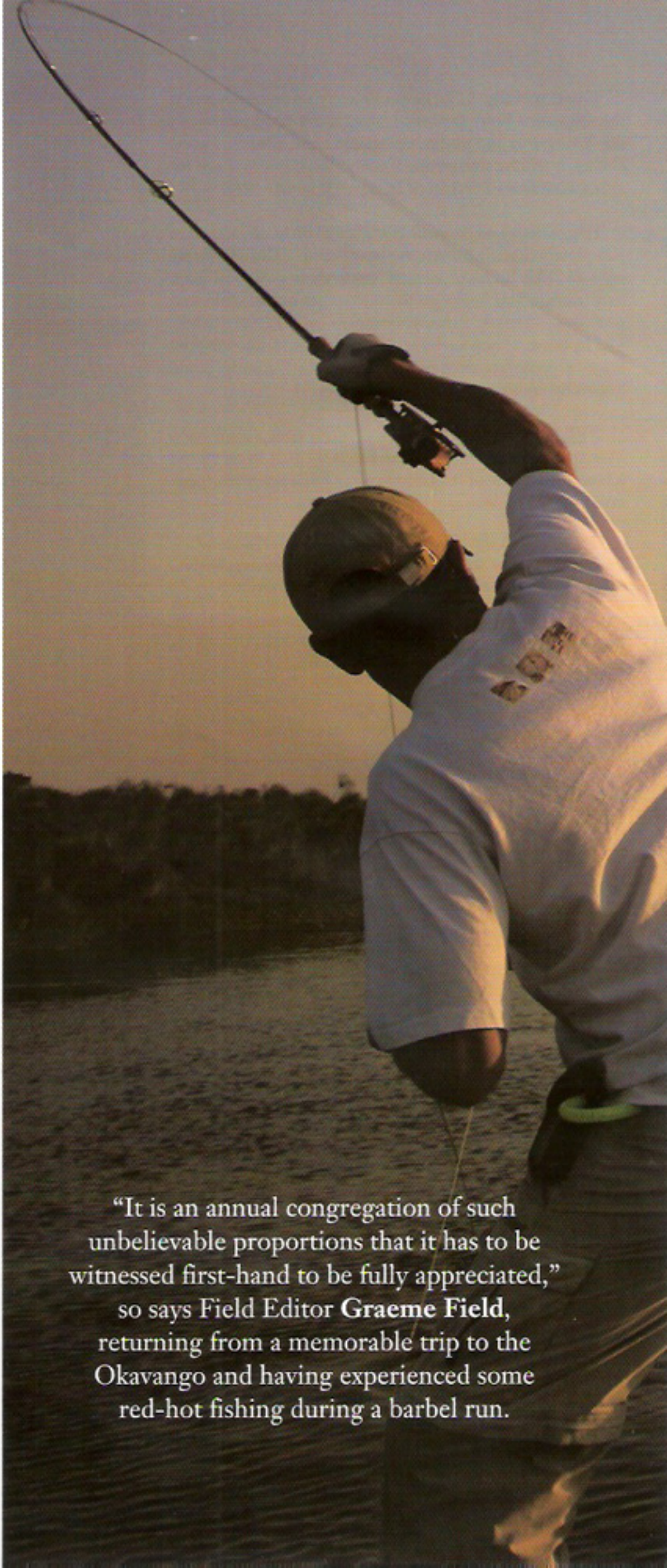


**E**h man, if you casting dere you gonna fire-hook de bubbles!” reprimanded Adam as another fly landed perilously close to the tightly packed school of feeding barbel. If not a legitimate strike by one of these aesthetically unpleasing creatures, the result of such a mistimed cast is often an annoying tussle with a foul-hooked specimen instead. Either result was frowned upon and deemed “not in the spirit of the game” by the occupants of our boat because it detracted from our primary mission of catching tigerfish. Fortunately, we had the company of local skipper, guide and bird expert Adam to continually remind us, in his native accent, that we didn’t want to catch the “bubbles,” especially if we “fire-hooked” them. This was, however, often easier said than done, considering that we were swinging flies through the incredible feeding phenomenon known in the area as the annual barbel run.

