TAIL

FLY FISHING MAGAZINE

THE VOICE OF SALTWATER FLY FISHING SINCE 2012

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ULTIMATE TARPON TIMELINE

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We typically trade off on the bow.

My pal, Nick Roberts, and I fish together often, but there's never been a good way to decide who's on deck first. Remembering who caught the last fish three months earlier, say, when we last shared a boat, is way too much to ask, so we fall back on pleasantries. *You go first. No, please, you go on, I need to check my leader.* Someone will eventually cave and step up to the deck.

On our first day in the Bahamas, during a trip this past January, we tried something different. We'd come to an early agreement: whoever had the most recent surgery got the bow of the boat first. Whoever had been sliced, diced, and put back together in some form or fashion got the first crack at a fish. Anesthesia was required—twisted ankles and stitches didn't make the cut. You had to have gone under, and gone under the knife.

Nick won this sort of offbeat coin toss.

I want to say that it's not like either of us is that old, but we've had our share of hard knocks over the years. I'd had a complete knee replacement two years earlier. In contrast, Nick only recently had a weird fishing accident in which a boulder smashed his fingers as he grabbed his father-in-law to keep his father-in-law from going over a Colorado cliff edge. It was a rather large boulder, and it smashed Nick's finger flat. The distal and middle phalanx of the index finger on his line-stripping hand were shattered like twigs pounded with a rock. He texted me a picture of his X-ray, which turned my stomach. And just a week before our fishing trip, he'd had a second surgery. Between the two of us, we were sporting $100,000 worth of titanium plates, joints, and screws. That explains why rehabilitation, restoration, and renewal were at the top of our minds on our Bahamas bonefishing trip in late January. But only partly.

Photo: Nick Roberts

Nick and I had made the same trip four years earlier, a year after Hurricane Dorian pummeled the Bahamas. On that visit, we toured the island with biologists, visited with relief workers, and helped replant a tiny sliver of the vast stretches of mangrove forest obliterated by the storm. You can read about our return this year in this issue of Tail and hopefully get a sense of how awesome the fishing remains on Grand Bahama and how vital the saltwater fly-fishing community can be to help maintain and restore beloved destinations facing such challenges.

I don't want to get too touchy-feely, but that return trip to East End Lodge on Grand Bahama helped me realize anew how this sport enriches my life. Whether it's bonefish or tarpon or redfish or pinfish, I cast flies to saltwater fish because I get a kick with every tug on the rod and a thrill when I see fly line roostertail in the sunlight as a fish decides to take off in the other direction. At warp speed. And doesn't stop until it is into the backing. I love it when I figure out what a fussy fish will finally eat, and I love it when the fish beat me and send me home empty-handed but nearly always full-hearted.

I love the fun and games of saltwater fly fishing, but I also love the sport's quieter, more introspective elements. In meaningful ways, every trip to bonefish country—or striper, redfish, surf perch, or cobia country—is an opportunity for restoration. I get to repair a frayed connection to wild places. To renew a commitment to practice casting into the wind and find new ways to work for conservation. I want to sharpen my focus, which is blunted by deadlines and everyday responsibilities (I'm looking at you, lawnmower). Every cast is a chance to rewrite the script of the day, just like every fishing trip is a chance to start fishing more.

I hope you'll find a similar dose of inspiration and aspiration in this issue of Tail. Find a place that needs a helping hand, and step up to the task. And find a place that's worth returning to as often as possible.

T. Edward Nickens
Editor-in-Chief

On the Cover

Capt. Tyler Bowman went overboard for his portrait of the final fish in a grand slam for angler Adam Huthinson. Guide Juanito Briceno from Punta Allen Fishing Club on Ascension Bay holds the tarpon like a treasure. For good reason.

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TAIL
FLY FISHING MAGAZINE

Saltwater fly fishing is imbued with values of stewardship and conservation.

