

The Retrieve



The day is sunny. You are relaxing in your lawn chair on the front porch after lunch when, suddenly, a 200-foot-long creature built like a vacuum cleaner bounds around the corner. To your disbelief and horror, it is sucking up your friends as they flee and pulverizing them in its jaws. What should you do? Run and hide? In panic, you dive into your house. . .but it is too late. The creature sees you, inserts its snout into your doorway, and sucks up everyone inside.

It's not a pretty picture, but you now have a faint idea of how flats animals respond when bonefish enter their neighborhood for a snack.

Animals that flee are almost always spotted and pounced on. Those that dive into their mud or sand shelters are treated like those fairy tale animals, the three little pigs. Those that rely on camouflage, keep their wits, and remain stationary might escape if bonefish do not detect their scent.

An understanding of bonefish feeding habits and the movements and response of prey helps you present your offering in a convincing manner. The retrieve should attract initial attention to your offering and excite bonefish to attack it. The retrieve often becomes a game of enticement, creating a great deal of anticipation for both bonefish and angler.

The basic retrieve used for bonefish is simply a pull, or strip, retrieve. It is easy to master. Hold the rod handle with one hand. Catch the fly line under the first or second finger of the rod hand, and press the line against the cork handle. With your other hand,

grasp the fly line behind your rod hand with your thumb and first finger. Strip, or pull, fly line down and back while releasing tension on the fly line between your finger and the cork handle. Resume fly line tension against the cork when you are not stripping line.

Pay careful attention to the location of the fly line that has been stripped in. Make certain it is not tangled or trapped by your feet or objects in the boat; you must clear the line quickly when a fish is hooked. When two people are fishing from a boat, the angler who is not fishing should help keep the fly line free of obstructions. When you are stripping line, point the rod tip directly at the fly and keep the tip just under or at the water's surface. This ensures direct contact between the rod tip and the fly. The fly line should always be tight to the fly and under your complete control.

Eliminate as many variables as possible and make each strip count. Your best chance of success is during the first one or two strips. Each succeeding strip reduces your chances of a hookup. The further you strip a fly, the greater the chance it may snag the bottom, pick up a weed, or be detected as a fraud.

Various combinations of slow, fast, short, and long pulls interspersed with pauses can be employed. Remember, the retrieve is not always associated with movement. Sometimes a very slow-moving or even stationary offering is preferred. At other times a continuous series of short pulls ("ticks") keep fish interested and from getting a good visual fix on your imitation. The combinations are endless. The mood and response of bonefish dictate the most effective retrieve to use.

Adjust the speed of the retrieve so it is slightly faster than the speed of the bonefish. Deeper-swimming fish usually move faster and require a faster retrieve than those feeding in shallow water. Rooting or tailing bonefish are best enticed with a very slow retrieve, a twitch, or perhaps a short single pull and stop. Most anglers retrieve too fast and move the fly too often. If you are fishing from a boat, you might need to compensate for any boat movement toward the fly or fish, making quick, hard strips to barely move the fly. Water movement (tides) and wind also influence retrieve speed. When fishing cross tide, incorporate a variable speed, but not one so slow that a belly forms in your fly line or so fast that you pull the fly away from interested bonefish. If possible, position yourself to take advantage of water movement.

When fishing with the current or wind, you need to retrieve faster to keep up with the natural drift. This is like controlling a fly on an upstream dry fly cast. The same holds true when fishing into incoming waves or swells. Incoming water pushes the fly, and you must compensate with a faster retrieve and, perhaps, a heavier fly. Sometimes tides move so fast that it appears you are fishing a river. Fast-moving water over a clear sand bottom is reminiscent of fishing transparent trout streams in New Zealand, and bonefish can be just as spooky as the trout.

A twitch is one to three inches. A short strip is three to eight inches; a medium strip is eight to 18 inches. A long pull is 18 to 30 inches. A slow strip takes about one second. A hard, or fast, pull is very quick. Under some situations a s-l-o-w hand-twist or twitch retrieve is in order. Remember, most bonefish prey moves slowly, even awkwardly, and retrieving too slowly is difficult—retrieving too quickly is easy to do.



