

SALT WATER

POPPING

FOR RIVER SNAPPER

Sometimes you just *know* that your popper is going to get smashed – partly because of the look of the spot you have just cast to, and partly because you have just put your cast bang on that spot. You can almost feel the pairs of beady little eyes locked onto your popper as it lies on the surface, and you just know that as soon as you twitch it, it is going to disappear in a flash of red and an explosion of white water. It's a great feeling when you know that you've got it just right, and on your first strip a hungry river snapper charges out from the riverbank and engulfs your offering.

Get it *very* right and often it's more than one fish that emerges from the shadows. Sometimes three or four fight aggressively over the popper as it splashes across the surface. The water boils and swirls, the popper gets smacked into the air a few times, then disappears from view, and finally the line pulls tight as the hook finds its mark. Then it's game on as you try to prevent a powerful and determined fish from reaching the tangled roots of the riverside vegetation where few fly lines dare to venture. If you aren't afraid to put faith in your tackle and really lean into it, the fight is usually short lived, and soon you are slipping the net around the white and golden-red prize of east African estuaries – *Lutjanus argentimaculatus*, the river snapper (or rock salmon as it's known in KZN).

RIVER SNAPPER – GETTING IT RIGHT

Snapper are (or in many places, *were*) fairly common in warmer water estuaries along the east African coast from East London northwards. They are generally regarded as quite difficult to catch on fly, mostly due to the areas and underwater terrain they inhabit, as well as the fact that they aren't well understood and therefore not actively and successfully targeted. I'm sure there are plenty of anglers who have gone after these prized fish with great success, but I've certainly not been one of them. Most of the fly fishermen I know only land the odd one while fishing for other species. However, in the last year or two I have been fortunate to be able to target these fish in some of the mangrove estuaries on the Mozambican and Tanzanian coasts, with good success.



Think “ambush predator” and river snapper will be high on the list. Field Editor Graeme Field takes a closer look at how to target this elusive species on fly.



Above: The ideal habitat of submerged reeds, mudbanks and underwater structure where snapper and perch lurk.
Below: Success at last for Yusuf Vanker and Yusuf Gandor. These fish were taken deep in the mangroves and, although relatively small for the species, well worth the effort.



I haven't personally landed that many of them, but I've spent many hours guiding clients on both fly and spinning gear and have seen many good fish landed. This has enabled me to learn a fair amount about targeting river snapper, where to find them and how to catch them. Guiding at the dynamic Rio Azul Lodge in Mozambique has allowed me to fish in the mangrove waterways of the Govuro River, which runs northwards from Vilanculos to Bartholomew Diaz Point, about 40km north of Inhassoro. Here, river snapper and river perch abound – if you know where to find them.

WHERE TO LOOK FOR THEM

Typical of the snapper family, these are tough and aggressive neighbourhood bruisers, lurking in the shadows and dark alleys as they wait for an easy meal. They seldom stray far from structure – the rougher, deeper and darker, the better – and the dark caverns between gnarled and twisted mangrove roots are by far their favourite lair. This makes them particularly difficult to target on fly. Accuracy of casting is paramount, and when you do hook one, the close-quarters fight is tough on a long and relatively soft rod. Think American bass fishermen – have you seen how they fish right in the structure and virtually strike, hook, fight and land the fish in the boat with a single crazy movement? While most anglers outside of the USA bass pro league would agree that this behaviour is somewhat over the top, the concept I am trying to get across – of not giving the fish an inch – is well demonstrated! This, however, is a lot harder to accomplish when fishing with a fly rod.

