



# “Two Bonefish, Quarter-Mile”

*Witnessing a true master at work*

BY OLIVER WHITE

I've spent an inordinate amount of time in the Bahamas poling and wading endless flats. A lot of it blurs together, but I'll never forget my first trip — the trip that ignited my passion and was the birth of my addiction.

A longhair college kid/trout bum/wannabe fishing guide, I was eager to burn my season's tip money chasing bonefish. As with many anglers, my bonefish virginity was to be lost in the promised land of Andros, on a two-week trip split between the Joulter Cays and Red Bays in the north — and the west side and southern flats of South Andros.

The first evening was casting tuneup and double haul practice on the dock. It's funny, I've now spent way more time throwing 8-weights or larger rather than the 4's and 5's of my youth. These days, I simply can't pick up a rod without hauling, but trout fishermen have little need for the mega line speed required to throw tight loops into the wind that fall at

50-plus feet. I casted and hauled until the Kaliks took their toll and staggered to bed dreaming of bonefish.

In the morning, shortly after breakfast, the guides were hanging out, loudly laughing and joking like only Bahamian guides can. I had drawn Arthur Russell, the obvious veteran of the group, for the week. He was weathered with kind eyes and a warm smile short a few teeth. His hands were surprisingly powerful for such a thin and old man. On our ride to the ramp, I learned a little about Russell. He was 74 and had been guiding most of his life. He had 17 children including a toddler. He claimed to know every inch of the flats, and there was no reason to doubt him. He was soft-spoken and quiet but undoubtedly wise and comfortable in his environment. Russell spoke very little, but when he did his words were direct and most often insightful. In all of his years on the water guiding anglers, he had never picked up fly-casting himself;

his guiding and insight were limited to the place and the fish. My rookie eyes needed training to spot these invisible fish that seemed to be there one minute and gone the next. It took me days to see anything before Russell. I suppose he did have the advantage of the platform, but keep in mind that he never wore sunglasses — ever. I even tried to give him a pair, but he adamantly declined. If I looked closely, his eyes appeared slightly hazy. Perhaps it was cataracts, but given his spotting ability, I'd like to believe that he has a self-created polarization.

There were plenty of fish to be had, he knew where they lived, and he loved to get me hooked up. He never failed to surprise me with his eyes, boat handling and intuition. A lifetime of guiding had made him one with the water.

He had an incredible disdain for sharks and, therefore, he always carried his shark stick — a wooden dowel with a 4-inch spike on one end. The old man would reach back and hurl it like a javelin at any and every shark he saw. He never missed.

Russell's place in the world was on the flats; it is where he belonged. We had gotten along well in our few days together and he offered to take me by his home. Like most Androsians, he lived a humble life, in a charmingly small, salt-weathered home. He took me in the kitchen and smiled as he pulled the largest bonefish I have ever seen out of his freezer: a monster weighing more than 17 pounds that he caught on a hand line with a piece of conch and was saving for Thanksgiving dinner. Just a teaser of the monsters that swim in his home waters.

Beyond the monster bonefish Russell had in his freezer, what I remember best was the most remarkable call of a fish I have witnessed. The sun was high, the water was clear, and the bottom was snow white — you could see forever. The hazy-eyed 74-year-old with no shades spoke softly — “two bonefish, quarter-mile.” Did I hear that correctly? I turned around in disbelief and he smiled and said “wait.” Russell called two fish a quarter-mile out. He poled 15 minutes and, sure enough, there were two bonefish. When I finally saw them, I turned around in shock, and he only smirked as he positioned the boat for the cast. Whether they were always there and this was all for show I'll never know, but I couldn't doubt him.

I managed to get one of them, a nice fish and the smaller of the two. The fish has faded to a distant memory, but still, almost 15 years later, I can hear Russell's voice making the call — “two bonefish, quarter-mile.”