

# Bucket list Bonefish



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The bucket list column I wrote about tarpon was very well received. I had several of our readers email me for information and captains who could help fill this dream for an angler.

I also realize that some folks may not particularly enjoy a knock-down, drag-out battle with a 100-plus pound saltwater fish. Despair no longer. Perhaps you would prefer a battle with the most cunning, elusive, pound-for-pound toughest fighter to ever swim, the bonefish.

Bonefish go by the street name Abula vulpes in case you were wondering. There are 11 species, all with equally interesting Latin names, specific to where the fish is found and in what ocean. Generally, bonefish are found worldwide in tropical and warm temperate waters.

In the Americas, bonefish have wandered as far north as New York, and south throughout the Caribbean to Brazil. The West Coast shows them as far north as San Francisco, south to the coast of Peru. Dream spots for anglers would be Christmas Island, New Caledonia, Bahamas, and the Florida Keys.

Bonefish are usually found in tidal flats, mangroves, creeks, often able to tolerate poorly oxygenated water found commonly in the tropics because they can inhale air into a lung-like bladder.



Carol Rackay with an 8 pound bonefish, caught and released in the Florida Keys. (Courtesy photo/Mark Rackay)

Some areas, like the Turks and Caicos, will see huge schools of a hundred fish or more. My son and I once caught 60 fish in three hours near Providenciales, but most were under two pounds, with the largest maybe reaching four pounds.

Larger fish seem to travel in smaller groups, and the real monsters are usually solo.

Bonefish will often follow a daily pattern of coming up onto the shallow flats as the tide rises to feed. They will swim into the current, or into the wind if it is strong enough, then retreat to the deeper cuts and channels as the tide falls.

Anyone who has spent considerable time chasing the “ghost of the flats” will tell you there is never an always. The fish will show up on a flat daily for a week with the tide, then for no apparent reason other than to drive you crazy, not show up for days.

You don’t fish for bonefish you hunt the flats for them. Sight-fishing from a flats boat in very shallow water, often under a foot deep. The pole is slowly poled along, and you watch for any

movement in the water.

Sometimes you see the tip of a tail as they nose down to pick up a crab or shrimp, other times you just catch a slight shimmer on the water’s surface called nervous water.

The trick is to place the bait in front of the always moving fish without spooking him. They know shrimp and crabs don’t fall from the sky. When they hit the bait, about all you can do is hold on.

They run 200 to 300 yards nonstop, reaching speeds over 40 mph. Fast enough to blow out the drag system on most reels. I would venture to say that less than 40 percent hooked up, get away before coming boat side.

Bonefish have keen eyesight, and unbelievable sense of smell, able to detect a crab in the water at a hundred yards or more, and a lateral line that detects movement in the water.

If that is not enough, they have a chrome, mirror-like color on their sides that reflects the bottom, making them near impossible to see.

Don’t feel bad if only your guide can see them. I fished many anglers who spent a day or two on the water and

never saw one. Polarized glasses with brown lenses and wide-brimmed hats help.

White cloud days that reflect over the surface of the water are near impossible to see fish.

When bonefish nose down into the bottom, they “blow” with their snout, clearing debris and exposing the bait they feed on.

When they get active in a school feeding, the puffs of bottom show like little clouds in the water, called mudding, and this is an angler’s dream. Cast into that mud folks and hold on.

Breeding among bonefish occurs annually, with a female laying 1,750,000 eggs. Spawning occurs between November and June, on the full and new moon cycles. The fish leave the flats and head to nearby offshore waters, sometimes up to 70 miles away, forming giant schools called pre-spawning aggregations (PSA).

Bonefish in the PSA prepare to spawn by gulping surface air to fill their swim bladder. At night, they head offshore and dive hundreds of feet in waters than can be over a thousand feet deep.

After the dive, the fish

surges to the surface and the change in pressure helps them release the eggs and sperm.

Once fertilization occurs, the hatched larvae drift for several months before settling in the shallow waters of the flats and bays. An unbelievable feat for a fish that lives most of its life within a mile or so around a flat.

A 17-inch bonefish is considered mature, at about 4 years of age. They may live longer than 20 years in the wild. The world record was caught by Bob Schroeder, in my old stomping grounds, Islamorada, and weighed in at 16 pounds, 3 ounces.

Bob brought the fish for weigh-in at the Worldwide Sportsman’s dock in his live well. The fish was weighed and quickly released, so he is out there somewhere.

The large bonefish come from the Florida Keys although there are a few areas where big one’s roam. A fish of a lifetime will be double digits, and anything over a dozen pounds is a monster.

For fly fishers, an 8wt. or 9wt. fly rod with a saltwater taper line is needed. You will want a sturdy graphite rod and a reel of high quality with a strong drag system.

I prefer a reel handle that does not turn as line runs out, to spare your knuckles from pain. There will need to be 300 yards of backing on that reel also.

For the spin angler, 7-to-8-foot graphite rods, fast action, and 8-pound test line will do the job. Don’t scrimp on a reel either. You will need every bit of 300 yards of line and the best drag system you can find to stop one of these critters.

Bonefish are listed as Near Threatened, making them heavily regulated for anglers. Most places are catch-and-release now, so a quick boat side picture and let him swim away.

With an estimate of length, a taxidermist can make a beautiful replica mount of your released trophy.

