

Garrick on fly

A 'how to' guide for one of our premier salt water gamefish

by Graeme Field

Photo: Rod Haestier

The warm, clear seawater was just beginning to trickle over the sandy drop-off as the tide slowly shifted, gradually stemming the outgoing flow and forcing its way slowly but resolutely upstream. A fresh westerly breeze had sprung up, creating a small surface chop on the deep green waters of the mighty Breede River.

After the lifelessness of the spring low tide, the exposed sandbanks had finally begun to flood and the shoals of baitfish huddled nervously together as the great river awakened and slowly came to life. This was the moment that we had been patiently waiting for, and we began casting our big foam poppers methodically along the edge of the channel, concentrating on the transition zone where the clear incoming water wrestled and struggled with the murky, low tide river water. Conditions were good, anticipation was running high and it wasn't long before an excited shout signalled the arrival of the fish and the first of many knee-weakening chases by big Breede River garrick.

Concentrating harder on my own fishing, I kept working the fishy-looking water, and before long there was a flash and boil behind my popper just as I lifted it out of the water to cast at the end of the retrieve. I hastily shot the line back out in the general direction I had seen the fish heading, and almost immediately the dark shape reappeared, zigzagging aggressively behind my popper. Speeding up my two-handed retrieve, I stripped the popper as fast as I could, and it suddenly disappeared in an explosion of foam and spray, the line pulling tight as the fish devoured the fly. The line disappeared in a flash and the rod pulled nearly horizontal as the garrick headed for deeper water, the sweet singing of the drag drowned out

by my whoop of excitement. As the fish headed out into the channel, I noticed that another one of our party was also leaning into a good fish. Smiles all round and shouts of encouragement from the rest of the guys added a sense of excitement and camaraderie to the fight. The garrick made full use of its broad tail and the strong current, making a number of powerful runs before it began to tire. After stubbornly holding itself just out of reach in the channel, I was eventually able to lift its head and slip a hand around its broad tail. After a quick photograph, the beautiful silver fish was revived and released. It swam tenaciously back into the heart of the majestic river, the dark outline of its back slowly fading out of sight as the deep, green water quietly swallowed it up.

Surface fishing is, for me, one of the most exciting and rewarding forms of fly angling. Whether it be a big garrick smashing a popper, a sailfish homing in on a teaser, or the explosive take of a largemouth bass engulfing a big deerhair frog imitation – it's visual, it's aggressive and, at times, downright spectacular! The sight of a big garrick chasing down a quickly retrieved popper, zigzagging and crashing after it, is enough to turn even the most seasoned of anglers weak at the knees.

Many a peaceful summer morning has been pleasurable spent walking barefoot along the sandbanks of an estuary or river mouth, casting poppers into the channels on an incoming tide. It's exhilarating fishing but, as is the nature of our sport, also relaxing and invigorating. It's hard work too sometimes; the drop-off area can be vast and a few hours spent continuously casting large, wind resistant poppers while walking in thigh deep water, fighting the wind and current, can be extremely tiring. But if the fish are there and the action is non-stop, the excitement runs high and the hours soon slip by unnoticed.

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My infatuation with garrick began many years back on the Transkei Wild Coast – 14ft surf rods, large poppers and big fish in the surf off the legendary Mazeppa Bay island. This passion for the explosive surface action soon extended to include the numerous rivers that cut through the rugged coastline of the Eastern Cape and, before long, the surf rods were gathering dust as I discovered the thrill of pursuing these speedy predators on fly. I spent blissful years catching garrick of all sizes in and around the numerous estuaries of the Eastern Cape and Transkei, and all the while I became more and more addicted to this exciting form of fishing. When I relocated to Cape Town in 1993, I thought I would have to put the garrick fishing on hold, but it wasn't long before the potential of the numerous rivers in this area became apparent. An 8-weight rod, floating line and a 1/0 foam popper proved to be perfectly suited to the vast number of garrick in the 2- to 10lb class that abound in these south-west Cape estuaries. Armed with a tent and boat, and with a few close mates in tow, regular weekends away exploring these waters soon became a much appreciated and refreshing escape from everyday life in the big city.

