



TRIGGER HAPPY

by Graeme Field

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FOR DEEPER WATER**



The moon is in its first quarter phase, bringing with it the slow moving neap tides and a good foot or so of water covers the rugged coral flats that the colourful triggerfish call home. The first fish of the day gives its position away waving its brightly coloured tail at you as it contentedly feeds head down in the coral. Knowing that the fish is focussed on foraging for food and is unlikely to move very far from its feeding station, you begin stalking it carefully, moving slowly into a good position from which to make a short and accurate cast. The fish is clearly visible now, munching on the many organisms that shelter in the safety of the chunks of coral that litter the flats. You watch and wait patiently for the shot. The fish dips its head again, its tail breaks the surface, and you quickly make the cast while the fish has its head down and its vision is limited. The fly lands with a plop a few feet away and begins drifting slowly in towards the feeding fish.

Waiting until the fish lifts its head again, you give the fly a short twitch to attract the trigger's attention. It reacts instantly and scurries over to the fly but then comes to an abrupt halt just above it – and gives your fly a long, scrutinising look before turning back to its piece of coral, having decided that your offering just doesn't cut it. You let out the breath that you had inadvertently been holding, retrieve your line and fly and immediately proceed to change flies, as you know that the fish will not be fooled into taking the same offering. Changing to a small Velcro crab imitation, you wait for another opportunity and have to make another few casts before the fish again sees the fly. This time it is having none of it and, after back pedalling a short distance, turns and shoots off for deeper water. Oh well, on to the next one.

Three spooked fish later, you are beginning to feel the first twinges of frustration and are already halfway through the various patterns in your box, but are now more determined than ever to get one of these fish to take the fly. Another opportunity soon presents itself as an orange tail breaks the surface a short distance away and again you begin the stalking process. Keeping a low profile, you make a few casts starting ten feet away, working your fly slowly towards the fish. Trigger fishing is about accuracy and if you get the fly in the right spot the fish will react, but too close and it will spook. This time the fly drifts in towards the fish, and when you give it that first strip, it moves in a manner that impersonates a crab escaping from the coral that the fish is crunching to pieces. The fish spots the fly and comes charging over, and this time your fly will not escape. The fish tips down on the fly and traps it against the bottom. Resisting the urge to strike you continue with a short steady strip, but the fly pulls away from the fish. It lifts its head and again scoots over and tries to eat the fly. This carries on for a few strips; the fish now completely absorbed and determined to catch its prey. Triggers have odd-shaped

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mouths, and after unsuccessfully trying to eat the fly, it turns on its side and attempts to pick the fly up in the side of its mouth. It is now only a rod's length from you and you suddenly feel the solid tension of a hookup. Alarmed by the prick of the hook, the fish begins shaking its head and you set the hook. Suddenly this comical, slow moving fish transforms into a very strong and fast adversary and makes an incredibly powerful dash for deeper water.

COMMON CHARACTERISTICS

This is where trigger fishing comes into its own, and it's a case of strength against strength as the fish charges for the edge of the ledge and it's up to you to stop it from getting there. Very often the trigger wins; sometimes the line breaks, sometimes the fly is crunched to a mangled ball of steel and spat back at you, sometimes your rod breaks... But every now and again, you turn that powerful fish and break his spirit before he breaks yours! And when that trigger eventually comes to hand, you know that you've landed a trophy fish and that is the appeal of fishing for these strange and wonderful clowns of the flats. Trigger fishing is different. It's intensely entertaining and challenging, but can also be very frustrating and exasperating and will often test one's patience to the limit. They are very picky, moody fish and on some days can be frustratingly difficult to entice to the fly. Yet sometimes they will attack anything that comes near them, and even on the toughest days every fish still presents an opportunity. In fly fishing, where there is a possibility, there lurks a challenge, and it is this challenge that keeps you coming back for more. In a nutshell – you will either love it, or you will hate it. Much of the time you will love to hate it.

These fish combine an interesting blend of attributes – which seem shrewdly selected from a myriad other species – into a concoction of power and cunning. Beneath the colourful and often comical facade of the charismatic triggerfish, lies a raw and explosive power that is completely disproportionate to the outward appearance of these charming, docile-looking fish. The sting of a sharp hook as it is embedded in the triggerfish's thick, rubbery lips will elicit an explosive reaction and a powerful and often unstoppable dash for deep water and the security of the razor-sharp reef. This translates into fly rods bent right into the butt, protesting reels and determined anglers hanging on for dear life as they are dragged reluctantly towards the edges of jagged coral flats and reefs.

The fight is not long, but it is intense, hardcore and there is no room for error. It's normally over in seconds – the result usually given away by the sickening twang of line parting under high tension, followed shortly by a loud curse of disappointment that carries far over the water and vast, silent flats.





Top and left: Its striking colours literally alive, a yellow margin triggerfish comes to hand.
Above left: A beautiful but tiny Picasso triggerfish. Above right: The giant triggerfish has an allure all of its own.

