

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANTONY DIPLOCK AND GRAEME FIELD

Getting down deep is sometimes the only way to get to where the fish are. Field Editor **Graeme Field** takes a look at deepwater dredging and how you can make it work for you.

# DEEP, DOWN & DIRTY

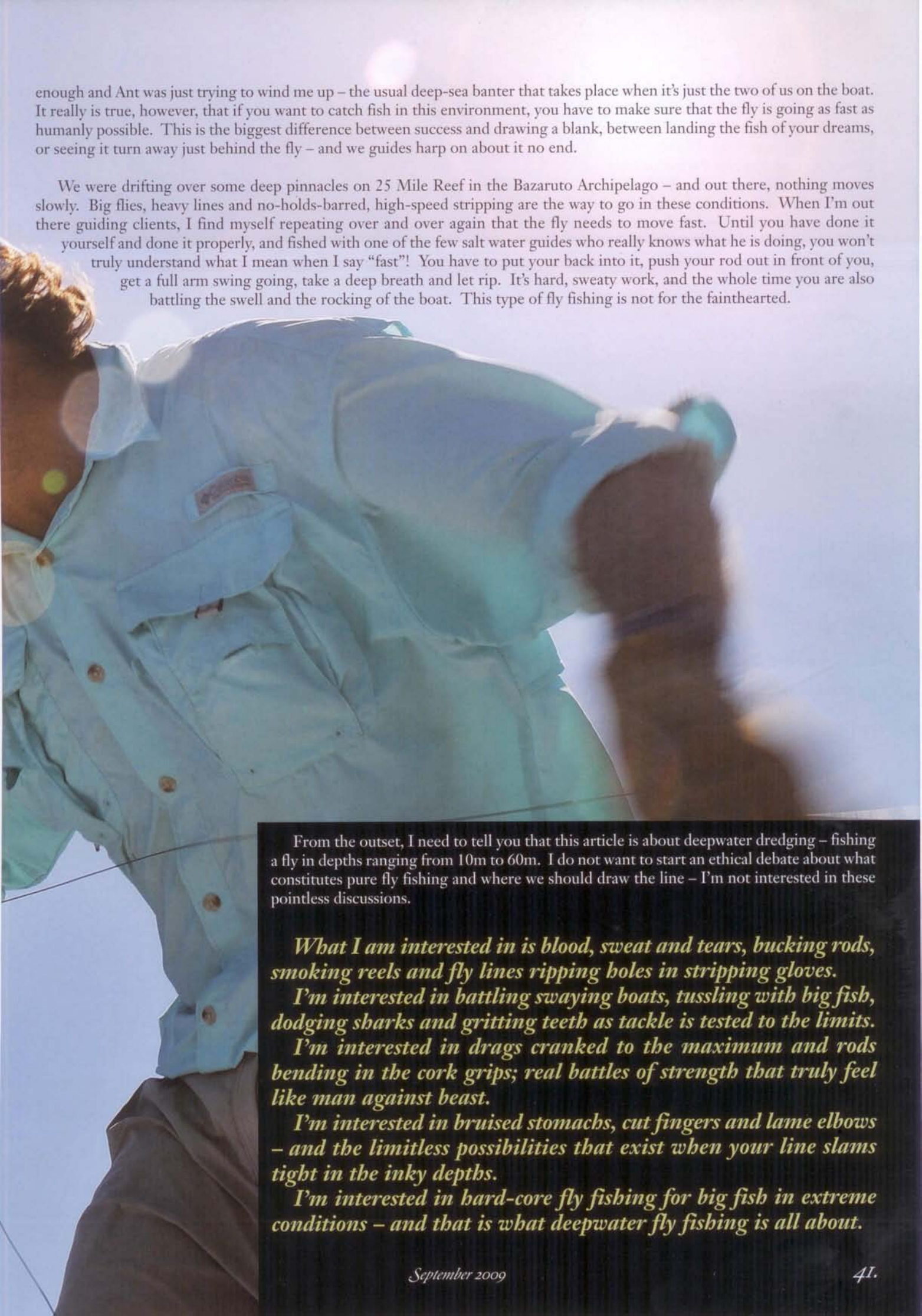
*The art of deepwater fly fishing*

**L**onger, harder, faster, deeper – yeah, work it baby!” Ant yelled at me, and I burst out laughing again, missed the line I was trying to strip and, in turn, missed the big, fat strike that came at that exact moment. I turned to him, exasperated: “Ah, come on bro’, I just missed another fish – stop it now!” But he just grinned at me and told me I wasn’t stripping fast enough. “Oh yeah? Then why are the fish hitting the fly, big guy? If you would just shut up and let me fish, we might actually get one on the boat!”

