

Turkey Bones . . .

By: Captain Ted Wilson

It's Thanksgiving in the Keys. Time to give the diet a rest and loosen up the belt a notch. A time to settle in with friends and family for a parade or football game that inevitably involves the Detroit Lions. The Pilgrims and Native Americans certainly did quite a bit of fishing to support themselves and their family. What better way to remember those times and give thanks for all that we have than a nice day on the water fishing with family or friend's.

November marks a time of the year when the Keys historically get it's first cold fronts. This year was no exception, as we have already had two respectable drops in temperature and two other measly fronts that made a little difference as well. With these changes in temperature come changes in fish behavior.

I'm asked all the time from anglers when the best time of year is to bonefish in the Keys. These questions usually stem from people who live in colder climates and have grown accustomed to very hard lines in respect to the portion of the year that is suitable for fishing. My answer is always the same. We can bonefish twelve months a year in the Keys. The only change comes in where we look to find them and the tactics used to accomplish fooling them onto our hook.

Bonefish are sub-tropical fish so they like it warm. They do much of their feeding on the flats and along the shallow shorelines of the Keys. Unfortunately, these are the places most susceptible to huge swings in water temperature that we experience during the winter months. If the weather has been mild for days on end then they should continue their typical pattern of moving onto and off of the flats as the tide suits them. If a cold front comes and the weather has been, or currently is cold, you have to look elsewhere.

When the temperature gets down right cold and stays cold, bonefish have a tendency to huddle up in large groups. They spend most of their time in deep water awaiting a rise in temperature and are rarely seen. During this state of emergency, they exhibit behavior like no other time of the year. Sometimes they can be found in deep marina basins "floating" near the surface as if sunning themselves. I've also found them almost catatonic in deep pockets of water carpeting the ocean floor and are nearly impossible to spook or to fool. You can plop a fly or bait right in the middle of a huge school and they just move around it and go on trying to stay warm. They see the offering, they just don't want it but they don't speed off as usual. Instead they just regroup and settle back down. It's almost if they are saying, "it's freezing, we're not hungry so go away and leave us alone".

There is a "good part" to cold weather. The huddled masses of bonefish will sometimes feed a little in the deeper basins while waiting out the thermometer reading. They graze along like herds of cows and when they do they kick up mud or sediment on the bottom. The sediment stays suspended for a few minutes before settling back down to the ocean floor. One bonefish grazing along the bottom in eight feet of water will probably go unnoticed. Two hundred bonefish grazing along the bottom could be seen from outer space. This phenomenon is affectionately known as a "house mud". Meaning it is a muddy looking area the size of a house. It is also a scene of great joy to any self respecting bonefish nut. This is the situation where you might experience the fabled "best day of bonefishing you've ever had". Heavily weighted flies and small lead headed jigs tipped with shrimp are all you need to catch them. Make sure your offering is on or near the bottom and slowly hop it along through the dusty water. It's not exactly sight fishing, but who cares if your crushing the bonefish. When your talking about a species that

typically catching just one in an outing should be considered a successful day, finding a house mud should be treated as a rare treat and just enjoy yourself.

Finding bonefish on the shallow flats in the winter is a function of water temperature. What you have to remember is that a fish's reaction to water temperature is relative to what it was the day before. In some cases it is relative to just a few hours before. Follow me here. The "Mendoza line" for water temperature with bonefish is around 70 degrees. If it's above seventy they are happy, below the line they go into survival mode. However, if the water has been in, let's say, the high-seventies and drops to seventy-one, they disappear from the flats even though it's still above their happy temperature. On the other hand, if the water has been in the mid-sixties and jumps up to sixty-nine they may decide this is to their liking and go on the flats to feed. Also, keep in mind that morning water temperatures are typically colder than afternoon temperatures and shallow water warms (or cools) faster than deep water. When considering fishing a flat for bonefish ask yourself if the water on the flat is colder or warmer than it was yesterday, and is it colder or warmer than the surrounding deeper water. If it is warmer, you've got a good chance of finding fish. If the answer is colder, look someplace else wait for better conditions. The inverse of this logic applies in the dead heat of summer. A thermometer can take the guess work out of it but usually a little common sense is all that's necessary.

Some days are just not meant for sight fishing for bones. On occasion, we get the combination of cold, windy and overcast conditions. The triple crown of crappy weather. Usually, you can adapt to the presence of one or two of these conditions and still make a day of it. Sometimes you just have to throw your hands up and put off sight fishing for bonefish for another day. There is a way to catch them on these days, but I'll save that for another column. Happy Thanksgiving everyone and go catch a fish.