

Eastern

Chicago
Suburban Bass
ILLINOIS

Everglades
Into the Wilds
FLORIDA

Matapédia River
Atlantic Salmon
QUEBEC

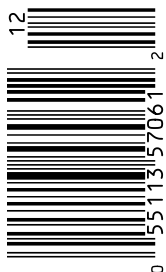
FLY FISHING

November/December 2019

Incredible fly-fishing destinations



\$7.99 US/CAN • www.matchthehatch.com



Trip of a Lifetime
Ragged Island, Bahamas

EXPOSURE
Southern Trout

Trout Streamer
Page 12



Trip of a Lifetime

Ragged Island, Bahamas: Finding the Edge in a Caribbean Wilderness/By Will Blair

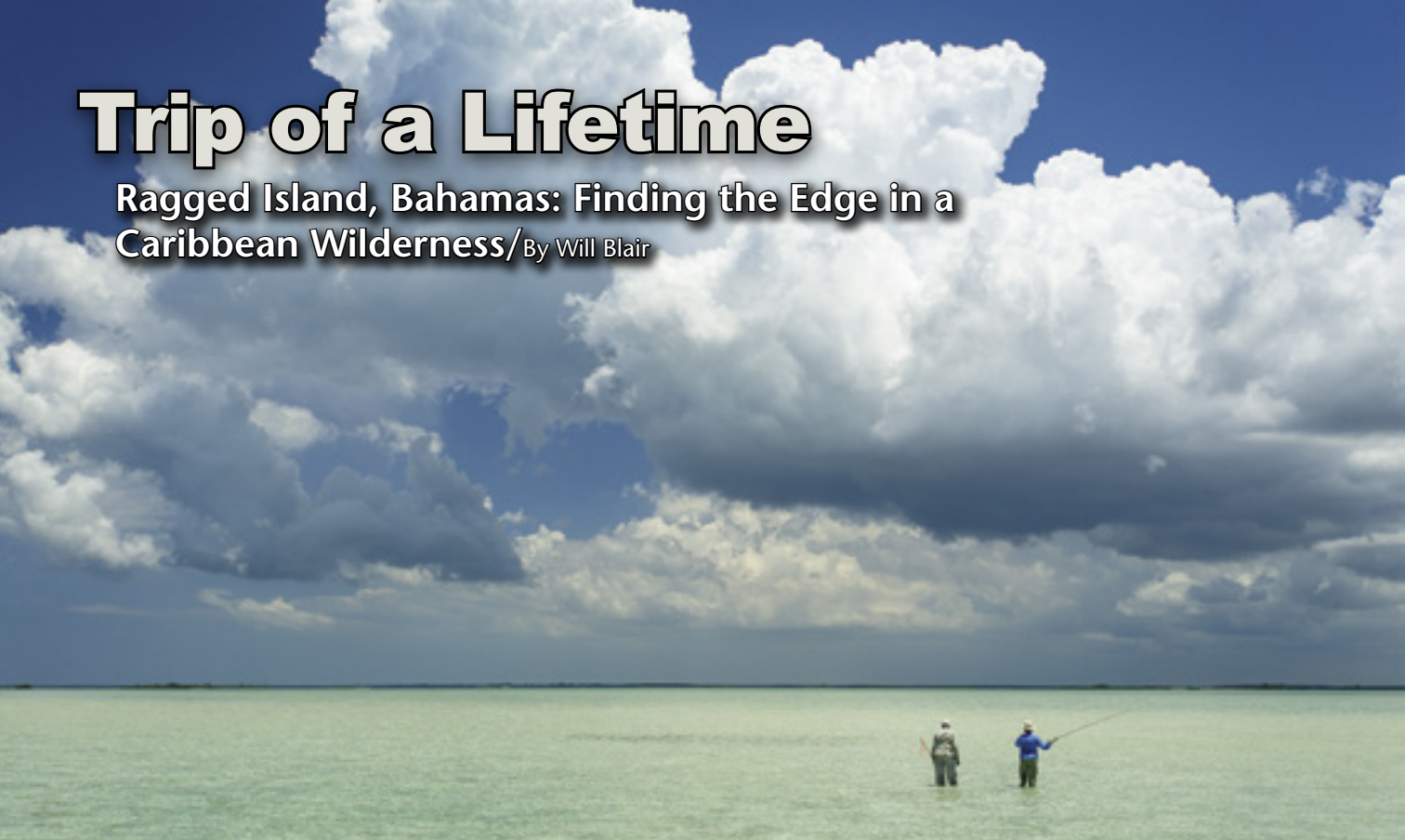


PHOTO BY MARK LANCE

When I look at fishing-related travel-agent magazines, I see two kinds of offerings: one is what I call the leather-couch lodges and destinations, and the other is what I call the edge.

The leather-couch destinations are swanky, developed, easy to reach, and situated to provide anglers with access to well-known fisheries. They typically combine good fishing, luxurious accommodations, and memorable meals. The edge is different—at destinations on the edge, the fishing is over-the-top outstanding. I can't recall in detail the fishing at the leather-couch lodges I've visited as a guest or guide, but excursions to the edge are unforgettable.

My most awesome fly-fishing experiences have happened on the edge. The edge means prodigious numbers of large, mature fish—game fish that grow big and old because humans don't interfere. The edge is where the seemingly unusual is normal: giant lobsters on a pristine reef in shallow water just minutes from town; piles of mature conchs in every rocky cove; 50-inch barracuda just 20 feet from the dock that slam a fly like they've

never seen one before (because they haven't)—and massive schools of bonefish that don't seem to be bothered that their brethren keep screaming across the flats with a fly in their mouth and an awestruck angler barely able to slow them.

That's the edge

Finding the edge close to home is virtually impossible. For 22 years I have been guiding fly anglers to the edge on the rivers of Kamchatka. But adventurous fly anglers long ago penetrated virtually every great flats-fishing destination, so the saltwater edge always seemed elusive to me. But then I got lucky.

I had heard about Jumento Cays and Ragged Island in the Bahamas. Ragged Island used to pop up occasionally in discussions of potentially great bonefish destinations, but it

