The Great Bonefish Confusion

In the late 1800s, when scientists and sportsmen were trying to sort out the great assortment of sportfish found in Florida waters, there developed a number of misunderstandings over names. Perhaps the longest-enduring of these involved the bonefish. It seems strange to us now that a fish so popular and revered as the bonefish could be the victim of mistaken identity; its appearance and fight are unlike most of its colleagues. The problem developed, as it so often has (consider the many western anglers who disagree over pacific salmon names), because of local variation in names.

At the outset, so that the following discussions make sense, we will give the scientific name of the bonefish—Albula vulpes. *The fish it was most often confused with in those days was the fish we now call the ladyfish*—Elops saurus.

Both the ladyfish and the bonefish have been popular sportfish. They are relatively similar in size, bonefish most commonly being caught in the four to eleven pound range, and ladyfish usually running between two and six pounds with a rare larger individual reaching eight or nine. Both are known as excellent fighters, though their fights are radically dissimilar.

What happened, and how the confusion endured for more than half a century, is really quite interesting. In the late 1800s, as explained in the first selection printed below, both *fish were apparently called ladyfish. The ladyfish* (Elops saurus, *that is) was also known as the ten-pounder, or the* bony-*fish. Naturally, both guides and visiting sportsmen could not be expected to treat such overlaps with care, and so bonyfish became bonefish, and ladyfish, which might or might not have been ten-pounders (and remember that the true bonefish is more likely to reach ten pounds in weight than the ladyfish, which was more widely known as a ten-pounder), became bonefish.*

Given the circumstances, especially the general lack of high-quality writing about Florida sportfishing before 1930, it isn't surprising that the confusion endured so long. The confusion has *left us an intriguing legacy, however, in some very early accounts of fly fishing for what we suspect were probably bonefish.*

As we've pointed out in previous issues of The American Fly Fisher, *saltwater fly fishing in Florida goes back at least to the 1870s, and bonefishing with flies at least to the 1920s. In our efforts to untangle the bonefish/ladyfish question we've come across evidence that at least a few people were catching true bonefish,* Albula vulpes, *on flies as early as 1896. We reprint one such account here.*

We start with a good review of the bonefish/ladyfish debate, written by James Henshall for Forest and Stream, *in September of 1920. Henshall is best known for his book on the black bass, but he was also for many years an important fisheries researcher; he participated in some of the earliest surveys of Florida fishes, as he points out here. He also was an influential voice in the bonefish/ladyfish debate, and his review of that debate pretty much brings the story up to the present, except that Henshall thought that the ladyfish would be called the ten-pounder most of the time. Notice also that for a while he tried to get people to call the bonefish* (Albula vulpes) *a ladyfish, an effort also made by the distinguished fisheries authorities Jordan and Evermann.*

The confusion didn't really fade away, even in the 1920s. In 1950, Joe Brooks wrote that the confusion still existed, and that the only really satisfactory way to be sure someone knew which fish you were talking about was to use the scientific name. The worst of the confusion was over, though, by the time Henshall wrote the following article.

