

ANDROS SOUTH LODGE

ANDROS SOUTH
THE BAHAMAS

BONEFISHING 101

DENEKI OUTDOORS

A GUIDE TO BETTER BONEFISHING



photo: Jeremy Inman

Chasing bonefish with a fly rod is some of the most fun you can have on the water, but bonefishing requires unique skills and tactics. The purpose of Bonefishing 101 is to take you efficiently & effectively through the basic skills you need to catch bonefish.

We will cover five fundamental topics:

- 1. The Ready Position**
- 2. Spotting Bonefish**
- 3. Casting on the Flats**
- 4. Setting the Hook**
- 5. Fighting Bonefish**

We hope you find these tips helpful. We also have hundreds of fly fishing tips on our blog. If you'd like to practice some skills, drop us a line! We'd love to take you fishing at Andros South, our bonefishing lodge on South Andros Island in The Bahamas.

Team Deneki Outdoors



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Lesson 1- The Ready Position



For many beginner bonefish anglers, the hardest part is not being able to make a long cast as well as fighting the fish. The main challenge is setting yourself up correctly, in order to make a quick presentation when a shot at a bonefish presents itself. You'll need to be quick (just like the fish you are chasing), so keep the following tips in mind, and you will be ready when you need to be.

First, take off your shoes. When fishing from the boat it is especially important to minimize your noise level on deck, as well as the opportunities for tangles. More often than not, your fly line will end up underfoot, which makes for a messy & unfortunate missed opportunity at hooking a bonefish. Whatever you do, do not forget to put some sunscreen on your feet before you step on deck; or wear socks, or neoprene booties.

Lesson 1- The Ready Position Continued

Next, strip off an amount of line you can comfortably cast. Then pull off another strip or two. This will ensure that your cast does not fall short if you need to make a long shot. However, be realistic; having too much line stripped off will increase your risk of tangles while casting.

Now, make a practice cast and then strip it back. If you strip line off your reel into a pile in the boat, your coils will be laying in the wrong direction. As you lengthen your cast, coils will pull up from the bottom of the pile instead of the top, creating tangles in your fly line. Therefore, if you pull your fly line off your reel, make a long cast, and then strip the line back in, the coils will pull off the top of the pile, and you will be much happier when you are making your cast.

Then Keep a rod length's worth of line outside your rod tip. You need to have enough line outside the tip to preload your rod when you start casting. However, if you have more than a rod's length, it can be more challenging to control when looking for fish.

Finally, hold your leader just above the fly. Doing this ensures the fly drops cleanly when you start your cast. It reduces the chances of the fly making contact with sun-screen and sweat. Bonefish don't like unfamiliar scents.



photo: Jeremy Inman

Lesson 2 - Spotting Bonefish



Spotting fish in the water is hard. When it comes to bonefish, it is more difficult.

First, Look for movement. When you first see a bonefish, it is very unusual to see a clear outline of the fish. Bonefish generally first appear as dark spots, moving slowly and steadily. They are almost always on the move, so keep your eyes out for moving dark spots! Ripples on the water and the boat's movement (if you are poling) can make it difficult to tell if that dark spot is really moving. So if you see a spot that you think might be a bonefish, look close by for other objects on the bottom as a reference point, and compare the movement of the spot against that point.

Look where you can see. This may seem obvious at first, but you should spend most of your time looking in the direction you can see. The angle of the sun and the color of the bottom will make for better visibility in one direction and area, so look there! If you can not see a 100 feet out well, then look 50 feet out. During challenging visibility periods, it's a good idea to periodically scan the area around. Do not waste your time looking where you can not see.

Lesson 2 - Spotting Bonefish Continued

If you cannot see the bottom, look at the surface. If clouds and/or glare prevent you from seeing the bottom, look at the water's surface. V-wakes, nervous water, and the sought-after tails and/or fins can indicate the presence of bonefish. Cloudy but calm days can produce some fantastic fishing if you learn to look for movement on the water rather than trying to look into it.

Finally, follow your released fish. If you have not spent a lot of time looking at bonefish in the water, take advantage of every opportunity you get. One of the best times to see fish is when you or your partner has just released a fish, and it swims away. Try to keep your eyes on the fish for as long as possible. This is a great way to practice spotting bonefish in the water, particularly at various distances.



Lesson 3 - Casting on the Flats



Speed is more important than distance! If you are set up correctly, bonefish will be swimming toward you most of the time. Once you have located a fish and the fish is within casting range, you need to get the fly there fast.

