



Hunting giant kingfish is tough, bruising fishing. Fast, furious and exhilarating, it's all about power, strength and stamina. Field Editor **Graeme Field** has survived many a battle with these formidable gamefish and this month explains the rules of the game.

# Hunting Giants

*shallow water GTs on the fly*

**H**unting the mighty, giant kingfish, *Caranx ignobilis* or GT (Geet, as it's affectionately known) is tough, bruising fishing. Fast, furious and exhilarating, it's all about power, strength and stamina. In shallow water these giants may not need the finesse required when targeting species such as bonefish, but with their nature and the terrain they hunt in, finesse wouldn't get you very far anyway. Big rods, big flies and big fish – it's hardcore fly fishing at its finest.

GTs are finally getting the respect and recognition they deserve. For years they have been regarded by much of the international fly fishing fraternity (Americans in particular) as a “trash fish.” Perhaps it is because they are found in relative abundance in the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and are often only caught as an alternative by anglers fishing for species such as bonefish and permit. Perhaps it is also because they don't jump when hooked and catching them doesn't call for the degree of subtlety required for other species. Whatever the reason, they have always been regarded as secondary to other more “glamorous” species. But they have finally come into their own and with their aggression, speed and large size are now targeted specifically as trophy fish.

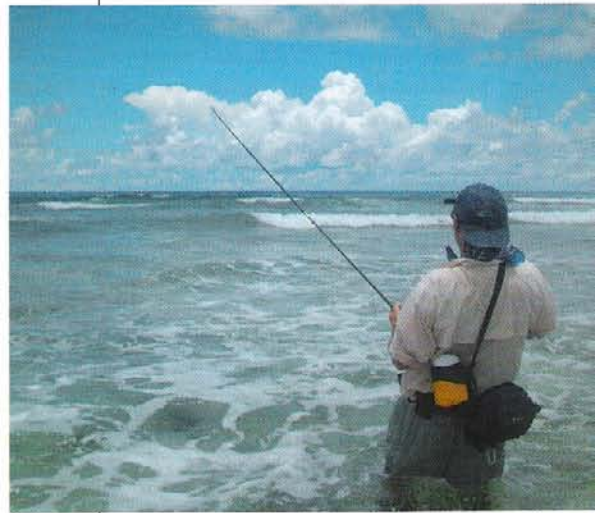


Above: A weary smile signifies relief at the end of the battle as the author and trophy pose for the camera.

There is not much more you could ask from a sport fish; they grow to over 100lbs, are fast, powerful, aggressive and, on top of it all, will readily take quickly retrieved flies and poppers. They can, however, also be taken on a delicately presented crab pattern, gently sight-cast to a single spooky fish, notably when they are following a feeding stingray on the flats. They are hard and dirty fighters, and will use every trick in the book to rid themselves of the fly. Big fish are not easy to land, especially without the assistance of a boat. I hooked a very big fish on a 10-weight rod and a #2 crab pattern when fishing for triggerfish a while back, but was stripped before I could make it across to the skiff to chase after the fish. You cannot hold the big boys, and the only way to land them is to follow them in a boat, working your way through the coral heads and channels until you wear the fish down sufficiently to get it close enough to land.

Below: Hanging on for dear life. GTs are tough, clever opponents.

While guiding in the Seychelles I have been fortunate enough to have the opportunity to observe their behaviour firsthand. We have a shoal that has become quite tame and spends the day under our boat in the lagoon at St Francois. A 60 - 80lb male named "Whitefin" (because of his dark complexion and contrasting white dorsal fin) heads the pack of trevally. He is a real character, exhibiting numerous different moods and displaying some entertaining and sometimes comical behaviour. But the most remarkable thing is to observe them feeding – their eyesight, speed and aggression is something to behold. For instance, one of us will take a chunk of fresh fish (or their favourite, a ham and cheese roll) and throw it (overhand) as far as possible from the boat. Every single one of those fish will streak after it, following it precisely as it arcs through the air, homing in and demolishing it the instant it hits the water. The way they track an object (or prey) through the air is quite incredible, and makes you feel a bit sorry for those needlefish – they don't stand a chance! If, for instance, during a day's fishing a badly hooked fish has to be killed, we sometimes dangle it on the end of a short rope over the water. Whitefin then launches himself out of the





Giant kingfish have sharp protrusions on their tails that can badly cut and injure your hand. Note that this angler wears a protective glove – essential equipment if you wish to hold your trophy for a photograph.

water and latches onto it, not letting go until he has ripped the fish from the rope – much like a Staffordshire terrier clutching onto a piece of driftwood. It gives you a close-up view of the strength and stamina of these beasts, and a new found appreciation for why solid tackle and powerful tactics are required to subdue them on fly.