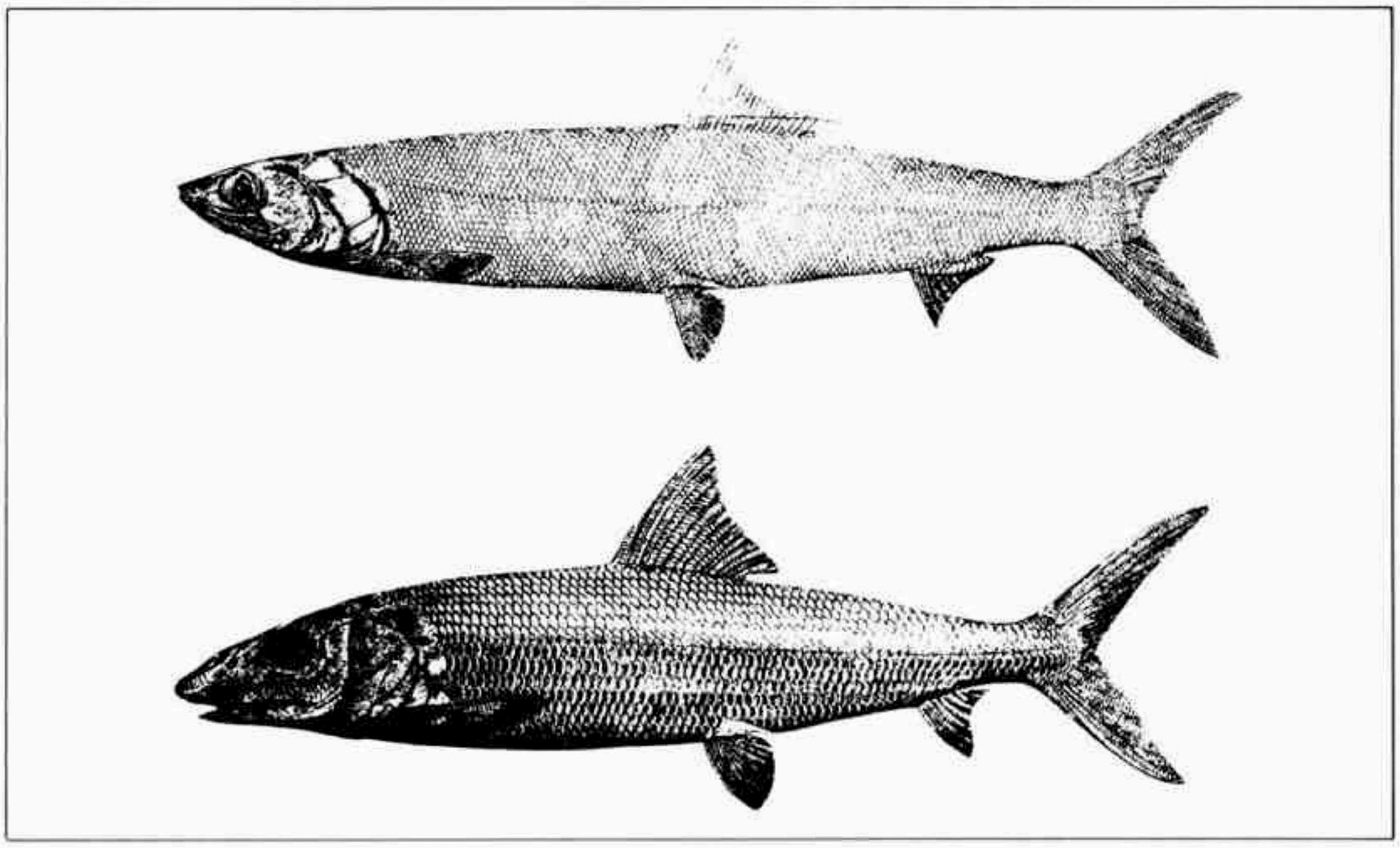
LADYFISH, BONEFISH OR TEN-POUNDER

There are two fishes, allied to the herrings, and belonging to different families, that co-exist on the sandy shores of all warm seas of the three continents. They have received a number of vernacular names in various localities, but to the ichthyologist they are *Albula vulpes* and *Elops saurus.*

Albula vulpes was first described by Marcgrave in his "History of Brazil", 1648, as *Unbarana*, from Brazil. Later it was described by Catesby in his "History of the Carolinas", 1737, as *Albula Bahamensis,* from the Bahamas, and known locally as "Bone-fish."

Elops saurus was first described and named by Linnaeus, in 1766, from specimens sent to him from South Carolina by Dr. Garden. Captain William Dampier, an early hydrographer, explorer and buccaneer, in his "Voyage Round the World", 1697, mentioned it as "Ten-pounder", and "Bony-fish", from the Bahamas.

Jordan & Evermann in "Fishes of North and Middle America", 1896, enumerate the following vernacular names for *Albula vulpes:* Lady-fish; Bone-fish; Macabi; Sanducha; Banana-fish. Dr. G. Brown Goode, in "American Fishes", 1888, says of *Albula vulpes,* "With us it is usually called Ladyfish, in the Bermudas, Bonefish and Grubber."



Ladyfish, above, and bonefish, below from James Henshall's Favorite Fish and Fishing, *1908.*

Jordan & Evermann, in the work just quoted, give the following vernacular names for *Elops saurus*: Ten-pounder; John Mariggle; Bony-fish; Big-eyed Herring; Metajuelo Real; Chiro; Lisa Francesa.

From the foregoing account it appears that, while the scientific nomenclature of the two fishes concerned is clearly and well-established, there is much confusion regarding their common names, or at least to those inhabiting the Atlantic or Gulf of Mexico. On the score of priority, however, it is evident that the name "Bone-fish" was first applied to *Albula vulpes* from the Bahamas by Catesby. It is also evident that the name "Ten-pounder" for *Elops saurus* was the first to be applied to that fish from the Bahamas by Dampier. These names, then, according to the law of priority, rightly belong to the fishes named. The term "Bony-fish" which was early applied to both species under consideration can very well be eliminated and justly discarded.

