

BONEFISH FOODS

*New patterns
that imitate the foods
bonefish actually eat*

CRAIG MATHEWS

THE FLY PRESENTATION looked good. The cast put the fly ten feet in front of two rooting and tailing bonefish, and when they approached within three feet of my fly, I began the retrieve with slow six-inch strips. The fish turned and moved away. In a short while my guide, "Pops," and I located another pair of large bonefish working the reef. I cast my fly so that it landed with a subtle plop ten feet to the near side of the fish. The fish bolted to the next flat. A few minutes later a large school approached us from behind a small island. The fish were working up into the reef to feed. Pops had me cast well in front of the school and wait until the lead fish was ten feet away from my resting fly. He then instructed me to strip the fly in slowly. As I retrieved the fly a few feet, a small bonefish angled toward my moving pattern, but as the fish came in to take the imitation, my fly hit a piece of coral and the entire school spooked as if run off by a barracuda.

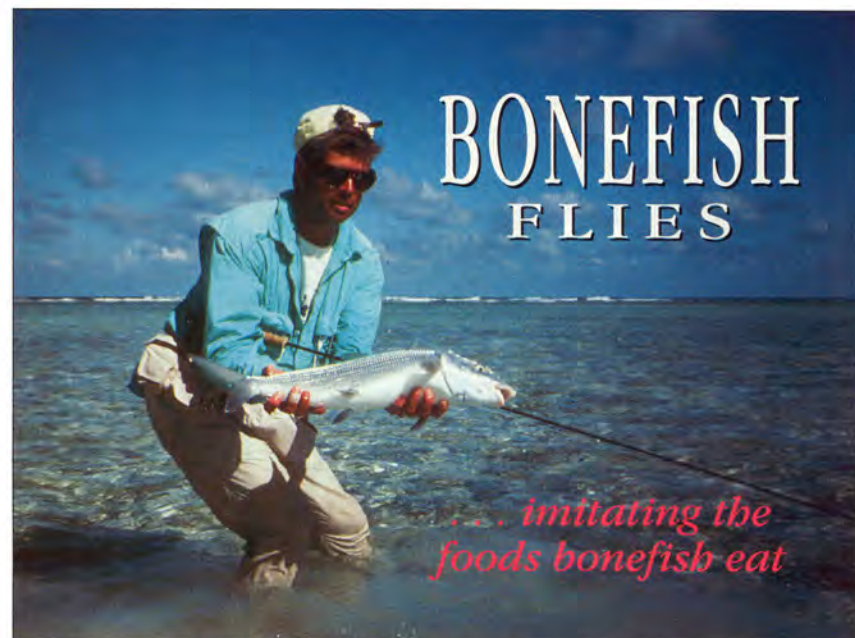
I had been led to believe that Belizean bonefish were "easy" and "unchallenging," and small. Friends who had fished the flats told me to tie the usual weighted and bead-chain-eyed flies. I was loaded with these patterns in #2 through #6. I thought I was prepared, but I wasn't.

Pops asked if I had any unweighted flies or some without eyes. I didn't, so we cut off the bead eyes from a #6 brown Crazy Charlie. I took a few average-size fish every day that week, but I was disappointed with the results of standard bonefish flies on the flats. Pops took me to deeper water and into the lagoons and mangroves where weighted and eyed flies work well, but for the larger, wary, shallow-water flats bonefish, I was frustrated by my lack of success. I wished I had brought along my fly-tying gear.

On the last day of that first bonefish trip I asked Pops to show me what the bonefish eat. He grinned and told me first that our popular bonefish flies look like nothing the fish want. Pops, like most successful Caribbean bonefish guides, had cleaned thousands of bonefish in his previous job as a net fisherman and lobster diver. The guides now all practice and encourage catch-and-release, but their knowledge of past bonefish postmortem examinations is invaluable to bonefish fishermen and fly tiers.

