



TAMING

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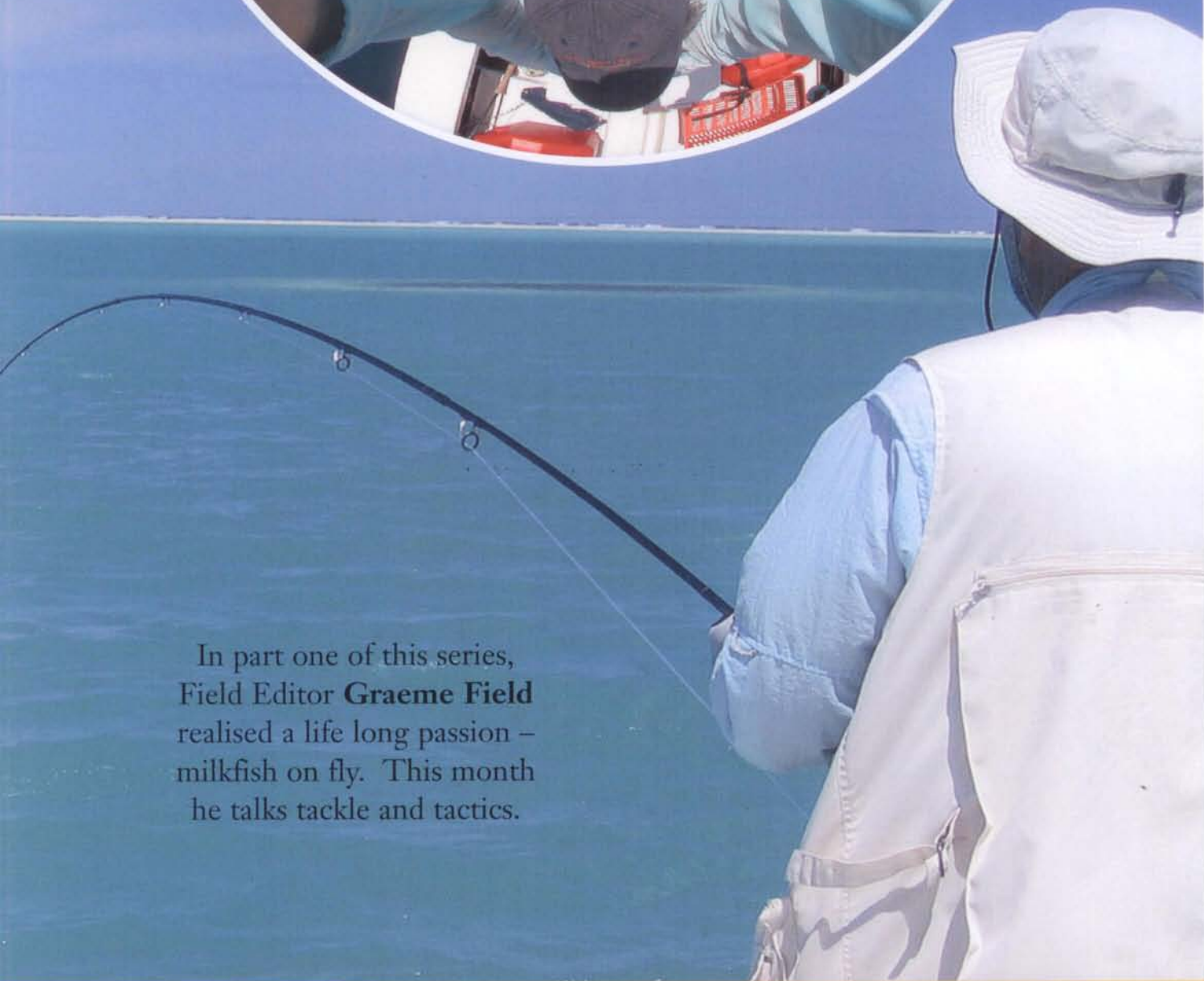
Part II - Tackle and Tactics

Fishing for milkfish is a relatively new concept and in its infancy as far as tackle and techniques are concerned. Flies and tactics are still progressing but we have already enjoyed immense success and milkfish are consistently being taken when they are feeding under the right conditions. Milkfish are big, powerful fish, yet they are caught on flies that imitate small pieces of floating algae. This is a problem, as heavier tackle is necessary to tame these beasts yet it needs to be scaled down to suit the diminutive tippets and small flies required to hook them. Also, the heavier lines used on bigger rods can create too much disturbance when landing on the water and can spook the fish.