River snapper are opportunistic predators that literally feed on anything venturing into their domain. Preying mostly on juvenile fish that seek shelter in the structure, they'll also



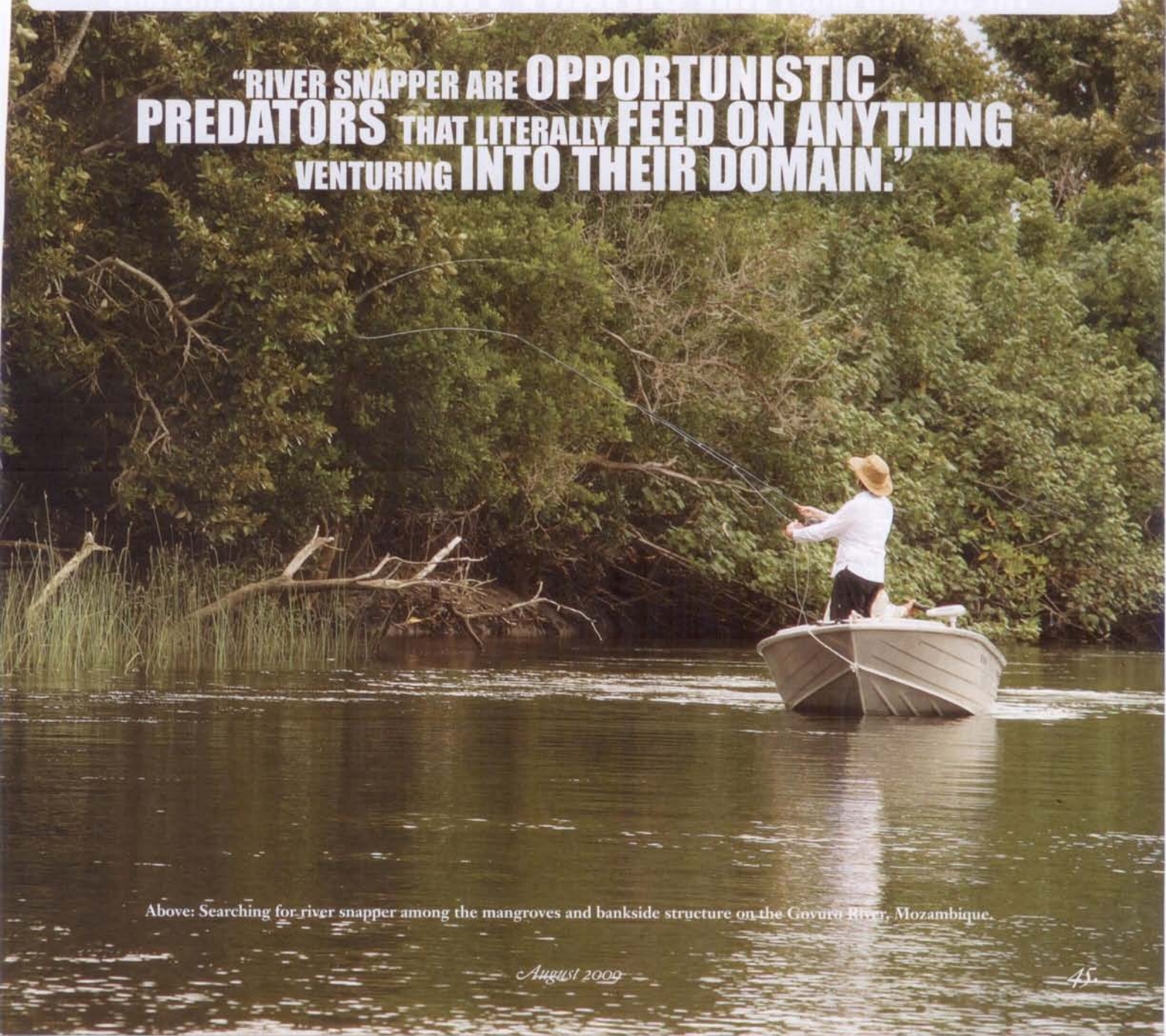
pounce on crabs, shrimps, prawns and other crustaceans that inhabit the area. They are territorial fish that frequently hang out in small schools (which often consist of different-sized fish), and are sometimes found with river perch. It is quite possible to catch both species on the same day, since the perch feed in the same manner and are also suckers for a well-presented popper.

