



ALL PHOTOS BY MARK B. HATTER

## Grand Bahama Island, Bahamas Avoiding the Penalty Box at North Riding Point

By Mark B. Hatter

**“OK, Stanley, what’s the deal here?”** I asked. “How *exactly* do you want me to work this fly for your bonefish?”

I was perched on the bow of our guide’s 16-foot Dolphin skiff, on a marl flat a mile southeast of Sale Key, 18 miles north of North Riding Point, Grand Bahama Island. My fly line was stretched and loosely coiled behind me, ready for my first shot. I fingered the familiar Brewer’s Amber Shrimp bonefish pattern in my left hand, checking the point on the stainless hook.

I’ve been fortunate to have tested bonefish from Florida to Venezuela, but this was my first trip to the northern Bahamas. And what I found is that at each different location, the choice of fly patterns and the action the angler is required to impart to the fly is unique. In short, what works in Belize does not necessarily work in Grand Bahama. So my question was not only germane but also appreciated by our veteran guide, Stanley Glinnton.

“A’right, mon,” Stanley began in the classic patois that reminds you that you *can* relax because things *are* better in the Bahamas. “I wan’ you to strip dat fly long an’ slow,” he said. “None o’ dat strip-strip-strip stuff on my boat. Our bones here gonna run from dat kinda motion, mon.”

Doug Schlink, my fishing partner, looked at me from the skiff’s jump seat behind the casting platform and smiled knowingly. Doug is a veteran of big bonefish; he’d fished Grand Bahama before and knew the protocol well. However, I would not learn

from Doug, as the luck of the draw had me on the bow for the first shot; my “rock” had beaten his “scissors.” But our trip actually had begun a about a month earlier.

*Of course* I was ready for potential bonefish action when he called me one cold January morning in 2008. Was I interested in a brief trip to Grand Bahama? Hell yes! It seemed I was not the only angler needing a respite from a chilly, windy winter; Doug was also itching for something that would take him deep into his backing. He had in mind an international place where the bones were purported to average 6 pounds, a place that was easy to get in and out of and was just the ticket for a couple of days on the water.

So I checked flight schedules, found several through Miami departing every day, and accepted his invitation to join him at the North Riding Point Club. The best part was hooking up once again with Doug, who is not only a great fly caster but a lucky angler to boot. Fishing with “Lucky Doug,” I was virtually assured of getting some images of a quality bonefish and a good story.

“OK, long and slow,” I said to no one in particular. “I can do *that*.” As Stanley climbed onto the poling platform and Doug stripped off layers of fleece in the nearly still air, I quietly thanked the wind gods. They had provided a long-needed pause to the strong blow that kept Stanley and other guides at the club from fishing remote Sale Key for more than a month.

Yet, in spite of the nearly calm conditions, the early-morning air and water were cool, 66 degrees to be exact, thanks to an “Alberta Clipper” that had washed over the Islands three days earlier. I really had little to be concerned

*Need Caption*



about; just a day before, in cooler weather and with a stiff wind, a pair of anglers staying at the club had had plenty of shots at some *really* big fish. They had been relegated to fishing sheltered bays on the vast flats on the north side of Grand Bahama, but were ebullient when we met them the evening of our arrival.

"I've never seen so many large bonefish in my life!" said one of the guys. "While we struggled with the wind and the cloud cover, we did land one 9-pounder on a fly—and that was a small one!"

As I pondered our good weather fortune from the bow of the Dolphin, still quietly worrying about the water temperature, Stanley suddenly came to life. "Bonefish!" he barked. "Two fish, eight o'clock, 40 feet!"

"Yeah, OK, yeah, got 'em!" I said, starting my false cast. But the truth was, I did *not* see the fish. Instead, I made an accurate cast to an innocuous piece of dark bottom 10 feet behind the closing bones. I only saw them as they departed, leaving a toilet-bowl boil and twin jet contrails of silty marl. Sheepishly, I looked back at Stanley, who was shaking his head grimly.

"Lemme tell you, mon," Stanley began counseling. "Know what happens if you mess up a shot on my boat?" Doug and I looked at each other, not knowing what to say. I was feeling a bit of apprehension welling up when, after a long pause, Stanley continued. "I tell you what happens, mon—you go to my penalty box!" And with that, Stanley let out a loud belly laugh, flashing a white-toothed smile on his ebony face, evaporating the tension.