Pops showed me the tiny crabs, mollusks, marine worms, shrimp, sea lice, squid, and sea urchins that the fish eat. In our seining of the

The flats in Belize hold some of the world's largest bonefish, but to catch them requires patience and skill with the right patterns. Craig Mathews photos.



To catch big bonefish in shallow water you must properly present the patterns that imitate the foods bonefish eat.

shallow flats and reef I discovered that the crabs, mollusks, sea urchins, and sea lice are the most abundant creatures. I vowed to return with representative fly patterns the next year.

Since that first trip, I've fished for bonefish several times. During my last trip, in February 1991, Pops and I had three flats-filled weeks of hunting big bonefish in ankle- to calf-deep water. We concentrated on hunting singles, pairs, and small schools. The new patterns we developed worked well in conjunction with our latest techniques in presentation and retrieve.

Four of the most effective new patterns are Pop's Bonefish Bitters, the Turneffe Crab, Winston's Urchin, and the Sea Lice. Pop's Bonefish Bitters imitates crabs, mollusks, urchins, and sea lice. It is tied in amber, lime, gold, and white. The Turneffe Crab imitates the tiny crabs of the reef and flats. It is tied in tan, lime green, and olive green. Winston's Urchin imitates a sea urchin and is tied in tan, orange, and green. The Sea Lice imitates sea lice and is tied with white chenille and chartreuse dubbing.

The Flies

BONEFISH SEARCH OUT SMALL CRABS, mollusks, and sea urchins as they patrol the shallows of the flats and reef. If you watch bonefish working the shallows, you can see how slowly they root, turn, tumble, and tail as they feed. The large fish do not chase minnows or fleeing shrimp; they leisurely root along in the coral, mud, and turtle grass, feeding on their favorite creatures.

Strip a conventional #2 to #4 bonefish fly by those fish and they will often move off or blow up and spook to the next flat. Urchins, mollusks, crabs, and sea lice move very slowly and are not imitated well

with traditional bonefish patterns.

We discovered small unweighted or slightly weighted flies worked best. Size 6 patterns worked, but #8s were much more effective. The patterns we have developed over the years have been refined and are more effective than any other standard pattern.

By properly incorporating the right deer hair into the fly, the patterns become weed- and coral-proof. This is important, because when a fly hangs up on anything, the fish get spooked.

Fly color can make a big difference, depending on the light conditions, bottom makeup and color, water depth, tides, and the time of day. The proper fly color can even vary from one flat to another. Subtle colors like tan, olive, and gold generally work best in the mornings, during bright sunny conditions, in heavy coral-bottom areas on the reef, or in extremely shallow water when the fish are half-exposed out of the water when they are rooting and feeding. Since bonefish tend to work the reefs during low tides or at the beginning and end of tides, you should fish subtle colors at those times.

Bright green, white, and pink work best in late afternoons, on cloudy days, during strong tides associated with the full moon and high pressure systems, and in deeper water with a mud or soft bottom.

Presentation and Retrieve

THERE'S ANOTHER ADVANTAGE to incorporating deer hair into the patterns: It allows for delicate presentation, because the hair cushions the impact of the fly landing and slows its descent in the shallow water of the reef and flats. I cannot emphasize strongly enough that the fly must land quietly and without notice to the fish.

TURNEFFE CRAB



HOOK: TMC 800S or Mustad 34007, #6 and #8.
THREAD: White or cream 6/0.
WEIGHT: None to six wraps of .020" lead wire.
LEGS: Sili or round rubber legs to match body color.
BODY: Chenille in olive, tan, or lime green.
CORAL/WEED GUARD: Natural mottled deer hair over Zelon underwing. Zelon should match the body color.

SEA LICE



HOOK: TMC 800S or Mustad 34007, #6 and #8.
THREAD: White or cream 6/0.
ABDOMEN: Fine white chenille.
RIB: White or grizzly saddle hackle, palmered and trimmed flat on top and bottom.
THORAX: Chartreuse dubbing picked out.

