

Trophy Tigers

Putting together the pieces

Contributors **Keith
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report back on lessons
learnt targeting monster
tigerfish in Tanzania.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOURETTE FISHING



Yes, it'll come back – cast! Cast! Wait. Right, strip now. Faster! Here it comes... On! Stick it – and again. Insiiiiide... &^%\$ it's big!" I won't carry on with the rest of this transcript from our recent season in

habits of the Tanzanian tigerfish and the fishery. This in turn led to us refining our tackle and fly fishing techniques, details of which we share with you in this article together with observations made during the season.

and drop-offs, rocky outcrops offering riffles and big eddies, deep undercut outside banks and, at the headwaters, rapids of astounding beauty. What this means to the fly fisher is simple: no cast is made without thinking about where



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Tanzania – suffice it to say that the fish in question ripped 30m of line, tore through a fallen tree and spat the fly out in disgust! The Canadian clients on the boat were shell-shocked, trying to piece together what had just happened. We shared a knowing grin with Sixbet, our coxswain, similar moments of chaos having been repeated many times during an epic season chasing trophy tigerfish in Tanzania.

Last year, we spent 114 days guiding on both the Mnyera and Ruhudji rivers which make up the Duma Tiger Fishery in Tanzania. Having spent seven weeks setting up in the area, we entered the season thinking we had the fishery pretty much worked out. This soon changed as we came to understand the intricate

UNDERSTANDING THE SYSTEM

First, it is imperative to have an understanding of the waters being fished. Both these rivers flood seasonally, with water levels rising over 2m between the dry and wet season. Much like the lower Zambezi, we focus on the area when the waters begin to drop until the rains arrive (when the water level literally rises as you watch it). Both rivers are an average of 50m wide, many areas narrowing down to 30m, with the widest sections around 100m. Competent fly casters can reach either bank when drifting the middle.

The rivers are rich in structure: loads of fallen trees and submerged timber, sandbanks and associated deep channels

the fish will be holding in the associated structure. Fishing is done off the drift and off anchor when trying to get flies into the deeper holding areas which is both technical and exciting. Drifting a productive stretch while planning one's strategy, knowing you have only one shot at the prime lie and possibly a trophy tigerfish, is fly fishing par excellence.

EVOLUTION OF TERMINAL TACKLE

To achieve consistent results, one has to adapt to the local conditions – an evolution of sorts as fly fishing in new territories provides a completely fresh angle on how best to target certain species. We ended off the season in 2008 using standard 20lb leaders attached to

the fly line with Perfection Loops, leader to wire with an Albright Knot, and finally a Haywire Twist joining the fly to the wire. June and July's pre-season recce saw the first change to this set-up. We were losing too many big fish on the take, most break-offs occurring at the weakest point in the setup, namely the Perfection Loop. After a series of tests, we began to use Bimini Twists as the top loop attaching the 20lb leader to the fly line, which offered far more strength. However, we were still unhappy with the Albright Knot joining the #4 piano wire to the leader, since this now became the weakest link. The "improved" or "double" Rapala Knot was then used, and we achieved a breaking strength of around 18lb on this leader set-up. Job done – or so we thought.

Late August – the first couple of days of the season – and guests were popping this improved leader setup as though it were 6X tippet. The strength and speed of these fish proved too much for many anglers to handle in the heat of the moment. All leaders were then beefed up to 30lb, which is where they stayed for the rest of the season. For those who think this is overkill, imagine a 20lb fish hitting a fly that is moving in the opposite direction at 50km an hour –

Left: Rob Scott with a trophy tiger that fell to a black SF Blend bait-fish pattern. Below: Stay focussed when you're about to land a fish as even the slightest slack in pressure will result in a fish lost.



Above: Brush Flies are a favourite in clearer water conditions.

Left: With a beefed up leader, landing trophies such as this one became easier to achieve.



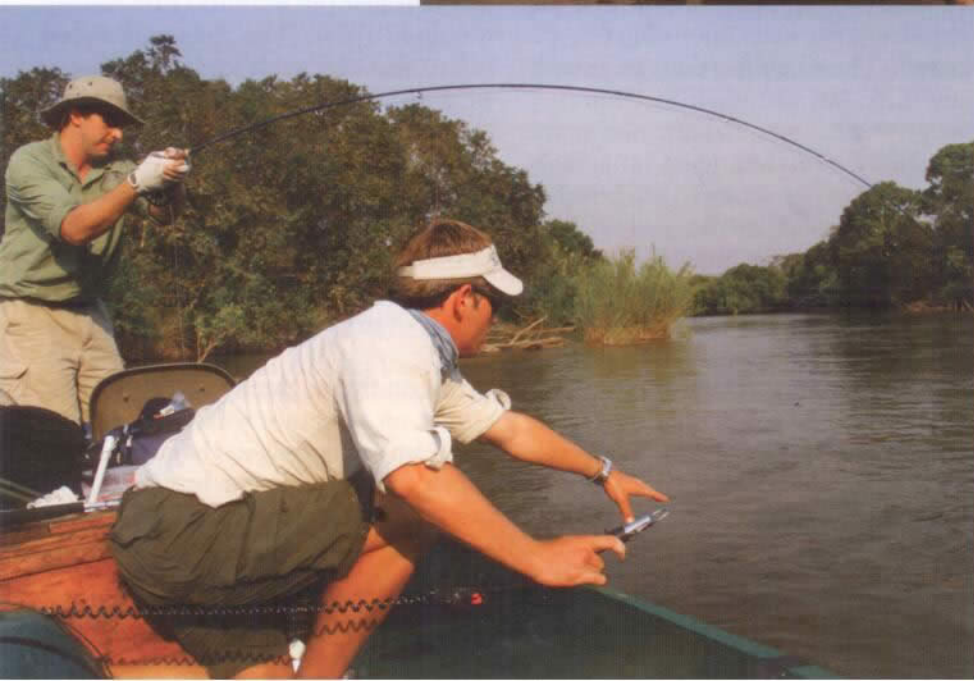
this translates into 140lb of force on the take! We would quite happily have beefed the leader up to 40lb if the risk of losing fly lines by snagging on structure were not a constant threat. Even using 30lb monofilament, snapped leaders were a constant reminder of the size of the tigers we were targeting.