Lichia amia (leerfish), or garrick, as they are known to anglers further up the East Coast, are regarded as one of our premier sport fish and, due to their aggressive, predatory nature, are relatively easy to take on rod and line. In South Africa they range from way up the West Coast down to the South and East Coasts and up into KwaZulu-Natal. They can be found anywhere; from the turbulent, foaming surf zone all the way to the brackish far upper reaches of estuaries and even blind rivers. Primarily a summer fish in the Cape, they do move northwards during winter. Following the sardines and shad, they work their way up the coast in June, July and August each year. Juvenile fish have been known to stay in certain rivers through the winter, and persistence during the colder months will certainly produce some fish, albeit normally not large specimens.

FINDING THE FISH

The beauty of fishing for garrick is that they can be caught almost anywhere under a variety of conditions. Hunting primarily by sight, they generally prefer clean water, but a splashy, noisy popper may often attract the attention of a garrick in the warm, murky water found higher up in estuaries. They have a greater temperature tolerance than skipjack, for example, and can be found in water ranging from 16 through to 28 degrees Celsius, depending on the region and area you are fishing. They are also tolerant of low salinity levels, hence they occur high up in estuaries or even blind rivers that have been closed for some time. Being a gamefish, they feed prolifically on baitfish such as mullet, so they'll usually be found where they have easy access to shoals of this prey species. On the low tide, mullet will huddle and shelter on the shallow sandbanks and in the shallows in the surf. The garrick will hold in the deeper channels nearby, waiting for the tide to force the bait into deeper water, or alternatively charging into the shallows when the pushing tide allows them to.

Previous page: Casting for garrick from Skiffingtons, Port St Johns.

This page from top to bottom: MC Coetzer with a good garrick.

Hookup along the Hermanus coastline.

The author releasing a Breede River garrick.

This one was taken in the Buffalo River.



Photo: Mike Delhoff



Photo: Bryan Field



Photo: Bryan Field



Photo: John Brown



Photo: John Costello

Fishing in the surf or in a river mouth is most productive on a pushing tide in clean, warm water. Areas of turbulence caused by wave action close to deep water are the spots to concentrate on. Fishing off rocky ledges or a sandbar into the channel of a river mouth as the tide turns is also a good place to start. Along the Transkei coast, ledges or rocky outcrops in the surf bordering on deep, clear and warm water are prime spots, but these areas are not always suited to fly fishing. Remember that your safety is of primary importance, so please be aware of the dangers associated with fishing in these areas, especially on a pushing tide.

In an estuary, the most productive method is to work the channels and drop-offs as the clean seawater pushes up into the river. Start fishing on the slack, low tide and, just as the tide turns, try to work the transition line where the murky, outgoing river water meets the incoming, clean water, moving up with the tide as it pushes into the river. Garrick will often hug the drop-offs, hunting right up against, and even onto, the shallow sandbanks and weedbeds, so be sure to stand slightly back from the edge and work your fly along the drop-off. Continue stripping your popper or fly right into the shallows, as a take will often happen at the last moment – just as the popper comes out from the deep and up over the edge. The entrances to any small creeks or cuts into the banks or weedbeds are always good areas to concentrate on, as these small inlets will often harbour shoals of small baitfish. “Chases” are normally good indicators of prowling garrick, so watch for small sprats or mullet leaping out of the water in panic as the predators plough into them. Early morning and late evening are prime times for garrick to attack baitfish in the shallows, and this is the time when you are most likely to see garrick chasing bait on the surface.

FLIES AND POPPERS

I prefer to fish for garrick with a large, splashy, foam popper rather than a subsurface fly. The primary reason for this is the excitement and visual aspect of watching a fish chase down and smash your popper on the surface, but also because the noise and disturbance caused by the popper often attracts fish that would otherwise not have seen the fly. Garrick fishing frequently entails long periods of no action while you work the water in search of fish, and a popper normally draws following fish to the surface, allowing you to see fish that you would otherwise not have known were there. This keeps you motivated and keen, and adds to the excitement. However, that is not to say that subsurface flies do not work; indeed they work rather well, and can even produce better than poppers under certain conditions. Poppers can sometimes spook garrick in calm conditions, or the fish may follow the fly, but be reluctant to eat it. In such instances a more subtle approach with smaller baitfish profile patterns is sometimes called for. On occasions when the fish are deeper down, a subsurface fly on an intermediate line may be the only way to entice the fish to eat. This is often the case during the colder, winter months when the fish are less active and tend to stay deeper in the rivers.