Always point the rod tip directly at the fly and keep it at or below the water's surface. This ensures direct contact between you and the fly.



Concentrate on the position of the fly in relation to the fish. Watching the movements of the fish helps you determine how to retrieve the fly.

Before you begin the retrieve, wait for the fly to settle to the bottom. You should usually select a fly that reaches the bottom on the count of three. If the sink rate is shorter, the fly is probably too heavy. If it takes longer, chances increase that fish may pass the fly before it reaches the bottom.

Ideally, the fly should lift up off the bottom on the strip and settle to the bottom on the stop. This is referred to as a “jig” or “hop” action. Flies with bead chain and metal eyes naturally lend themselves to this action, which simulates a fleeing crustacean. A shrimp swims in short, erratic spurts. Keep this in mind as you retrieve your fly. Better yet, get a face mask and snorkel and observe shrimp and crabs in their natural environment. The heavier the eyes, the faster you can retrieve without sacrificing this action. Flies without weighted eyes do not impart this action because they settle downward too slowly. They are reserved for very shallow water and must be fished slowly.

The retrieve is meant to attract attention and elicit a response. Usually, fish see the fly during the first strip and show interest. Fish usually take the fly when it is stopped between pulls. Do not pull the fly away. Allow the fish to tip down and grab it. Bonefish think this is a sure meal. If the first strip does not attract fish, twitch or strip the fly again and, perhaps, again. If a grab has not occurred after the first series of strips, usually three, your chances of a hookup decrease dramatically. I prefer to strip short once and stop, then two or three times and stop. After this, it often becomes a game of enticement and frustration. If a bonefish is close to the fly but does not see it, *twitch* the fly. A hard pull almost always spooks the fish.

Bonefish often play cat and mouse with your imitation. When this is the case, a series of short pulls and pauses often renews their interest and brings them in for a close-up view. Sometimes a two- to three-foot pull entices a grab as the fly settles. Bonefish rely partly on scent when feeding. Perhaps they are attempting to get a sniff of the unfamiliar offering. Do not allow the fly to sit too long, especially if it is not life-like or animated, because bonefish may detect it as a fraud and become suspicious or lose interest. When more than one fish is playing cat and mouse, the competition factor might elicit a grab.

You should not ordinarily put yourself in a position of speeding up the retrieve to hold their interest. Such strategy seldom results in a hookup. Instead, they follow right to the end of your rod tip and bolt, taking all their friends with them. If you do not feel fish are genuinely interested, it is better to stop the game early. Stop the retrieve or lift your fly carefully and gently out of the water, avoiding any liftoff noise or line spray.

Allow fish to move away, or cast to another fish that is farther away. If you lift a long length of line to make another cast, the liftoff noise and line splash may scare any nearby fish.

If bonefish appear genuinely interested, don't give up. Many times bonefish have seen you or the boat and are disturbed and plan to leave, but they may stop for one last morsel before departing. Slow down the retrieve to a series of slow, short pulls and stops in an attempt to finesse them to the fly. Many bonefish are hooked a rod's length away, even when you are in a boat. Remember that when fish are close in, you should kneel or crouch down.



The strip retrieve is simple. Catch the fly line against the cork handle and under your first or second finger. Grasp the fly line with the thumb and first finger of your line hand.



Pull the fly line down and back while releasing tension between your finger and the cork handle. The photo exaggerates releasing the tension. Assuming there is a tight connection between the rod tip and fly and there are no other variables, the fly moves as far and fast as you pull on the line.



Resume tension when you are not stripping



All bonefish destinations offer exciting opportunities to catch many species of fish. Each offers a unique experience and challenge. This school of mangrove snapper in the Bahamas may be more difficult to trick than this giant tarpon at Isla Holbox in the Yucatan. Both are fascinating quarries and tough adversaries. Don't miss the fun and excitement of other flats visitors.