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Tail Fly Fishing Magazine

In loving memory of John C. Melfi

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– TFFM Staff

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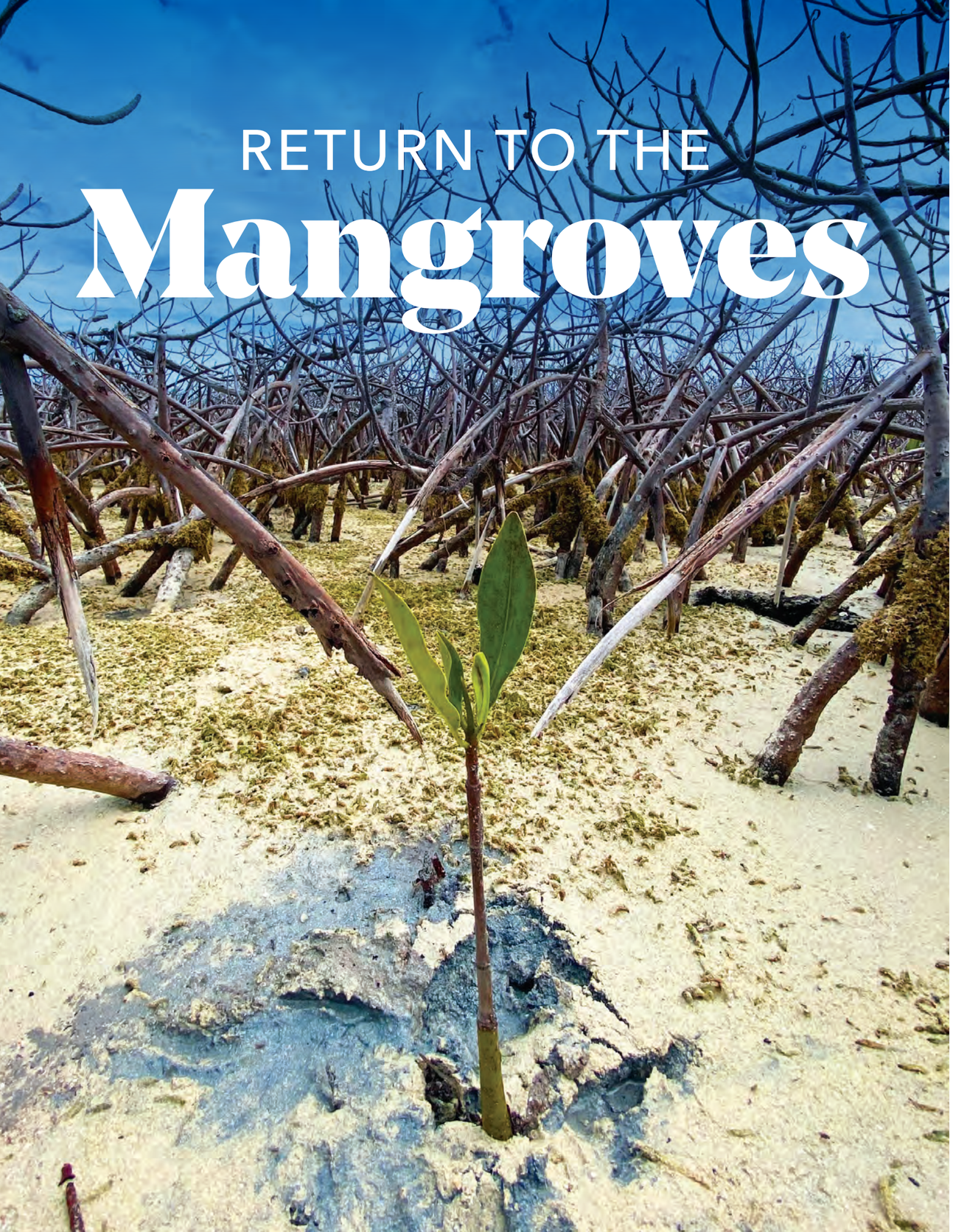
Photo: T. Edward Nickens



RETURN TO THE Mangroves

On the fabled East End of Grand Bahama, there was only one way to restore community after Hurricane Dorian: Go fishing.

