

Bonefish Preparations:

1. Prepare your line by stretching it. Grab four feet at a time between your hands, put the line *across your back* and pull hard to take the coils (“memory”) out of the line, repeat as needed during the day, especially if you were “on your reel” for a lunch break. Dress your fly lines each night after fishing to clean the lines. A wet cloth will also work wonders in the late mid-day to freshen it up and help you shoot line in the afternoon.
2. Strip the line you’ll need off the reel and onto the deck, but no more than you are comfortable casting, especially if there is wind. Cast the line and practice a couple of single or double hauls to get your timing and rhythm. Then re-strip in the line--as if you were retrieving a fly--to make a new pile in which the line going up through the rod guides comes off the top of the pile when you next cast. (If you try to cast line coming from the bottom of the pile, you increase your chance of a tangle.
3. Work 25 feet of line out of the rod tip. This will enable you to achieve an immediate 35-foot cast (the line plus a 10-12 foot leader). Let the line drift in a semi-circle loop beside the boat, but be sure there isn't so much line out that it reaches the trim tabs or motor. This makes it hard for the guide to pole and can get caught in all the stuff at the back of the boat.
4. Hold the fly’s *head* in your thumb and index finger, don’t hold it by the leader letting the fly twist and catch leader/line/clothes.
5. Position the rod tip slightly to the left side of the bow and keep it near the surface of the water. This will minimize the effects of the wind. If the guide sees fish, or you think you see fish, point your rod to show the guide where you’re looking, so he can help vector you to the fish.

Casting (For Rt. handed casters): Wait for the boat’s momentum to slow before casting. You won’t be able to move the fly/give it action if you cast directly in the direction the boat is coasting...Pay attention to when the boat changes direction, once you have spotted approaching fish; this is usually your clue to start casting because the guide has adjusted your angle to the wind, the boat, and his position on the poling platform. This creates a window or “opening” for you to back cast, without looking back to avoid the pole/guide, etc. You do not want to take your eyes off the approaching silver ghosts, because you will lose valuable time (and distance) to the fish in trying to re-spot them.

1. When it's time to cast, swing your rod behind you, with an exaggerated motion, to the 2 o'clock position. This will flip your line into the water behind you.
2. Hold your left arm (the one with the fly) out in front of you.
3. Come sharply forward with the rod tip, to make a roll cast in the direction you want to cast.
4. Don't drop the fly on the deck! Instead, toss it out and to the left allowing it to be pulled from the boat by the momentum of the line.
5. Let the cast roll out onto the water and use the water tension to load the rod for your back cast. Now you're ready to start shooting line on the forward cast.
6. Try to "lock yourself into position" so you twist at the waist, not shift your feet. This will greatly reduce the number of times you will step on your line when casting.

Shush, be very, very quiet: "Quiet" feet are essential to good bonefish hook-ups. Wading boots are worse than bass drums on the casting deck. The fish can hear and feel even the slightest of repositioning of your feet with these clodhoppers. They are also notorious for stepping on your fly line just as you shoot a cast, causing the fly to land short. (Wading boots are for wading, have a quiet pair of low profile sneakers, preferably without laces to tangle in fly line, for casting from the boat. Switch to wading boots when it is time to wade.)

Fishing Partners: are a key part of any bonefishing trip when you are in a boat together. When the other guy is "up" for his "turn", this is not the time to take a nap, rummage around in the cooler for a drink, futz with gear in a hatch and then drop the hatch lid, eat a sandwich, or clip your toenails leaving shards all over the bottom deck, (yes, I have seen all of these happen...).

Bonefish have a way of "appearing" at the most inopportune of moments. Before you switch turns, ask the guide if now is a good time to switch positions. Unbeknownst to you, he may see fish and is already getting you in position to make a cast, and changing would be a very bad idea given all the noise and kaffuffle that that entails. (Same goes for cutting off a fly to change it for whatever reason, ask first...)

The buddy not fishing at the time the guide is poling the boat needs to be an active line “caddy” for the angling partner. Help lay the line out on the deck, below the casting platform so it is free of coils and any potential snags on rod butts, shoe heels, dry bags, etc, that always seem to “grab” flylines at the worst possible moment. Wind naturally makes it all the more important to be an active, involved line caddy. Rather than pull line out from under an angler’s foot, just say, “raise your left heel” (or “move your right foot to the left a bit”). This way the angler doesn’t have to look down and lose his orientation to the flats/fish, areas he was looking for fish before he accidentally moved a foot or the line blew under his heel.