I prefer a closed-cell foam popper with a cupped face in white or chartreuse that fits onto a long shank 1/0 or 2/0 large gape hook. A product called “Boilermaker” poppers, which I buy from the States, are perfectly suited to garrick as they are a good size, are relatively easy to cast and have a lovely splashy action when retrieved fast. I tie them with a short length of white or chartreuse bucktail and some flash extending from the bend in the hook. I find the use of feathers unnecessary

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as they tend to wrap around the shank, make the popper too wind resistant and the tail too long – sometimes resulting in missed strikes.

Subsurface flies that imitate small fish are most productive for garrick. Flies that are sparsely tied with Supreme Hair, bucktail or Polar Fibre, and incorporate a fair amount of flash and big stick-on eyes, are perfect in clean water. Patterns such as Surf Candies, small white Deceivers, Woolhead Mullet and small bucktail streamers are productive under most conditions. In water that is slightly off-colour with reduced visibility, I would recommend using a bulkier fly (such as the Woolhead Mullet or Polar Fibre Baitfish) that “pushes” more water. In estuaries such as the Swartkops River in Port Elizabeth with its abundance of crustacean life, olive prawn imitations such as Crazy Charlies or Mud Charlies can bring success when fished on a floating line around the edges of mud- and weedbeds. All my flies are barbless – firstly because they cause less damage to the fish and, secondly, because they are much easier and less messy to remove from the back of your head or ear when the stiff breeze has blown your popper off course on your back cast!

When retrieving your fly or popper, bear in mind that you cannot physically strip that fly away from a garrick – so strip as fast as you can! I find a double-handed retrieve with the rod under my arm most effective. If the fish is zigzagging after your popper but not taking, try to speed up your retrieve as this is the natural instinct and reaction of a baitfish that is being pursued. If that doesn't work (and this often applies when you are fishing in exceptionally rough water when the fish has difficulty following the popper), the opposite may work, and slowing down may allow the fish to catch and eat the fly. Experience will teach you to recognise and understand the behavioural body movement of the fish, so get out on the water and practise, practise, practise!

When the fish hits the popper, keep the rod down and keep stripping hard until the line is tight and being pulled from your fingers – only then do you lift the rod and clear the loose line. This is the most effective way to set the hook, and this method also doesn't whip the fly away from the fish if the hook doesn't stick, sometimes resulting in a second take. If a fish chases your popper all the way in but doesn't get hooked, or hits and misses, try to get your fly back out there as soon as possible. They will often hang around searching for the meal they were chasing, and frequently come after the fly again on the next cast if you are quick enough to get it back into the water.



Photo: Bricky Branfield



Photo: John Costello

Above left: Rod Haestier with a 14lb garrick taken early morning from Skiffingtons.

Right: Bricky Branfield releasing a 47-inch garrick taken offshore from Lighthouse Rock in the Port St Johns area.

TACKLE AND TACTICS

Eight to 10-weight rods, a full floating line or shooting head and a stripping basket are the tools needed when targeting garrick. Distance is often crucial and with the added wind resistance of a popper, a shooting head and braided running line helps to get the fly out to the fish. Stripping baskets are a must, as most of the time you will be fishing in moving water – either small surf or wash, or strong tidal currents. As far as terminal tackle is concerned, I use a short, stiff and fast tapered leader when fishing a popper, as this gives me more control in the air and aids in turning the big fly over properly. A leader of no more than 6ft in length, tapered from 40lb down to 20lb is perfect for most conditions. In flat, calm conditions or when targeting smaller garrick with a small popper, the leader can be adjusted and lengthened accordingly.

Garrick are strong but clean fighters and will stay on or near the surface for most of the fight. They tend to make long, powerful runs, so enjoy the fight, but also try to land the fish as quickly as possible in order to release it in good condition. They don't have much in the way of teeth, and 20lb tippet is more than adequate. If you have set the hook properly, they seldom come loose and you should land most of the fish you hook. Garrick fishing is fast, furious and addictive, and we are fortunate to be blessed with such a willing and feisty adversary in our home waters. As is the case with all our fly-caught quarry, they are fragile and are susceptible to injury and death when out of their watery environment. Please handle them carefully, enjoy and respect them, and help to ensure that their stocks flourish and bring us and our future generations many more years of angling pleasure.