Story and photos by T. Edward Nickens

I was worried about my friend, Nick Roberts. We've fished together for a long time and in a lot of places, but at the moment, I didn't think he was having much fun. We were trading time on the bow of the skiff like we always do—catch a fish, you give up the casting deck—and it had been working out like this: Nick would be on the bow and see a bonefish when the guide called it out. He'd cast to the bonefish, hook it, land it, sit down, and then it would be my turn on the bow. But it could take me 45 minutes, a tangled line, and three blown shots to actually land a bonefish, which meant that I got to fish a lot more than Nick did. He seemed to be mostly catching. I felt like I was hogging the good spot, but we had a deal. What was a pal to do?

He was back on the bow when our guide, Walker Recklin from East End Lodge on Grand Bahama, saw them coming.

"Two fish, gimme a cast," he commanded. "Two o'clock, let's go!"

Two chunky monkeys moseyed down the edge of the flat. Nick played out line with a false cast, but not enough.

"Gimme some line," Walter urged. "There! Shoot it!"

The cast was a little too close. It practically bounced off the lead fish's head. In any other bonefish universe, the fish would have been gone in a contrail of muck and disappointment. But Nick was fishing in an alternate universe that morning. The bone bent its body 90 degrees and pounced on the spawning shrimp fly like it wanted to drive it into the muck first and beat it senseless.

I held my tongue while Nick landed the fat bonefish with dark banding. Then I couldn't help myself.

"So, the strategy is to bonk 'em on the head first?" I smirked. "Unbelievable."

Nick laughed. "Naw, man. It's like Uber Eats," he grinned. "Fresh food delivered right to your door!"

I shook my head. "Get off the bow, buddy," I said. "You can't do anything wrong today. It's my turn to fish. And nite-nite, 'cause you know this could take a while."

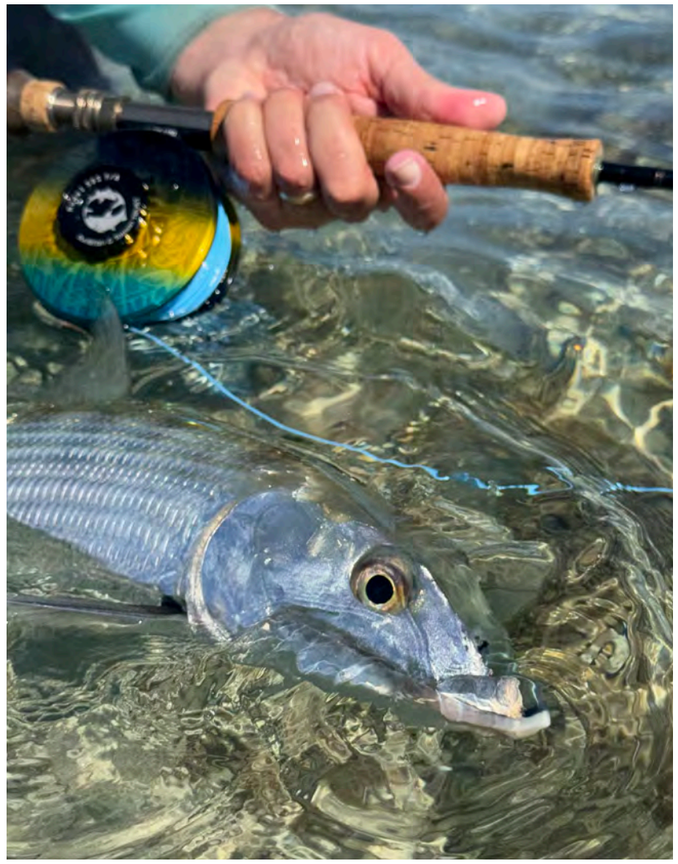
AFTER THE STORM

What was more impressive than Nick's bonefish whispering was the fact that there were so many bonefish on these flats to whisper to. Nearly four years earlier, we wondered if that would ever be the case again.

