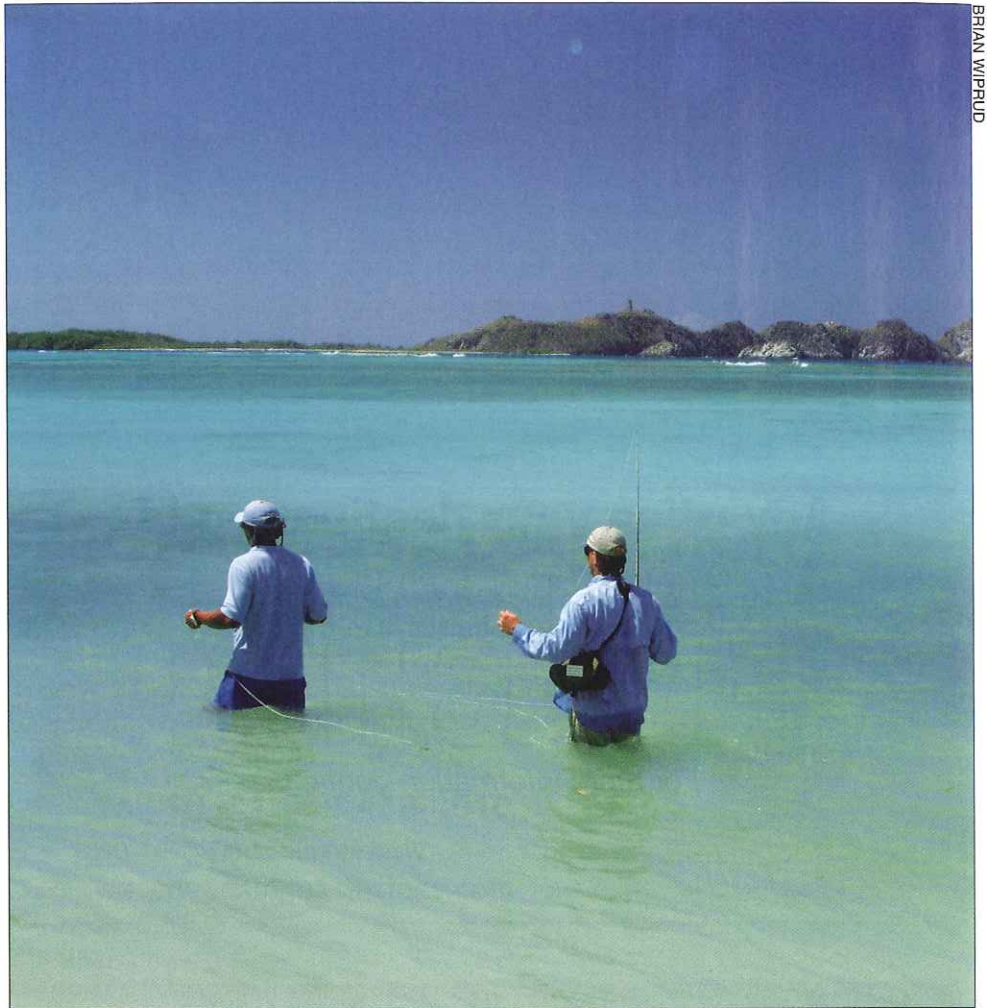
Novice fly fishers can be overwhelmed by the number of tasks they must perform all at the same time when bonefish are in their sights. An effective mentor will help just enough to keep the beginner calm and on track, but he also knows when to step back.

ruins, and beaches that, while of passing interest to most bonefishing maniacs, normal people seem to enjoy. Travel agencies that cater to anglers are adept at meeting the needs of the mixed-agenda trip. Alternating days is the best way to provide your partner with a day off between trips to the flats and perhaps make them more interested in a return venture—if that's your intent. We may not realize how grueling the conditions can be out there in the blazing sun and salt for the tenderfoot. Or that walking miles upon miles of shark-ridden, stingray-infested flats may not be everybody's idea of bliss.

This leads to another important point: Make sure your protégé doesn't get sick, stung, or sunburned on the trip. Sand fly bites don't bother some people, but they can cause allergic reactions, rashes, and painful welts. And be as forceful as you have to in encouraging the constant use of a minimum of SPF-15 sunblock for dark-complexioned anglers and a minimum SPF-30 for the light-complexioned. Advise them to ease into the local food, too, rather than diving headlong into the conch chowder.

