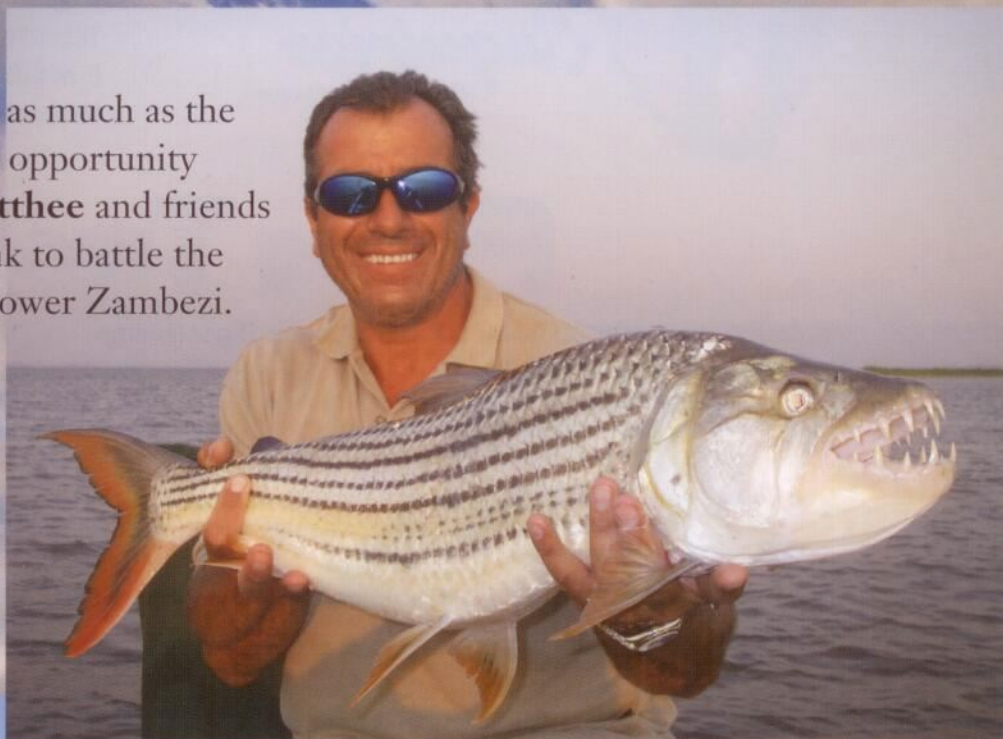


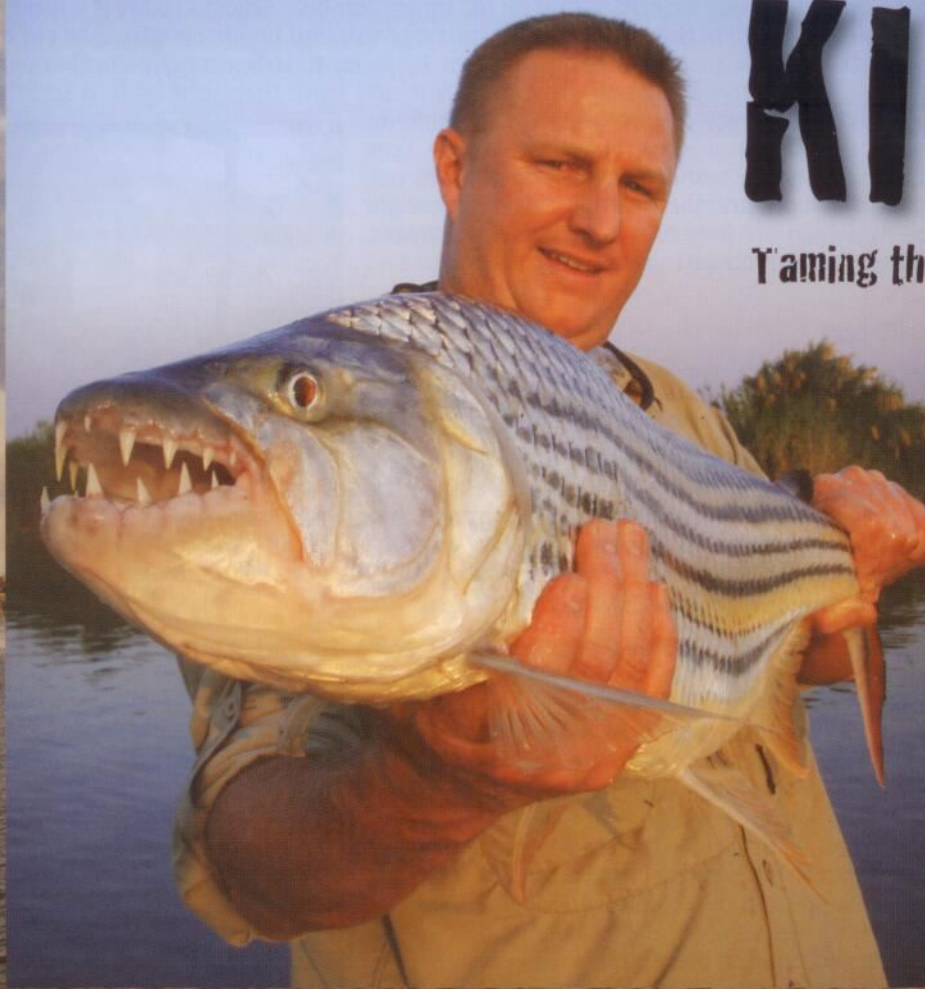
Some guides like to fish as much as the next guy, so when the opportunity presented itself, **Arno Matthee** and friends took a well-earned break to battle the mighty tigerfish of the lower Zambezi.