Then I realised that he sounded just like I do when I’m the one doing the guiding. Now I was at the receiving end of it: continual (and mostly unwanted) advice from a skipper relaxing in the shade of the T-top, drinking an ice-cold Coca-Cola while you are working your butt off trying to get that fly going at top speed. The only difference is that I *was* actually stripping fast

enough and Ant was just trying to wind me up – the usual deep-sea banter that takes place when it's just the two of us on the boat. It really is true, however, that if you want to catch fish in this environment, you have to make sure that the fly is going as fast as humanly possible. This is the biggest difference between success and drawing a blank, between landing the fish of your dreams, or seeing it turn away just behind the fly – and we guides harp on about it no end.

We were drifting over some deep pinnacles on 25 Mile Reef in the Bazaruto Archipelago – and out there, nothing moves slowly. Big flies, heavy lines and no-holds-barred, high-speed stripping are the way to go in these conditions. When I'm out there guiding clients, I find myself repeating over and over again that the fly needs to move fast. Until you have done it yourself and done it properly, and fished with one of the few salt water guides who really knows what he is doing, you won't truly understand what I mean when I say "fast"! You have to put your back into it, push your rod out in front of you, get a full arm swing going, take a deep breath and let rip. It's hard, sweaty work, and the whole time you are also battling the swell and the rocking of the boat. This type of fly fishing is not for the fainthearted.



From the outset, I need to tell you that this article is about deepwater dredging – fishing a fly in depths ranging from 10m to 60m. I do not want to start an ethical debate about what constitutes pure fly fishing and where we should draw the line – I'm not interested in these pointless discussions.

*What I am interested in is blood, sweat and tears, bucking rods, smoking reels and fly lines ripping holes in stripping gloves.*

*I'm interested in battling swaying boats, tussling with big fish, dodging sharks and gritting teeth as tackle is tested to the limits.*

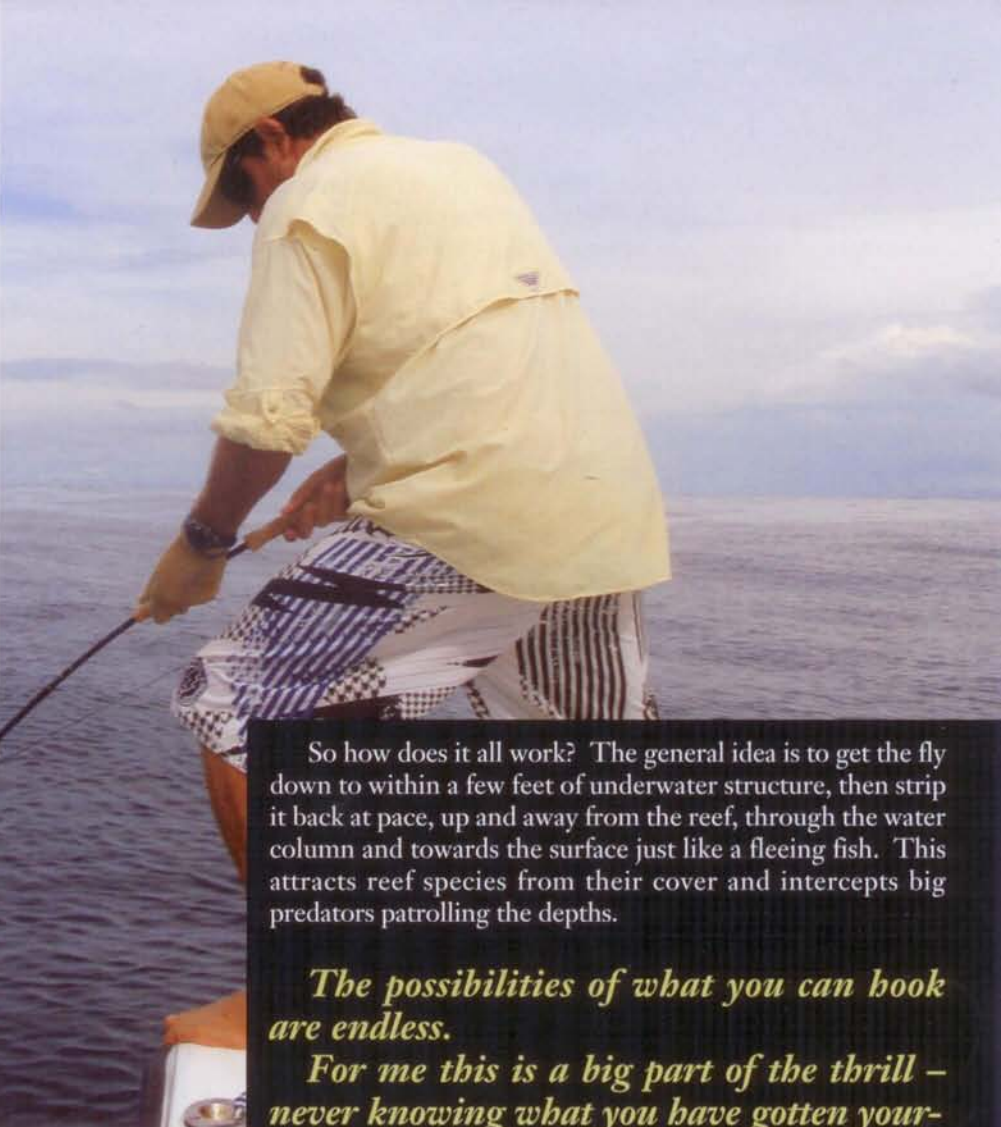
*I'm interested in drags cranked to the maximum and rods bending in the cork grips; real battles of strength that truly feel like man against beast.*