Start 'Em Right

Many beginners are overly concerned with having to make a 75-foot presentation. Dissuade them of this notion. In my experience, most fish are hooked at 45 feet or less. What they do need to be prepared for is casting to the clock, compensating for wind, and judging distance. In preparation for a trip to Venezuela, a friend of mine made a point of heading to a nearby park on windy days. On the grass, he measured out distances on radiants from ten o'clock to two o'clock, marking his spots with golf balls. Judging distance can be quite subjective, and I've even had guides who were 10 to 15 feet off in their estimations. But it helps greatly if you have some concrete sense of distance. Casting to the clock is a technique that a lot of freshwater anglers are not familiar with, and this, too, takes some getting used to. A dry-fly fisherman will have a heck of a time trying to compensate for a 15 mph wind. If not fully proficient at hauling and double hauling, they should practice that as well, both to cut the wind



Line management is one of the most challenging tasks for the beginning bonefisher. In a skiff, a mentor can sit back and quietly help keep line straight on the deck while the angler scans for fish. The same principle applies while wading and will prevent the newbie from tangling up in his or her best bonefishing intentions.

and to get a lot of line out for quick presentations. Also, have them practice with an actual fly, with the hook broken off. I've been astounded to find that certain fishermen—dry-fly anglers in particular—have a difficult time casting Clousers and even size 6 Gotchas.

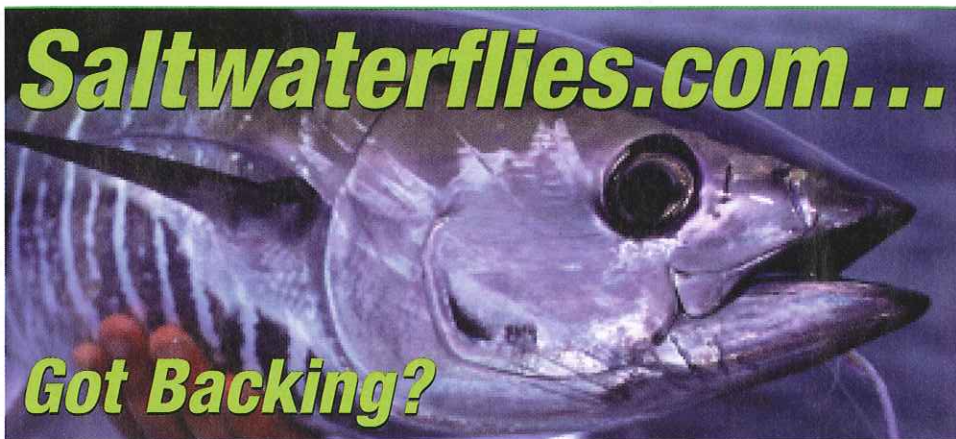
Practical Help

Once on the water, it's time to play coach. For beginners, bonefishing is a very intense and often confusing enterprise that requires them to simultaneously perform many new and demanding disciplines. Some guides will do a lot of coaching themselves, but if they don't, it's up to you to help your friend. When he or she is standing on the foredeck—be ready to assist with line management. Few novices fully anticipate the lightning bolt that they have at the end of the line, and the result-

ant problems of line jumping off the deck as one tries to get the fish on the reel can fluster an angler.

Make sure they are not standing on the line, and if it's tangled, come forward and untangle it for them so they can keep their concentration on the target. When they hook a fish, remind them to watch their line to make sure it clears. Be Johnny-on-the-spot: If you can step up and help get it out of their toes or work out a knot quickly, you can be instrumental in avoiding frustrating break-offs.

Wading has a different line-management dynamic. The surface tension of the water helps keep the line from jumping into dangerous loops that wrap the rod butt or reel handle, and the line often trails behind the angler in a very polite manner that makes for smooth transitions to the reel. But line in the water does need to be



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managed. A clump of grass can get caught in it, or the tide can wrap it around the angler's leg. Stalking the flats is a consuming hunt in which one's full attention is focused on scanning for fish. Whether the line is laid out neatly can be an afterthought.

Once the fish is hooked and the line is on the reel, the game still is not over. Hazards abound. If there are mangroves or a coral head nearby, alert them that they need to turn the fish away by lowering the rod horizontally and leveraging the bone toward open water. If the fish races over the edge of a coral head, the rod needs to be held as high as possible so the line clears the obstruction and is not sliced. When the bottom terrain isn't potholed, backing away from an obstacle is also a good way to draw the fish to open water.

While I cast for bones exclusively with a fly, I'm not prejudiced against those who are relegated to angling on spinning gear. Remember, when you have a trip planned for four and someone drops out a week before you fly out, the more options the better. A non fly-fisher can hook up on spinning gear without too much difficulty and not a lot of investment. All they need is a 6½- or 7-foot, medium-action rod that can cast 1/8-ounce jigs. Less experienced spin fishers may need to cast something slightly heavier to improve their distance and accuracy, especially in the wind. Simple pink-and-white, tan-and-white, or brown-and-white wobble jigs are ideal.

I have a collection of photos on my desk of friends cradling their first bonefish, big smiles of exhilaration on their faces. Much of their pleasure comes from having met the multiple difficulties faced by the fly angler: fish spotting, accurate casting, deft stripping, line management, and landing what is arguably one of sportfishing's best quarries. In every case, the experience has enriched them. Bonefishing can be just about nailing the biggest fish and challenging yourself. But don't overlook the joy of sharing this incredible sport with the uninitiated. ■

Brian Wiprud is a novelist and freelance writer who lives in Brooklyn, New York.