has largely disappeared from the radar screen. When an acquaintance suggested I investigate it, I found little information, and what I did find was dated. However, I was introduced to Ragged Island resident Phicol Wallace, who, 10 years prior, had started Ragged Island Lodge to little fanfare. Wallace also runs Bahamas Power and Light on



PHOTO BY WILL BLAIR

Ragged Island, and with four kids in school and plenty to do, he ultimately decided to mothball the lodge for a while.

After much consulting with Wallace, this past spring four young fishermen—Paul Nicoletti, Elliot Hall, Rex Messing, and Sanford (Sandy) Anthony—and I went in search of adventure in the waters of Ragged Island. The guys had all worked in Alaska together, and three of them have served as the road crew for the Fly Fishing Film Tour (F3T) the past two winters. Over the course of several dinners in Boulder, Colorado, we planned, set up the charter, and scoured Google Earth in search of shallow flats with the potential for great fishing.

Fast-forward a few months: after a scenic flight from Nassau, our Cessna 208 approaches Duncan Town on Ragged Island and we recall that the island was pummeled by Hurricane Irma in September 2017. But the runway is in great shape, and we touch down softly. It's too late in the day to fish, so after introductions and settling into the restored lodge, we make a decision: I will drive one boat and Lester Wallace, Phicol's cousin, will pilot the other.

The next morning, we head north to what the locals call the Blue Hole. While slowly cruising the flats on our way, we see a huge permit that speeds away at the sound of the motor. We also see lots of barracuda, and some other species, but no bonefish. We learn later in the week that our tide timing was off, and that ideal tide levels for fishing these flats vary depending on location. Exploring a new flats destination is not an exact science, but the hunt was on.

During lunchtime, I decide to don snorkel gear and explore the aptly named Blue Hole. I come face to face with thousands of bonefish—big bonefish, packed into the deep hole and awaiting feeding tides. It's a good sign.

In the afternoon, Paul, Rex, and I return to a big flat near Duncan Town to work the mangrove edges; somewhere off to the east, Lester, Sandy, and Elliot are likewise sneaking up on mangrove-lined edges.

