



## Tropical Sportsman Roundup

*The western edge of Abaco, Bahamas, is loaded with aggressive bonefish year-round.*

By Sam Hudson, Associate Editor

# The Marls of Marsh Harbour

Jody Albury's 40-horsepower tiller engine grabbed what little water flowed between the tunnel-hull as we squeaked south along the western edge of Great Abaco Island.

"A lot of these trails are from bird hunters with airboats," explained the guide. "Don't let up on the throttle until you're at the spot—you might not be able to get back on plane."

Marl landscape appears harsh but beautiful—a jumble of keys, limestone, grass, gemstone salt water, and candy-white bottom that can devour a wader whole. Imagine Mosquito Lagoon or upper Florida Bay without the freshwater influx and turbidity. Skinnier, too. You can expect to encounter bonefish, sharks, 'cudas, mojarra and mangrove snapper. As a bonus, permit feed along the outer reef edges close to open water, and occasionally a dazed

and confused tarpon pops up.

After a half-hour run south, we settled along an edge sprinkled with sawgrass. Bonefish stalked amongst the grass, taking advantage of high water by sucking up shrimp, crabs and sea worms.

"Out here, the water level is mostly wind-driven, not tide-driven," said Albury. "A westerly wind pushes water into the Marls, allowing us to access spots usually too shallow to reach. An easterly wind pushes the water out."

### A Bone to Pick

It took all of five minutes to hook up to a bonefish, which is one of the big draws here. These fish, while smaller than Florida Keys bones, are aggressive feeders. I started at the bow with a 10-pound spinner and a custom-tied jig that mimicked a shrimp.

"Four o'clock," said Albury from the poling platform. "Look behind you. He's moving away from the boat." I spotted my first fish (amber lens sunglasses are best) and made a cast right at its tail. I quickly reeled in my line and made a second cast, this time in front of its nose. The grey fish spotted my offering and pounced on it.

"Fishing across The Bahamas, I've never seen bonefish this aggressive," explained Albury. "If you miss on a first

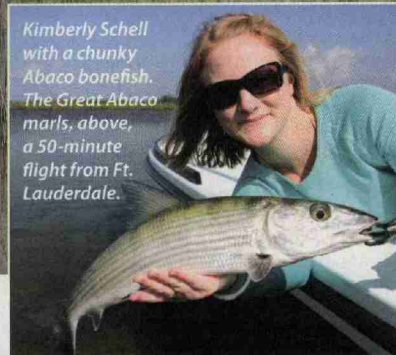
cast, keep trying. I rather you give it a few more seconds to make the right cast than to make a bad cast. I had one angler make 8 casts at a fish. Finally, we checked the fly and the leader had wrapped around the hook. He fixed the problem, cast it out and hooked the fish."

My fish launched away from the boat as I lifted the rod tip to keep from wrapping around the reeds. After two fun runs, the slab of silver came to boatside. Jody tussled with the fish, and then flipped it upside down. The bonefish immediately went limp, a neat trick.

The competition amongst the bonefish benefitted us. Friend and fellow angler Kimberly Schell, from Sanford, and I took turns at the bow, hooking fish throughout the day. "My stomach is going to bruise from this rod butt," said Schell, after her bonefish took off again.

The Marls of Great Abaco cover about 400 square miles. That's a lot of bonefish fighting for a finite amount of grub. Sight fishing is the optimal approach. It's why Albury rarely fishes bonefish "muds," though they can be a common occurrence—they're just not as fun. Local anglers believe bonefish cloud the water to cool it off, while others feel the muds are simply fish feeding aggressively together.

Abaco bonefish move purposely from deeper bay waters to mangrove shorelines. If the water is high, bonefish head for the mangrove roots, where they become inaccessible. Albury poled the shorelines each morning,



Kimberly Schell with a chunky Abaco bonefish. The Great Abaco marls, above, a 50-minute flight from Ft. Lauderdale.

### Bahamas Outlast Hurricane Irene

Hurricane Floyd, from 1999, was the last major storm to inflict catastrophic damage on the Bahamas chain of islands. It's the one local Bahamians bring up, if you ask them. In late August, Hurricane Irene pummeled the islands but didn't compare to Floyd. Any major flooding during the storm receded quickly, funneling waters back to the sea. Resorts like [Abaco Beach Resort](#) were built to sustain hurricane conditions.

