

New Caledonia Trophies

Mathew McHugh finds trophy bonefish in New Caledonia.

What is it about a trophy fish? Fly fishers, more so than any other discipline of fishing, have an obsession with the definition of what is and isn't a trophy. Each species that we fish for with a fly has over time, somehow, developed a benchmark weight at which point any fish caught over that weight is considered a trophy. For a trout it's 10 lb. For tarpon, 100 lb. Probably the only fish that has not had a weight attached to its trophy status is the permit. They are all trophies. For bonefish, that other pinnacle saltwater fly rod species, the magic number is 10 lb.

There are few places in the world where bonefish exceeding 10 lb are found in large numbers. There are always rumours of new destinations and trophy bonefish but few stand the test of time and most suffer the affliction of exaggerated weight syndrome. The Florida Keys and northern Bahamian

islands of Andros and Abaco are renowned big fish producers and it seems that the Pacific has its fair share of big fish waters. Reports of trophy bonefish leak out of Hawaii, French Polynesia and the Cook Islands but there is one place that has earned a legendary status for big bonefish...New Caledonia.

A BRIEF HISTORY

New Caledonia as a potential bonefish fishery was brought into our consciousness in the early 2000's by Dean Butler who fished the region with Phillippe Loureux, the man who made the first attempts at establishing a bonefishing operation in the Northern Province around the Boatpass region. Phillippe and a few very intrepid anglers were the first to uncover the potential for bonefishing in the region.







Dean Butler's interest in the region was developed as he flew over New Caledonia and noticed the large expanses of shallow flats surrounding the many islands that make up New Caledonia. Dean, having spent time looking for bones in Australia, was intrigued by these shallow flats in this little known South Pacific group of islands. His research dug up Phillipe's contact details and resulted in a trip that saw Dean land a 9 lb bonefish on the first morning's fishing, with the first cast of his first visit to New Caledonia.

Since that time, a sprinkling of anglers have visited New Caledonia, including many of Australia's most respected fly fishers, confirming that there were bonefish throughout the Loyalty Islands and the southern coral cays. Yet the place never really took off as a bonefish destination and reports out of Phillipe's operation went cold. Reports of guys fishing DIY varied from excellent fishing to hard going. Outdated reports still make up the majority of information that can be found on the internet when you undertake a Google search of bonefish in New Caledonia and much of the knowledge gained through Phillipe's exploration of the north is now lost as he makes honey high in the New Caledonian mountains. The latest incarnation of the New Caledonian bonefish fishery has been instigated by Richard Bertin, whose previous life saw him manage Charles De Gaulle Airport. A lifelong fly fisher who, having been posted from Paris to manage the Tontouta Airport in New Caledonia, took to casting a fly at bonefish. Richard immediately saw the potential that Phillipe had previously uncovered and has invested in getting bonefishing in the north back into the spotlight. Richard's new operation uses the local Kanak guides that are the cornerstone of any successful fishing trip in the north.

THE DIY EXPERIENCE

There are two options when it comes to bonefishing. A fully guided trip that guarantees access to flats that hold bonefish with a guide who knows what to look for, or the Do-It-Yourself approach which offers no guarantees at all. My first visit to New Caledonia in early 2006 was the latter and part of a cunning plan that fooled my partner into thinking we were going on a tropical holiday when in reality I was planning to catch my first bonefish.

The trip that we took was to Isle Des Pines. Extensive research had revealed that a few anglers had fished Isle Des Pines by themselves and it was possible to catch bonefish there. At the time of my trip to Isle des Pines there were no guides working the area and access to the flats was by *sortie en mer* or water taxi. Locating and organising a trip across to the flats was an adventure in itself and ensures that you will be the only person there. Mine involved hiring a mountain bike from our residence, then cycling the 10 km to Gite Manamaky where it was rumoured a man named Christian offered boat trips to tourists. I arrived with rod in hand as a group of local fishers were loading up their boats and attempted, with a poor grasp of French, to find a boatman. After several confused looks and some laughter as I tried to get my message across by mock casting a 4 piece rod tube, a man shot off to a nearby house and returned with Christian. We organised to meet at nine the next morning and he would drop me on the flats and return six hours later.