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There is a variety of triggerfish species, but many are deep water fish and unlikely to be encountered by the fly angler. Certain species, however, enter the shallows to feed and it is here on the flats and reefs that you are able to stalk and catch a trigger. Three species are common on the flats of St Francois and Alphonse Islands – the yellow margin and giant triggerfish are the prize catches and can reach up to 12lb in weight. The beautifully painted Picasso triggerfish is very common on the coral flats, but seldom reaches a size bigger than the palm of your hand. They are, however, incredibly beautiful fish and are great fun to catch as they will readily take a small bonefish fly fished in among the coral.

ANGLING TECHNIQUE

Out of roughly every 20 fish you cast to, you will probably spook ten of them and four will have a good look at your fly before swimming off. You may get around six to take the fly, hook three and land one. That's pretty much the average ratio. After each one you find yourself growing more and more determined and careful, so when that fish does eventually come to hand, the elation heavily outweighs the earlier frustration. Most of our clients here in the Seychelles find themselves totally fascinated by these colourful fish, and many are well and truly hooked on fishing for triggers by the time their week of fishing draws to a close. Many even return the following year with only one thing on their minds – to successfully hook and land a triggerfish!

after the fly. It will swim up to the fly, then tip down onto it and try to pick it up off the bottom. With its big teeth and strange-shaped mouth, it is not easy to grab a fly so you have to be patient.

It is a case of "tip and strip" – allow the fish to tip down onto the fly, then make a short, steady strip to see if it's got the fly in its mouth. It is of paramount importance to keep the rod tip down and not to pull the fly away from the fish. If it hasn't managed to grab the fly properly, it will lift its head and come after it again. Now you wait until the fish tips onto the fly again, then strip it slowly and steadily. It is a very precise rhythm that is required, and you can sometimes have the fish attempt to eat the fly up to ten times on a single cast. If you leave it too long the



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A feeding triggerfish's presence is given away by its characteristic waving tail sticking out of the water.

T triggerfish have peculiar-shaped mouths with extremely big, strong crushing teeth and they will crunch coral and rocks in order to expose organisms such as crabs, shrimps, other crustaceans, molluscs and a variety of invertebrates on which they feed. They will often stay in one spot and feed for a lengthy period and are relatively easy to approach. They are easily visible due to their bright colouring and because they wave their tails in the air as they feed with their heads down. The basic technique is to try and present your fly in a way that it drifts in towards the fish as it sinks, so that when you gently strip it back, it appears to be crawling out and away from the area that the fish is feeding in. Crabs, shrimps and slider-style patterns are most effective – and the more legs the better. Everything happens in slow motion, as triggers aren't the quickest fish in the world – until they are hooked, that is. Once you have caught the fish's attention, it will normally lift its head and come

trigger will "taste" the fly and reject it. Strip too early and you will just keep pulling the fly away from the fish and not allow it enough time to get a decent grip on the fly – and the fish will quickly lose interest. It takes a lot of practice and self-control, but it's the only way to effectively catch these extremely tricky fish. I have on a few occasions had the fish follow and try to eat the fly for so long that the fly ends up jammed in my tip guide with the fish still trying to prize the fly out of the end of my rod!



the cast and strip off the minimum amount of line so that the fish gets onto the reel as soon as possible when it is hooked. This gives you more control to try and stop that immensely powerful first run. If you can turn them, you will generally land the fish, as they are relatively easy to control once you can keep them on the flats.

FLY SELECTION

Tackle too has to be stout, and a 10-wt rod, a reel with a smooth drag, and 20 or 25lb tippet is a prerequisite to tackling triggerfish on fly. Flies with weed guards that imitate the diet of a trigger such as crabs, sliders and shrimp patterns are the most productive, but these fish can be very picky and often a number of fly changes are required to get the fish to eat. This is all part of the challenge and the thinking angler will be a successful angler.



The comical appearance of the yellow margin is accentuated by its strange eyes. Triggerfish sport a formidable set of crushing teeth.

Another golden rule is not to strike, even if you feel tension on the line. Often the fish will have the fly in its teeth, and if you strike you will only succeed in pulling the fly away from the fish and scare it off. Just hold the line tight – if it doesn't have it properly, it will pop out and the fish will more than likely come after it again. But if you've hooked the fish, it will start shaking its head and you can then set the hook with a solid line strike. The trick is to get quite close to the fish when you make

Although these fish are very common on the flats of Alphonse and St-Francois Island (one of the prime places to fish for triggers), they are also found in many other similar environments in the Indian Ocean and certainly aren't limited to this area. Up until recently, anglers were generally unaware that triggers would take a fly and they have often been overlooked as a possible fly rod target. I know that on Christmas Island they are relatively common, but the guides and clients never fish for them, as they are unaware of the sport that these fish can provide. Personally, I have only fished for them in the Seychelles, so I cannot comment on their abundance in other areas, although I have heard that they are found on the flats and reefs in places like Bassas da India and possibly areas in Mozambique. So next time you are on a salt water fishing trip and you spot a large orange fish rooting around in the coral on the reefs, give it a try, you may be pleasantly surprised with the result.