I will take you through the entire process of catching a milkfish, but let me first start by examining the finer details of the tackle setup. After much experimentation with line strength, rod weights and fly sizes, I have found the ideal balance to be 10-wt rods, 20lb fluorocarbon tippets and flies tied on #2 hooks.



In part one of this series, Field Editor **Graeme Field** realised a life long passion – milkfish on fly. This month he talks tackle and tactics.





RODS AND REELS

A 10-wt rod is ideal for targeting big milkfish as it is light enough to get away with delicate presentations but has enough backbone to subdue one of these brutal fish. Obviously, an 8 or 9-wt rod can be used if the fish being targeted are of a smaller average size than the 20 - 40lb fish we encounter in the Seychelles. A good quality and reliable reel with at least 300m of 30lb backing and a super-smooth drag is invaluable protection for the light tippets and to withstand the incredible runs these fish make. A floating line matched to the rod is all you will need as milkfish will always be caught on or near the surface.

LEADERS AND TIPPETS

Leaders and tippets are quite complicated, but are essential in providing the best chance of staying connected to a big "milk." Leaders should not be more than 7ft long. This is primarily because a shorter leader gives you more control over your fly and secondly, when the fish is near the end of the fight you will need to exert some staunch pressure to lift the fish's head otherwise it will circle the boat for an eternity. A shorter leader allows you to reel down on the fish and gives you the power to lift it from below the boat. Because these fish jump repeatedly and put a lot of strain on the terminal tackle, Bimini Twists are an essential part of the



Persistence and the right fly choice is key to landing these prized fish.

make-up of the leader as they provide superior knot strength and incorporate some shock absorption into the leader. Your fly line should end in a braided loop to which the leader can be connected via a loop-to-loop connection for optimum strength.

The leader should consist of a 3ft butt section of 35lb monofilament or fluorocarbon with a Double Surgeon's Loop connected to the braided loop on the end of your fly line. On the other end of this butt section you can also tie a Double Surgeon's Loop. The tippet should consist of a 4ft section of 20lb clear fluorocarbon with a Bimini Twist tied into the one end. The butt and tippet sections are then looped together, and the fly connected to the 20lb tippet with a Non-Slip Mono Loop which is a very reliable and strong loop knot and provides the fly with freedom of movement. The scope of this article does not allow me to go into detail on the tying of these knots, but they are readily available in many knot-tying books and are relatively easy to tie. Milkfish can be extremely tippet shy, especially in ultra-clean water out at sea, and fluorocarbon is therefore essential. I sometimes even scale down to 17lb when things are really tough.

FLY SELECTION

Fly development has been the most difficult and technical aspect of cracking the milkfish code, but a few patterns have gradually been developed that do consistently take milkfish. The most important characteristic is the specialised hook needed to withstand the power of these fish. One of the hooks that makes the grade is the Gamakatsu SL12. These hooks are super-strong and are my preference for I have found that they can stand up to these hard fighting fish. They are also extremely sharp, but more importantly, they are very light and this is essential when you need the fly to sink very slowly in order to stay suspended in the fish's feeding window for as long as possible. Ideally a #4 - #6 hook would match the size of the flies, but these small sizes cannot stand up to the fight and I have settled on a #2 which provides the best overall balance between fly size and hook strength.

Fly patterns imitating the algae on which these fish feed are the key, and many different styles and ties have been tried. Flies tied using olive marabou or rabbit fur were initially thought to be the answer, but finally a fly utilising a combination of calf tail and egg yarn has been developed which is the prime producer of milkfish. The buoyancy of egg yarn provides just the right amount of floatation and movement required and, in terms of colours, a combination of chartreuse, olive and white has been the most successful. The fly was named the DCT (Dream Come True) and guides Arno Matthee and Wayne Haseleau must take credit for their research and creativity in developing this pattern over a number of seasons.

