


First Bone!

Acklins Island, Bahamas

By Captain Jim Lucas



One of my favorite fish to stalk and catch is the elusive bonefish, the silver ghost, one of the most challenging fish to catch in shallow water. Pound for pound the bonefish is one of the fiercest fighting fish in salt water. Skittish and elusive they always promise a screaming long first run and are a joy to catch, even a small one!

This trip was a long time in the planning stage. I have fished for bonefish most of my adult life and had experienced the drag screaming action many times and always looked forward to experiencing it again. For this trip I chose Acklins Island for one specific reason, I'll explain:

Years earlier I had by chance visited Acklins while on a yacht delivery to the Virgin Islands. It was an interesting trip and somewhat different from most of my other yacht deliveries down Island. In this instance, it was a nice motorsailer and against my better judgment I had allowed the owner of the yacht to come along as crew, this is normally a rule I do not break, but in this case the owner wanted to gain offshore navigation experience and enjoy some of the Bahama out-islands on the journey, specifically, he wanted to dive Hogsty Reef. I had been to Hogsty on several other occasions and another trip was always in my plan, so I decided that having the owner aboard might not be so bad, in light of the visit to Hogsty being a requirement. The trip went as planned, we motorsailed our way from Island to Island and were having a wonderful time. The weather turned a little stinky after we left San Salvador for our due South run to Hogsty. We decided a late afternoon stop in the bight of Acklins would be a respite from the strong winds and we didn't want to miss North Rocks in the rough weather, plus I was unsure of what protection we could get at Hogsty. So we pulled into the bight of Acklins for a welcome rest and good nights sleep. As it turns out it was a very wise choice, the wind continued to blow even harder all night. Early in the morning I was sitting in the cockpit of the sailboat enjoying the wonderful morning view when I quickly realized the flat we were anchored behind was covered with acres of tailing bonefish. Brighter than I look, I quickly loaded up my spinning reel and a few small jigs into the dinghy and went exploring. I beached the dinghy on a shallow spot of the hard sandy flat and proceeded to wade the flat. I was soon in casting range and spent the next 4 hours or so reeling one after another in. All told I landed easily 75 to 80 bonefish, none were real large, but all gave one heck of a fight, until my arms were way beyond tired. I went back to the sailboat for a welcome break and lunch, then returned again in the late afternoon when the tide changed and did it all again. Easily a 150 plus day of bonefish. As I reluctantly left the flat as it grew dark, I swore to one day return to Acklins Island, so this trip was planned, some 30 years in the making!

After some extensive research, I decided that Acklins Island Lodge seemed like the perfect destination. I contacted their US office and worked on a price for a small group. The trip planning went almost without a hitch. One of my participants had to cancel at the last minute, seems he fell on the ice, damaged his shoulder and could no longer cast! So at the last minute I was faced with substituting a fishing partner! My best friend who is NOT a fisherman, decided a trip to the Bahamas sounded like an ideal trip. The man had hardly ever fished and was not an avid fisherman by any means, but I was determined to make

sure he had a good time and caught at least one bonefish! Little did I know how difficult this might be!

The trip down was for the most part uneventful, the trip home was a whole different story and will be covered later. We flew from Tampa to Nassau, both via different routes, since my buddy was using miles and flew Delta via Atlanta. We arrived in Nassau at almost the same time for an overnight. It is almost impossible to connect to Acklins from the US, so an overnight in Nassau is pretty much a requirement. We had arranged to stay on Cable Beach at a casino, so a fun night was assured. The next morning we counted what money we had left and headed to the airport for our flight to Acklins. The flight on BahamasAir left right on time and in a little over an hour and a half we touched down on



Acklins Airport Sign

Acklins Island! We were met at the airport by a couple people from Acklins Island Lodge, one, Elvis Collie would be our fishing guide. We were driven on what resembled a road to the lodge location only to be informed by the Lodge manager, Les Knowles, that the Lodge was temporarily closed due to some ownership issues and that we would be staying at one of the owners private residence. Of course this was fine, we had come for fishing and a beautiful home to stay in was just fine.

We would thank the owner Hewitt Brown, profusely after our departure. Les Knowles was a wonderful host, cooking our meals and making sure we had everything we needed. The house was just beautiful, so there were no complaints there. Our guide for the upcoming three days, Elvis Collie was introduced, we discussed what we were looking for and he assured us he would be by first thing in the morning to take us to his boat and promised a great day of fishing, we were both excited to get out on the water.

