

Islamorada with Charlie Causey

by Nathaniel P. Reed

CHARLIE CAUSEY, MY FRIEND and compatriot in the battle against the rape of the Florida Keys, invited me for three days of bonefishing with Eddie Wightman, the great bonefish guide. I had to miss the first day because of an endless meeting, but got on the road with great expectations and excitement the afternoon of 27 April 1998.

The long drive ended with a delightful reception by Charlie and his wife Marby at their truly wonderful property on the bay side of Islamorada. Charlie and Marabeth (Marby) are the conscience of the upper Keys, where avarice and greed run rampant. Charlie serves on every possible board dedicated to slowing and controlling development, attempting to curtail the terrible pollution problems caused by the Key's 4,000 cesspool and 8,000 leaking septic tanks. "It is frustrating, even depressing, but my love of the Keys drives me on," Charlie says. Marby is "all things"—wife, homemaker, ally, and expert researcher trained by years of work in investment banking at one of Wall Street's best firms.

Charlie "found" the upper Keys while making his own waves on Wall Street thirty years ago. He became a passionate bonefish fisherman. He fishes for the gray ghosts 100 to 150 days a year. He poles his own skiff, wades soft flats occasionally in snowshoes, and frequently flies to the Bahamas for two to four days of "easy" fish, compared with the incredibly bright fish of the Florida Keys that are hunted and attacked daily by too many guides and too many fishermen. Now sixty-two years of age, he loves to fish alone, loves to wade.

Charlie and Eddie Wightman have been fishing together for twenty years. They know how to have fun together. Eddie came to the Keys as a boy of six. He's been in love with fishing ever since. Now fifty-seven, thin, lithe, 5-feet-8-inches tall, 165 pounds of muscle, he is a magnificent poler and fishing guide. Eddie has been guiding since he was sixteen years old and prefers bonefishing,

but spends time on tarpon and permit. He has restricted his guiding to about 150 days a year and only guides "longtime" anglers.

Eddie has come to the conclusion that the best backing for bonefish is 20-pound monofilament. The stretch of the mono keeps the fly secured in the bonefish's mouth. After years of using Dacron and noting that many bonefish were able to lose the fly after a long run, Eddie tried mono and is convinced that the losses have been dramatically reduced.

weight rod overloaded with an 11-weight line.

APRIL 28

Off at 8:30 A.M. in Charlie's super skiff. Eddie had schools of small tarpon located that would make a good start for any day. We stopped on the deepwater side of a bank. Eddie said excitedly, "They're still here!" The bottom was a mixture of dark grass and rock, which, with the slanting sunlight, caused me serious problems in seeing either an individual tarpon or any cruising schools. The tarpon were also a dark color that made them very difficult to see. Eddie, however, had no problem finding them, pointing out individual tarpon with his pole.

I jumped a 15-pounder and lost another after a savage strike. Charlie hooked a bigger tarpon, perhaps 30 pounds, that threw the hook after a busting jump. Finishing with the tarpon, at 10:30, we crossed Florida Bay to an endless flat where Eddie was sure numerous bonefish would be found. Before lunch, I landed a 6-pound bonefish, but then we suffered through a long, slow two hours without a



Author (right) with giant bonefish and Charlie Causey.

Eddie believes the best shots at bonefish are directly in front of the fish or school. The fly is supposed to land 4 to 5 feet short and is tied with weighted eyes to settle swiftly. The next key is the "Wightman strip": a long, smooth strip. It will attract many if not the majority of feeding or cruising bonefish. Once attracted, you're supposed to let the fly settle and then bump it with smooth, small strips, rod tip near or in the water, then speed the fly up if a bonefish gives chase, and hand strike. The key is to not make any jerky movements; everything must be smooth.

Eddie and Charlie like crab patterns that they tie themselves. The critical factor is the weight of the eyes: a light fly for shallow water, a heavy fly for deep water. "Get the fly down to the bonefish's level quickly" is their mantra. As for rods, they both believe that to cast effectively in the common 15- to 25-knot winter and spring winds, the best outfit is a 10-

sighting as the tide fell and began to flow in. Finally, around 3:00 P.M., Eddie spotted a nice bonefish, which I hooked and landed—a 7-pounder. An hour later, Charlie cast to what appeared to be a school of big bonefish. A fish took his fly after one bump that turned out to be a 9-pound redfish, a species that had been nearly fished out by the commercial fishermen, but are making a great comeback throughout their range. At 4:30, Eddie spotted another large bonefish that I hooked and landed—an 8-pounder.

Home at 5:30 P.M. A long day of poling, a wonderful experience.

APRIL 29

It was windy at 8:30 A.M.; 10 to 15 mph, growing to 15 to 20 mph by noon. A strange cloud cover cut visibility; high cirrus with fifty percent cumulous low-level clouds. We experienced frequent blackouts because of the scuttling clouds.

There were warnings of heavy afternoon rains as El Niño's weather pattern persisted.

Off at 8:30 A.M. I asked "permission" to try for one of the giant, highly educated Islamorada local bonefish. Eddie quipped, "They all have Ph.Ds." There are four or five flats right off the bay side of Islamorada. Lignumvitae Key, which I helped preserve way back in 1967, was in the background. The bonefish on these flats are among the largest anywhere in the world. They are pummeled by hopeful anglers daily. Some of the largest fish feed only at dawn, in the evening, and at night. Eddie swore that they can feel, see, and smell anglers. Even a perfect cast is regularly rejected. Eddie likes the incoming tide with the wind behind it.

"Nat, this flat is 'Failure Flat,'" said Eddie, fastening his eyes on me. He immediately spotted bonefish muddy around the edges of the flat. I had four good shots at three singles and a pair. Eddie's summary was that I had made "one perfect cast, two good casts, and one disastrous cast." The four fish either ignored the fly or fled.