The name "Ladyfish", which has gained considerable currency for *Albula vulpes*, was apparently first applied to the fish along the Atlantic coast, but was not used by the market fishermen of Key West or Nassau. The name Ladyfish must evidently be relegated to synonymy.

During the winters of 1878, 1881, 1886 and 1889, when collecting fishes in Florida, it was my custom to go out with the Conch and Bahaman market fishermen to the fishing grounds, as many valuable specimens, not used for food, could be obtained in this way. The usual name applied by these fishermen, black and white, to *Albula vulpes* was "Bonefish", while "Bony-fish" and "Ten-pounder" were restricted to *Elops saurus*. The former was esteemed a good food-fish, while the latter was considered worthless. The significance of "Bonefish" or "Bony-fish" as applied to either fish is not very apparent, though the Ten-pounder has a bone in the floor of its mouth like its big brother, the tarpon.

In my "Bass, Pike, Perch and Others", 1903, and "Favorite Fish and Fishing," 1902, I endeavored to straighten the tangle by discarding both Bonefish and Bony-fish, and in deference to such authorities as Jordan, Evermann, Gilbert and Goode, I adopted their name "Lady-fish" for *Albula vulpes*, and in conformity with the law of priority I retained the name "Ten-pounder" for *Elops saurus*. However, this attempt to establish a uniform and permanent nomenclature proved futile, inasmuch as the great influx of northern anglers and tourists, during the last ten years, to the fishing resorts along the keys and Gulf coast of Florida, has furnished a more satisfactory solution. These anglers, coached by their guides, have substituted Bonefish for Ladyfish.

In these circumstances, and in accordance with modern usage, and in conformity with established custom, it becomes inevitable and proper to restore the name Bonefish for *Albula vulpes*, and to retain the name Ten-pounder for *Elops saurus*. It is a consummation devoutly to be wished that these names may continue to be used in this way world without end.

Now we go back to an earlier time, 1896, when we find the following exchange of letters in Forest and Stream. *The first is important, not because it describes fly fishing but because it describes so well the typical fight of a bonefish,* Albula vulpes. *As most saltwater fishermen know, the bonefish's fight is characterized by long, fast runs, sometimes 100 yards or more. This is an important point because the ladyfish* (Elops saurus) *is known not as a runner but as a spectacular jumper. The fights of these two fish are so totally unlike that it is probably reasonable to consider a description of their fight an important diagnostic characteristic for field identification.*

So, notice that the fish the writer (identified only as F.S.I.C.) caught were long-running fish. Notice, additionally, that in his description of the fish, that the writer places the mouth properly—for a bonefish, that is—under the nose. The ladyfish's mouth is more like that of a tarpon than that of a bonefish (see the drawings printed here as well). These identifying characteristics will become quite important in the final article we will turn to momentarily. The following article appeared on April 4, 1896.

THE "BONE FISH" OF BISCAYNE BAY.

For the past two winters, skillful fishermen among the Northern tourists, whom I knew personally or by reputation among mutual acquaintances, have been reporting with enthusiasm the discovery in Biscayne Bay of a new game fish which is to surpass all the other ministers to piscatorial amusements. Some went so far as to say that the tarpon is superseded as the king of fish; as expressed by one of them who kills annually more than fifty tarpon, "the tarpon is not in it."

Such strong statements greatly excited my curiosity, and meeting Mrs. Stagg, of Kentucky, who holds the belt—or cestus,

being a lady—upon tarpon, and she repeating again her story (not from her own experience) of last year, and being inflamed by this story of the "new planet which swims within our ken," I took a day at Biscayne Bay, returning to-night with three of the fish.

The bone fish is new to me, and so far as I can ascertain is taken only in Florida, at Biscayne Bay and probably southward, though as to the latter fact I have no information. A guide did tell me that it is abundant in Cuba, where it is called what he pronounced leeths, or "the swift."

The three specimens taken by my friend and myself weighed (by estimation) 6, 5 and 4 lbs. respectively. The bait is surf bugs or sand fleas such as are used occasionally on the Jersey coast for sheepshead when that capricious fish declines his ordinary diet. They are taken in the same manner as there, by a scoop net, or digging with the fingers, when the breaker recedes.