# NATURAL BORN KILLERS

Taming the tigers of the lower Zambezi

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GERHARD LAUBSCHER



Top: Guy Constantino with a trophy tiger taken at last light out of a shallow run opening up into the lake.

Left: Fishing a bend in the river where a shoal of big fish were observed feeding on baitfish, Mark Truman hooked and landed this 18lb beauty!

continue fishing from 3pm to 6pm. Most mornings and late afternoons were calm with a moderate easterly wind at midday, and air temperatures ranging from 22°C - 26°C.

The second part of the season is the September/October/November period, when the river is at its lowest and the fish are more concentrated. At this time, big fish of up to 25lb migrate out of the lake and into the river prior to spawning. However, air temperatures ranging 30°C - 40°C can be uncomfortable for those who are sensitive to sun exposure. Summer provided us with the opportunity to explore the northern bank of the river,

which is normally discoloured during June/July because of the dirty water being pushed into the Zambezi by the Luangwa River. By the middle of September, we found that the river had changed considerably, having dropped 2.5m lower than in June. The constantly falling water levels created an interesting and challenging fishery, although we continued to use intermediate lines in the early morning and late afternoons, and DI-7 lines for the rest of the day.

There was no remarkable difference in numbers of fish taken during winter and summer. The biggest we landed in summer was a beautiful 18lb specimen.

There were, however, many occasions when anglers were left standing with knees knocking after a monster fish had broken the line or spat out the fly. I clearly remember one incident where two-thirds of the line coating was bunched up on top of an angler's glove after he was hit by a 20lb-plus bus! The line resembled dental floss, having been shredded to pieces by the razor-sharp teeth of a Zambezi tiger.

It is truly a privilege to be able to fish in such pristine natural environments such as the lower Zambezi. This is evidence of the fact that Africa still produces memorable fishing in the extreme!

Below left: One of the comfortable en suite chalets at Chawalo Camp. Below right: The dining/lapa area where anglers relax in the pool or around an open log fire at the end of the day. Bottom: Tim Babich with an early-season trophy.

This fish was taken in very bad weather and relatively dirty water, but it still managed to locate the fly.



had been searching for the ultimate tigerfish destination for five years. After fishing almost the entire Zambezi River system from Western Zambia to the Caprivi Floodplains in Namibia, Botswana and the Zambezi River Valley that divides Zimbabwe and Zambia, I arrived in Mozambique at the headwaters of Cahora Bassa in June 2008. At this time of the year the river is at its highest, but it soon starts dropping fast, forcing millions of baitfish out of the shallows and into the river. I was prepared for this, having tied hundreds of flies covering the entire spectrum of baitfish found in the lower Zambezi.

### A FEROCIOUS QUARRY

The tigerfish populating this section of river are super-predators with elongated silvery bodies, lined with horizontal black stripes tapering to a deep-red tail. Although beautiful, they are equipped with a formidable set of teeth that contain an anticoagulant, so must be handled with care. They are the fastest and most powerful fresh water fish I have ever had the privilege of fishing for. At times the takes are vicious – they attack their prey from the side and front, and a hookup is normally followed by powerful runs and dramatic aerial displays. Tigerfish fascinate me and it's difficult to describe them without a shiver running down my spine. I'm just glad they have not evolved

to walk on land, in which case we would be in serious trouble!

