



Meet the

kingfish family



This month Field Editor **Graeme Field** takes a closer look at some of the most popular and often targeted gamefish off the African coastline.

What is generally known locally as the “kingfish family” refers to those fish we recognise as and call kingfish. The *Carangidae* family, of which these fish are members, includes many other fish, e.g. from the genus *Scomberoides* (queenfish), *Trachinotus* (pompano) and *Seriola* (yellowtail), to name but a few. This large family of fish is collectively known as “kingfish”, so things can get a bit confusing. When I refer to the “kingfish family”, I mean those fish commonly known as kingfish off the African coastline. These are mainly from the genus *Caranx* and *Carangoides*. In international waters they are called “trevally”, and to add to the confusion, what they call kingfish there are in fact what we call yellowtail!

When we speak of kingfish, the first fish that normally comes to mind is the

undisputed king of them all, *Caranx ignobilis*, the giant kingfish (nowadays commonly referred to as “GT” – giant trevally). The great and majestic GT reigns supreme and demands respect through its sheer size and the raw power and the aggression it displays. They are undeniably a noble species, rightly held in high esteem at the top of the kingfish hierarchy and spoken of with great respect by anglers who have tangled with them on the long rod. It must be remembered that a large GT is a prize catch and is not, generally speaking, a common catch on fly. They do, however, still hog the limelight where kingfish are concerned and the pursuit of this legendary fish tends to detract from the other “lesser” species in the family. Yet it is these other, often overlooked, family members that one is more likely to encounter when fly fishing in the majority of our waters in South Africa.

Being members of such a notoriously tough family, all the kingfish species display the same attributes inherent in the *Caranx* genus and are, by reputation, strong, hard and dirty fighters. They are bad boys, bruisers from the wrong side of town and they use every trick in the book to break you off or smash you up when hooked. They are fast swimming

tioned here and hopefully this will help you to locate and catch some of these wonderful, hard fighting fish which occur in fair numbers on our coastline.

BLUEFIN KINGFISH

Caranx melampygius

The bluefin kingfish is arguably the most beautiful and sought-after of the

feed on crustaceans that the shark or ray churns up. They have incredible eyesight and can home in on a fly from a good distance away. Be sure to cast ahead of them rather than too close – they will hit a fly that has landed 20 feet (6 metres) away before you even have time to get your stripping hand around the line. Stripping the fly at full pace



Previous page: Bluefin kingfish (*Caranx melampygius*). Above left: Yellowtail kingfish (*Caranx sem*). Above right: Giant kingfish (*Caranx ignobilis*).

and aggressive hunters, they thrive in a harsh environment close to shore, and the best part is that they love flies – all of which makes them a great adversary for the inshore salt water fly angler.

A great variety of species are found in both the sea and estuaries along the east coast of South Africa, especially during the summer months. They are mostly fast swimming predators, but certain species also root in the sand for food and all are opportunistic feeders. The species one is most likely to encounter are yellowtail, bluefin, bigeye (*Caranx sexfasciatus*) and the brassy or greenspot kingfish. Further up the coast into Mozambique, Tanzania and Kenya, and also across to the islands of the Seychelles, you will find species such as the bludger, fulvie, yellowspotted and Indian mirrorfish. Some are more common than others, some are bigger than others, some are found inshore while others prefer deeper, offshore reefs – but they are all respected targets for fly anglers and are worthy adversaries. I will try to give you a brief overview of some of the species men-

family. A spectacular speckled blue green in colour, these fish are more likely to be found from Zululand northwards and prefer clear, warm water and coral reefs. Normally solitary or in small groups, they frequent the shallows and drop-offs of reefs and lagoons, but may be found as deep as 590 feet (180 metres). Voracious hunters, they will charge into very shallow water where they feed on baitfish and various crustaceans. Juveniles may be found in shallow, sandy, inshore waters, but most of the fish you will target will be in the surf zone on reefs where there is good water movement. Look for their unmistakable glowing blue colour in the shallows and white water along the edges of reefs and gullies.