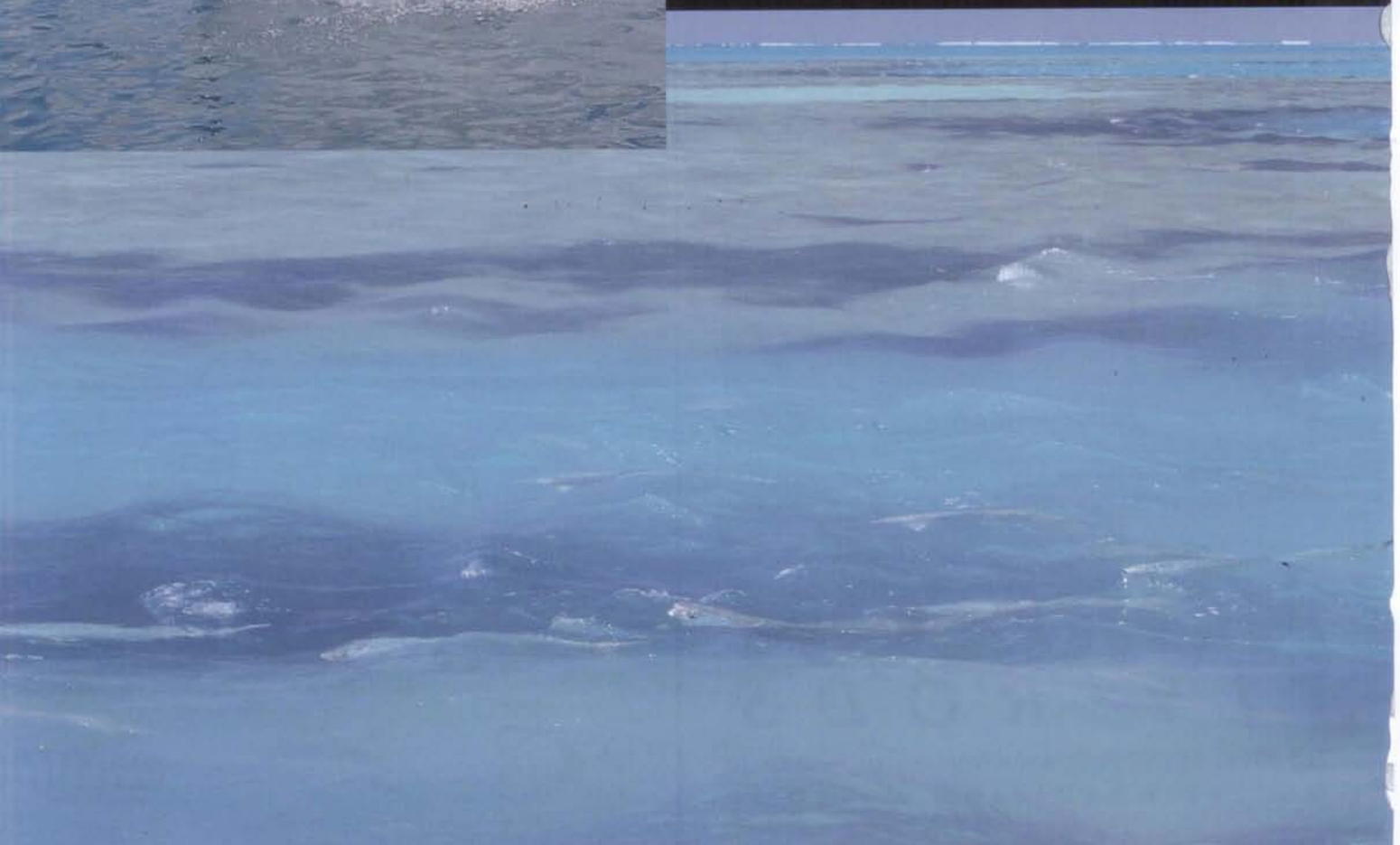
HOOKING AND FIGHTING THE FISH

As I mentioned in Part I of this article, milkfish are likely to be found feeding in the channels in the lagoon or in weed lines out at sea on an outgoing tide. They are also present in some estuaries in South Africa. I am sure that under the right conditions they can be found feeding in tidal currents in these estuaries and that the same techniques could prove to be successful in our home waters. In these instances, the fish will be feeding in a specific direction, and your aim should be to dead-drift your fly across the feeding fish much like a drag-free drift to a trout or salmon in a river.