Flat #2 had several large bonefish, but they were still in the deepwater edge, and we couldn't really see them well. At the far end of the flat, a pair of large bonefish began to mud. Eddie positioned me perfectly. A good cast produced a take, but I lost the line while trying to hand strike—and the bonefish was gone. Recriminations, disgust, and begging forgiveness—what a bonehead! It was the largest bonefish I'd ever cast to or hooked and I blew it! Convinced that I was done for the trip, I was feeling down, defeated, and out.

The next flat was covered with "Ts"—wooden cross bars that have been put on the flat by researchers to measure the nutrient load from birds on a frequently tide-flushed flat. The fifty-odd crosses make it look like a graveyard. Every one of the perches had a bird sitting on it: terns, gulls, and cormorants. As we poled onto the flat, Eddie said that he could see a number of bonefish feeding. While lengthening line, I hooked a needlefish that caused a long delay while Charlie and Eddie repaired the leader. It took longer than anyone expected because several sections of the Ande leader needed to be replaced. The first fly, which Charlie selected from his vast array of crab flies, fell apart while being tied on the leader, so he had to search again for the "perfect" fly. Finally, just before 11:00 A.M., we were ready.

Eddie peered across the flat and said, "Hey, the bonefish are still feeding!" I blew the next three opportunities in a row: all at major bonefish. I either cast

too long, too short, misplayed the Wightman strip, couldn't see the fish until they were too close, you name it—it happened. Finally, I cast at a large solo bonefish off the starboard bow of the skiff. The fish was feeding into the wind tide, busy muddy. The fly fell 5 feet upstream of him and sank. As the fly was swept to the fish by the tide, I gave it one smooth strip, and to everyone's surprise, the bonefish swam over and ate the fly.

The bonefish fled the flat through the bird stakes. "Nat, take the drag off; Charlie, start the engine!" Eddie was in control. I cleared the line from the stakes, Eddie poled the skiff off the flat, and we began the chase. I had lost more than 150 yards of line and was sure the bonefish had swum around Channel Marker #12, a tall concrete post that was covered with barnacles. "Hold on, Nat," bellowed Eddie, and "Keep off the drag!" I don't know why the mono backing wasn't cut by the piling or the growth on the piling, but we cleared it.

After reeling in a huge amount of backing, which took me awhile, we were confronted with the next hurdle: the bonefish had doubled back, headed "upstream" into the tide, and had turned around a stone crab pot line. The line, of course, was covered with a mass of sharp, clinging shells and barnacles that should have cut the mono backing—but it didn't. Charlie reached overboard and lifted the backing up over the float. Again, I spent a frantic minute's time reeling in a minimum of 150 yards of backing and 35 yards of fly line.

The next obstacle was an anchored boat with three anglers fishing for tarpon. The bonefish headed for their anchor line. Eddie called out, "Would you lift your anchor?" The three fishermen responded instantly, pulling up their 20 yards of anchor line. What a refreshing, reaffirming act. It is becoming rarer and rarer to encounter anglers in a choice spot who would understand and react so quickly.

The bonefish turned and went back upstream, into the tide, and then doubled back around Channel Marker #11. Eddie chased him, drove the skiff upstream, and again the backing slid off the channel marker without being cut. I handled one more exciting long run that took the bonefish onto a small flat west of the channel marker. There I was finally able to get the backing onto the reel and successfully finish the fight with the fly line on the reel.

After a full fifteen minutes of holding the bonefish, trying to turn him over, trying to get him to come to the surface, without results, I wondered out loud if the hook had slipped and that the bone-

fish was foul hooked. Finally, forty-eight minutes after being hooked, Eddie reached down and handtailed the bonefish. "Good heavens, Charlie, look at this bonefish!" They were in my way and I could only hear Charlie say, "My God, he's a genuine monster!"

The bonefish was stocky—35 inches long; bulging—20 inches thick around the shoulders; and heavy, all the way to its tail. I think it had to be a female filled with roe. Eddie admitted, "It's bigger than my personal record of 15.6 pounds." Charlie added, "It's bigger than my 15.12-pounder." We quickly photographed and released the monster. It was firmly hooked in the corner of its mouth. The bonefish was so strong that I could not lift it with a 10-weight rod bent double! Think of pulling an 11-weight line around for forty-eight minutes. Rarely have I fought a more determined fish.

During lunch, the "battle scene" was revisited, and each obstacle described vividly. Finally, Eddie said, "You know, it was meant to be. The needlefish, the new leader, the long pause, a change of flies, the obstacles—all of that—it was meant to be."

I'd always wanted to catch a really large bonefish. Charlie and Eddie are convinced the fish must have weighed between 16 and 18 pounds, a potential world record (except for assistance in clearing the crab pot float), but a "life fish." As I have no interest in killing a bonefish, the potential world record is meaningless.

On the long drive home, through torrential rain, I had plenty of time to relive the fight and realize that this was the largest bonefish that I had ever seen, the largest bonefish that I will ever hook or land. It was meant to be!

There's a 40-pound permit out there, somewhere!



Nathaniel Reed is a keen fisherman who loves snook, bonefish, tarpon, Atlantic salmon, and permit adventures. Reed has served as founder of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and 1000 Friends of Florida; assistant secretary of Fish and Wildlife and Parks in the U.S. Department of the Interior; vice chairman of the National Audubon Society, the Nature Conservancy, and the Everglades Foundation; and a member of the board of the Atlantic Salmon Federation. His mother once commented, "Nathaniel was born with a fly rod in his hand!"