In the spring of 2021, Nick and I visited East End Lodge in McClean's Town, on the East End of Grand Bahama, on a less cheerful mission: Nick is director of communications and marketing for Bonefish & Tarpon Trust (BTT), and we were part of a team replanting mangroves on the Bahamian flats a year after Hurricane Dorian smashed the region. The storm roared ashore on September 1, 2019, with 185 miles-per-hour winds and a surly attitude: It sat atop Grand Bahama for some 20 hours, piling up over 20 feet of floodwaters in some areas. The official death toll stands at 74, with more than 275 people still missing. More than $3 billion in damages has been recorded. The villages of McLean's Town, plus High Rock and Sweeting's Cay, were ravaged and are still on their heels. Fewer than a quarter of McLean's Town residents have returned.

Added to the damage—and seriously hampering the region's comeback—was the devastation of the island's mangroves. Dorian destroyed 75 percent of the mangroves on Grand Bahama Island and nearly half the mangroves on the Abaco Islands. Sixty-nine square miles of mangroves were thrashed, uprooted, stripped of their leaves, and drowned in days of saltwater.

On that initial trip, Nick and I were part of a group of some 75 volunteers—guides, locals, and a high school biology class from Freeport's Bishop Michael Eldon School—planting mangrove saplings by hand at the mouth of Romer Creek, not far from East End Lodge. Led by BTT, the Bahamas National



Clockwise from top: Seeing eye-to-eye off Grand Bahama. / Locals volunteer to replant damaged mangroves. / It's no small task to transport plants to affected areas.

Trust (BNT), Abaco's Friends of the Environment, and a West Palm Beach apparel company called MANG (see page 86), the public planting effort was the first in what has turned into a multiyear Northern Bahamas Mangrove Restoration Project. To date, the project has put more than 100,000 mangrove trees back into the shores of the Bahamas, giving the hurricane-flattened habitats a jump-start on recovery.

On our return trip, Nick and I could see the mangroves we'd planted springing up as promising waist-high young saplings. In places, they fringed the water's edge. Elsewhere, they hung on stubbornly in the middle of vast patches of dead mangroves. It will take years and decades for these pioneering mangroves to grow, reseed, and restore the shores of Grand Bahamas. But nothing gets started without a start. And four days of near-constant bonefish action out of East End Lodge assured us that Grand Bahama's bonefish were up to the task of hanging on. And coming back strong.

AMAZON OF THE CARIBBEAN

For those who love saltwater flyfishing, there may be no more critical plant than mangroves. Their intricately interwoven root systems hold sand in place and serve as a nursery and a feeding ground for fish from the egg to the adult stage. Mangroves are a foundation for the ecosystem: A mangrove leaf falls into the water and begins a chain reaction of life support. Bacteria grow on the leaf, and the bacteria feed the phytoplankton and the zooplankton that feed the little fish. And the little fish feed the bigger fish, and it goes on from there. What happens in the mangroves matters all the way to the offshore reefs.

The mangrove restoration project jump-started in Florida, where citizens were asked to collect mangrove propagules and deliver them to staging sites at World Wide Angler and Sandy Moret's Florida Keys Outfitters in Islamorada. Working with partners, BTT shipped a 40-foot container with 15,000 propagules and 7,500 seedlings to the Bahamas. Now, BTT runs a pair of mangrove nurseries on Grand Bahama to help fuel the effort.

When Nick and I first saw the miles-long stretches of dead and dying mangroves four years earlier, it was impossible not to wonder about the fate of the region's bonefish. But the storm's ferocity came with a thin silver lining for bonefish anglers: So much water swelled up and swept over the islands that the submerged meadows of turtle grass, manatee grass, and shoal grass on the flats were buffered from being scoured and scrubbed away. The receding storm surge also dragged immense amounts of accumulated leaf litter and rich organic matter from the mangrove flats, which served as a nutritional jolt for flats and reef fish. But the mangroves are critical for keeping the flats' sands and sediments in place. No matter how daunting the task, putting seedlings into the ground, by hand and one at a time, is the best approach to first-aid and healing.