Isle des Pines has absolutely stunning beaches with some of the finest, whitest sand imaginable. I spent the remainder of the day lying on one of them dreaming of the sand flats full of bonefish waiting in these turquoise waters. That night fly boxes were reorganised, leader connections tested and a bag packed with the essentials; sunscreen, hat, polaroids, fly lines and camera. I reread articles on spotting bonefish: they are invisible, ghost like creatures requiring bionic vision to spot. Look for shadows, silver flashes, and nervous water. I soaked it all in, but it really has no meaning until your own eyes register these things.

The trip to the flats was quick. On arrival, Christian pointed to the vast expanse of sand covered in a foot of water and mumbled something in French. My French hadn't improved overnight but I took this to mean that if I were to find a bonefish anywhere this would be the place. There were miles of flats to fish and to finally set foot on one was the culmination of several months worth of planning. Out of the fly box came a tan Gotcha that was quickly tied onto a 9 ft length of 15 lb monofilament. I was bonefishing.

OPPOSITE: Big bonefish in shallow water is what New Caledonia is all about.

BELOW: Polaroiding in patchy, overcast conditions requires intense concentration.



LEARNING CURVE

When you are doing anything for the first time, a degree of uncertainty, self doubt and quite often mistakes will encroach on your initial attempts. It would not be long before my first lessons in bonefishing would begin. After walking perhaps 20 metres down the flat I spotted my first 'shape' swimming straight towards me. I had already stripped off 40 feet of fly line that was trailing behind as I walked the flat. A quick back cast and delivery of the fly in front of the fish resulted in the fish swimming straight over the top of the fly and continuing onwards. It didn't stop until it ran into the end of my fly rod. First lesson learnt; that's what bonefish don't look like as the 2 foot black tip whaler scarpers from the gentle prodding of the rod. This continued as I cast at schools of mullet, dart, small GTs and golden trevally.

This bycatch, while being good fun, proved a distraction and ultimately the focus on catching bonefish had shifted to getting a bend in the rod from a variety of tropical species. By the end of my first day on the flat, I had learnt two valuable lessons. The first was that to catch a bonefish would require the willpower not to cast at everything else that was swimming by. The second was that while I still had not spotted a bonefish I was pretty sure that every other piscatorial offering the sand flat had to offer had been revealed. I now knew what not to cast at.

The next few days were spent enjoying what the island had to offer, including some fun flicking flies off the wharf in Kuto Bay, but my mind was preoccupied. I had organised another trip to flats with Christian so there was one final opportunity to find the bonefish that had lured me to this island. A resolution was made to myself that even if I did not make a cast for the whole day, I was NOT going to cast at anything other than what I considered to be a bonefish.

CONFIDENCE

In all forms of fly fishing, confidence in what you are doing plays an important part in actually catching a fish. A lot of the time this confidence is bolstered by knowing the fish you are targeting are actually there. So, when after walking down the edge of a sand flat for 15 minutes I spotted my first bonefish, a pod of three cruising at high speed on the edge of the drop-off, I actually believed for the first time that there was a chance at catching one. My cast landed about a metre behind the tail of the last of the three fish and no notice was taken of my fly. The fish were moving so fast that by the time the fly line was aerialised for a second shot, they were out of sight.

My attention was now focused well ahead of my actual position in the hope of picking up the cruising fish much earlier and therefore being able to present a fly well ahead of the fish. It wasn't long before another opportunity arose.



LEFT: A big New Caledonia bonefish almost ready to land.

ABOVE: That shark-like dorsal fin piercing the surface when shallow water foraging is one of the many great sights when bonefishing.

I picked up two fish swimming along the edge of a weed bed and made a short, quick cast. As they approached the fly a quick strip of the little pink and green hammerhead saw a GT charge the fly and then charge off into the distance with my orange dacron following. I had broken my earlier resolution, but it was one of those sight fishing moments that keeps you fly fishing, with all the suspense and exhilaration of the take unfolding right before your eyes.