The idea is to single out individual fish and make short, accurate casts in order to get the fly right into their line of sight. Your best shots will be when the fish are above you and moving away from you and an upstream cast ahead of the fish will drift your fly towards and across the fish – and will provide instant line tension if one sucks in the fly. Remember to keep mending the line and keeping any slack out of the line and leader so that you are in constant contact with your fly. These fish are easily spooked and have oversized eyes and good eyesight, so don't get too close to them, keep a low profile and try not to line them with your fly line as they swim past. Aim ahead of the lead fish and try to cast so that just your leader lands

Left: Fly-hooked milkfish sometimes give spectacular aerial displays.

Below: Milkfish actively feeding in a channel.





put on enough pressure to wear these mighty fish down. The fish will most likely jump when first hooked, but these jumps are sudden and there is not much you can do but hold on and hope that the tippet holds out. With tarpon fishing, it is recommended that you “bow” to the fish when they jump, but this isn’t as important with milkfish as they don’t shake their heads in the air like tarpon do, which often dislodges the fly or breaks the tippet.

LANDING THE FISH

Once the initial jumping and running is over, you need to follow the fish as closely as possible in order to steer it away from obstructions, as they are reasonably dirty fighters. Be warned though, that they can suddenly get a second wind and just when you think you have the fish under control it can suddenly burst away, head for coral or go into very shallow water and over flats, requiring you to leap from the boat and charge after the rapidly departing fish. Milkfish have incredible stamina and will never give

Above: Milkfish have large eyes, so avoid getting too close before presentation.

Right: Unfortunately the taxman took a chunk out of this huge milkfish which got the instant attention from the kingfish.

across the fish’s path. You may have to make many casts at feeding fish because it is not in their nature to chase down a fly, so you need to keep putting the fly in their feeding window until you get it into the right place and the fish sucks it in. Sometimes you will see the fish sip in the fly, but most of the time you need to watch the tip of your fly line like a hawk – and if it stops or straightens, strike!

The strike is one of the few times that a rod strike is recommended in salt water fly fishing, but it must quickly be followed up with a couple of solid line strikes to properly set the hook as the fish takes off. This is to take up any slack line you have on the water and to set the tip of the hook point into the flesh around the edges of their mouths. As the fish takes off, hammer the fly home with a couple of short, sharp line strikes. Milkfish have strange, round mouths which are quite delicate. But behind their lips is a very hard cartilaginous plate which is difficult to penetrate, so you need to be pretty firm with your strike in order for the hook to hold securely. Even so, many milkfish will throw the hook and this is one of the most difficult aspects of catching a milkfish – keeping the fish hooked. It is therefore essential to keep a tight line on the fish at all times to prevent the hook from coming loose. When fishing from a boat, follow the fish and try to keep as short a line on the fish as possible as this affords you some measure of control and allows you to



up. They can circle the boat for ages, just out of reach and it sometimes seems like you will never be able to lift the fish's head. Be patient, keep the fish working against the pull of your rod and wait for your opportunity to lead the fish towards the surface when you can net it. We use large nets to land these fish as they are difficult to control when they are close to the boat. The tippets are too light to grab and the tails too strong to hold onto, so the best bet is to lead the fish into an oversized net to land it safely.

Remember that a 20 - 30lb fish can take around an hour to land, so don't rush things; you will eventually cradle your prize in your arms. A short while ago, I fished with a lady client who fought a big milkfish for an hour and 22 minutes before losing it at the boat when the hooked pulled out. Needless to say, she was very disappointed. Another lady angler who may be known to T.C.F.F. readers is Hester Plank who spent two weeks with us earlier last season. Hester successfully hooked and landed a number of big milkfish and is now infected with "the fever" and totally addicted to catching these insane fish! Unfortunately they were not playing the game during her return trip this year, so she had to settle for a 23lb GT on a 10-wt rod. But that is a whole different story...

This article is specific to an area that is out of reach for many South African fly anglers, but the techniques we use can be adapted to any area where milkfish are found and should open the door to some experimentation back home. We are continually learning more about these primitive fish and I am sure that tackle and techniques will continue to advance and be refined in the years to come. Figuring out a way to consistently catch these milkfish on the flats will open a whole new world of shallow water flats fishing. Hopefully, we will be able to adapt the knowledge we have already gained to our home waters, and maybe one day milkfish can be added to the already impressive list of inshore species available to the South African fly angler.

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