

Summer is here, and wherever you live (or, more importantly, wherever you fish) along our beautiful coastline, there should be fish in abundance. One species in particular should be high on your agenda: garrick (*Lichia amia*), as they are correctly named by anglers in KwaZulu-Natal, but more commonly known as leerfish or just "leerie" to the rest of us in South Africa. No matter what you call them, the most important thing about this species is that they readily take flies and can be found just about anywhere. I would hazard a guess that most newcomers to salt water fly fishing start out by chasing garrick, and that it was probably the first fish they had success with. For those of you who have figured out how to catch them, consider this a refresher course (perhaps I can remind you of a few things you have forgotten). If you are just starting out, I hope that my words will help you to catch the first of many garrick.

#### IDENTIFYING GARRICK, AND WHERE TO SEARCH FOR THEM

Garrick are easy to identify. The broad, elongated body tapering to a large mouth with a well-defined, dark, wavy lateral line makes them unmistakable. The streamlined profile and large forked tail scream speed and power – which are what make the garrick such a sought-after fly rod target.

One of the biggest challenges in catching fish is finding them, and garrick are easier to find if you know when and where to start looking. Over the next few months of summer and autumn, garrick will be prolific along our entire coastline from Cape Town through to Port Elizabeth, extending into the former Transkei. Focus your efforts on the tidal estuaries, since these generally provide the best opportunities and most can be fished without a boat. Shoals of juvenile and adolescent garrick will often spend prolonged periods in estuaries at this time of year, returning regularly to prime feeding areas (subject to favourable tide and weather conditions).

Garrick will occasionally move in and out of the estuary with the pushing and dropping tides, and this usually starts to occur more regularly towards the end of the season (late autumn) when adult fish prepare for their migration to KwaZulu-Natal. They also feed more readily at this time of year, which is usually when you find the bigger adult fish. Accept the fact that most of the garrick that you will be targeting in estuaries will be smaller fish, and match your tackle accordingly. Six-, 7- and 8-wt rods are ideal and quite capable of landing a substantial fish, should you encounter one. A reel which holds 100 yards or more of 20lb (10kg) backing will be more than adequate for most situations.

Garrick is one of the mainstay fly rod targets of the South African fly angler. Field Editor **Anthony Krüger** discusses finding the hot spots and fishing them with the right tackle.



The author with a garrick, tagged and ready for release.

Main photo: Using a popper when prospecting for garrick under calm conditions is an effective method to attract the attention of any fish that may be in the area.

# Gearing<sup>up</sup> for Garrick



## FISHING THE HOT SPOTS

Every estuary is different, although basic characteristics will be the same. Aspects such as tide and weather play a crucial role in determining when and where garrick will be feeding within a specific estuary. Many other factors can also influence feeding activity, which will vary according to the unique features of the specific estuary. As a starting point, concentrate on early morning and late afternoon, which are the prime hunting times for all predatory fish. I have always favoured a pushing tide when targeting garrick, but the last two hours of a dropping tide can also produce good results.

Areas worth prospecting are drop-offs and deeper channels, and at this time of year the top end of tidal estuaries should attract reasonable numbers of fish. Ideal locations are where the tide flows over or off a shallow bank into deeper water.

Another area always worth prospecting is where the main river or a large channel narrows considerably, creating a funnel effect. These areas congest with food and attract baitfish followed by the larger predators. The water flow is also usually stronger there, making it difficult for small fish to swim and easier for large fish to hunt.

Closed estuaries along the Western, Southern and Eastern Cape coastlines should not be overlooked – even small, insignificant-looking ones hold healthy populations of garrick, although mostly juvenile and adolescent. I do not advocate actively targeting juvenile fish, so if you keep catching very small garrick you should move to a different area and try to find bigger fish. In some instances the larger closed estuaries (especially those which have been closed for many years) have the potential to produce a trophy garrick. Such fish can also be the most difficult to entice to take a fly. With no tidal movement, the best

Below: Tidal estuaries play host to large concentrations of garrick at this time of year. Focus your efforts in areas that garrick frequent, such as drop-offs and other places where they can ambush prey. Bottom: The author with one of Swartkops River's finest.



**"GARRICK ARE STRONG, POWERFUL FISH, AND EVEN SMALL SPECIMENS WILL PUT UP A GAME FIGHT ON LIGHTER RODS."**

areas to fish in a closed estuary are drop-offs and deep channels. Many of these estuaries also have large weedbeds located along the edge of a deep channel. Concentrate on fishing parallel to the weed or in any channels between the weedbeds. Garrick feed throughout the day, from first light to well after the sun has set, but seldom (if ever) at night. Between 11am and 3pm is usually the quietest.

**TACKLE AND FLIES**

Floating lines are about the most versatile in an estuary, particularly when targeting garrick, which will actively feed on or near the surface. There are, however, days when the garrick are holding or





Above: Gordon Pope with a summer garrick. Fish this size will take you well into your backing and put up a good fight (one of the reasons why garrick is such a popular angling fish). However, due to their habitat offering few obstructions, they can be subdued on fairly light tackle.