After a wonderful dinner, we got unpacked, fishing gear rigged and settled in for a few cocktails and watched the beautiful sunset on Acklins Island. Filled with anticipation of our upcoming fishing adventure in this remote Island paradise!

Fishing Day One - After a great nights sleep we were quietly awakened by the smell of fresh coffee, quick to rise we were greeted by our host Les Knowles busy cooking breakfast and fixing our boat lunch. A good cup of coffee and a wonderful breakfast was just what we were looking for. A few minutes later our guide Elvis Collie arrived and we quickly loaded the van and headed towards the northern part of the island to where his boat was docked. Easily within a half an hour of leaving the house we were busy loading our gear into Elvis's boat and would soon be on our way. A quick 20 minute run and we arrived at our first fishing destination of the



Our quarters

day. The tide was in the process of changing it was an outgoing and our plan was to fish a wide expansive flat as the water receded and the fish came in to feed. We anchored the boat on the edge of the flat and quickly started our hike to the other side of the flat where Elvis assured us there would be plenty of bonefish! It was a very soft flat and since my partner and I are both somewhat "gravity challenged" in other words weighing in at well over 250 pounds it was a long and challenging hike. Did I mention that the wind was also blowing at 25 knots and casting was going to be difficult to say the least. Not only for myself, but my partner Tom had little to no experience casting. Elvis had his work cut out for him to get Tom a fish for sure.

Elvis assured us the flat got more solid where we intended to fish, so our 300 yard hike at least had a positive end in sight! We soon reached what promised to be our most ideal location based on the wind and current and within a few minutes our guides excellent eyesight spotted a nice school of bonefish working the flat in front of us. Very carefully we crept forward and to the side of the school where we would have the best chance of making a decent cast. I made Tom practice casting along the way and it was a struggle to say the least.

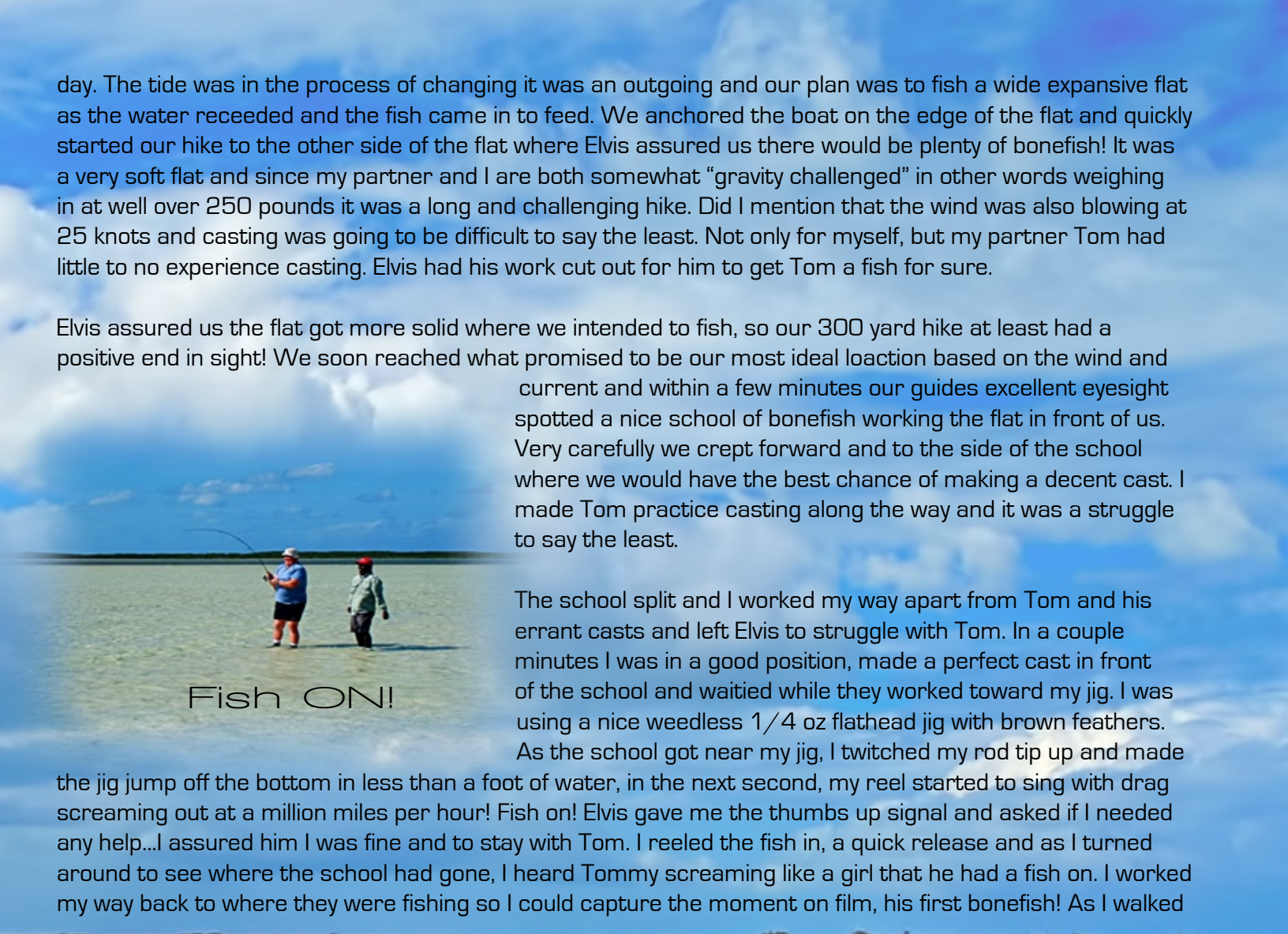
The school split and I worked my way apart from Tom and his errant casts and left Elvis to struggle with Tom. In a couple minutes I was in a good position, made a perfect cast in front of the school and waited while they worked toward my jig. I was using a nice weedless 1/4 oz flathead jig with brown feathers.