Bluefin absolutely love flies and small poppers and will chase and pounce on a fly with great aggression. Poppers and flies such as chartreuse and white Clouser Minnows are deadly, as are crab flies when targeting them in the shallows over a reef. Bluefin will often follow a big stingray or nurse shark and

normally triggers a strike from these aggressive predators. Although bluefin can attain sizes of up to 39 inches (100cm) and 20lb (9kg), fish in the 5 - 10lb range (2.2 - 4.5kg) are more likely to be encountered and fish over 15lb (7kg) are fairly rare.

BRASSY KINGFISH

Caranx papuensis

The brassy or greenspot kingfish closely resembles the bluefin in shape, but is not as heavily set. It has a pale, sometimes yellowy/green colour with a sprinkling of dark spots over its flanks. Juveniles are sometimes confused with the yellowtail kingfish, but the brassy is distinguishable by a thin white margin around the edges of its tail and anal fin. Not reaching as large a size as the bluefin, they attain a maximum length of around 32 inches (80cm). A fish of around 10lb (4.5kg) is a trophy, but smaller fish up to 5lb are more likely to be caught. However, in certain parts of Mozambique specimens of 10lb are not uncommon. These shallow water fish range all the way up the coast from

KwaZulu-Natal and can be very common in the hot summer months – especially off rocky seaward reefs or in lagoons. Not as fast and aggressive as the bluefin, brassies will still attack and chase down small flies such as Surf Candies and Clouser Minnows, but also love a delicately presented crab fly when feeding in the shallows of lagoons, or when following a feeding stingray.

YELLOWTAIL KINGFISH

Caranx sem

Juvenile yellowtail kingfish are fairly common during the summer months in the warm water of estuaries from East London to the Transkei and northwards, where they terrorise the resident glass minnows and estuarine round herrings. They range all the way from the mouth of the rivers, right up to the warm upper reaches and tend to move around the river a great deal as the tide moves in and out. They seldom reach more than about 5lb in this environment, but are hard hitting and hard fighting fish and provide much enjoyment on fly. Further up the coast, larger specimens can be caught in the surf zone, lagoons and bigger estuaries, but they are not usually found in large aggregations. Small flies such as small Clouser Minnows, Glass Minnows, small poppers and buck tail streamers in white, char-

trouse, yellow and grey work well. For some reason, I've had good success on small flies that sport big, oversized doll's eyes. Yellowtail kingfish can reach a size of at least 33 inches (85cm) and weigh up to 18lb (8kg). They are strangely absent from the Seychelles and most oceanic islands.

BLUDGER KINGFISH

Carangoides gymnotethus

Mozambique is the place to go for big bludger kingfish – mainly offshore on the reefs and channels around the islands off the Mozambique coast. Reaching a size of up to nearly 35 inches (90cm) and 32lb (14.5kg), big adults can give you a serious workout on fly. They are predominantly an offshore, deep water reef species and, although said to be solitary, can sometimes be found in big shoals offshore in Mozambique in fairly shallow waters, feeding off baitfish on the surface. Fast sinking lead core lines and big Clouser Minnows stripped up fast from the bottom around underwater reefs and wrecks is the most productive method of targeting bludger. Bludger have thick rubbery lips and lack any serious teeth, so tippet strength is not a great concern – except that you are likely to hook many other species while fishing for bludger, so rather be safe than sorry! Be

sure to give them stick when hooked to keep them up and away from the reef to prevent getting broken off when they head for cover.