Minimize the number of false. In most situations, one false cast should be enough, and five false casts will mean the fish swam right to you or spooked away. Cast aggressively, and get the fly to the fish

Double hauling is a great thing. Speaking of casting aggressively, yes, a double haul can be very helpful on the flats. Can you catch bonefish without a double haul? Of course. However, having the ability to double haul is very helpful. Work on your double haul if you got time to brush up on one casting skill before your trip.

Lesson 3 - Casting on the Flats Continued

Do not drop your rod tip when you deliver the fly. We see this happen on the flats all too often: an angler makes a couple of beautiful false casts, complete with a nice tight loop, then decides it is time to deliver the fly. So the angler will move strong, on a cast, thinking, "I'm going to really punch it." The last-second effort to apply power results in a much longer casting stroke which forces the rod tip to go down further than desired. Moreover, the high stop of the rod tip is lost, creating a gigantic, weak, wind-blown loop. When you deliver the fly, do it just like you did on those false casts: stop the rod tip high. Do not try to overpower the rod at the last second, and that nice tight loop will launch itself out there. No problem.



photo: Hollis Bennett

"Don't trout set, mon!"

Over the years, countless bonefish anglers have heard this phrase from their Bahamian guides. Okay, we know not to trout set. So what are we supposed to do?

Let us start with a little bit of background. As trout anglers, we have been trained to raise the rod when a fish eats. Raising a fly rod turns it into a shock absorber; it gives a smooth, steady pull on the fly that protects a light trout tippet while efficiently and effectively pinning your barbless #18 hook into a trout's lip.

Bonefish have hard mouths, and you need a quick, sharp pull to bury the hook and really stick the fish. If you raise your rod tip, your fly will get pulled right out of the fish's mouth, not pierced in the lip as you want it. If you've never had the shock absorption of a fly rod demonstrated to you, get a buddy and try this fun little exercise:

- 1. String up a fly rod with a line and leader but with no fly.**
- 2. Grab onto the end of the leader (with a light leader; you can wrap it around your hand if you like).**
- 3. Have your buddy grab the fly rod and step back about 20 feet.**
- 4. Then have him (or her) do a trout set i.e. just briskly raise the rod tip. Pretty smooth pull, huh?**
- 5. Now have your buddy point the rod straight at you, slowly pull in the excess line, and after the line is tight, give it another quick strip. Okay, the point made?**

Lesson 4 - Setting the Hook Continued

If you can't pull this off, just trust us; the classic trout set results in a very smooth, gradual pull, excellent for protecting 7x tippets for trout but is terrible for burying #2 saltwater hooks into the mouth of a bonefish (a.k.a. the flats shrimp and crab excavator). Stripping the fly with the rod pointed straight at the fish will result in a much sharper, more powerful, and effective jab.

Here is a step-by-step on how to present and then set the hook when a bonefish eats:

- 1. Make your cast.**
- 2. Keep your rod tip in the water, pointed straight at the fish. Strip out any excess slack.**
- 3. When the fish sees the fly, give it a few quick strips.**
- 4. Once the fish starts following, keep moving the fly, pausing only to let the fish keep up with it.**
- 5. Keep your rod pointed straight at the fish.**
- 6. When you see the fish tip down to eat, or you feel resistance when stripping the fly line, keep your rod pinned straight at the fish.**
- 7. Now give the line one more firm, long strip. You'll notice your line will stop dead, or the fish will take off, but in either case, the hook is now set, and you can raise the rod tip and have some fun fighting that bonefish.**

It is really hard not to raise your fly rod. The best way to remember is to just keep stripping until the line is tight. If you do that and you don't raise your rod tip, chances are you've buried the hook into that fish's mouth and you're good to go.

Lesson 5 - Fighting Bonefish



Great, you have done it all right, and now you are hooked up with a bonefish. Now what?

1. **Let him run** - As soon as you are confident that you have properly got the hook set (you strip-set, right?), let that fish run. Bonefish can initiate runs suddenly, so the entire time you are hooked up, you need to be ready to let go of that reel handle in a split second in case that fish turns to go. Any time you feel the start of a deep tug during a fight, let him run.
2. **Put the heat on** - As soon as that fish stops or changes direction, put the heat on! If you are fishing on South Andros Island, you are probably using a tippet that is 12 pounds or more, so you can and should pull really hard. Do not raise your rod like you are fighting a trout with a 4 weight. Instead, pull back on the butt of the rod, with the rod at a relatively low angle to the water. Fighting the fish hard will get him landed faster, minimizing the time the fish gets exhausted and/or chowed by a predator like a shark.