As the school got near my jig, I twitched my rod tip up and made

the jig jump off the bottom in less than a foot of water, in the next second, my reel started to sing with drag screaming out at a million miles per hour! Fish on! Elvis gave me the thumbs up signal and asked if I needed any help...I assured him I was fine and to stay with Tom. I reeled the fish in, a quick release and as I turned around to see where the school had gone, I heard Tommy screaming like a girl that he had a fish on. I worked my way back to where they were fishing so I could capture the moment on film, his first bonefish! As I walked

I enjoyed watching Tom struggle with the strength of his first bonefish! In less than 15 minutes since Elvis had spotted the school we both had fish on! My memories of the productive flats of Acklins came rushing back and I felt confident we would be catching more fish as the day went on! Soon I was back beside Tom and watched as he quite expertly fought the fish and Elvis moved in to help remove the hook for a quick picture and a quick release. No they were not the biggest fish on the flat, but they were both nice Acklins Island bones! We continued fishing the area for another hour or two with both of us getting several more nice fish. As it approached lunchtime we worked our way back towards the boat, again trudging our way back through the soft bottom area, Elvis offered to go move the boat closer, but Tom and I were both determined to make it all the way back.

Upon reaching the boat, Elvis decided we should make about a twenty minute run to a sheltered area which might hold some more fish, we were chasing the tide...and a place out of the wind where we could enjoy lunch. A few minutes later we had the boat grounded on a nice flat, sheltered a little more from the wind and we settled back to enjoy our Lunch. Did I mention that Les had made some nice fresh Conch salad for our sandwiches. It was fantastic! After lunch we jumped off of the boat and worked our way up on the flat. Wind was still blowing but this flat was much more solid and easier



Fish ON!



First Bonefish



Acklins Island Bonefish

walking so we went in pursuit of some more elusive bones! The scenery was beautiful but the flat was empty, nothing but a couple small sharks which Tom just had to cast to! In short order he hooked up a nice little blacktip and Elvis quickly headed over to help with the release! Back to the boat we decided to try another deeper water spot where we would fish from the boat. Elvis assured us it held bigger fish and true to his word, within a few minutes of arriving I had a real nice 7 pound plus bone hooked up. I handed it off to Tommy and grab my camera to record the catch!