And while it's impossible to say with certainty how long it will take to restore these mangrove forests—or what restoration will ultimately look like—one thing was clear to Nick and me on our recent trip: Bonefish on the East End of Grand Bahama flats are healthy. And plentiful. And totally up to the task of confounding bonefish anglers.

GLORY HOUR

I should have listened to that little fishing voice inside my little fishing brain, which was clear and direct: *Take off your shoes, man. You better take off your shoes.*

I like fishing barefoot. I fish better barefoot when I can feel if the flyline slips under my feet and make instant adjustments.

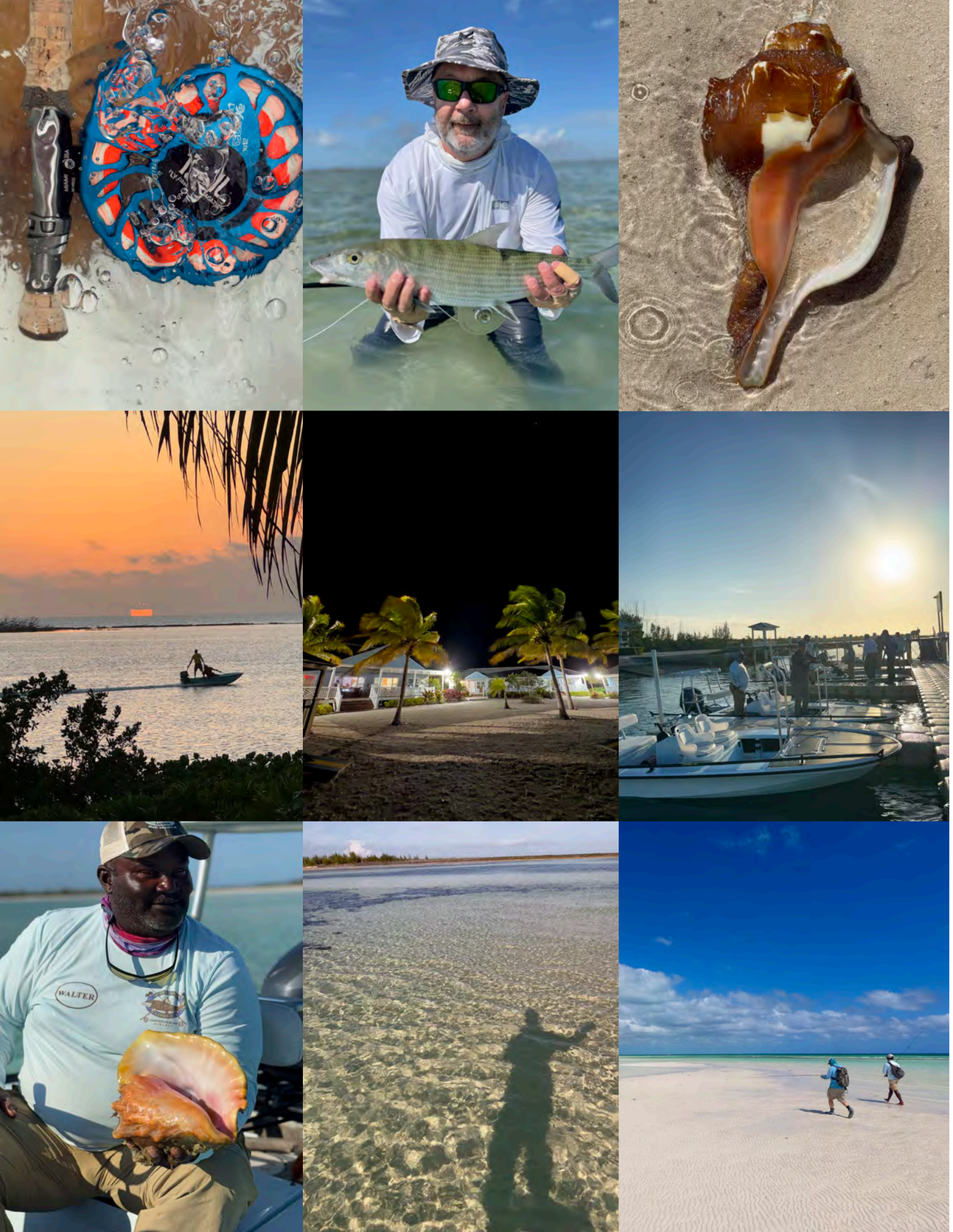
It takes more than casting prowess to catch a bone. Not stepping on the line helps.