A good day on the water will be eight to ten hours in searing tropical heat and humidity, so dress accordingly and bring lots of sunscreen. You can expect to see some fish and catching one a day is a fair expectation.

Remember, there will be failures and frustrations, but that is why these fish are one of the most sought after in the world. Throw a bonefish trip in your bucket and email me if you need help setting a trip up or about tackle requirements. Tight lines.

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# Preparing Amaryllis for show time!



## Gardening From A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

You could see the eye rolls as the big box garden centers replaced the seasonal garden items with Christmas trees and all the trimmings and I understand that.

But this is the time to be thinking about a gorgeous Christmas amaryllis plant either for yourself or to give to a friend for the holidays. And here’s the best part.

You can buy one, stick it in a back bedroom, and almost forget about it until Christmas when you’ll want to display the festive flower. Just in case you’re not familiar with amaryllis let me explain what we’re talking about. Amaryllis are grown from large bulbs. Unlike tulips and daffodils, these are tender bulbs, so don’t plant these bulbs outside in the fall.

Amaryllis bulbs are a lot bigger than tulip and daffodil bulbs and are usually planted indoors at this time. In their native areas, like South Africa, they bloom in spring or summer, but around here they’re com-

monly “forced” into early bloom for the holidays.

Amaryllis have a beautiful, large, lily looking flower or group of flowers that are displayed on a tall stalk. They come in colors everywhere from burgundy, red, white, variegated red and white, and pinks.

The name Amaryllis actually means to sparkle in Greek. So apparently the Greeks also thought they were pretty great flowers.

The size of the bulb usually determines the size of the flowers. If you want a large, quality bloom display you should invest in a larger quality bulb. If you really don’t care about the bloom size and amount of flowers you can buy inexpensive smaller bulbs.

With that said, there are a few varieties that naturally produce smaller bulbs but it should state that somewhere when you purchase it.

Here’s the tricky part. It’s hard to know exactly when an amaryllis will flower. Some varieties tend to bloom sooner than others, but generally most bulbs will take about 6 to 8 weeks before they bloom.

So you might want to buy a couple of bulbs and start them at different times if you want to make sure you have one blooming for say, your Christmas party.

If you’re buying an individual bulb, rather than one in a kit, you might want to choose a heavier pot that won’t tip over due to the

height of the flowers. Your pot should only be about inches wider than the bulb.

But you’re not limited to just one bulb per pot. Several bulbs can be planted in one container. Just keep them about an inch apart from each other.

When planting your bulb use high-quality, sterile growing mix (to avoid fungus gnats). Just moisten the soil, fill the pot a little more than half full, and set the bulb on top.

Add a little more soil, leaving the top 1/3 of the bulb exposed. That’s all there is to it. Then place your planted bulb in a room with bright, sun-lit exposure, away from direct sun, and with temperatures around 60-70 degrees.

Water it sparingly until the flower bud appears. After this, keep the soil moist but not saturated. You’ll want to rotate the pot occasionally to keep the plant growing straight instead of leaning toward the sunlight.

Don’t move the plant to a new location after the buds appear or it may drop the buds. Once it’s bloomed you’ll be ok. Also, keep your flowering bulb way from direct sunlight to prolong the bloom time.

Amaryllis can make a dramatic statement as a cut flower, so if you want to add some to your fresh flower arrangement there’s no reason not to.

If you have room for an extra house plant it’s easy to



This is the time to be thinking about a gorgeous Christmas Amaryllis plant for the Holidays. (Courtesy photo/Linda Corwine McIntosh)

get them to bloom again the following year. After your bulb blooms and the flower fade, cut the stem to within an inch the bulb.

After the bulb flowers, it will produce several long leaves. Just like with other flowering bulbs, amaryllis use their leaves to produce energy for next year’s flowers, so don’t cut them off.

Give the plant plenty of bright light to help it build up its reserves. Grow your amaryllis indoors all winter and into the spring. After danger of frost, you can move the bulb, right in the pot, outside for the summer.

Fertilize the plant once or twice a month to keep the leaves lush and green. The soil should be kept barely moist. In late summer or early fall, stop watering it and move the potted bulb to a cool (55°F), dry location, away from bright light. A basement or garage is ideal.

The leaves will gradually wither and fall away as it goes dormant. Leave the bulb alone and don’t water it. After your amaryllis has rested for a couple months, you can start it again.

If you have several bulbs you may want to start them at different times. Repot the bulb using fresh growing mix. Water it once and move the pot into a bright, 60-65°F room.

Water sparingly until the bulb is actively growing. You’ll discover the bulbs reproduce by growing “daughter” bulbs next to the “mother” bulb. It will take three to five years for a daughter bulb to reach a mature size, so be patient.

If you treat it right, an amaryllis plant can live for 75 years! (I hope my kids will want my bulbs.)

I think a lot of people must think amaryllis are pretty great Christmas plants

because the U.S. imports more than 10 million amaryllis bulbs every year. Most of these come from Holland or South Africa.

With that said, be aware that amaryllis are considered poisonous to pets. If they do eat some your pet may vomit, appear depressed, or show signs of a painful abdomen and a loss of appetite.

So keep them out of reach from your pets as well as small children!

With more than 600 named varieties of amaryllis I bet you can find one that will be a perfect fit for your Christmas décor. You know what? I think this has put me in the mood for Christmas.

Maybe it’s not too early to get excited about it after all.

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