We continued chasing single fish for the next hour or so and managed to hook-up several more, but the real big fish eluded us! It continued to be a great day and it was decided it was nearly time to head back in, so we cranked up the boat and headed back towards the dock. On the way back in a deep channel I rigged up a wire leader and we trolled a gold spoon hoping to hook one of several big barracuda we spotted. Sure enough, in a couple minutes we had a nice three foot plus cuda on the line, Tommy had a good fight with that for a few

minutes! End of day one, well over 15 bones hooked up, a nice blacktip and a decent cuda. All in all a productive day! Docked the boat, stowed away gear and drove back to the house where it was cocktail time!



Conch Fritters

Quick shower, gear rinsed, fishing clothes hung up to dry, ice in a couple glasses a little gin and tonic and I thought how could the day get any better...little did I know it would reach even higher heights. Just about the time we settled in for cocktails Les Knowles arrived to prepare dinner!

Dinner - Proved to be one of the most fantastic dinners I had ever had. Les had been the Chef at Peace

& Plenty Resort in the Exumas before he headed down to manage Acklins Island Lodge and his culinary expertise proved to be second to none! We started off with some freshly made Conch Fritters to enjoy with our cocktails, then he prepared some fresh Lobster, add in some mixed vegetables and a nice salad and it was dinner fit for a king!

Needless to say Tommy and I had a few more cocktails with the fantastic Conch Fritters, then settled back to enjoy our Lobster dinner.



Lobster Dinner

Fishing Day Two - The wind remained up for day two and it limited the locations we could comfortably fish, but it was still a wonderful day and we managed some decent bonefish. At least another 8 to 10 apiece. And as long as the wind kept blowing at over 25 knots, it was tough fishing. So day two ended much the same as day one...back to the house, clean-up with a nice warm shower, cocktails and another fine dinner by Les Knowles.

This evening we had huge Grouper filets which of course were cooked perfectly, the remainder of the Conch Fritters with cocktails....another perfect ending to a perfect day!

Fishing Day Three - We knew today would be a special day, the wind died down, it was sunny and bright, good tides. Our last day of fishing promised to be the perfect ending to a wonderful fishing vacation.

Elvis decided the flat to fish was where we ended Day two - a perfect flat, solid sand, very few weeds and over a mile of wading space. So after we got



Elvis at work



Acklins Bone on a jig

loaded up, we took the 20 minute run and beached the boat on the edge of the flat. We could already see some fish moving in the distance so we hurriedly hopped in the water and made our way towards the fish. It was a big school of smaller fish, but we hoped to find a big one in there some place.

Less than 15 minutes after arriving we had fish on, both of us. Now that the wind had died down, casting was much easier, especially for Tommy, he was turning into a flats fishing fanatic! The flat continued to produce fish all day!!

This was bound to be our best day of fishing and we were sure to enjoy it. We spent over 3 hours on that flat and the fishing was fantastic. Light winds, clear sunny skies, very large school of Bonefish almost everywhere you looked. They weren't real big fish but the sheer numbers of fish was overwhelming. We caught fish for

the entire 3 hours, then like someone turned off a valve, the bones left the flat, the tide had run completely out and the flat was nearly out of water, so the fish moved off the edge of the flat to deeper water. We worked our way back to the boat and decided it was time for lunch. After a nice rest and a delicious lunch we motor to another flat some distance away, without the wind to worry about we had many more places to fish. Which was a welcome relief. 25 minute boat ride and we decided to again fish from the boat for some larger fish. Elvis poled us up on the flat and kept a sharp eye out for moving fish. With tide at it's low point there were not many areas that were really fishable. We found a few fish, but they were real skittish and if your cast wasn't perfect they spooked and ran, then pole again to get in position and do it all over again. We hooked up a few fish and brought them boatside for an easy release, but it was not fast and furious fishing. After about two hours and a half dozen fish on, we decided to start to work our way back towards home with several stops along the way to try and find some fish, still looking for that one big bonefish! Several stops plenty more casts and a couple more fish rounded out the day, we hit the dock a little early and sun tired for sure. A little sunburned and ready for a nice warm shower and another fine dinner and of course a cocktail or two! Returned to the house and got our chores for the evening finished, clothes cleaned up and packed away in plastic bags for the trip home tomorrow. Les outdid himself again with another fine version of fresh grouper, vegetables and a crisp salad.



We reflected on our vacation and felt a bit of sadness to have to leave this little piece of Bahamian Paradise.