Stanley and Doug were still making cracks about my great cast to a plug of algae when, out of nowhere, a

6-pound single appeared at nine o'clock, down-sun—a dusky football shape paralleling the skiff at 60 feet. Fortunately, I was the first to see this fish and executed the right cast and the right strip to spark the desired Pavlovian response in the fish's raisin-size brain. One long strip, as prescribed by "Stan-the-Man," as we affectionately labeled him later in the day, and the fish was tight to the leader.

"A'right, mon! Good cast! No penalty box for you!" Stanley, still laughing, staked the boat while the bonefish ran for the horizon leaving me with a doubled-over rod, a protesting drag, and a feeling of complete elation. In less than five minutes, I was deep into backing on a respectable Sale Key bonefish.

As it turned out, this fish was just the beginning of an epic day. The original plan had Doug and me rotating at one of two junctures: every 15 minutes or after the release of a fish, whichever came first. From a little after 9 a.m., when we started, until 4 p.m., when we finished and started the engine for the first time since leaving the ramp in the morning, we never had to implement the rotation rule.

In fact, the fishing was *red* hot. At one point in the middle of the day, the fish were still stream-

ing to the boat in singles and pairs while one of us was tight to a fish. So we took advantage of this by having the hooked-up angler move to the back of the skiff while the other guy took shots at fresh fish. The result was five doubles. When it was time to leave, Stanley told Doug and me that our day, going 32 for 39 on bonefish to 9 pounds, was the second-best he'd ever experienced at Sale Key. I knew Doug was a lucky charm.

Over lunch we discovered that Stan-the-Man was

more than just a great guide; he was also a consummate storyteller with a quick wit and a great closing. With regard to my earlier question on fly action, he emphasized his point with a funny story while we ate sandwiches.

"I had dis one guy on my boat who would *not* listen," he said. "I say to him, 'Why don't you listen to me about strippin da fly, mon?' He say to me, 'Stan, Lefty Kreh told me that bonefish like short, sharp strips, so that's what I'm doing, just like Lefty instructed me to do.' So I say to him, 'Hey, mon, look 'round you. You see Lefty on dis boat? No? I don't think so. This is *my* boat, mon. When you fish my boat, you strip like I say. When you fish on Lefty's boat, you can strip like Lefty say!'"

Stan-the-Man had a gift for the punch line. And, yeah, he told us, the guy got the message and immediately started catching fish.

There is good reason for Stanley's counsel on the way one should impart fly action. The guides at the club like lots of weight to get the fly to the bottom quickly. This weight, coupled with a long progressive strip, causes the fly to drag through the marl, often leaving a "smoke" trail. It is this smoke trail that seems to light up big bonefish on a consistent basis. The club has plenty of photos of anglers releasing fish in excess of 10 pounds and even a few shots of bones exceeding 16 pounds.

We were pleased to find that the bones on Sale Key were not terribly judicious in their diet; they fell for a number of patterns, provided they had sufficient weight to get the fly to the bottom quickly. Doug even pulled a virgin invention from his box that was tied weighted, with nothing but natural materials. The bones found Doug's fly particularly attractive, so, in honor of Bahamian tradition and in remembrance of our epic day, Doug named his pattern the "Stan-the-Man."

It had been a long run over open water to Sale Key, but our journey proved well worth it. Somehow, the rough and wet afternoon ride home over once again choppy seas seemed meaningless against the backdrop of a blockbuster day in which not another boat was sighted. We were the last of three fishing groups to finally arrive back at the club and were warmly greeted by Mercedes and Tim Comstock, club managers. After swapping stories with them on the day's fishing, it was time to shower off the salt before dinner. Fortunately, we arrived before the first round of hors d'oeuvres (conch fritters) were served, and we looked forward to the lobster dinner planned for 7:30. According to Tim, the two other boats elected to fish the

"back country" on the north side of the Grand Bahama. While they did not post the phenomenal numbers Doug and I did at Sale Key with Stanley, they too had double-digit days and caught fish to 9 pounds.

