

There are some very nice flats and beaches along the Ningaloo coast.



# Exmouth & Ningaloo



Steve Lubiana with his first WA bonefish.

Rob Sloane finds himself cast away on the Coral Coast of Western Australia.

**B**ack in issue #25, *FlyLife* readers were introduced to North West Cape and the town of Exmouth. It's in the west, the extreme west—the bit that sticks out in the middle of the Western Australian coastline—midway between Perth and Broome.

I've had three trips to Exmouth now, and feel I've barely scratched the surface. My exploits have been aided and abetted by former trout guide—and now resident saltwater guide—Brett Wolf, the man who announced his historic bonefish discoveries in *FlyLife* #42. He found the bones while I was still unpacking after my second visit, so I have been desperate to get back there ever since.

Life is much easier now that Brett has a purpose-built saltwater fly fishing boat on the flats; our initial experiences with hire boats were disconcerting to say the least. With a dedicated flats boat you can really cover the water, and there is plenty of water to cover. On the inside of the Cape there's the vast Exmouth Gulf, which provides unlimited shallows to explore. On the western side, the sandy white flats inside Ningaloo Reef stretch for some 260 kilometres south beyond Coral Bay. Unfortunately much of the Ningaloo coast is now closed even to catch-and-release fishing, so you have to avoid the marine reserves.

Of course you can wade the shores and beaches and still catch plenty of fish, but there are vast productive areas that remain out of reach even at low tide.

## TRUE BLUE BONES

Naturally, my latest trip was mainly about bonefish, and my eventual induction into the True Blue Bonefish hall of fame was a great relief to all involved. Our best effort in persistently windy conditions was four bonefish landed in one session, with ones and twos boated on other outings. On most days we did find good numbers of bones rolling their silver flanks and feeding actively in 1–2 metres of water, but hooking and landing them was anything but easy.

Did I mention the wind?

First you have to have X-ray vision to actually see the bonefish, and then the boat has to be expertly manoeuvred within casting range. Next you have to make a long (generally wind-hindered, rather than wind-assisted) cast to land a relatively heavy fly

## Exmouth & Ningaloo... continued



Another satisfied customer. Mark Carl couldn't stop smiling after landing his first ever bonefish.

without spooking them. The fly then needs to be given sufficient time to sink to the bottom in front of (not behind) the moving bones, allowing for boat drift, tidal flow and depth (the full mathematical equation will be posted on the web site). Then, if the boat hasn't already drifted over the fish, you have to make a few sneaky retrieves without lifting the fly too far off the bottom. If you get all that right, the bite should be inevitable (but it isn't) and you just have to remember to strip-strike, hang on, and clear any loose line.

Even having got to this point we had bonefish transform into trevally, come off for no good reason, or break on coral before we could turn the

boat around and chase after them. While all this is happening you have to listen to stories about some 80-year old client who landed 11 bones with Brett in two mornings!

If this all sounds too hard you can try catching bonefish off the shore. On the right tide (generally low), in the right place (wherever bones happen to be feeding within range), it can and has been done (not by me), but some serious time and effort is required.

It's a challenging environment for sure. But these are bonefish, on Australian flats, and any capture, boat or shore based, is worth its weight in gold. Well, at 4–5 kilos, this may be an exaggeration, but I will be heading back there for sure.



### EXMOUTH FACTS

June, July & August are the coolest months with daytime temperatures around 24 degrees C, and similar water temperatures. And they say that's cold! In summer air temperatures are typically 36 degrees and max out at around 48. Not surprisingly water temperatures get up above 30. It can be a windy spot but the topography (with fly fishing options on both sides of the Cape) allows some respite in all but the worst northerlies. Accommodation is available at Exmouth, Coral Bay and at several outlying stations. There are camping grounds, caravan parks, backpackers and a range of cabins, apartments and rental houses to suit all budgets and tastes. Skywest flies daily from Perth to Learmonth (near Exmouth) and there are weekly links to Broome. Rental cars, campers and four-wheel-drives are available for airport pick-up. Boats are available for hire, but launching is a drama and you need a serious four-wheel-drive. Keep clear of the no-fishing sanctuary zones, which are well marked by buoys and signs. Everything is well sign-posted and there are comprehensive information centres. It's a well-run show (except for the ramps). The local boys at Bluewater Tackle are helpful and have some fly fishing knowledge. For expert guiding visit [www.truebluebonefish.com.au](http://www.truebluebonefish.com.au)

Ben Knight came out with us one day and hooked a hard-running bonefish with his first cast!

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## TACKLE & TOGS

*An 8-weight and intermediate line is ideal for the beaches. Take a 10-weight or heavier for the serious boat stuff. Fluorocarbon leaders of 15 and 20 lb will handle most species. Clothing is optional but I suggest at least a cap, polaroids, sandals and bum-bag (with flies, leaders, pliers and water bottle). It's dry, so mossies are not a problem. Sand flies are, but mainly around Learmonth, Wapet Creek & Yardie Creek. Take some repellent just in case, and don't rely on the mesh in those fancy, vented shirts to keep them out! Flies should include yellow over white Clousers, some FlyWorld Deceivers for the speedsters, Gotchas and crab patterns for the bottom munchers, and milkfish flies if you want a real challenge.*

## GOLDEN RULES

Bones aside, golden trevally are the prime fly-rod target in these waters because they are present in good numbers, are relatively easy to see, and rarely refuse a yellow Clouser if you get it anywhere near them. They are big, hunt in packs, and are often found scavenging around 'muds' stirred up by feeding stingrays and dugongs.