A rich cacophony of noise surrounds a Botswanian barbel run in full swing. The papyrus rattles, the hippo grass shudders, and herons hop and squawk above as they scavenge for baitfish killed, injured or stranded by unrelenting attacks from below. Tigers splash and swirl in the main channel, and occasionally a croc explodes from the undercut bank causing a huge flurry as it feeds on the barbel. But mostly it is the phenomenally loud snap, crackle and pop of the barbel as they feed on the hapless baitfish sheltering along the banks. The combined noise of their mouths snapping closed, their tails slapping the water and hundreds of bodies packed together causes a huge commotion along the normally peaceful and tranquil banks of the Okavango River. It is an annual congregation of such unbelievable proportions that it has to be witnessed first-hand to be fully appreciated.

#### THE DYNAMICS OF THE BARBEL RUN

Late every year the waters recede from the floodplains in the panhandle of the mighty Okavango Delta and gravitate back into the main channel of the river and its tributaries. As the waters disappear, so does the last remaining shelter for hordes of baitfish and juveniles that had been living safely in the shallows during the winter months while the high water was spread across the wetlands. Forced to drop back into the deep channels that meander southward towards the distant desert, these small fish huddle together until the last minute



“It is an annual congregation of such unbelievable proportions that it has to be witnessed first-hand to be fully appreciated,” so says Field Editor **Graeme Field**, returning from a memorable trip to the Okavango and having experienced some red-hot fishing during a barbel run.

# 'Fire-Hooking Bubbles'

## *An Okavango Odyssey*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GRAEME FIELD AND NEIL FORD



and then enter the main rivers en masse, triggering a massive feeding frenzy of barbel and tigerfish that lasts a few chaotic weeks. The barbel pack together into groups ranging from a handful of fish to tightly packed shoals of hundreds that surge upriver devouring everything in their path. They head under, through, around and even over the reeds and grass lining the banks, flushing out the petrified baitfish as they go.

Following these runs and feeding off anything that gets chased out by the barbel are the ferocious fresh water denizens of Africa, the mighty tigerfish. These Okavango tigers hang slightly away from the main action, preferring to stay in the deeper channels where they pounce on any prey that attempt to flee the mayhem along the banks. When it is tigers that the intrepid African fly angler is looking for, there is no better place to enjoy this natural marvel than the Nxamaseri area in northern Botswana.

### TIGERFISHING AT NXAMASERI

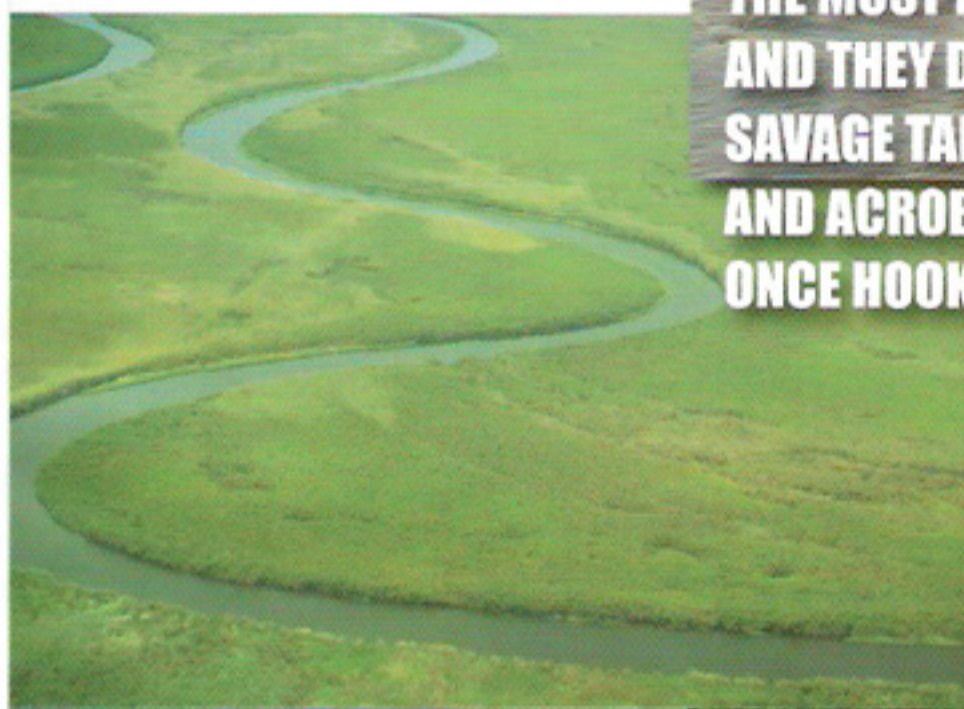
Every year fellow guide James Warne and I take our regular clients to the delightful Nxamaseri Island Lodge for two weeks of tigerfishing that is simply out of this world. Accompanying us on the most recent trip were my British regulars Neil Ford and Dougie Taylor who have fished with me in the Seychelles, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania. Flying out from the UK for only five days of fishing is taking a risk, and I was holding thumbs that the weather, water and fishing would all collaborate and deliver the goods for Neil and Doug, since they have become good friends and loyal clients