"Everything is up and running and we're ready to go fishing," said Captain Jody Albury, of Marsh Harbour. "All utilities were restored within a few days after the storm; very few structures were impacted. Most of the damage was to trees, with many losing limbs and all their leaves."



spotting fish heading toward the roots. We never went ten minutes without spotting fish.

Three watery ghosts meandered about on a sandy stretch, oblivious to our presence. Capt. Albury poled within range, and Schell made a cast to a fish heading away from the skiff. "Nice cast," whispered Albury. "Keep it still."

Schell struck Bahamas gold with this fish. The bonefish found the fly, sucked it in and shot off faster than trackstar Usain Bolt. The speedster cornered imaginary turns like a racecar, headed toward a maze of roots.

Kimberly's line aimed at the shoreline, but her fish was screaming off into the bay. Albury poled hard toward the line, and I bent down and unhooked the tangle from a branch. Kimberly kept the line tight and the fish stayed on, avoiding catastrophe. Eventually, Schell brought to boat an honest 4-pound fish, our biggest of the trip. Some other portions of The Bahamas and parts of the Keys may average heavier bones, but good luck finding an area that has more willing fish than the Marls.

## Tackle Up

Proper spinning and fly technique requires anglers to throw about five feet in front of a cruising bonefish. Lead the fish and let the fly or jig sit still. As the target swims within range, reel a couple turns or make a few strips. Game on! If windy, more turns or strips may be necessary. They'll pick up on the movement, follow it and scarf it. "Once bitten, don't set the hook," reminds Albury. "Keep the rod low and reel quickly [if you're using spinning gear]."

Standard 10-pound spinning setups and 10-pound fluorocarbon leaders are all that's necessary for conventional anglers. We used custom jigs that were lighter than a Florida "skimmer" jighead, but similar with a lead weight squeezed to the shank to anchor the hook. Albury likes to use these jigs tied with fly material, or even a fly that has a couple of split-shots attached to the leader.

For fly tackle, Albury pairs Orvis reels to 8-weight Temple Fork Outfitter's rods. He uses an 8-weight floating line with a bonefish taper, attached to a 10-foot leader tapering to 10-pound tippet. Top bonefish flies to bring from Florida include Gotchas and Crazy Charlies. Albury personally likes the local Mantis Shrimp and Beck's Sili Legs patterns.

Different flies work, but make sure to tie enough weight to get the fly down quickly, but not enough weight to splash the water and spook fish. Expect some breeze, too. Try throwing 40 feet and laying down a straight, taught line instead of going for distance. Throwing 80 feet and having the line loose all over the surface doesn't cut it, admits Albury.

For live bait, fresh shrimp are tops, but incredibly tough to obtain in The Bahamas. "If possible, hit your local bait shop," says Albury. "Buy live shrimp and then freeze them yourself. Bring them over on the plane flight."

## Getting There

We flew from Fort Lauderdale on Gulfstream Airlines ([www.gulfstreamair.com](http://www.gulfstreamair.com)), which works in conjunction with Continental Connection. Flights directly to Marsh Harbour are available from West Palm Beach, too.

Spend a couple days at one of Marsh Harbour's impressive resorts that cater to fish-

ermen and family. We stayed at the [Abaco Beach Resort](http://www.abacobeachresort.com) ([www.abacobeachresort.com](http://www.abacobeachresort.com)), which features two pools (one with a built-in bar), luxurious rooms that overlook a private beach, and the gourmet Angler's Restaurant with accompanying outside bar. Also, the bar straddles the largest full-service marina in The Bahamas—perfect for those who want to boat instead fly.

Bonefish packages are available for anglers. The Abaco Beach Resort's three-day, two-night package includes two half-days of bonefishing, breakfast each morning, and access to all the resort's amenities. Just bring cash for meals and drinks, and a tip for your guide. In honor of our visit, they named it the Florida Sportsman Magazine Bonefish Package. **FS**