### TACKLE AND TACTICS

Finding the fish is obviously of primary importance, and understanding their behaviour will aid you in locating feeding fish. They are found all the way up the east coast of Africa and juveniles can be found as far south as East London. Preferring water above 20 degrees Celsius, smaller fish are found mainly in estuaries and protected areas like harbours. The larger fish inhabit rough, jagged coral and rocky reefs, the surf line, channels and gullies, but will also venture into calm lagoons and onto sand, grass and coral flats. They are tough predators that ambush and attack their prey with short bursts of speed, and will often use waves or broken water to disguise their tactics in order to prey on hapless baitfish.

They very seldom stop moving and can appear in an instant as they charge into the shallows to ambush unsuspecting prey. They will even enter extremely shallow water, often breaking the surface with their backs, or turning on their sides to enable them to launch a surprise attack on fish sheltering in the shallows. I've seen them plough into shoals of mullet right up against the beach, the terrified mullet jumping straight out of the water and flapping on the sand. GTs also feed on a variety of other organisms and, being essentially opportunistic hunters, will often eat crabs and any other prey that crosses their path.

**G**Ts love fast moving or rough water, and places with a strong surge, rips and currents are prime areas to look for them. They will often hang in deeper water or prowl the edge of a reef until they are ready to attack, at which point they will aggressively enter the shallows to feed, so this is where to look for them. This could mean standing and waiting at a small bay or cut in the reef which gives them access into the shallows, walking and searching deeper water along the edge of a flat, or standing guard at the edge of a narrow channel in a lagoon and waiting for a GT to cruise through as the water flows through the channel. Times of strong tidal flow (pushing or dropping) are best, as this is when the fish are most active. When walking a reef or on rocky ledges, keep scanning the water looking for big, deep-bodied and fast moving fish. They will often “surf” in towards shore in a swell, so look in the waves as well as in the slightly deeper and broken water behind a wave as it washes up onto the reef. GTs will often be closer than you think, sometimes even at your feet; so keep a lookout for fish in the broken water right up against the beach or rocks.

They will frequently follow a shark or big stingray, picking up crabs and other organisms that the ray or shark dislodges. Harmless nurse sharks that forage in the sand and coral for food sometimes have a fish or two following closely behind them. Always give a ray or shark a good look, and if you aren't sure, make a cast anyway. Finding a GT is often a case of being in the right place at the right time.

Try putting yourself in an area where they are most likely to be at a particular time or state of tide. If you are sight-fishing for them in shallow water, you have to formulate a game plan and stick to it – and only cast when you see the fish you are hunting. You may spend a few hours out there and not see one fish and therefore not make a single cast, but if you do cast, you know that it is going to be a worthwhile fish you are casting at. Standing in one spot just watching and waiting can be tiring and it is difficult to concentrate, but I guarantee that the second you get bored and make a blind cast or two (or cast at that small bluefin kingfish that has been hanging around in front of you) is the moment the trophy GT appears – and you either have 30 metres of line out on the water, or you are attached to some smaller fish and can't get your fly back in time to make a cast!

When you do get a shot at a fish, placing the fly *ahead* of the fish is of utmost importance. As I mentioned before, they have incredible eyesight and will pick up a fly from a long distance away, as long as it is in front of them. Do not be fooled by their aggressive nature, as they will quickly spook from a badly presented fly. Try to let the fly sink for a moment or two, so that it shoots forward, upwards and away from the fish when you make that first hard strip.

It is often not possible to sight-fish for these giants, and in that case working good-looking water is the way to go. Finding a good ledge or channel and methodically working a big foam popper or big flashy baitfish pattern through rough water or current, can often result in a GT smashing your offering. Remember that you cannot physically pull a fly away from a GT if he wants it, so strip as fast as you humanly can. Casting poppers when fishing blind for GTs is generally an excellent method to entice a strike from one of these fish, as the noise and disturbance from a popper is detected more easily than a sub-surface fly. Using a popper also brings the visual aspect into play and experiencing a chase by a giant kingfish will leave you instantly weak-kneed. Even if the fish doesn't take, a chase will at least let you know that there are fish in the vicinity, and this will certainly keep you motivated and focussed.

As far as tackle goes, a 12-weight rod and good quality reel with a strong, smooth drag and 200 metres of 30lb Dacron or Gelspun backing is the ideal outfit. For fish up to 15lbs this may seem like overkill, but bear in mind that you are dealing with strong, dirty-fighting fish in rough, rugged areas, and you need the backbone of a big rod to keep them away from rocks and coral. In addition to this, using a heavier rod ensures that the fish are brought in quickly and therefore released in good condition with minimal build-up of potentially fatal lactic acid in their muscles. Unfortunately, sharks are also fond of the same areas that GTs inhabit, but the strong rod will help you to manhandle a GT away from one of these menaces. Another very good reason for using a 12-weight is because of a GTs size. When that 80lb beast comes charging towards you, you will want to have all the firepower possible to have a chance of landing it. A 12-weight, however, is a heavy rod to cast continuously for any length of time, and will quickly take its toll on your casting arm. So, if you are planning on doing a lot of blind-casting (especially with large poppers), then you may want to scale down to a fast action 10-weight rod.