Our month-long exploration started off with an end-of-season guides' trip. After a particularly long and exhausting Seychelles season, it was great for all of us to fish together and relate stories around the campfire. Our base was Chawalo Camp set below Mount Zumbu and overlooking the river, and it was nice to have good food and a comfortable camp to relax in after a hard day's fishing. As experienced guides, we were able to gauge the potential of the fishery very quickly. The river is about 2km wide with several channels, lagoons and islands, creating the perfect habitat for tigerfish. In this particular stretch, a fish that weighs more than 10lb is considered a trophy, but within the first two days we had landed several of between 10lb and 13lb. There were just no little tigers around, the smallest fish weighing in at 5lb.

Apart from this being an annual reward trip for the guides, we had also invited some guests along. During the next three weeks they discovered the awesome power and raw, destructive nature of tigerfish, and experienced phenomenal fishing. Wherever we found tigerfish rolling on the surface or feeding in shallow water, we used intermediate fly lines with great success. All of our guests hooked fish in excess of 16lb. During the 20-day period, we (13 anglers) landed

33 fish of 10lb - 17lb, and 122 fish of 5lb - 9lb.

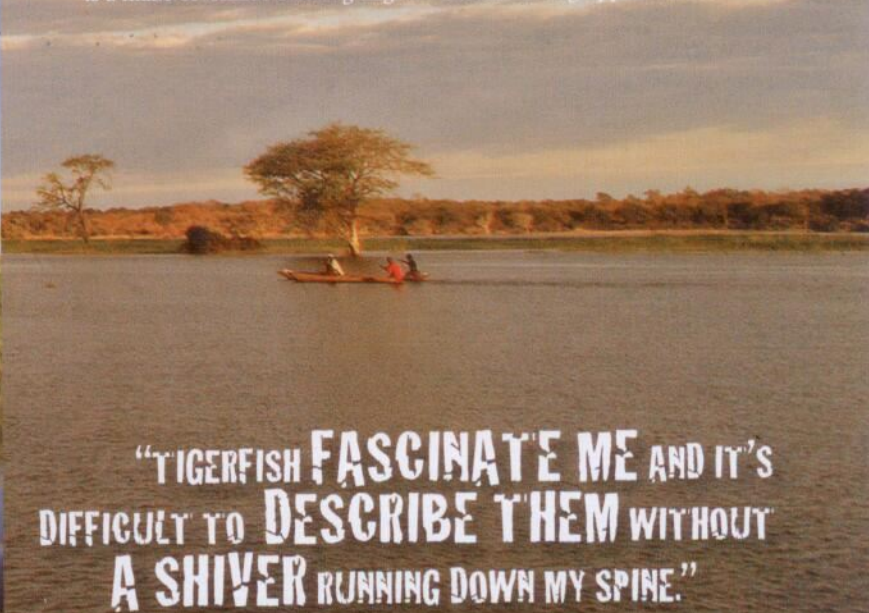
Chawalo is a fishery that changes constantly as the level of the river drops. The Zambezi flows through a delta before entering Cahora Bassa; this creates many channels around islands and feeds floodplains and lagoons that later drain back into the river. Here I witnessed tigerfish behaviour the likes of which I have never seen before. We had fish feeding in very shallow water right on the banks of the river and in between shallow structure. There were tigers of up to 16lb hunting baitfish in water less than a foot deep! We also hooked fish in tiny inlets to lagoons that were no more than a foot wide. I was very surprised to see that big tigers were hanging out in these little channels where one would normally only find tiglets (little tigers). The most exciting aspect was that one could fish in shallow water with intermediate fly lines and in the deeper water with DI-7 lines. It is mind-blowing to see a 16lb fish hit the fly in the shallows and take off with the fly line ripping through the water.

### THE BEST TIMES TO GO

There is very little chance of rain during the months of June/July since it is the dry season, and we found the most productive times to be from first light at about 6am to 11am, which allowed us to return to camp for brunch and a siesta during the slow midday period, and then



Left: The author with a 14lb fish taken from shallow water around an island on an intermediate line and an SF Fibre Minnow. Below: The delta at the headwaters of Cahora Bassa where the river empties into the dam. The area is a maze of islands offering anglers endless fishing opportunities.



**"TIGERFISH FASCINATE ME AND IT'S DIFFICULT TO DESCRIBE THEM WITHOUT A SHIVER RUNNING DOWN MY SPINE."**