over the years. Fortunately Nxamaseri did not waste any time in proving just what a world-class fishery exists there, and we dived headfirst into the action.

Our trip was made that much more enjoyable by the company of Adam who worked tirelessly for the full five days and whose humour and intricate knowledge of the area were much appreciated. Together we formed a great team, and soon got into a rhythm that resulted in endless action and some truly memorable fishing. Fluent in English, his local accent often brought a smile to our faces. "You hear that – klump, klump, klump, gea gea, gea?" he would say as the noisy barbel runs approached us – "the bubbles is coming!" In addition to his colourful description he would often pick up on an English word that he would pronounce



**"TIGERFISH ARE WIDELY REGARDED AS SOME OF THE MOST POWERFUL FRESH WATER FISH, AND THEY DO NOT DISAPPOINT WITH SAVAGE TAKES, BURNING RUNS AND ACROBATIC LEAPS ONCE HOOKED."**



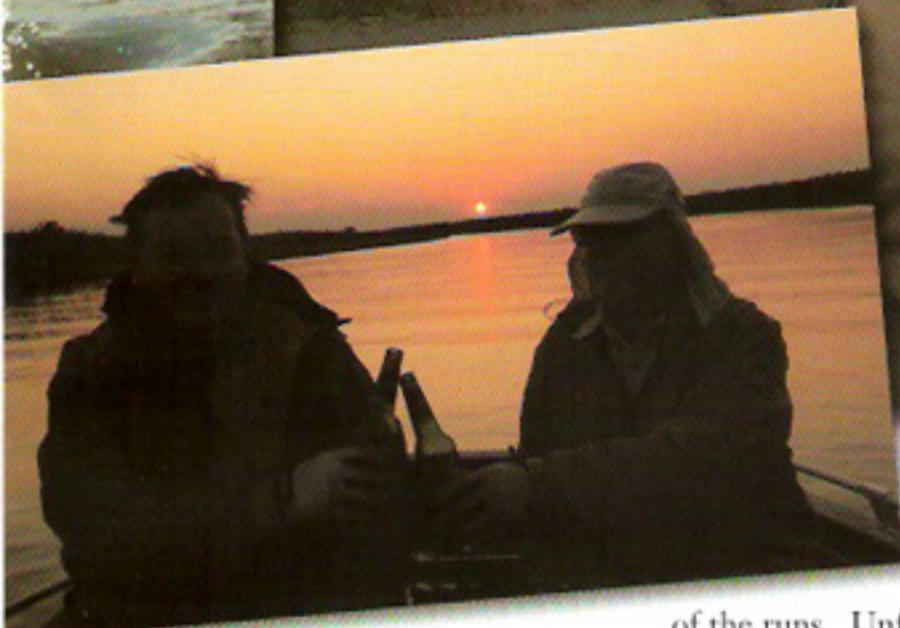
slightly incorrectly, giving it a completely new meaning. For instance, his use of "fire-hooked" when a fish was foul-hooked, and a "bus" of a fish would be a "boss." Needless to say, a number of bosses were caught during the trip.