YELLOWSPOTTED KINGFISH

Carangoides fulvoguttatus

Very similar to the bludger, the yellow-spotted kingfish has subtle splotches of yellow in rough vertical bands on its sides, and adults usually also have three or four black mid-lateral spots along their lengths. Fulvies, as they're affectionately known, also have thick rubbery lips and broad bands of rough teeth with no sharp canines. They can be found anywhere from the shallow turtle grass flats of the tropics, right down to a depth of 330 feet (100 metres) on offshore reefs and banks, and commonly shoal along the steep drop-offs of outer reef slopes and rocky coasts. They often occur among shoals of bluefin kingfish just off the deep edges of coral reefs. Fulvies are not as fast and voracious as some of the other kingfish species, but will nevertheless take a big baitfish imitation or large Clouser Minnow stripped slightly slower than one would for some of the faster predators. Fulvies love crustaceans, and a big crab pattern fished in the shallows on the reef to visible fish, is the most successful method of targeting these fish. They can also be



Above left: A good-sized bludger (*Carangoides gymnotethus*). Above right: Yellowspotted kingfish (*Carangoides fulvoguttatus*).

caught when fishing for bludger on deeper offshore reefs. Fulvies attain a decent size, reaching a length of 39 inches (100cm), weigh up to 40lb (18kg) and put up a fair fight.

YELLOWDOTTED KINGFISH

Carangoides orthogrammus

Again similar to both the fulvie and the bludger, the yellow-dotted kingfish is slightly more bluish in colour, has vague vertical dark bands down its sides, and five to ten bright yellow dots that closely resemble splotches of yellow enamel paint. It has a smaller but more prominent jaw and mouth which it uses to root in the sand for invertebrates and small fish. Fish up to 8lb (3.5kg) are fairly common in small groups in sandy channels of lagoons and seaward reefs, but large adults are normally found deep. Being foragers, yellowdotted kingfish often tail a feeding stingray or nurse shark, and are most successfully targeted with a crustacean pattern or slowly retrieved baitfish imitation. Bear in mind that they have quite soft mouths and hooks can sometimes pull out. They are not exceptionally strong fighters, but a fish over 10lb (4.5kg) will give you a solid workout. They attain a fork length of up to 29 inches (75cm).

TACKLE REQUIREMENTS

On the whole, kingfish are strong, hard-fighting fish and stout tackle is generally needed to keep the pressure on and keep them away from jagged rocks and reef. I would recommend a 10-weight rod or upwards – depending on the species you are targeting and where you are fishing. Obviously, when fishing for juveniles in a small estuary, an 8-weight rod will suffice, whereas when offshore, a powerful 10- or 12-weight would be preferable. Although kingfish fight hard, they tend not to run too far, so backing isn't usually a major concern. Strong rods are more important to put the brakes on a big fish heading for the reef, and there is always the possibility of hooking into a big *ignobilis* or some other oceanic speedster, so rather be prepared for all eventualities.

In estuaries and when fishing shallow reefs and lagoons, a weight forward floating line is perfect, but an intermediate or sinking line is preferable when fishing in the surf or areas of strong currents, as it cuts through the wash and current and keeps you in direct contact with your fly. Offshore from a ski-boat, a fast sinking or lead core line and short strong leader are recommended to get down to where the fish are holding. Leaders vary a great deal according to

where you are fishing and what fish you are likely to encounter, but tippets up to 40lb or heavier are recommended.

Kingfish generally have large mouths and I prefer hooks in sizes from 1/0 to 4/0, going up to 6/0 or 8/0 if I am expecting a GT or other large kingfish. I have found barbless Gamakatsu SL12s to be the best hooks for all applications, being super light, super sharp and super strong – and they aren't stainless steel, so if you are broken off it should rust out of a fish's mouth in no time. On the other hand, make sure your flies are washed in fresh water and kept dry in your fly box to prevent corrosion. Remember that most of the kingfish species have very sharp scutes on the base of their tails (perpendicular to the tail) and I highly recommend that you use a glove or wrap a bandanna around your hand when tailing a fish. Those scutes can slice through your hand in a flash if the fish struggles and you lose your grip.

Walking the rocky reefs, lagoons and flats, fishing for the wide variety of kingfish species on the African coast is one of my favourite pastimes. I hope that this article will go a way to helping you locate and catch some of the finest and hardest fighting fish available to the African fly fisherman.



Above left: A large brassy (*Caranx papuensis*). Above right: Yellowdotted kingfish (*Carangoides orthogrammus*).