*I'm interested in bruised stomachs, cut fingers and lame elbows – and the limitless possibilities that exist when your line slams tight in the inky depths.*

*I'm interested in hard-core fly fishing for big fish in extreme conditions – and that is what deepwater fly fishing is all about.*

## GETTING DOWN AND DIRTY

In southern Africa, deepwater fly fishing pretty much began off the coast of Mozambique, pioneered by renowned guides such as Andrew Parsons, Craig Thomassen, Guy Ferguson and Antony Diplock. Like any new style of fishing, techniques are learnt by trial and error and success and frustration, and are gradually refined until the most productive and effective methods are established. Tackle is continually evolving, manufacturers developing new, specialist equipment for the task at hand. These days, deepwater fly fishing is a well-defined, successful facet of our craft, and specialised deepwater guides are worth their weight in gold.



So how does it all work? The general idea is to get the fly down to within a few feet of underwater structure, then strip it back at pace, up and away from the reef, through the water column and towards the surface just like a fleeing fish. This attracts reef species from their cover and intercepts big predators patrolling the depths.

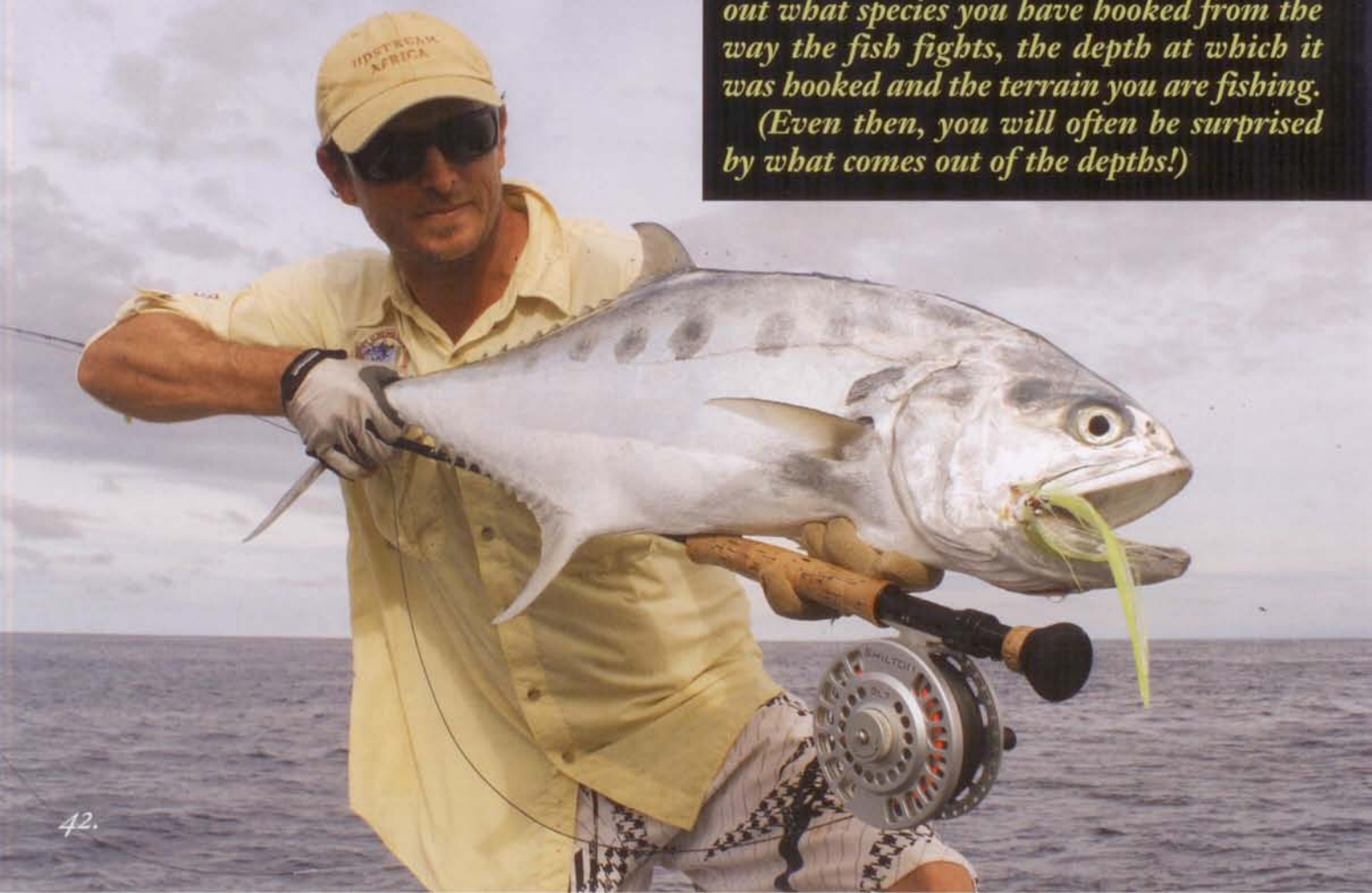
*The possibilities of what you can hook are endless.*

*For me this is a big part of the thrill – never knowing what you have gotten yourself into or how big it is.*

*With experience you will begin to figure out what species you have hooked from the way the fish fights, the depth at which it was hooked and the terrain you are fishing.*