While golden trevally are great fun to hunt from a boat, it is a shore-based encounter that most sticks in my mind.

I was on a solo beach mission at the time, down towards Yardie Creek, when a marauding pack of goldies appeared within casting range. There were a dozen or more huge fish, bunched together and jostling for position, their broad shoulders lurching forward like dolphins. Instincts take over at such critical moments and somehow I managed to throw a backhand cast across the wind. A moment to let the Clouser sink, a few quick strips, and I had at least half a dozen of these bruisers nosing after the fly. The hook-up was emphatic, and sent the tightly bunched mob racing back along the shore, trailing a tracer of pink gelspun-backing.

I had a slight panic attack about the size of the fish, the amount of backing I'd already lost, and the inadequacy of my 8-weight rod to deal with the situation. Then I was off along the shore after them, trying not to lose too much line before they passed a nearby point and headed into the turquoise blue yonder.

Still doubting that the fish actually knew it was hooked, I had no



Queenfish grow big in these waters ...



... and there are some big herring too.

choice but to plant my feet, tighten up the drag and try to regain some ground! How hard can you pull on a 15 lb leader with an 8-weight rod and 3-weight arms? I don't know, but the line didn't break and the fish did eventually tire.



Steve Lubiana helps son Marco to play a lively trevally, while Brett gets ready with the net.

A shark looked like stealing my prize at the last moment but I think it decided that the trevally, though exhausted, was too big to handle—a feeling I shared after 20 minutes of grunt in 30-degree heat. Finally, having beached the goldie, there I was, with no-one for miles, and no camera. All I could do was release the fish, drink half a bottle of water and sprawl out on the sand like Tom Hanks, but I was blissfully happy and had no desire to be rescued.

## EMPERORS REIGN

How did Peter Morse land that spangled emperor on the cover of *FlyLife* #35? With great difficulty, is the obvious answer. These turned out to be a good fall back species when wind and cloud conspired to shut down the sight fishing. On these less than perfect days, we entertained ourselves by drifting across beds of mixed weed and coral, and giving these areas a thorough work over. Good old 'blind flogging' Ningaloo style, with intermediate line and trusty Clouser Minnow.

The action was fast and furious at times; emperor hit hard and pull like mangrove jacks, diving straight back down and burying in the coral. It took us a while to learn to fish heavy—real heavy. You have to slam the rod up tight and hold on to the line to stop them running for cover. But they still did, and it was a low percentage game.

These are a worthy fly rod challenge and very tasty on the barbie

after a feed of fresh Exmouth prawns. And yes, they stock Boags at the local bottle shop!

## OTHER SPECIES

Permit are another Exmouth possibility, along with those elusive milkfish. We had many shots at both when chasing bonefish, but they really require a fully dedicated approach in terms of flies, lines and presentations. Maybe next time.

Other trevally species are plentiful on the flats, although to tame the big GTs you would need to use serious rods, reels and flies. The local badge of honour seems to be a GT over thirty pounds. I reckon they are best avoided, although the small ones to 4 kilos or so are good fun to catch.

Away from the reef in the expansive Exmouth Gulf and around offshore islands we found the boat very handy for targeting giant herring, queenfish and the occasional school of tarpon—all great fun on a fly rod. You've just got to rove around until you see fish moving, or find good aggregations of baitfish. Herring seem to like smaller Clousers fished deeper and slower, but queenfish will thump a Deceiver or surface popper on a fast retrieve.

And I have not even mentioned what might happen if you berley-up in deeper water, or venture out-wide into mackerel, mahi-mahi, tuna, sailfish and marlin territory. All these fish, in fly-catchable sizes, are seasonally available outside the reef.

## CORAL CURIOSITIES

If you are seriously on a species mission, all sorts of coral curiosities can be hooked near patches of reef in water less than waist deep. Just fish a crab or Gotcha, letting it sink deep around the coral outcrops. One day I must have caught six or seven species while standing in one spot, just casting into a sandy gutter amongst the coral.

For an even bigger thrill, leave your fly rod behind and venture into one of the marine reserves. The fish diversity has to be seen to be believed, and spectacular corals grow within metres of the shore. I'm loath to admit it but snorkelling is the greatest attraction of Ningaloo, as Libby and I discovered during a few days of strong northerly winds. With the boat confined to the trailer we donned masks and snorkels for the treat of a lifetime—absolutely no diving experience is required.



Exmouth is a great family destination too.

## BAY WATCH

Other flourishing eco-tourism activities include coral viewing from glass-bottom boats, charter dives, snorkelling with manta rays and whale sharks (seasonal), turtle tours, and whale watching (seasonal).

Humpback whales are plentiful in August and September and can be seen breaching all day long from the Lighthouse Lookout on the point of the Cape. While fishing near Learmonth, Brett and I had a close encounter with four humpbacks, one of which swam directly under our boat creating more turbulence than a Manly Ferry.

The only sight more unexpected was a live sex show we confronted while patrolling along a beach on the stealthy electric outboard. All of a sudden, there they were, right in front of us, totally oblivious to their wide-eyed audience. I have seen some unusual things whilst fly fishing, but never anything quite so pornographic. **FI**