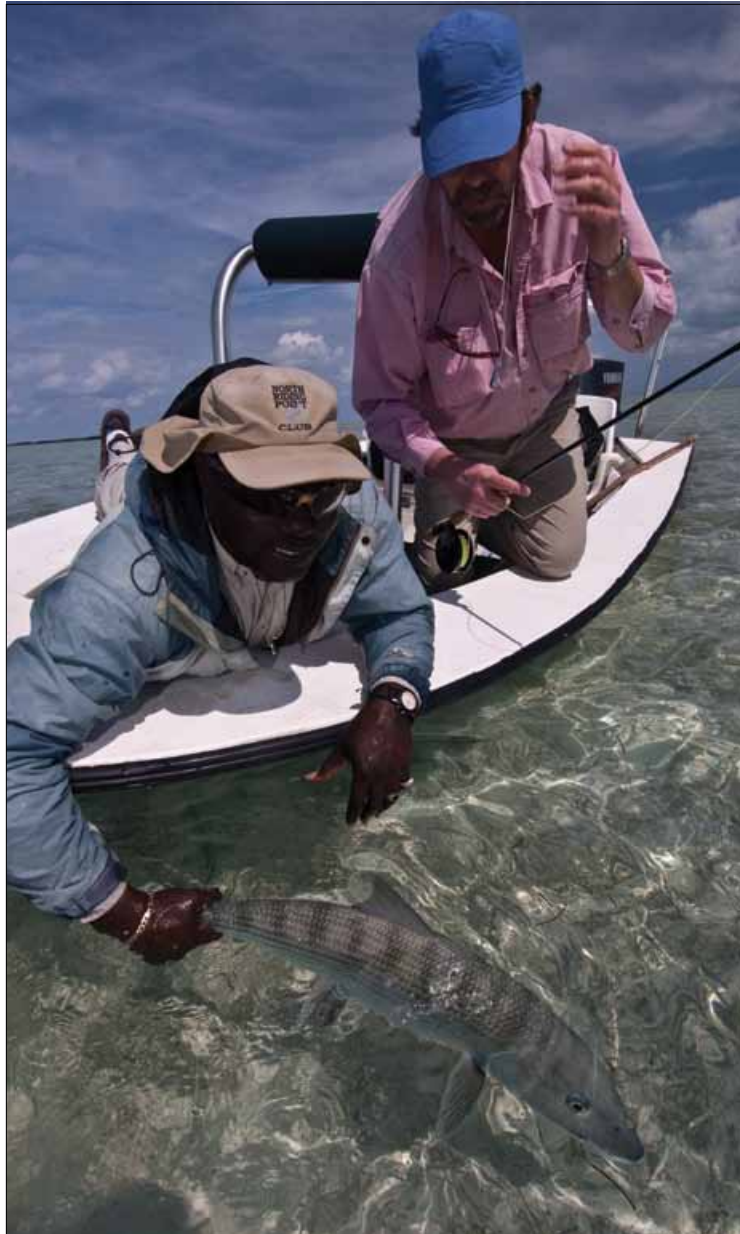
In all the locations I've bonefished, with the exception of the Florida Keys, a fish approaching 10 pounds was *always* the exception. That is, until I fished North Riding Point Club. Doug was accurate when he first told me about this place where the average bone is 6 pounds. Here, neither the staff nor the guides bat an eye at any fish less than 10 pounds; these fish are routine.

The club has a unique and exclusive operation on Grand Bahama Island. Unlike the other two bonefish lodges located on opposite ends of the island, North Riding Point Club is located almost in the middle of Grand Bahama, 20 miles east of Freeport at Freetown. The club encompasses 6 remote acres and 400 feet of beachfront that runs undeveloped for miles in both direction. The club even offers decent bonefishing off their secluded beach on the right tides. I can never get enough fly fishing, and I was up at first light each day walking the desolate beach and looking for tailers. While I didn't find fish on any of the mornings, two guys scored several fish on the afternoon we returned late from Sale Key.

Unlike the other lodges, North Riding Point Club is not located on a bay or harbor where their skiffs are berthed on the water. Rather, the club keeps its fleet of eight Dolphin skiffs (seven primaries and one backup) on trailers attached to new Ford Explorer SUVs. Frankly, I find this to be a distinct advantage. While the other outfits are limited by the distance their skiffs travel from their respective marinas, the club has widespread access to remote sections of the island based on five well-spaced boat ramps.

Fishing can literally begin in as little as a minute from the boat ramp. However, if you get a chance to run to Sale Key, it's an 18-mile trip that takes at least 30 minutes under calm conditions. The boats are supposed to be back at the lodge by 5:30 p.m., so the number of hours you can spend on the water will depend on ramp and fishing site location.