A day's tigerfishing starts before 7am; after a light breakfast the boats head both up- and downriver in search of the barbel runs. As is so often the case with fishing, finding the birds means you also find the fish. The wide, flat-bottomed boats meander through a dizzying number of bends and corners searching for the flocks of herons and egrets that converge on the action each day. Depending on the proximity of the runs to the lodge, the search for the barbel can take some time, as they always seem to be fairly



concentrated in one area. Although the boat trip can take up to an hour, finding the runs pretty much guarantees that there will be fishing. Once located, the optimal way to fish for tigers is to anchor the boat upriver of the runs, a cast length from the bank, and wait for the feeding frenzy to move past.

Using an 8- or 9-wt and 350 grain sink-tip lines cast across and down, the fly is delivered close to the bank and allowed to sink and drift down the edge of the papyrus. Throwing some big mends in the current to ensure the fly stays close to the bank, the extra line is fed out and then the fly is stripped back



Above and left: Neil and Dougie having a great time – renewing friendships, drinking beer and catching tigerfish.  
Previous page: The Okavango River and its barbel run – each year anglers flock to these waters to get in on the action.

fast in a way that imitates a baitfish fleeing the bank into deeper water. The tigerfish usually hit the fly in the first couple of strips. 2/0 Clouser Minnows in colours such as chartreuse and white, red and black, orange and white, or purple and black with a short light wire trace are usually all that is required to elicit a ferocious take from the aggressive tigers.

Tigerfish are widely regarded as some of the most powerful fresh water fish, and they do not disappoint with savage takes, burning runs and acrobatic leaps once hooked. For all their power and aggressiveness, they seem to tire fairly quickly after the first crazy runs and jumps, and can be boated reasonably fast. Most fish in this system average around 5lb, but we took numerous fish over 8lb, with a good number reaching double figures.

#### “CHIRPING” AND CHAMPIONS

Neil and Dougie’s trip ended with a bang. The runs that day had been concentrated in a fairly small area and a number of boats had converged on the fish. In this instance it becomes a case of leapfrog as the boats try and stay ahead

of the runs. Unfortunately, some of the local fishermen are used to fishing for tigers by tying their boats up tight against the papyrus. While this is the usual and preferred method for fishing for bream and tigers during the remainder of the year, parking a boat right in the path of the moving barbel totally disrupts the runs and the barbel tend to break up and disappear. Staying in the middle of the river allows boats to cash in on the runs for longer.

On this particular day a number of boats had been following the barbel and the runs were beginning to break up. We decided to hang back and let the other boats get ahead of us, since there were signs that a new run may be starting lower down. This decision turned out to be a wise one as we were soon the only boat in the area, and the runs were slowly starting to build. We managed to find a perfect little bay alongside a long stretch of hippo grass, and couldn’t believe our luck when a run moved into the area and didn’t leave for the rest of the day. The barbel moved up and down that stretch, and each time they moved into the bay we would get strike after strike hooking into tigerfish after tigerfish.

As anglers, we often spend time flogging the water with little reward, and when faced with conditions such as we had that day, there was no holding us back as we cashed in on red-hot fishing. The fish were big, too, and it wasn’t long before some competition crept into the equation and we started counting fish caught to add to the fun. There were challenges to see who could catch the 10th then the 20th and then the 30th fish, the biggest, smallest and the most. The banter, laughter and constant “chirping” added to a memorable day.

As dusk settled and other boats appeared upriver of us on their way home, our tally had reached 64 fish, most between 6lb and 12lb – a great day’s fishing by any stretch of the imagination and a great memory for my British friends. With healthy competition also existing between the local skippers, Adam was quick to gloat as his fellow skippers putted past us after a sketchy day’s fishing. It was a fitting end to a great trip, and Adam had the final say on Dougie’s video: “I tell my friends I anchor here from 9 o’clock till 6 o’clock and we catch seexty-for tigerfeesh. I am de champion!”