The cast—two hooks No. 7 O'Shaughnessy, above a small sinker and 1 ft. apart—is made 70 ft. or more from the boat, along a sand bar, on the rising tide. Three inches of water on the top of the bar are preferable, but the day I was fishing was at the tail end of a "norther," and I had to fish the shallow channels next the bar in 3 or 4 ft. of water. The strike is a slow nibble or mumble; and it requires quickness and discretion to hook the fish. But when he is hooked, which is by a sudden, slight motion of the wrist, the aspect of the contest changes from apathy to fierce activity. There is a lightning-like run of perhaps 100 yds., then a return nearly to the boat, then an equally extensive run which cannot be checked, and then zigzag rushes and flourishes here, there and everywhere until the fish is exhausted, and finally lifted into the boat by the line—no gaffing or other ceremonial; there is no leaping or jumping—all honest fishwork, below the surface and in his own element. I have taken small-mouth bass of similar weight and length, and brook trout not so large, and they simply do not compare with this fighter. There is no fish (of his class) which can be named with him. Comparison with the tarpon is absurd. They are not in the same category unless it be in beauty. It would be like comparing snipe shooting with hunting deer.

The fish is round barreled and heavy for its size. It has a pointed snout, with mouth under its nose like the hake, which is most erroneously called by New York fishermen kingfish. Its head has no scales, but is covered by a shining silver epidermis. The eye is black and quite large. The scales are large and are closely set on the body, and look like a network of closely compacted silver rings. A most gleaming fish! The back shades from light to bright ultramarine. It is certainly one of the prettiest as well as the most graceful of fish.

The first question asked as to a fish, "Is it good to eat?" This one is very good to eat. It has the disadvantage of the best of all fish for the table—the shad—of being full of bones, but the flesh in the intervals is delicious. I like it better than the pompano, and next after the shad.

Now is this fish a new discovery? Mr. Hulings, who spends his winter outing, pursuing them with occasional lapses into tarpon fishing for variety and exercise, tells me that he took the pains last year to stop over in Washington to consult the Fish Commissioners, and all the satisfaction he received was a disquisition verbally upon the lady (or "bony") fish very common in Florida waters and in no way related to this fish. Again, Mr. McFerrand, of Louisville, who claims this fish to be superior to the tarpon, reported to the same commission and received an elaborate (written) description of the same lady fish.

What is this fish, and how is it to be classified?

F. S. I. C

Finally, we turn to a response to the above letter. The response appeared in Forest and Stream *the very next week, on April 11, 1896. The author is identified only as "Maxie," a pen name we do not recognize. Perhaps one of our readers knows more of this pseudonym. Notice that, based solely on the description of fight and physical characteristics given in the above letter, this Maxie person identifies the fish as a bonefish; notice also that Maxie seems to be quite familiar with its scientific history and its other characteristics. Then, and most important for our purposes, see that Maxie describes taking bonefish with several different flies. This, as far as we know, is the earliest reference yet found to fly fishing for bonefish. The books Maxie refers to, by Henshall and Orvis/Cheney, are rather vague on the question of whether or not they actually caught true bonefish. Both books were written early enough that the authors did not seem to have a clear feeling for the distinction between bonefish and ladyfish, even though Henshall was, as we have seen, to become very outspoken about the matter later.*

In any case, the following account stands as reasonably convincing evidence that Albula vulpes *fell to fly fishers in the very early days of Florida fishing.*

New York, April 8.—*Editor Forest and Stream:* In your last issue I notice an interesting description of the bonefish of Biscayne Bay, Fla., and also an inquiry as to its classification, etc.

While being a comparatively new fish to the angling fraternity, it is by no means new to ichthyologists, as it is recorded in "List of Food Fishes of the United States," of 1879, under the name of *Vulpes albula* (Linn).

During a ten years' residence on the east coast of Florida I have had a large experience with this fish and heartily agree with F.S.I.C. in proclaiming it "the game fish *par excellence* of the Atlantic."

As he says, sand fleas, fiddler and hermit crabs are the most successful baits, but I have derived more sport from using a medium weight fly-rod with large, gaudy salmon or bass flies. Jock-Scott, butcher, scarlet-ibis and parmachene-belle are my favorites, all tied on No. 8-0 hooks with twisted gut loops. There is some excellent advice to fly-fishermen intending to visit Florida contained in Dr. Henshall's "Camping and Cruising in Florida," and in the collection of papers made by C. F. Orvis and A. N. Cheney entitled "Fishing with the Fly," but the bone or lady fish, mentioned in these works, is a totally different fish in appearance, habits and habitat.

I will add that there is great and almost unknown sport in store for the Northern angler who will go to Biscayne and depart from the conventional bait and "billiard cue rod" and experiment with the fly along the sandbars and mangrove shores.

MAXIE