

March of the Bearded Army

Each year, around October, Botswana's Okavango Delta plays host to the legendary barbel run. Throwing a fly into this melee is sure to leave you shaken (and well stirred), says Field Editor **Graeme Field**.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAEME FIELD

Main photo: Fascinated by the spectacle, an angler watches a barbel run in the Okavango Delta.



During the run, barbel trap bream and other baitfish in shallow water and encircle them. With jaws agape, they suck in the baitfish like dust from the floor.

Clousers, minnows and Whistlers. Often the main school of tigers will be just ahead or behind the pack of barbel, and this is where your good strikes will come from. It is imperative to land your cast tight to the bank and to throw big upstream mends in your running line so that the fly sinks close to the bank and underneath

the tightly packed barbel. That way, when you take up the slack and start your strip, the fly shoots out into the deep water like a fleeing baitfish – and if the tigers are there, they will pounce on it.

While this is regarded as the most effective method of fishing a barbel run,

a really exciting way of hooking a big tiger is on a floating line and surface popper. Occasionally you will find a school of baitfish and resident bream cornered in a shallow bay, with fish literally flying in every direction. The barbel surround their prey, gradually tightening the circle and forcing them to leap for safety. In a fascinating hunting display, the barbel stick their heads clean out of the water and open their mouths wide – and the leaping baitfish land right in them! The tigers swirl around the edges, and if you cast a popper into this melee you are almost guaranteed a smashing surface take. Even if you don't get a strike, just casting into water frothing with chases will get the adrenaline pumping – and that is what tigerfishing is all about! Combine this piscatorial phenomenon with fascinating scenery, hundreds of bird species, crocodiles, hippo and pastel-coloured sunsets, and you have the perfect blend of beauty and excitement that makes for a truly African fishing adventure. The run is an experience not to be missed!



“THE BARBEL SURROUND THEIR PREY, GRADUALLY TIGHTENING THE CIRCLE AND FORCING THEM TO LEAP FOR SAFETY.”



Sunset over the Okavango River near Nxamaseri Island.



Flushed out by marauding barbel, baitfish flee into the path of waiting tigerfish. With dentures such as these, the tigers make short work of them.

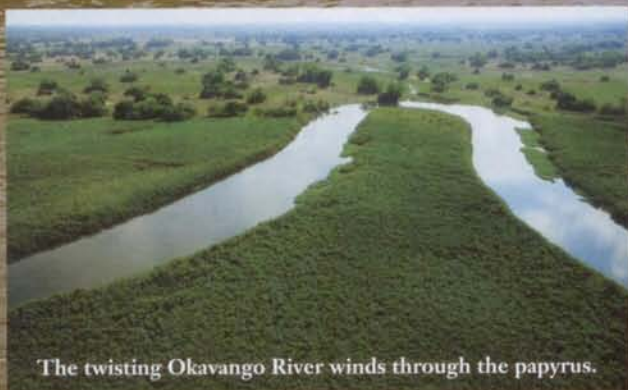
the barbel move upriver as they feed, sometimes heading in one direction for a few days before turning around and dropping back downstream – and starting all over again. Each time, they start a bit lower downriver, so over an extended period they gradually move further and further downstream. They tend to come past the Nxamaseri area around early to mid-October, and each year Liquid Horizon takes clients to Nxamaseri Island Lodge on the Nxamaseri River, a tributary of the main Okavango River. Here, we intercept the runs when at their peak, enjoying absolutely mind-blowing fishing for tigers ranging from 2lb to 12lb.

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Each morning, the runs need to be located, which is sometimes quick and easy if they are close to the lodge, but on other days a lot of riding around is necessary to find them. The local guides generally have a good idea of where the fish are since they are able to track the progress of the runs on a day-to-day basis. Tell-tale signs assist in locating the runs: birds flying overhead, and finding bits of broken reed and grass, or patches of muddied water drifting downstream are good indicators that you are nearing the action. Whether you have been on the water for five minutes or been motoring for an hour, nothing beats that feeling of relief and excitement when you round another bend in the river to find banks dotted white with feeding birds.