And while anglers come for shots at the very large bonefish, the amenities at the club are the best I've experienced yet in a fishing lodge: well-appointed beach cottages replete with screened porches, artfully tiled bathrooms, imported European mattresses, 600-count Egyptian cotton sheets. Each cottage has a small refrigerator well stocked

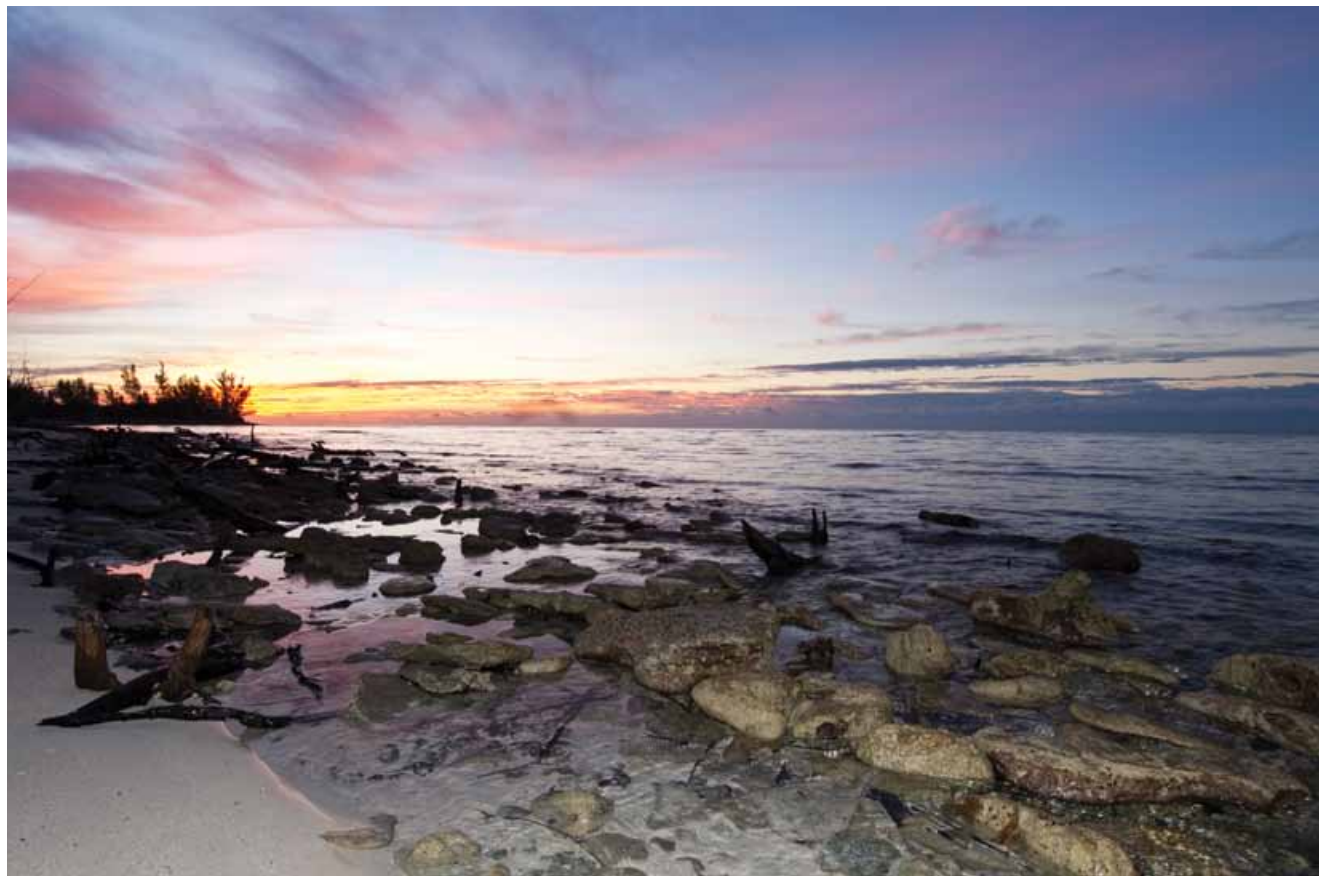


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### Stan-the-Man

**Hook:** Daiichi X452, size 2  
**Thread:** Tan  
**Eyes:** Brass or gold dumbbell eyes  
**Tail:** Gray squirrel tail  
**Body:** 4 Cree neck hackles, palmered and trimmed flat on top and bottom

PHOTO BY EASTERN FLY FISHING



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with your preferred beverage. Just let the staff know your desire and it will be there upon your return from fishing.

The main lodge houses the kitchen, dining room, and a very comfortable social hall complete with an open bar (all drinks are included in the rate package) stocked with nothing but top-shelf liquor. They even offer Cuban cigars. I have to say, it was pretty cool to chill out after a great day on the water with three fingers of port, a Montecristo, and like-minded friends. All this *after* three rounds of hors d'oeuvres, a dinner of fresh Bahamian lobster, and several rounds of single-malt Scotch. It's a wonder any of our crowd could get out of bed in the morning to fish.