So how do you find them and how do you target them effectively? Well, one of the most important discoveries I have made is that they *love* brackish and virtually fresh water, and we have been finding them much higher upriver than I ever thought possible. When Rio Azul Lodge was first being built and we were exploring the area, Craig Thomassen and I stopped our 4x4 on a bridge about 40km upstream from the mouth in totally fresh water, and made some casts around the lily pads along the water's edge. We were utterly surprised when what looked like river snapper darted out from under the lilies and charged after the flies. We didn't land one, so I couldn't be sure, but later, when exploring that same river from the mouth upwards, Craig discovered that the further upstream he went and the fresher the water became, the more river snapper there were.

Previously we had concentrated on the thick mangrove banks within a few kilometres of the mouth and had enjoyed some success with snapper and rock cod, but further upstream is where the real action lies. Adult snapper actually head for the ocean and can be caught on offshore reefs in water up to 80m deep. We have caught a number of big river snapper on conventional tackle poppers, but for the purposes of fly fishing we concentrate on the estuaries. Nowadays, we head straight for the brackish water, right up where the mangroves give way to lush ferns, reeds and other leafy plants and trees – and the action is red hot! I have yet to put this knowledge to the test in South Africa, but I'm sure that if I spent some time much higher up our Eastern Cape and Wild Coast estuaries, I would run into a few big snapper.

So what constitutes a good spot? This differs, depending on where you are fishing and how far upriver you are. Snapper inhabit any kind of structure, from submerged logs to rocky outcrops and overhangs, reedbeds, mangroves and undercut riverbanks. The mouths of little creeks and feeder streams are ideal, especially if there is a drop-off or submerged log at the mouth of the stream. Snapper can also be a few metres up the stream or creek, even if it looks only inches deep.

"RIVER SNAPPER ARE OPPORTUNISTIC PREDATORS THAT LITERALLY FEED ON ANYTHING VENTURING INTO THEIR DOMAIN."



Above: Searching for river snapper among the mangroves and bankside structure on the Govuro River, Mozambique.



"THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO UNDERSTAND THAT YOU NEED TO CAST CLOSE TO THE BANK - AND I MEAN REALLY CLOSE!"

Top: A chartreuse foam popper always works well on river snapper. Above: The hunter drifts and watches for a good-looking lie to cast to.

TACKLE AND TACTICS

The second most important thing is to understand that you need to cast close to the bank – and I mean *really* close! As I mentioned earlier, you just know when you have got it right. That means landing the fly a few centimetres from the bank, or even bouncing it off a branch or landing it on the mud. Sometimes you need to skip the popper off the surface in order to sneak it under some low-hanging branches. Most of the time, landing your fly 2ft from the bank is not going to get you a strike – you have to get it right in tight to the bank. The rule of thumb is that if you aren't periodically getting hooked up in the bushes, you aren't fishing close enough. Landing your fly in the dark shadows, under overhanging bushes and branches and into those narrow gaps between structure is going to substantially increase your chances of a strike.

The best way to fish these estuaries is to slowly and quietly drift along the river in a flat-bottomed boat fitted with an electric motor, covering each likely looking lie as you go. Ideally you should have one person fishing and one controlling the drift of the boat and holding you 10m - 15m from the bank. Work each bit of structure you see and try to make the first cast count.

It is unusual for snapper to chase a fly on the second or third cast once they have seen the popper a few times, so wait until you have a good shot before making your cast. Allow the popper to lie still for a second or two, then retrieve with a one-handed strip, pausing briefly between strips. If the fish chase it, resist the urge to strike, and just keep stripping until the line pulls tight. It often takes a few hits before the hook finds its mark.

Once the fish is on, don't give it any line! You have to fish with a strong tippet and bully the fish into the open water. I mostly use a 4ft leader made up of a 50lb butt section and 30lb tippet for this purpose. While the initial run is very strong, the fight is usually over quite quickly once you turn the fish away from the bank, and soon you will be able to slip a net under a wonderfully coloured river snapper. It goes without saying that flies and poppers tied to be weedless are going to be the most productive and least frustrating to fish with. Foam poppers, Dahlberg Divers, Flippers and Gurglers are excellent choices.

Snapper make for beautiful photos, and even though they are tough fish out of the water, please try to handle them as little as possible and revive and release them as quickly as you can.