Immediately we notice that our expansive flat is covered with bonefish feed marks—lighter-colored depressions left by bones rooting in the bottom substrate for crustaceans. Suddenly the radio lights up with excited chatter from Elliot and Sandy; they've found bonefish in big schools. I head to their location, and by the time I arrive, they have landed several decent-size bones. Those fish launch a week of great action.

That evening, over fresh lobster, we strategize and decide we will explore a place called Maycock Cay, located north of Ragged Island, in the morning; then check out back bays indenting the area's myriad small islands; and finally have a look at a long back-slough bay located a couple of cays north of Ragged Island. Again, we would use two boats to cover more water.

The next day begins inauspiciously, with little activity on the big flat north of Duncan Town. In the first back bay we enter, we find small barracuda and one modest school of bonefish, but the bottom is

pocked with divots left by big bones—again our timing is off and we've missed the fish. While the smaller boat ventures to a bay to the west, Sandy, Elliot, and I beach our boat and walk overland to reach the secluded back end of a long slough we saw on Google Earth.

As soon as we approach the mangrove-edged slough, Sandy spots a pair of big bonefish and begins positioning himself to cast. I veer quietly off to his left, scanning the water for fish, noting that the center of the slough is murkier and difficult to see into, particularly with morning clouds still obscuring the sun. Radio chatter, from the handheld units we all carry, interrupts the silence: the other guys are catching fish. Fantastic, I think, and then I watch Elliot

step into the water and cast toward a puff of mud—he can see the bonefish feeding, puffing out little clouds of silt in foot-deep water. He hooks up and soon lands a 3-pound bonefish.

“Come over—I think I see more,” he calls to me.

The last of the morning clouds break to reveal perfect blue skies—and the sun reveals bonefish everywhere. Thousands of them. The slough is alive with fish, and as Sandy makes his way over, Elliot and I double up. Then we triple up, all three of us fighting bonefish simultaneously. We radio our success to the other crew. They join us at this secluded slough, and soon all five of us are hooked up to big bonefish. The area in the center of the bay that had appeared turbid to me earlier turns out to be a huge school of baitfish surrounded by countless bonefish—big bonefish. Elliot takes the prize, landing a fish pushing 8 pounds.

With so many hungry bonefish on the prowl, Elliot decides to experiment. He ties on a small gray Gurgler—a



PHOTO BY MARK LANCE

surface pattern—and casts into the fray; immediately the fly is assailed by so many bones that they are running into each other like jacks in their desire to capture what must have looked like a gourmet meal to them. Before long, all of us are laughing aloud as big bonefish chase flies across the sparkling blue surface.

The frenetic action continues until we decide we've had enough. We are sated. We haven't moved 100 yards, but we have easily caught 50 bonefish apiece. Yes, you read that right: 50 bonefish each!

This is the edge

On the edge, watching the weather and planning accordingly is critical. During our exploration of Ragged Island, the forecast promised only one day when we could safely venture offshore, into the deep, with our small boats. The east side of Ragged Island drops deep into the ocean—more than 3,000 feet. The run out to the blue water requires all my boating skills, but once we start trolling, our flies are routinely bitten off by unseen pelagic beasts. We land a few barracuda and watch a shoal of albacore scream through.



PHOTO BY WILL BLAIR

Suddenly, two of our conventional-gear rods double over under the weight of some huge, powerful fish. One line breaks almost immediately, and the other, on

the rod in my hands, lasts just a few seconds longer. The third rod is trolling a popping fly, which is sitting on the surface. Suddenly the popper disappears in a huge, violent swirl, and an epic battle begins.

We soon identify the marauder as a yellowfin tuna, one of the hardest fighters in the sea. An hour later, muscles exhausted from the battle, we haul aboard a 70-pound oceanic torpedo. Our total time on the blue water is just over two hours, and running back in to clean and cool the tuna, we are amazed that this has all occurred within sight of the island—but on the edge.

Dinner that night is indescribably delicious.

The next day we decide to run south and check out the waters between Ragged Island and Little Ragged Island. Immediately we see bones on the shallow flat just south of the channel separating these small cays. Sandy and I leave the guys with the boats and stroll to the far end of the bay that is fed by the channel separating the two islands. We

GRID PHOTOS BY WILL BLAIR



find a few small bonefish, but no big schools. Again, we have mistimed the tide.