When a cast is made to a sighted fish, and the angler begins to strip in the line, the line “caddy” needs to be gathering in the spare line and laying it on the deck so the angler can lift the fly and line and shoot a second cast quickly without getting all tangled up, or having the fly line getting sucked under the bottom of the boat, creating friction/tension that limits a second cast. A line caddy needs to be as stealthy as a Sioux warrior to be an actual asset to the team.

“Turns”, (i.e. “taking turns”): This is complicated and needs some flexibility. Based on the level of bonefishing experience, this is a fluid dynamic.

- a. My strongly suggested *minimum* length of time for a turn, assuming you are not seeing many fish, is 20-minutes.
- b. I suggest not taking more than 35-40 minutes in the bow as you simply can’t concentrate on seeing fish and be ready to cast beyond that window.
- c. How much longer the guide is going to pole on the flat you are fishing and if you are approaching a slack tide period also comes into the equation. If your turn has been 35 minutes, (but you might only have 5 more minutes till you reach the end of the flat), *ask the guide before* you switch places, if you should switch or wait till you get to the next flat.

That being said, you also need to be sensitive to how many “shots” you are “allowed” during your “turn”.

- a. If you are seeing and casting to lots of fish/schools of fish, plan on changing after two or three legitimate “shots” at fish where you had a fair chance to get a fly to a fish and had a chance to strip and re-cast if you didn’t hook-up.

- b. By the time you get to a third “strikeout”, your adrenal levels will be too high and you will start “pressing”. Take a timeout, let your buddy have a chance, settle your nerves, help him with his line, get refocused and watch him try to catch a fish. Watch and learn from his tactics, absorb and repeat the ones that work, avoid his mistakes...
- c. If you have caught 2 or 3 more fish than your buddy, give your buddy some “bonus time” in the bow of 5-10 extra minutes with each turn to try and get him caught-up. *(This can be tough if one angler is more experienced at bonefishing than the other and you may never catch him up, however, you have given him some extra shots. For the guy having a bad day, you shouldn't diminish too much the time a more experienced angler has at getting fish as that isn't fair to him either. This is probably the most delicate area of a bonefishing day and if not handled thoughtfully on both sides, can lead to hurt feelings and disappointment on both sides.)* One way to reduce this situation from getting to out-of-whack is to ask the guide to let the better angler do some wading, if the better angler likes to wade and there are productive, wadeable flats close to where the guide will be poling the other angler. This way, the less fortunate angler can have some one-on-one teaching experience with the guide and hopefully get up to speed a little faster than with an audience. This lightens the psychological pressure that can build and cause the less experienced angler to “press”, further diminishing his odds of gaining the experience needed in seeing, hooking and fighting a bonefish.
- d. If you catch a fish in the first 4 minutes of your turn, you should give up the bow, unless your buddy has already boated 3 or 4 more fish than you have. If you have been poled for awhile and your buddy has been wading, then it is your buddy's turn in the bow for the mutually agreed upon “length of turns”, even if you don't plan to wade that day or there are no wadeable flats in the area for you to go walk while your buddy takes a shot in the bow with the guide poling him.

Poling vs. Wading

For guys that like to wade, there is nothing more satisfying than seeing, hooking and catching a fish while wading. If you are relatively new to bonefishing, wading is not a good use of your time as you need to learn more about seeing, stalking, casting, hooking and fighting these fish under the watchful/helpful tutelage of a guide. That being said, a “poled” angler will probably out-catch a wading angler 3-1 because of the additional water

that can be covered and the extra pair of experienced eyes being brought to bear on the quarry.

Do not plan to wade if you do not have good saltwater flats wading boots and a good lower back...Wading on flats is a misnomer as most flats aren't flat...they are pocked with soft depressions, mucky sections that could suck a shoe off your foot in a matter of seconds, (never to be recovered), or worse, crab hummocks, which are worse than walking on frozen tufts of tundra grass...slippery, awkward, and a sheer misery if you find yourself with a half mile of flat and no going back and it is all crab mounds...and then there are stingrays and 'cuda on the flats. Don't cast at a barracuda unless you are in a boat with a guide. You won't be able to safely handle a hooked 'cuda without needle nose pliers and the safety of some fiberglass. People get hurt by having 'cuda's jump into them when they are pursuing bait and you get in the way or they are hooked and accidentally jump in your direction. They aren't malicious, but you need to treat them with care.