During the three days Doug and I fished, we saw dozens of bonefish in the 6- to 10-pound range. However, on the second fishing day, under a strong easterly wind creating

less-than-ideal casting conditions, Doug and I got shots at some real slobbs that would have gone 12 pounds plus, but neither of us could close the deal. That day had us in the back country, fishing with club guide Bully Beavens. While the wind had once again freshened during the night, the clouds held off and we had bluebird conditions to fish for



some truly giant bonefish in sheltered bays within minutes of the ramp.

Almost immediately Doug had shots at a pair of fish we estimated at 12 pounds, but he was unable to connect. The fish were fewer and farther between than those at Sale Key, but were definitely larger. For the first time on the trip we implemented the rotation plan.

Over the course of an hour both Doug and I had several shots at some real "toads," but we were able to fool only a pair of fish at 7 and 9 pounds, respectively. Interestingly, under any other circumstances at most places around the world, a pair of fish like this during an entire trip would be cause for celebration. However, on Grand Bahama Island, they only serve to whet your appetite for what might be lurking on the next flat just ahead. This place *will* spoil you.

As the day grew longer, so did the wind, making for some interesting fly casting at the constant parade of fish working the flats. We would have been well served to have a rod with an intermediate fly line on board to combat the wind drift we suffered with the floating fly lines, which imparted the wrong action to the fly.

Every now and then, one of us would get the right situation where the competing vectors of wind, boat drift, and fish movement canceled one another and we could impart the right action, resulting in a hooked fish. We did have plenty of chances to make the club's photo album with double-digit fish; however, just as the fish gods can be generous one day, they can be stingy the next. And after the day we had at Sale Key, we did not mind their recalcitrance.

We hoped for better conditions on our last day, but awoke to not only wind but also rain squalls. Eventually the squalls passed, leaving a heavy overcast that made sighting conditions difficult at best. Our guide for day three, Steve Tate, was able to give us a good hour's worth of fishing in a couple of shallow mangrove-lined creeks before the falling tide chased us to deeper water. Somehow, under these tough conditions, Lucky Doug was able to get on the board with a cookie-cutter 6-pounder.

For me, the conditions proved too tough; I could not pick up the fish before they were already at the boat. However, it really didn't matter. Coming off two excellent

## GRAND BAHAMA ISLAND NOTEBOOK

**Where:** Northern Bahamas.

**When:** Oct. 1–July 15 for bonefish; April–July, permit and tarpon are also found on the flats,

**Headquarters:** North Riding Point Club, Free Town, Grand Bahama Island. Book through Angler Adventures, (860) 434-9624, (800) 628-1447, [www.angleradventures.com/northriding](http://www.angleradventures.com/northriding). *Additional fishing/lodging options:* Castaway Cottage, (207) 286-5414, [www.castawaybahamas.com](http://www.castawaybahamas.com); Grand Bahama Outfitters, (866) 933-2426, [www.grandbahamaoutfitters.com](http://www.grandbahamaoutfitters.com).

**Appropriate gear:** 7- to 9-wt. rods, floating and intermediate lines; 9- or 10-wt. rod for the occasional permit and a 10- or 12-wt. rod for tarpon.

**Useful fly patterns:** *Bonefish:* Brewer's Amber Shrimp, Crazy Charlies, Gotchas, Clouser Deep Minnows, Puffs, Stan-the-Man. *Tarpon:* Deceivers and standard Keys tarpon patterns. *Permit:* Del's Merkin Crab and other crab patterns.

**Necessary accessories:** Sunscreen, polarized sunglasses, tropical-weight clothing that wicks moisture, rain jacket, fleece or waterproof wading jacket for the winter months.

**Fly shop:** The club has a small in-house fly shop that carries recommended flies, leader material, and even fly rods.



bonefishing days with plenty of quality fish completely satiated my thirst for a little midwinter line-pulling action. So we bagged it early to head back to the lodge for lunch and a shower. After all, we did have a flight to catch at 4 p.m.

Back at the club, Stanley, who was presiding over routine maintenance on the boats and trailers, flagged us down as we pulled in. "Hey, mon," he called. "How'd you guys do with all dat wind an' rain dis mornin'?"

"Well, Stan, let me put it this way," I said. "You know that penalty box of yours? Let's just say that it had my name written all over it."

With that, he threw his head back and let out a belly laugh, flashing bright teeth under the overcast sky. ➤

*Mark B. Hatter is the Florida field editor for Eastern Fly Fishing magazine.*