Once you find the run, the most productive method of targeting the tigers is to position the boat upriver of the run, anchor a medium-length cast away from the bank, and fish across and down with sink-tip lines and weighted flies such as

Even though fish will be landed hard and fast, good conservation ethics dictate that care be taken with each release.



The twisting Okavango River winds through the papyrus.

It's all about the birds – especially those lazy and annoyingly common white-feathered egrets (and their various cousins) generally found hitching a free ride on the hump of a local Nguni cow. In Botswana, they seem to be everywhere you look, although much of the time you wouldn't give them a second glance. However, if you're an adventurous fly fisherman and out on a river in this area in October, I'm willing to bet you would happily pay top dollar for a tantalising glimpse of this sweet white gold. Because for a month or so each year, those egrets living in the very top-left corner of Botswana, tear themselves away from the tick-infested local cattle and transform into the most effective fishfinder/GPS combo south of the Sahara. Along with an array of other birds, they head en masse for the waterways and can be found hopping and scrambling around in the papyrus and hippo grass on the banks of the twisting Okavango River.

The trick is to find them – because if you do, you will find yourself slap-bang in the middle of an annual fish feeding frenzy that fly anglers should witness at least once in their lifetime. Joining forces with other egrets, herons, cormorants and more fish eagles than you can shake a pair of binoculars at, they gather together in loud, squawking, concentrated flocks in certain areas of the river, twitching, squealing and flapping in anticipation. Find these birds and you will find the cause of their excitement – big marauding armies of barbel marching relentlessly upriver, devouring everything in their path. These aggressive fish plough under, through and even over the riverside foliage in search of prey, splashing, slapping and snapping their jaws shut as they hunt.

But it's behind the barbel that the ultimate prize lurks – *Hydrocynus vittatus*, the infamous African striped water dog. Like a pack of hyenas following a pride of hunting lions, ferocious schools of large and aggressive tigerfish trail the feeding barbel, pouncing on the hapless, panicked baitfish that are flushed from under the riverbanks. For the fly angler, this is about as exciting as it gets: the cacophony of noise from the feeding birds, the phenomenal sight of hundreds of barbel with their heads out of the water, and tantalising glimpses of bright red fin tips slicing the water behind them. The excitement of positioning the boat upcurrent of the hoards of hungry fish, watching in anticipation as the mass of hunting barbel and tigers move into range of the fly. The pressure of casting accurately, knowing that if you get it right you will feel the finger-burning take of a big tiger hitting the fly at full speed. Then the whoop of excitement as the tiger takes to the air, droplets of water flying in all directions as the fish cartwheels and crashes into the water. Man! Which other fresh water fish in the world can put on such an awesome display?



“IT IS HERE THAT THE BIG PREDATORS WAIT, HUNGRY AND AGGRESSIVE AFTER A LONG WINTER.”

It all begins in mid-September each year, high up in the panhandle where the waters of the Okavango River glide and wind their way through Angola and Namibia and finally into the heart of the Delta. Once the high waters begin to subside from the floodplains, the shallows that have provided shelter to a myriad of juvenile fish suddenly begin to dry up and the baitfish are forced nearer and nearer to the deep channels of the main river. It is here that the big predators wait, hungry and aggressive after a long winter. Hold-

ing out for as long as possible, the baitfish group together in the shallows until the last minute, then pour into the main channels en masse, immediately seeking shelter under floating grass and papyrus and in shallow, muddy bays.

There is nowhere to hide once the barbel arrive on the scene, and very soon the baitfish are under vicious attack from below and above. Although the tigers tend to stay out in the open water, the barbel are not afraid to swim deep under

the floating foliage to reach their prey, chasing them out to where the tigers are waiting. As if that's not enough, the birds clamber around in the low brush, picking off any fish that stray too close to the water's edge or leap onto the grass as they attempt to flee the attacks from below.

The runs begin up north near the town of Shakawe on the border of Namibia, gradually moving south over a period of about six to eight weeks, finally petering out south of Sepupa. On a localised scale,



American Jim Whitehurst enjoys his first tigerfish.