Day Four - Trip Home - Early morning, packed the car after a nice breakfast and took the long bumpy trip to the airport, they really do need to fix that road! Arrived at the airport in plenty of time, got checked in, typical Bahamian confusion, but we settled in to wait for the plane. Flying anywhere in the Caribbean can be a challenge, the more remote the Island the more of an adventure it promises to be. Today would prove my point. The plane arrived right on time, people unloaded and I watched carefully as the pilot began examining the cover on the port side landing gear. The plane was a Bombardier Dash 8 Series 300. This is a twin engine turboprop that seats about 50 people and it looked as though we were going to have a full flight. Shortly after I watched the pilot examining the landing gear cover I began to realize that we were going to have a mechanical delay. I



was amused as one of the baggage handlers at the airport ran out as if to solve the problem with a coat hanger and a pair of pliers, fortunately wiser minds prevailed and the pilot refused his help. Of course there are no announcements or anything from the airport personnel. We wait and wait and about an hour and a half past departure time a small plane lands and taxis up. A mechanic in BahamasAir jump suit deplanes with tools in hand and in literally 10 minutes has the plane fixed. One small "C-Ring" clip is all that was needed. He reviewed the repair with the pilot, signed his maintenance log book and got back on the small plane and headed back to Nassau.

Now of course Tom and I have both already missed our connections in Nassau so we had no idea when we would get home. The flight left after about another hour, had to load the luggage and get everyone on board. Nice flight up to Nassau, clear skies, good view of all the various Out Islands of the Bahamas. Flying over crystal clear turquoise waters is always a pleasure. The landing in Nassau was a welcome relief, we quickly head to our respective airline counters to see what arrangements could be made. Tommy headed to Delta, he is a frequent business traveler and holds the elite Platinum status, so he didn't think he would have any problems, and he didn't. He got on the next Delta flight to Atlanta with seats guaranteed to Tampa. I had for some unknown reason chose Spirit Airlines (Cheap) for my airline and of course their one flight for the day had departed. But I was assured that since the problem occurred on BahamasAir they would solve the problem and sure enough they were true to their word. I was booked on a BahamasAir flight late afternoon Nassau / Miami then US Air from Miami to Tampa. I would arrive back in Tampa sometime around mid-night! I had driven to the Tampa Airport with Tom, so I figured it would be a cab ride home. Flights went off without a hitch and as I landed in Tampa, my cell phone rang and Tom said to get my luggage and meet him out front, he had already landed and got his luggage and was going out to get the car in long term parking and would come by and pick me up!! This had all worked out way to smoothly. We arrived back in Tampa within about 15 minutes of each other. Delta Flight Services in Atlanta (Crown Room) had tracked me down for Tom, he already knew what flight I was on and my arrival time, so he was prepared when he landed to meet me! Not only a great friend but a great traveling companion and now a great fisherman!



Luggage all came through with flying colors, I always worry about that when traveling with a rod case and all my camera gear, but I have to say Bahamas Air did a wonderful job of taking care of me and everything went off without a hitch!

The Thank You's - This trip was a special trip for me and there are some people who need some recognition for their part in making it happen..