FLIES

As with any new fishery, you always start with what you know about a species. To decode the feeding habits of the tigerfish of the Mnyera and Ruhudji rivers, we started with all the firm tiger favourites from other destinations. Black Clousers, Whistlers and Polar

Fibre baitfish patterns worked well early season due to the discoloured nature of the two rivers. With their ability to push water, black Whistlers were a firm favourite throughout the early season, especially in the late evenings.

With lower than average water levels, clarity on both rivers increased substantially over the first few weeks, requiring more thought on fly selection. More imitative patterns became the name of the game. We concentrated on tying flies based on the most prominent baitfish in the two rivers, namely the red-finned barbs which closely resemble the *imberi*





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A trophy landed in deep water. This fish fell to a rainbow Brush Fly.

found on the lower Zambezi (just a lot bigger). The biomass of this species in the river is astounding. One of the most prominent features of this baitfish when viewed in the water is its large, conspicuous eye and a striking black spot on the base of its tail. These, along with red tips on fins and tail, were some of the strongest triggers for tigers. Steve Farah baitfish patterns with large eyes and red tips proved extremely successful.

A number of natural Brush Flies, specifically tied for the Mnyera and Ruhudji rivers, proved deadly with increasing water clarity. As with other systems, the choice of fly colour varied throughout the day. Plain black and black/grey patterns dominated the fishing in low light conditions, and natural colours such as olive, rainbow and tan produced the goods through the middle of the day. Important to note is that SF Blend baitfish patterns, tied over and under the shank to give a stronger profile, outfished those tied only above the shank. Also, flies with large eyes and pupils dead centre produced better than those with pupils off-centre. The lack of

penetration when hooking trophy tigerfish results in a lot of pressure on the hook curve due to the pronounced lever effect. Grip's short shank Stinger hook (21571-BN) was the only one that consistently stood up to the task.

FISH HABITS

Fishing rivers so rich in structure presented two hurdles on the path to trophy success. First, how to get the fly into the strike zone of fish holding deep and tight to the structure. Second, how to avoid obstacles in the water once a big fish was hooked. These tigerfish don't necessarily fight dirty, but with their first run they often cover a substantial distance, so the probability of getting hung up is high. On more than one occasion, fish launched themselves through overhanging branches (and sometimes even onto the banks) on their first hit. The outcome was always the same. Later in the season, we had some success landing fish by quickly releasing the drag to almost free spool, which allowed the fish to carry on running through or around the structure, while giving us the chance to get the boat into a position to unsnag the fly line.

There were interesting lessons to be learnt about the structure-oriented habitat of tigers. Naturally, the biggest fish occupy the best territorial niches within any given area – those that offer the most cover, the strongest eddy from the current, and an optimal position from which to ambush prey. These are mostly the deepest parts of the river with related structure. There are two angles of attack when attempting to reach fish holding deep and tight. The first is to fish a longer leader (9ft or more) with heavily weighted flies. The flies mentioned before, tied with ample lead wraps, heavily weighted Clousers and even tungsten beads slid onto the wire above the fly help achieve the desired results. Accurate casts to the structure, mending upstream as the fly sinks, and a super-fast strip out of the structure produces strikes. Not surprisingly, most hits come in the first couple of strips.

Secondly, anglers can focus their efforts on structure where tigers hold upstream of (logjams and large boulders) which creates a buffer in which they can hold out of the current. In these

instances, casts are made 4m - 5m above the logjam and flies allowed to drift back and sink into it. Interestingly, fish caught using this technique tended to be smaller. In adverse fishing conditions (such as a drop in pressure or water temperature), the larger tigers hold tight in deep holes, behind or underneath structure. This makes fly placement and presentation very tricky. At such times when fish are reluctant to actively hunt and feed, the only path to success is to cast tight and let one's fly sink as deep as possible.



steal the flies right out of the hooked tigers' mouths, taking bites out of the other and, on occasion, slicing the hooked tiger in half! Once an intimate knowledge of the rivers was acquired, we could accurately predict areas and structure that would hold trophy fish. The aggressive response triggered by a hooked tiger could be used to good effect in these situations. If a smaller fish was hooked while drifting into a promising stretch of water, the small fish was not brought in immediately but left in the current about 8m from the boat. This would often lure the bigger tigers from their lies into the main channel – and into a feeding frenzy. Although very frustrating for the angler

FEEDING BEHAVIOUR

Interesting observations were made on the different sizes of feeding fish and how this affected the fishing. When the larger fish were off the bite, we generally caught fish between 4lb and 8lb since they could move and feed more freely with the larger hunting fish absent. A drop in feeding activity by smaller fish more often than not signalled that the larger specimens had come out of the structure and were actively feeding. During this stage, keeping one's focus for that one big hit was paramount. We always advise guests to be prepared for a hit each time they strip their line, in an attempt to prevent the angler from getting a fright on the strike and either jamming up on the fish or losing all coordination and failing to set the hook.

When these tigers were feeding aggressively, a good proportion of those brought to the boat would have others chasing them. We witnessed tigerfish

Top: A lady angler tussling with a big tiger.
Above left and below: The release is almost as pleasurable as the catch.
Smiles all round when the hard work comes together.