The tide was beginning to fall off the flat so I concentrated on searching the edges of the drop-off hoping to find fish making their way back into the deeper water. Several hours passed without any sign of a fish. A burning desire to find one of these mystical fish was the only thing that kept my eyes focused on the water and even that was beginning to fade, when it happened. A shape was moving slowly with the outgoing tide. A quickly attempted cast resulted in the fly wrapping itself around the fly rod. I had blown it. With one eye focused on the fish and the other sorting out the mess of tangled leader I tried to regain some composure. After what seemed like an eternity, I was set for another shot.

The fish was moving slowly from side to side; obviously feeding. Two false casts and the fly landed forward of, and a little to the right, of the fish. Allowing the tan gotcha to sink, I began a short strip retrieve. Before I knew what was happening, the line tightened and there was a moment of clarity that I will never forget...I think I have hooked a bonefish. This initial thought was soon confirmed when I looked down to see the knot attaching the backing to the spool. Lifting knees high I began to chase the fish in order to get something back on the reel. It has been written many

times before by more accomplished fly fishers than me, but the first run of these fish has to be seen to be believed. Eventually after a war of attrition and prayers to every god imaginable about knot strength and hook holding properties I beached a bonefish. A fish of 31 inches that I estimated in the 10-12 lb bracket was more than anyone could ever hope for as an introduction to this most addictive form of the sport.

EXPLORATION OF THE NORTH

That first bonefish encounter infected every pore of my body and over the next year, I spent every holiday opportunity that arose planning trips to bonefish destinations. I was lucky enough to visit some fantastic bonefish fisheries in French Polynesia and Central America. Eighteen months after that first visit I was sitting in a Heathrow Airport cafe trying to answer the questions of Charles Rangeley-Wilson on how many fish we were going to catch and how big these fish would be at the beginning of a 35 hour journey to the north of New Caledonia. I couldn't honestly say. These questions were what we were hoping to answer with our trip to the north.

We met up with Peter Morse in Sydney and then our hosts Richard Bertin and Henri in New Caledonia. Our transfer to the north and the Malabou Beach Hotel by road was the culmination of eight months planning and a bloody long journey. We would spend ten days with Malabou as our base to fish as much of the northern flats as we could. Charles and I were both filled with uncertainty as to what to expect, but Peter's tales of previous trips and big bones ensured



ABOVE: Flies vary, but anything small and shiny has potential.

RIGHT: This bonefish ate a Gotcha.



I woke well before sunrise on that first morning, with a rush of anticipation that precedes a day's fishing in unknown waters.

The coastline of the Northern Province, stretching from Poum on the west coast to Boatpass at the northern most point and down to Phagaan on the east coast, is a plethora of mangrove lined shallow bays, sand flats, coral reef and dozens of small islands scattered about. Looking at a topographical map of the region it is hard to imagine that a lifetime fishing could uncover all its secrets.

The largest islands, Isle Baaba and Isle Balabio, possess some of the most extensive flats I have seen. The reef of Balabio on the lee side of the island extends from the sand cay of St Phalle for over 25 km and is 2 km wide at its narrowest point. Sand has built up on this reef to create a sandflat habitat that takes your breath away when you first approach it and look at the expanse of white that stretches to the horizon where it meets rich, red, bare mountains. This must be one of the most scenic bonefish locations in the world. The St Phalle flats contrast markedly with the shallow mangrove lined bays of Isle Baaba, with the slightly tea stained water providing a colour reminiscent of that found in Ascension Bay and provide extensive feeding areas for the bonefish found here.

THE FISHING

On our first morning, we approached the easily accessible flats of Boatpass, not really knowing what to expect. Arriving at spring low tide the flat was practically dry and we

concentrated on the deep edges. It didn't take long before we found some bones but they were tough to fool as they cruised the drop-off waiting for the tide to flood in. It was however, a huge confidence boost having travelled all that way to find fish within hours of arriving, given the uncertainty of it all. The afternoon high tide bode well for our chances.