Lesson 5 - Fighting Bonefish Continued

3. **Keep the line at an acute angle.** This is not geometry class, so we will do our best to keep the explanation simple. The most force is exerted on a fish when you are pulling on them at a severe angle relative to the direction that they are swimming. Here is the easiest way to put this into practice: if the fish is swimming left to right, you should be pulling hard to the left. And visa-versa. Do not drag the fish along like a dog on a leash; pull hard in the opposite direction, which gets him landed quicker.
4. **Keep the rod tip low and to the side on a smooth bottom.** You can exert the most power on a fish with your rod low and to the side. This enables you to bend the butt of the rod, which is much more powerful than the tip. Get down and dirty, and switch sides as necessary according to tip #3. But not too quickly or too often, as that can loosen the hook.
5. **Keep the rod tip high when fishing on a bottom with mounds, coral, or weeds.** No matter what, you do not want your fish, fly, and leader being dragged through the muck, sand, weeds, or coral. That's a good way to lose your fish. Raising your rod tip will keep the fish's nose a little higher and prevent him from being pulled sideways into an obstruction. Furthermore, bonefish are known for burying their faces in the bottom to shake the hook; do not let 'em! You can still bend the butt of your rod when its tip is high. But now, you are just doing it while the rod is more upright (or vertical) instead of from the horizontal angle.





And that does it! If you have a basic understanding of the skills outlined here, you will have a great time and be successful when you go bonefishing.

Now, here is the best part: even without a basic handle on the skills outlined here, you will still have a great time when you go bonefishing. It is an incredible way to fly fish, and it only happens in beautiful places, so get your trip planned and give it a shot!

Want to join us at our bonefishing lodge on South Andros Island in The Bahamas? It would be our pleasure to have you. South Andros Island is a vast and pristine fishery, home to the finest bonefishing in the world. Our lodge is well-run, comfortable, and casual. **Click here to drop us a line and start planning your trip.**

Here are a few more tried and true tips to help you with your bonefishing adventure. Call it supplementary information, an appendix, or just etcetera ...

Knots

Someone on your boat may know how to tie good knots, but those folks might be on deck (trying to catch a bonefish) or on the poling platform (like your guide spotting those fish). We have mentioned, that things can happen pretty fast while bonefishing. It is in your best interest to know how to tie good knots. Here is a short list of knots we think you should be able to tie, quickly and effectively:

- **Fly to tippet** - Uni Knot, Improved Clinch Knot, and /or Non-Slip Loop Knot
- **Tippet to leader** - Blood Knot and/or TriSurgeon's Knot

Fancy Footwork

Do not dance on the boat. It scares the fish (and even some guides!). When standing on deck, keep your feet lightly planted in a comfortable, secure position. If you have to take a step, do it softly; a heel thump on the deck can spook fish for hundreds of yards or more. Furthermore, do not slide your feet, as you may catch your line under your feet, causing your fly line to twist over (and over and over) itself. This will put tangles in that line.

The same goes for wading. **Walk quietly**, which is not always easy when the bottom is less than flat. Take short, slow steps, and do not lift your feet entirely out of the water. Bonefish can hear that “kerplunk” sound too.

A Partner's Duty

Waiting your turn on deck is the perfect time to grab a cold beverage and take in the sights; we already pointed out that **bonefish live in beautiful places**. We also reminded you several times that being aware of your fly line is critical too, and there is no better time to do this than when your boat partner is in the ready position.

When it's someone else's turn, **your job is tending to their line** – making sure there are no tangles, clearing the lower deck of items that line might snag on, and recovering that line when the wind blows it overboard. Doing this will pay serious dividends when it's your turn. Why? Because your boatmate will do the same for you!



And finally (we mean it this time), gratuities.

There's a good chance that you will have a guide when you are bonefishing. **Poling a boat all day, spotting fish, and lining up shots for clients is extremely difficult work.** Of course, we know you understand it is customary to provide a tip at day's end. But you might not know that guides really appreciate getting a simple "thank you" after they set you up just perfect, often resulting in bringing a bonefish to hand that you could not even see when you made the cast. They also like having their favorite beverage in the cooler for the ride home.

Try one (or both) of those "gratuities" during your next outing; it'll make every day on the flats that much better.

Now get out there and make it happen!



photo: Amelia Willson



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