**Below:** Even though they are ferocious fighters, GTs are fragile when taken out of their environment and must be released with care.



**Above:** Big or small, GTs command respect when taken on fly tackle.

Right: Preparing to attack!  
Whitefin gives the bait the evil eye.



Fishing in shallow water requires the use of a floating line only. You do not need to get the fly down deep, and a floating line is easily manageable without a stripping basket (except in rough water, strong currents, or when fishing from exposed rocks). Most of your casts will be relatively short, so you can leave the loose line trailing behind you. When fishing blind in deeper or rough water, an intermediate or slow sinking line and a stripping basket will be more useful. The thinner, heavier line will cut through the surf or current, giving you better line control, and helps to keep your fly below the surface when retrieving quickly for long distances. Working a deep channel, wreck or reef from a boat necessitates the use of a fast sinking line which should be cast up into the prevailing current, and allowed to drift back down to ensure that your fly reaches the depth that the fish are holding at.

**G**Ts have sets of sharp, conical teeth which will quickly wear through light line, especially when fighting a big fish for a long period of time, so shock tippets ranging from 80 - 100lbs are recommended. When fishing for GTs amongst coral in the shallows, leaders are kept very simple. We use a 60 - 80lb monofilament leader of 6 - 8ft in length, a Homer Rhode Loop Knot and a braided loop to create a loop-to-loop connection to the fly line, and an Albright Knot to connect the shock tippet to the leader. I don't bother with class tippets or any "controlled weak link" in the line, preferring to have the strength of line throughout so that there is no fear of breaking off when applying hard pressure. There is obviously the chance of losing a fly line, but I would rather lose a fish in that way than have my leader pop because I was too cautious in that department.

If you are making a lot of blind casts, then you may find that a lighter, tapered leader makes the fly easier to handle, so use a length and thickness that you are comfortable with – just make sure you tie decent knots (the Bimini Twist is favoured) and don't skimp on tippet strength.

In the fly department, large cup-faced poppers (as big as you can manage) or big, flashy baitfish profiles and needlefish patterns tied on extra strong hooks are ideal. GTs have huge mouths, and will easily gulp down the biggest fly you can cast. #6/0 to 8/0 Gamakatsus are the preferred hooks in the Seychelles as they are extremely strong and sharp. They are not made of stainless steel, which ensures that the fly will corrode and fall out of the fish's mouth if it breaks off. We only fish with barbless hooks, and do not lose any more fish because of this. Remember, slack line, rather than barbless hooks, loses fish! Strip flies as fast as you can (you are imitating a petrified, fleeing baitfish) and don't stop until your line slams tight. Proceed to hit the fish repeatedly using a hard strip-strike, keeping the rod low and pointed towards the fish to set the hook firmly. Keep a tight line and pressure at all times – do not give an inch, as they will quickly sort you out if you do. Try to keep the fish on as short a line as possible, and work it into shallow water as soon as you can to keep it away from sharp ledges and marauding sharks. Do not be gentle – you will come off second best!

Landing the fish is a different story though. Handle the fish as gently as you can, keeping its gills in the water as much as possible and cradling it carefully under the belly if you lift it up for a photograph. GTs have extremely sharp protrusions on their tails, and it is highly recommended that you use a sturdy glove if you are going to hold them in the region of their tails. Remember not to lift the fish up by the tail. Revive them as much as possible before release – they, like any other fish, are very vulnerable when out of their usual element, and need to be handled and revived properly to ensure their survival.

Giant kingfish are tough, aggressive fish and have earned respect amongst hardcore fly anglers. They are found in relative abundance in our own backyard (KwaZulu-Natal and Mozambique) and are highly sought-after by fly fishers and lure anglers alike. Unfortunately they are also relatively good eating fish, and stocks are suffering in certain areas because of this. I'd like to think that people are gradually beginning to realise the recreational and economic importance of these fish, and are becoming aware of the amount of revenue that one fly-caught GT can generate for a country. Hopefully measures will soon be established and enforced to ensure that they will be conserved for the future. In the meantime, we as fly fishers united in a common goal should do as much as we can, not only to enjoy the exciting sport that these fish offer, but also to educate others so that together we can protect and preserve this prize predator for years to come.