"I will," I replied to that nagging little voice. "Just give me a minute, will ya?"

This silent conversation occurred as my fly line was in the air, and bead-chain shrimp fly was headed towards four honker bones slinking down the shoreline. The fly landed pretty close to where I wanted it to land, and one of the larger fish moved on it with pretty close to no hesitation and slurped it up as I strip-set the fly and raised the rod tip. It all went pretty much according to plan, until the fish bolted for about eight feet in its initial run, and the rod jerked, and the leader snapped, and I looked down at the coil of flyline under my shoe.

There you go, I thought. Always, always, always listen to your gut.

It took a while—and a few more hard lessons re-learned the hard way—but I got my revenge late the next day. Walter dropped me off on a giant flat on an incoming tide, with a pair of wide, sandy shallows framed with long banks of grass. "Fish all the way to the far shore," he hollered from the skiff. "I'll pick you up there." I looked around. The far shore was a half-mile away. As he ferried my fishing partner for the



Nick Roberts keeping 'em wet.

From top: In the rinse tank. / A fat two-hander. / Local color. / Headed home. / East End Lodge. / The chariots await. / Guide Walter Recklin with a great find. / Shadow casting, saltwater version. / On the hunt. Photo: Justin Lewis.

day, David Mason, to another flat a mile away, I wasn't sure what to think: Either Walter was tired of my hard-headedness, or he figured I knew what to do and would do better if success was all on me.

Thankfully, I rose to the occasion of the latter option.

As Walter motored away, a school of bonefish skimmed the reef that separated the flat from the ocean, their dark backs knifing through the wave-tossed water. When they made it to the white sand shallows, they stood out like beacons. I always struggle with actually seeing bonefish, a situation I blame on my physical status as vertically challenged. But I can tell time pretty well and cast to a specified distance much of the time, so I make do when a guide gives me casting orders. But these fish were singing my song. The little voice inside my head piped up.

Call me the Sand Man, I joked to myself. Even I can see a bonefish cruising a white beach.

I caught the first tailing bonefish on my second shot, and as the school scattered, I followed. But I kept returning to the glory hole: Two or three schools of bonefish made giant looping rounds, like ducks circling decoys, and nearly always returned to the white sand. I figured out that all I needed to do was make a stand and be patient.

When Walter picked me up 90 minutes later, I was standing in nearly the same spot I was when he left.

"What happened, man?" he called across the reef. "You get lost, or you find fish?"

I didn't have to say a word. He could tell by the smile on my face and my shaking head.

"Oh, yeah, boy!" he hollered. "You look like you figured a few things out!"

CURRENT SITUATION

In the days before Hurricane Dorian, flats fishing in the Bahamas delivered $169 million annually in economic benefits to Bahamian communities and supported 7,800 full-time jobs. Where those figures stand now is anyone's guess, but there's no escaping the tough reality of Grand Bahama. Dozens, perhaps scores, of private guides are still out of work. Deep Water Cay, among the most legendary lodges in the Caribbean, remains shuttered. A pernicious chicken-or-the-egg reality persists: Tourism is needed to rebuild, but anglers have far few options. It's been nearly four years since the storm, and while green vegetation has covered many of Dorian's scars, there's no escaping the wounds that remain.

East End Lodge owner Robert Neher remains undaunted. He was one of the first to claw his way back to McClean's Town after the storm, and he's never given up hope. All of his employees were

Bird's-eye view.