*(Even then, you will often be surprised by what comes out of the depths!)*

Above and below: Queenfish can put up a formidable fight, so you cannot afford to give an inch during the battle.



## RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

In order to fish these reefs effectively, a boat with a good GPS and fishfinder is required. Most importantly, you need a skipper who knows where the reefs are, how to use these instruments properly, and how to position the boat effectively to fish the underwater structure. The ideal water depth is 18m - 30m, but we fish water as deep as 60m in the right conditions. Once a reef is located, the drift is established; this is determined by currents, wind and tides, which combine to move the boat in a particular direction when it is stopped. Once this direction is known (see the GPS track), the boat can be repositioned upcurrent of the reef and a number of drifts made over the area where the fish are holding, and the fly sent down into the depths.

Below: Drifting off 25 Mile Reef produced the goods for this angler, who was dredging the depths with a sinking line.



The depth that you are able to reach with a fly will depend on the strength of the current and the wind, and therefore the speed of the drift. The stronger the current, wind or drift, the less depth your fly will achieve. In order to get the fly down, you need to use a depth-finder-style fly line, which is a weighted head and an intermediate running line. These lines are weighted in grains, and my personal favourite line is the Airflo Depth Finder 500 grain Big Game. It is 45m in length and has a 50lb core, with no join between the sinking head and the intermediate running line.