Sandy heads back to the group, but I decide to use streamers to probe around a point of land. I land small groupers and one large mutton snapper. Then I watch a bizarre fish, with waving fins, swim nearly up to my feet: a huge oceanic triggerfish. He is not easy to hook; it takes nearly two dozen attempts, but I succeed, and after a tremendous battle, the triggerfish comes to hand. It's my first triggerfish, and I'm enthralled by the beautiful creature. As I walk back to the boats, I cast to a decent-size 'cuda. The fish slams my streamer in 10 inches of water and fights spectacularly.

During our lunch break we see the only other boat we've seen all week, which turns out to be piloted by a local guy who wants to watch the crazy fly fishermen. Once again, I decide on a lunchtime snorkel, and in the cut between Ragged Island and Little Ragged I find another huge school of bonefish, much larger than the school I saw in the Blue Hole. They number in the thousands, and among them are bones that likely weigh 10 pounds. All the guys jump in for a look, and Wallace tells us bonefish have schooled in such numbers in these places since he was a child.

The edge

We spend the afternoon exploring in all directions, and everywhere we look, some kind of fish wants our flies. Some of the guys in our group are sure they saw tarpon, and locals confirm that the silver kings swim through the area in April and May. So on our last day, we decide to search for tarpon. Instead, we find massive barracuda—fish over 50 inches—along with abundant triggerfish in the big bay between the islands.

After lunch, we run north to Maycock Cay to search the flats there for permit. Rex wants badly to catch a permit, but with these famously difficult fish, everything needs to come together just right—including some luck. We anchor the boat on a hard-sand flat and step out to wade. Within minutes we spy a 20-pound permit swimming with a ray well within casting range. Rex takes the shot, the permit aggressively pounces on the crab fly, and it's off to the races. It's not supposed to be that easy. But this is the edge.

This exploratory expedition opened the doors for fly fishers in a saltwater paradise. Lost Key Lodge on Ragged Island will open in April 2020, and anglers can sign up for a five-day excursion anytime between April 1 and June 15—prime time for flats fishing in the Bahamas, and the perfect time for an adventure to the edge. 🦞



PHOTO BY JOHN SHEWLEY



PHOTO BY WILL BLAIR

Ragged Island FAQ

What are the trip dates? April 1–June 15.

How do I get there? Charter flight (\$1,200/person) from George Town on Great Exuma Island; commercial carriers fly to Exuma International Airport. Anglers meet their hosts upon arrival at the runway at Duncan Town Airport on Ragged Island.

What travel papers do I need? Passport required; clear customs in George Town.

What tackle do I need? *Bonefish:* 8-wt. rods, floating bonefish lines, 10-ft. leaders with 10-lb. tippets. *Permit/tarpon/barracuda:* 9- to 10-wt. rods, floating saltwater lines, 10-ft. leaders; 12- to 20-lb. tippets for permit; 25- to 50-lb. tippets for tarpon; wire bite tippet for barracuda. *Pelagic species:* 12-wt. rods, sinking saltwater lines or heads, 25- to 50-lb. tippets (spinning tackle for pelagic trips is provided).

What gear do I need? Sun-protective long-sleeve shirts, lightweight wading pants, flats boots or booties, wide-brimmed hat, face shield, sun gloves, two pairs of polarized sunglasses, cleaning cloth for sunglasses, saltwater pliers, extra leaders and tippet, nippers (on a lanyard), sunscreen.

What flies work best? Merkin-style crab patterns, Gotchas, Gotcha Clouser, EP Shrimp, Sugga Daddy, Long Strip Bonefish Fly, Tarpon Toads, Black Death, barracuda flies.

What currency do they use? Bahamian dollar.

What is the food and lodging like? The food is a mixture of American and traditional Bahamian dishes, including plenty of fresh lobster and other seafood.

What does the trip cost? \$4,395/5 days guided fishing.

How do I book my spot? Contact Will Blair, Lost Key Lodge, (530) 941-8524, info@lostkeylodge.com.