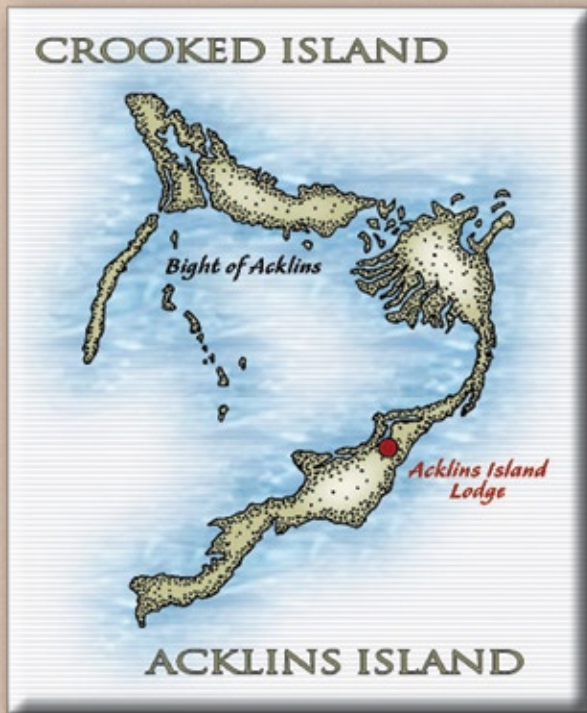
- **Tom Halinski** - My best friend the non-fisherman, now turned fisherman! Tom has since joined me in Alaska for the past two years and is returning this next summer for his third year. He is slowly becoming a very good fisherman!
- **Kevin Hack** - The owner of Yes Bay Lodge who had to cancel at the last minute which enabled my friend Tom to go!
- **Jennifer Steelmon** - Booking office for Acklins Island Lodge who worked out all the details and worked with me to make everything happen.
- **Hewitt Brown** - One of the owners of Acklins Island Lodge who was so gracious to allow Tom and I to stay in his private home while he was having some issues with his Bahamian partner.
- **Les Knowles** - Manager of Acklins Island Lodge and our host and personal chef during our stay. Les is a true professional and made the best of a difficult situation. Sadly I have heard that Les has since passed away, although I have not been able to confirm that.
- **Elvis Collie** - Clearly one of the best guides on Acklins Island. He has eyes like an eagle and can not only spot the fish but will tell you when it has picked up your fly or jig! Very personable and a hard working professional guide.
- **BahamasAir** - Great customer service solving a difficult situation at best. They went out of their way to make my trip home as uneventful as they could! Great people working hard to help.
- **Acklins Island Lodge** - This is a superb facility and certainly worthy of another trip. Although I understand it is not open at the present time, not sure when the problems will get fixed, but I know it will be the first place I check the next time I head down to Acklins Island.

The Art of Bonefishing & What to Bring

Catching bonefish is not as difficult as many people make it out to be. Finding them and getting into decent casting range without spooking them is the hard part. Having a guide who can spot a school from a long distance is critical. Bonefish are probably one of the most skittish fish in the ocean, the slightest sound or splash of water will send them running. Careful quiet steps is critical to sneaking up on a school of feeding bones. I like to watch the school and see which way they are moving and cast well ahead, keeping an eye on the location of my jig or fly and when the fish get close I twitch my rod tip up to make the jig or shrimp or fly jump off the bottom, it is almost a surefire hook-up. Another method is to cast well beyond the school and slowly reel the lure through the school stopping when you get in front of a fish. The danger here is the line spooking the fish. On fly I use any of the shrimp or crab imitations, there are a zillion fly patterns made especially for bonefishing, so shop around. For light spinning I use either a 1/4 oz or 1/8 oz flat weedless jig head with a brown or white colored feather. I find them to be deadly. A good old DOA Shrimp will also do the trick or a live shrimp free lined if you are fishing with bait.

When traveling to the Out Islands you need to bring your gear with you. Most of the Islands have very little access to quality gear, so bring plenty. Flies and jigs are easy to pack. I always bring plenty and leave most of it behind with the guide it will surely be appreciated.

Getting the Bone to bite is the easy part - the perfect cast is the hard part!



Acklins Island

Acklins Island is just about as far South in the Bahama Out Islands as you can get and is approximately 250 miles from Nassau. There are a number of fishing Lodges located on Acklins and Crooked Island to the North, all offering excellent fishing for Bonefish and several other shallow water species.

BahamasAir offers flights twice weekly (Wednesdays and Saturdays) from Nassau to Springpoint Airport on Acklins. Flights generally leave Nassau at 9:15 am and arrives at around 10:15 with the return flight to Nassau leaving around 10:20 am. Most likely you will have to overnight in Nassau on your way in as there are few flights from the US which arrive in time to make the early morning departure to Acklins.

Acklins Island has a population according to the census in 2000 of 428 and Crooked Island 350. So don't expect a huge crowd!

About the Author

Captain Jim Lucas is a seasoned professional fishing guide and USCG Licensed Captain. Jim spends his summers at Yes Bay Lodge in SE Alaska as the head guide and spends the remainder of the year in Florida at his home in St Petersburg or traveling to various locations in Florida and the Caribbean in search of shallow water species. Jim offers group trips when he travels to his favorite spots in the Caribbean and Central America, both fishing excursions and also photography excursions. Make plans to join Jim on one of his adventures!

Jim is also an accomplished photographer and travel writer, you can see some of his work on his website and trips he is offering and more of his photography is on the web site he maintains for Yes Bay Lodge, links are listed below.

www.captainjimlucas.com

www.yesbay.com



Rodbending Action