Our host concentrated on blind fishing the deep channel during this low water period and it wasn't long before he happily showed us what was swimming around these waters. A bonefish that pushed into double figures was a great sight. But we didn't come here to fish blind. I wanted to see these fish up feeding on the flats, stalking and casting, really bonefishing.

By the end of that first day, I hadn't landed a fish but had witnessed some fantastic flats fishing for bonefish. As the tide started to run we followed it onto the small flat of Boatpass, and so did the bonefish. The two hour or so burst of activity as the fish came in waves was exactly what bonefishing is about. Except there was one difference to what I had experienced in Mexico, and to a lesser degree in Tahiti. The fish were all big. Not all trophies but the average fish was in excess of 6 lb. A double hook up of a pair of twin fish estimated at 8 lb each was the highlight of the day and the smiles on Charles and Peter's faces made for a great start.

The real jewels were found on the flats of St Phalle, Ballabio and Baaba. Peter had been gabbing all week about the huge fish that he had previously witnessed at St Phalle and

the little queenie that stole his fly from one giant bonefish's mouth. We were eager to explore, knowing that these flats had been very rarely fished over the previous twelve months. Our first few days on the St Phalle flats coincided with midday low tides so we would catch the flow of fish off the flats into deeper water in the morning and then the return movement as these fish came back up onto the flats to feed during the flood tide. The short period of activity as the fish flood off and then onto the flats maybe only lasted an hour or two each morning and afternoon, but it was intense fishing. Not intense in the manner of landing huge numbers of fish but intense in respect of being able to hold your nerve and present a fly to these huge bonefish.

We spent the vast majority of our ten days fishing just a small portion of this flat, and if I could nominate just one place to fish my life away, I think this may be it. By the end of the trip we were in the neaps and the bonefish behaviour had altered. We were now encountering larger schools of fish. There was enough water left on top of the flat that the fish would stay longer and feed in the security of a bigger school. It was during the neaps that I witnessed something I won't forget in a long time. With the increased water depth on the emugle during the neap tides, we were now wading knee to mid thigh deep. Sounds of splashes broke the all-encompassing silence that is found when wade fishing these flats, and these turned out to be the give-away sounds of tailing bonefish. I've been lucky enough to see bonefish tailing in skinny water and there is no better sight, but to have fish tailing in thigh deep water, well that's just taking the piss.



We caught and landed fish each day. Big fish. Not everyone caught everyday and if I averaged the whole week out I landed one bonefish a day. A one fish day is a good day. My best day was three bones. I lost the same amount again through long releases, reef burn and useless knot tying. So all going well you might expect to land on average two fish a day. What's so special about that you may say? I can go to Christmas and a large number of other destinations and land a dozen fish a day! What makes this place extra special is not the *chance* of a shot at a trophy but the *guarantee* of a shot at one. These fish are genuinely big.

KEYS TO THE FISHERY

The New Caledonian bonefishery is unique. It is at the extremities in terms of latitude when it comes to bonefish distribution, being bisected by the Tropic of Capricorn; the invisible line marking the geographical limit of the tropics. New Caledonia has been blessed that the local Kanak people are very conservative and extremely protective where their sea wildlife is concerned. Combine this with very low population densities in the north of New Caledonia and you are left with healthy fish populations. Even today, local operators have to work closely with the tribes of the North to obtain permission to fish the region.

TIDES

During our stay we found that tides played a pivotal role in the way the fish behaved, the number of fishable flats available and the duration of your 'windows of opportunity'. We fished spring tides early in the trip and ended the trip fishing the neaps. During the spring tides, a pattern emerged during the week whereby a window of 1-2 hours, as the fish flood on or off the flat, provided the only chance at bonefish for the session. With middle of the day lows, you would get two shots at them, the runoff in the morning and the flood in the afternoon. Our down time during the low was spent eating lunch and harassing the local spangled emperor and trevally populations. Spring tides also allow access to some of the deep water flats that are unswampland during neap tides. The large southern flats of Balabio, flats that can only be accessed during the big spring tides, were teeming with bones and trevally during the run in and to access those flats again would be the main reason I would plan any trip to New Caledonia to include the spring tides.