As for sharks, essentially you have to watch out for black tips and lemon sharks when wading, they are seldom aggressive, but, if you have let several bonefish go in their area and they get all "sharky" and start shooting about looking for or chasing the released fish, it is time to move on...It is a bull shark, with their big head and broad shouldered appearance, to watch out for if you are in water any *more than knee deep*. (Another rule of thumb: *if your nuts are salty, you are too deep*, and now potentially a salted snack food for Mr. Bull.) These guys just have a bad attitude, are unpredictable and mean. Most guides are genuinely afraid of bull sharks given their history and experience.

Stripping/Hooking/Fighting a Bonefish

Rule One: Listen to the Guide!

Rule Two: See Rule One.

When you first get to the flat and make some false casts and start to get your line organized, ask the guide to do a practice session with you. Have him walk you through pointing the rod and "seeing" the mythical fish. Make a cast and have the guide tell you when he wants you to start stripping. Have the guide show you what he calls a "short strip", a "bump-bump" strip, and a "long" strip. Have him show you where he wants the tip of the rod *at all times* after the cast is made and you start stripping. (Hint: This is **NOT** a game where you lift the tip to set the rod...Yet we as trout and salmon guys do it all the time to terrible results on a bonefish flat!)

When you do come tight on a bonefish, you are about to experience the “Bonefish Boogie” (a.k.a. the “Bonefish Two-Step” and the “Bonefish Hustle”) dance steps...They take off and the line starts jumping about the deck and will grab anything and everything, even the most experienced bonefisherman. The line has a mind of its own...The best thing you can do is to reduce the most common problems.

- a. Keep the butt of the rod pinned against the inside of your casting forearm/wrist so the line can't butt wrap on you as easily.
- b. Ask your fishing buddy to be your line caddy, as this will reduce the chances of you stepping on your line.
- c. Hold the rod out and away from you with your casting hand and *lightly* hold the running fly line in your left fingers, out as far to your left as possible. (If you “pinch” the line with too much pressure, it will start to jump and grab stuff. *Don't pinch it too tight!*)
- d. As the fly line is almost off the deck start bringing your left hand towards the front of the reel and you will then be on the reel with the drag doing the work.
- e. Hold the rod as high above your head as possible during the first run and when first reeling in the fish. You want/need as much angle as possible to keep the line out of rocks, mangrove shoots and sea fans underwater. Bonefish have an uncanny knack for knowing where everyone of them are and will try to put themselves between the obstructions and you resulting in a cut-off, a broken leader or an “un-pinned” fish depending on its size/speed and the strength of your leader. Having said that, canny bonefish (and permit) will run quite a ways away and then double back and swim right at you. This is when you want to reel like crazy, but be careful you don't get a wrap on your tip top due to loose line and a waving rod as you wind. To keep pressure on the fish, put your rod tip under water, on the side of the boat away from the direction the fish is running back at you to keep resistance on the hook. This will help keep your hook (barbless, naturally) pinned in your fish until you can reel in the slack.
- f. Drag: Better to start with a light drag and add a little at a time than too much in the beginning. You can also palm the reel to add a little drag without messing with the drag settings. Reminder, the longer the run, the less drag you want as the pressure on the hook is increasing due to the resistance of the line and the backing in the water.

- g. As to which hand you should use to reel, there is much debate, but I go with Lefty Kreh on this one...for fish that often run fast, right back at you, you need to have your reel set-up, if you are a right handed caster, with the reel handle on the right side because you need your hand with the most strength and dexterity to recover slack line as quickly as possible. (The complaint I hear from right-handed casters with left-handed retrieves, is that they think they will drop the rod. I have yet to see anyone drop a rod or lose a fish because they switched from their right to left hand to hold the rod so they can reel with their dominant hand. (FYI, I trout fish with a left-hand wind reel and saltwater fish with right-hand retrieve, and it doesn't seem to require any practice to do it that way...))