WINSTON'S URCHINS



HOOK: TMC 800S or Mustad 34007, #6 and #8.
THREAD: White or cream 6/0.
SPINES AND BODY: Sili rubber legs trimmed flat on bottom and flared 180 degrees around the top of the hook, clipped to length.

POP'S BONEFISH BITTERS



HOOK: Tears of the Keys or epoxy blanks in #6 and #8 in amber, lime, gold, and white.
THREAD: White or cream 6/0.
LEGS: Sili rubber legs to match body color.
CORAL/WEED GUARD: Natural mottled deer hair over a Zelon underwing. Zelon should match the body color.

NOTES: The deer hair used in these patterns should be short and coarse, so it flares and cups your pattern around the hook point. This provides a coral/weed guard. The "Tears of the Keys" plastic blanks used to tie the Pop's Bonefish Bitters are available from most fly shops providing saltwater and bonefish tying materials. Zelon is available from fly shops around the country. The smallest fly hooks available for saltwater and bonefish flies are #8. Hopefully we will see #10 and #12 hooks in the near future; they are needed.

Try to lead the fish by six to ten feet. I prefer to cast beyond and to the far side of the fish so that when its attention is drawn to the fly, it is initially looking away from me and my legs. As the fish approaches to within three feet of my fly, I tighten the line and try to watch both the line and the fish while not moving the fly. These patterns imitate crabs, mollusks, and sea urchins, which move very slowly. The fish usually take the imitations softly. When the fish tails up, roots, tumbles, or turns on the fly, you should feel him as he begins to move off with it and crush it in his crushers. That's the time to set the hook. I've had great success watching the fly line or on calm days watching the leader, and if either move, I'm quick on the set. Do not raise your rod to set the hook; simply give a hard pull with your stripping hand. The method is simply one of no retrieve. Pops first had me try it a couple of trips ago, and since then it has accounted for several big bonefish in shallow water.

If the fish passes by and the fly is not taken, allow the fish to move off from six to ten feet and then recast to present your fly again. This time when the fish is within four or five feet, *slowly* strip in the fly with four- to eight-inch-long strips. You will know when the fish has your fly.

I discovered another method of presentation and retrieve quite by accident. This technique usually works best for fishing to small schools; it has never worked on a pair or single bonefish. When previous methods fail, try presenting your fly right into the school; hit them on their noses. Never begin an immediate retrieve with any method, as that usually spooks bonefish. Let the fly settle to the bottom—it only takes a second or two in shallow water—then

make three or four rapid and long strips. Strip 30 to 36 inches, then let the fly settle to the bottom, and leave it there until you hook up or until all the fish have passed by. A bonefish that takes with this technique usually grabs the fly and runs with it, so there's no mistaking when the fish has the fly. Often you can watch bonefish in competition as they race to grab the fly. I've had fish take patterns presented and retrieved in this manner on several occasions when all else failed. I seldom use this technique, but it is a good trick to have up your sleeve when all else fails.

Belize has some of the world's largest bonefish patrolling its reefs and flats. I took two last February that would be world records—the largest 39½ inches long with an 18½-inch girth and the other 34 inches long with an 18-inch girth—both on 13-pound tippet. Pops and I saw larger fish, too. If you want to catch such large fish, you should hire a guide like Pops who can show you where to find large fish and how to hunt them.

Big bonefish most often travel alone, in pairs, or in small schools of ten or fewer fish. They are often overlooked for the larger, more visible schools of smaller fish. Patience pays off as you hunt the flats with careful quiet wading, observation, proper presentation, and proper fly retrieve. You must also have representative fly patterns of what the large flats/reef-patrolling bonefish eat. With the flies shown here and with the techniques I've described, you should be prepared to hunt for the largest bonefish of the reefs and flats.

CRAIG MATHEWS owns the Blue Ribbon Flies fly shops in Montana.

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