The neap tides enabled the fish to stay up on the flats longer and feed and I would imagine during the smallest tidal neaps that they would perhaps stay up on the flats all day. The fish were found in bigger schools during the neap tides. Obviously, the threat of shark, barracuda and giant trevally attacks are more likely with more water on the flats allowing better access for these big predators.

While some deep water flats become inaccessible during the neap tides, some of the shallow water flats can now be fished throughout the tidal cycle. We would find ourselves fishing the top of the tide on a very shallow flat, with bonefish feeding all over the top of it and once the tide had started to fall. Harvey, our guide, would chaperone us to the boat and move us to a flat that would be at the correct depth to intercept fish retreating from the mangroves. The neaps then resulted in a longer window in which to fish. These northern waters have the advantage of having flats that fish well during both the neap and spring tides, and the instinctive understanding of the local Kanak guides as to which flats fish well during each particular tidal stage ensures that there are flats available to bonefish whenever you visit.



TACKLE

There are several considerations to be made with respect to tackle when fishing for bonefish in New Caledonia. For rods, a nine weight is probably the perfect tool for these fish. I fished half the week with a 9 weight and half with an 8 weight and preferred the extra control and punch of the bigger rod into the inevitable winds that you will face on these flats, and the extra grunt when it came to finishing the fight.

It goes without saying that a quality drag system is required to land these fish but probably just as important in a reel is the need to cram on as much backing as possible. I don't know how far these fish run but it is a bloody long way. Between the three of us, we all fished a variety of lines and I would recommend taking not only your standard weight forward floater, but

OPPOSITE TOP: Roadside stalls offer some clues to the marine life found in the surrounding waters.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM: New Caledonia is classic bonefishing - shallow flats surrounded by scenic landscapes.

LEFT: Big bonefish are the reason to visit New Caledonia.

also chuck a sink tip and intermediate into your tackle bag as well. At the business end, 5 feet of 60 lb mono made up the butt of my leader. I then tapered it down to 21 lb fluorocarbon at the tippet, totalling about 9 or 10 feet total length. As always, each fly fisher had a different selection of flies that worked for them. Charles enjoyed success with a variety of dark rabbit fur flies, Peter slayed them with Christmas Island Specials and Gotchas and I had confidence in small chartreuse Clousers and pink or tan Gotchas. I had imagined before my arrival that these fish would eat whatever was thrown at them being such unpressured fish, but as is generally the case, presentation was all important. There were plenty of refusals and even some fish found turning tail at the look of some of the flies I threw at them.

VISUALLY CHALLENGED

There is one advantage fishing to 26-plus inch bonefish on a bright sunny day and that is that their dark green backs stand out like beacons as they amble along white sandy flats. But there is also one guarantee in bonefishing; that the white, fluffy, cumulus clouds blowing across the skies above your head always meet the sun when you least want them to. The huge bonefish you had been following disappears with the light and the frustration results in all manner of abuse to the skies. The weather in New Caledonia is fickle and you must expect some frustration with the cloud, but there are a few approaches to overcome cloudy days. The first is to stick on the right hand shoulder of the guide. Their eyes are

out of this world and they can spot fish in even the most difficult conditions. The approach that I also found to work well on overcast days was the stake out. Knowing which direction the fish would be approaching, you get yourself a window of about 30 feet in front of you. I made the point of knowing exactly where all the dark patches of weed were in that window and then it is just a matter of staring and waiting for a fish to enter that space. It takes every ounce of patience to stand and wait and there is always the overriding urge to wade, but the stake out turned several overcast, unpromising days into days to remember.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

It is always difficult to know how these remote fisheries will develop over time. Since New Caledonia was first put onto the map, the original discoverer of the fishery is no longer operating. A second attempt to open up the fishery is under way and Richard Bertin's operation, while in its infancy, will ensure that anglers get the chance to experience bonefishing in the Northern Province. While the atolls to the south and east of New Caledonia offer bonefishing opportunities, the jewel is the vast northern region where the extensive mangrove system, huge variety of flats habitats, complete lack of human population and large numbers of very big bonefish make a trophy bonefish fishery a reality.



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