Garrick are superb predators in their own right and will feed aggressively on most small fish, with a preference for mullet, sardines, elf (shad) and mackerel. When frequenting estuaries, garrick will target mullet, swimming prawns and estuarine round-herring (*Gilchristella*). These prey species all shoal, and wherever you find them in abundance you are likely to find garrick close by. Any fly which represents a small baitfish will work for garrick. Colour is not that important, although natural colours that match the food source usually have an edge. Mullet have a white belly with silvery white flanks and a dark back ranging from a sandy brown through to green and almost black. Most other baitfish have similar colouration, with a light-coloured or translucent belly and sides becoming darker on the back. Flies which match this basic colouration of dark over light should always be your first choice, but do not be afraid to try colours such as yellow, pink or red for the back, and the universally accepted chartreuse. Flies tied on hook sizes number 4 through to 2/0 will suffice, the general rule being to use smaller flies when targeting smaller fish (although small garrick have little hesitation in attacking large flies). My view is that if you are unsure, always choose the smaller fly. There is a simple rule which applies to all fishing: it is far easier to hook a big fish on a small hook than to hook a small fish on a big one!



Fishing off a boat in an estuary gives you access to water that you would not otherwise have been able to search for garrick.

feeding a bit deeper, and an intermediate line will be a better choice. Increasing the length of your leader and using a weighted fly is an option to get the fly deeper and will often entice these fish. Leaders generally do not need to be longer than 9ft or 10ft, tapering down to a tippet of 10lb - 15lb for smaller garrick. Be aware that the fine, rasp-like teeth of garrick (especially the larger fish) can easily wear through a light tippet during a prolonged fight. If you anticipate a real chance of bumping into a big fish, use a shock tippet of 20lb - 25lb.

Flies tied with translucent materials are also effective in matching many smaller baitfish, especially species such as *Gilchristella*, and these can be highly effective on smaller garrick. Krystal Flash in the fly is definitely a trigger for garrick, although the effective quantity can vary considerably, depending on factors such as water clarity, light penetration and even the mood of the fish. All common baitfish-style patterns will work, although Clouser Minnows are in my opinion best.

## SURFACE PATTERNS

Without a doubt the most visually appealing fly to use is a popper, which garrick have a habit of smashing. Few things get the heart racing more than watching a fish home in on a popper – especially a garrick, which characteristically zigzags in pursuit before committing to the strike. Poppers are extremely effective in estuaries since they are able to attract fish from a long way off, so are an excellent searching pattern.



Above: The rasp-like teeth of a garrick can make short work of a light tippet during a prolonged fight with a large adult specimen.

Left: A garrick taken on a popper from a closed estuary along the Garden Route.



the area is critical. You need to be confident that the tide will bring the fish to you and hold them there. The obvious disadvantage of this strategy is that the fish may find food elsewhere and not move into the area you are targeting.

- The second option is to look for fish, spending short periods working through different areas in the hope of finding a feeding shoal. The disadvantage is that you could miss the fish while moving from one area to another. This is the better strategy to employ in a closed estuary where food and fish are not influenced by tidal movement.

Another advantage of fishing a surface fly, is that the angler will often see the garrick follow the popper, even if it does not strike. If this occurs, consider changing to a small subsurface baitfish imitation, which will usually produce a strike. Alternatively use a Gurgler or Flipper-style fly which slides across the surface with less commotion. These can be highly effective when the garrick are willing to feed but do not seem keen on the popper. Finger Mulletts and small Dahlberg Divers can be a good choice too – they slide rather than pop, and can also be used as a subsurface fly on an intermediate line.

## STRATEGISING FOR SUCCESS

There are two strategies that you can employ when targeting garrick in an estuary, and both have their pros and cons:

- Stake out a likely area and work the water thoroughly, routinely changing flies and the retrieve until you come across a combination that works. It is important to maintain the same retrieve for at least ten casts before trying something different, and stick with the same fly for at least 20 casts. This strategy is best used when you know there are garrick in the area (you may have seen them finning or chasing baitfish). Or you can hope that the fish are going to move into or through the area you are fishing. Understanding the tide and how it influences

In both cases the angler must have a reasonable knowledge of the area being fished, and a good understanding of the prevailing weather and (where applicable) tidal conditions. You should be able to identify patterns which can be applied to the specific area by spending time on the water and taking cognisance of what is happening around you. These can then be applied to a new venue, especially if it has similar characteristics.

## IN SEARCH OF TROPHIES

For fly anglers who consistently want to target bigger fish and who have access to a seaworthy boat, the best option is to head offshore. Harbour break walls and rocky headlands are good areas to target. Scale up to 9- and 10-wt rods; not only for the larger fish but also to accommodate throwing larger or heavily weighted flies. Fishing the surf, especially in the vicinity of a river mouth, can also produce good fly fishing for garrick, but is advisable only if you are highly experienced.

Garrick are strong, powerful fish, and even small specimens will put up a game fight on lighter rods. Match the tackle to the size of fish you anticipate catching, and when you do find them they can provide you with hours of pleasure!