Nick Roberts (left) and T. Edward Nickens with a pair taken on foot. Photo: Justin Lewis.

homeless, and power to the entire East End was out and wouldn't be restored for a year.

He and his partner at the lodge, head guide Cecil Leathen, dug in. The lodge and a web of friends kicked off a GoFundMe campaign. It raised $300,000 for residents. All of the lodge's employees were homeless. Neher called in favor after favor: I need diapers, generators, trailers, water, and lumber. McLean's Town needed everything.

Even today, between greeting guests, juggling logistics, and serving as one of the Bahamas' most enthusiastic bartenders, Neher hauls sheetrock and cinderblocks to locals still rebuilding their homes. The East End Lodge partnership with BTT and mangrove restoration continues. A recent fundraising tournament at East End Lodge with the Yellow Dog Community and Conservation Foundation, a nonprofit associated with Yellow Dog Flyfishing, raised nearly $100,000 for community rebuilding projects. Another event is already in the works. And the rebuilt, redesigned, and expanded East End Lodge is booked out months in advance. It's all evidence of Neher's guiding mantra: Rebuilding the area's bonefishing industry was the only sure pathway to rebuilding the community.

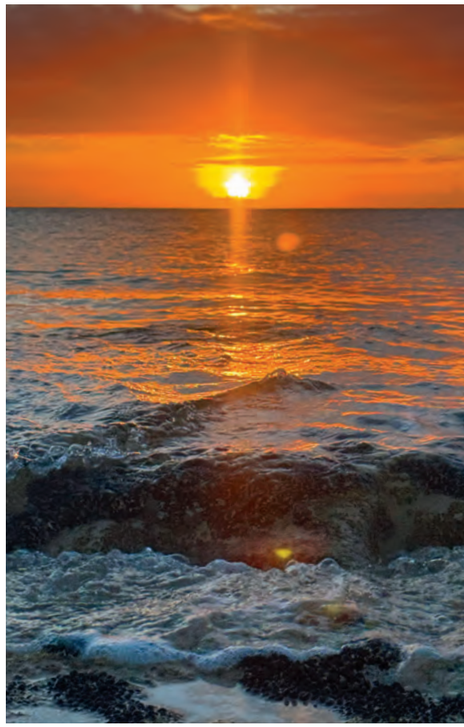
RETURN OF THE SANDMAN

On our last day, Nick and I waded the cove where I had my glory day—or a few glory hours, at least—the day before. We arrived a bit earlier in the tide and pushed up a school of small bonefish as we crossed the sand flat where I'd posted up the day before. There wasn't much happening. We split up to work a vast flat of sand and scattered limestone cobble a few hundred yards away, loathe to wander too far from what we figured was the sure thing.

And all along, we both shared that feeling that it was about to happen because it happened in just such a way only the day before—the same light, the same tide, the same flat, the same weather. I moved into the right spot, planted my feet just so, and was ready for the second bolt of bonefish lightning to crack through the Caribbean blue.

But this time, there was no thunderclap. No lightning in a bottle. No schools of big, dark bonefish knifing and tailing. And I heard the little voice

How do you bring back a mangrove forest?
One little piece of the future at a time.



again: With bonefishing, what was may have little to do with what will be, and all the wishing in the world can't bend a bonefish's will to your own.

When Walter picked us up, he was anxious to hear the tale.

"Tell me a story!" he hollered across the water.

Nick grinned sheepishly. "The thing about bonefish is that they always leave you wanting more," he said. And with that, the Bahamian guide knew exactly what had happened.

"Oh, yes!" Walter sang out, one leg dangled over the side of his skiff, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "You never know when the bones want to play. Different every day. And that makes it hard for you boys to leave and go back to work!"

Which is an actual fact, and here's another. It also makes it very enticing to return.

Clockwise from top left: Looking for that first glance at a hooked-up fish. / Caribbean colors. Photo: Craig Rogers / East End Lodge is just a hop, jump, and skiff ride from the good stuff. Photo: Nick Roberts