Species most commonly taken on fly around the reefs off the coast of Mozambique, Tanzania and KZN are a variety

of kingfish species such as GTs, bluefin, yellowspot, golden, yellowtail, Indian mirrorfish and bludger. Queen and king mackerel, as well as green jobfish are commonly caught and often save the day when nothing else is happening. In Mozambique, in particular, the hard-fighting, acrobatic queenfish make fantastic fly rod quarry and kawakawa always seem to make an appearance and streak into your backing. A vast number of reef species, ranging from snapper to triggerfish and grouper, will also take a fly, and you can quickly rack up your species count.

## THE TECHNIQUE

Once the boat is positioned at the start of the drift, the skipper should lock the engines towards the wind so that the boat

drifts sideways on. This is for two reasons: to try and slow the drift speed as much as possible, and to allow two anglers to fish at the same time (one from the bow and the other from the stern). Anglers then cast ahead of the drift, only casting out the sinking part of the line (about 10m). The concept is to feed the running line out slowly as the boat drifts over it, and eventually, when the running line is out (the length dependent on the depth you are fishing), it should be pointing down at an angle of about 30° - 45° off the opposite side of the boat to where the original cast was made (downcurrent). Now it's time to take up the weight of the line, let the line come tight and straight, and then unleash the super strip. The general rule of thumb is that the fly must be going at full speed; however, there are situations where a little more tact is required, where speeding up and slowing down at specific depths will result in strikes. This will come with experience, but a good thing to remember with all types of fly fishing is that if what you are doing isn't working, then try something significantly different!

## GETTING CONNECTED

Takes will often come on the first couple of strips. This is because fish frequently follow the fly as it sinks, and the second it takes off they will attack it. King mackerel often don't even wait until the fly moves - they eat it while it is sinking, so be ready at all times! Takes also seem to occur about 10m below the boat - just

as you start seeing your sinking head – so I often do something different with my strip at that point: a couple of quicker strips or even long, slow strips can induce a take. Varying your retrieve with the rise and fall of the swells is also good practice. When a fish takes the fly down deep it feels very solid, and you need to strip-strike hard, keep the rod tip down and the pressure on from the minute the fish is hooked, as it is going to try and head straight back to the reef. Rods of 12- to 14-wt are the way to go and you often need every ounce of muscle from them.

Below: Minette Thynsma putting her back into it, but the prize (a beautiful Indian mirrorfish) was well worth all the effort.



The first 30 seconds are crucial, and it is vitally important to manage the loose line on the deck and try to get the fish on the reel as quickly as possible. Drags must be smooth and tight and the rod tip kept low throughout the fight, so you're fighting the fish through the bottom half of the rod. Pumping and lifting the fish and not allowing it to rest are key to landing it quickly. If you don't get it in fast enough, you run the risk of losing the fish to a shark, or its dying from exhaustion.

#### TERMINAL GEAR

Flies are pretty standard, and there is seldom a reason to change from a chartreuse deepwater Clouser Minnow. Remember that your fly has to sink faster than your line (otherwise you will get big tangles), so it needs to be heavily weighted

(lead eyes and lead wire on the shank) and not too heavily dressed. I like a long, thin fly' about 15cm in total length. Good colours are chartreuse, olive and black. Flies need to be tied on Gamakatsu SL12s and sizes 4/0 and 6/0 are ideal. Deepwater Whistlers and other variants are also useful. I firmly believe that the way the fly is retrieved is the most crucial ingredient for success.

I keep my tippets pretty simple: 4ft - 5ft of 30lb - 50lb monofilament with a 15cm length of No. 5 brown piano wire, joined using an Albright Knot. The fly is attached to the wire using a Haywire Twist. If you are sure there are no toothy predators around, you can use a 60lb - 80lb shock tippet instead of the wire. Remember that you're going to get stuck on the reef at

some point (if you don't, you aren't fishing deep enough), so you need to have a light enough class tippet in your leader that will break before your fly line does.

There isn't enough scope to go into too much detail about tackle and techniques, but hopefully this article provides some guidelines to give you the confidence to get out to sea and give this exciting form of fly fishing a bash. As South African anglers, we aren't blessed with easily accessible flats fishing, but we do have access to good offshore fishing for a number of prize game fish. The great thing is that this technique can be adapted to different species and areas. So if you want to take your fishing to another level and are up for some hardcore battles, then get out there and get down, deep and dirty!