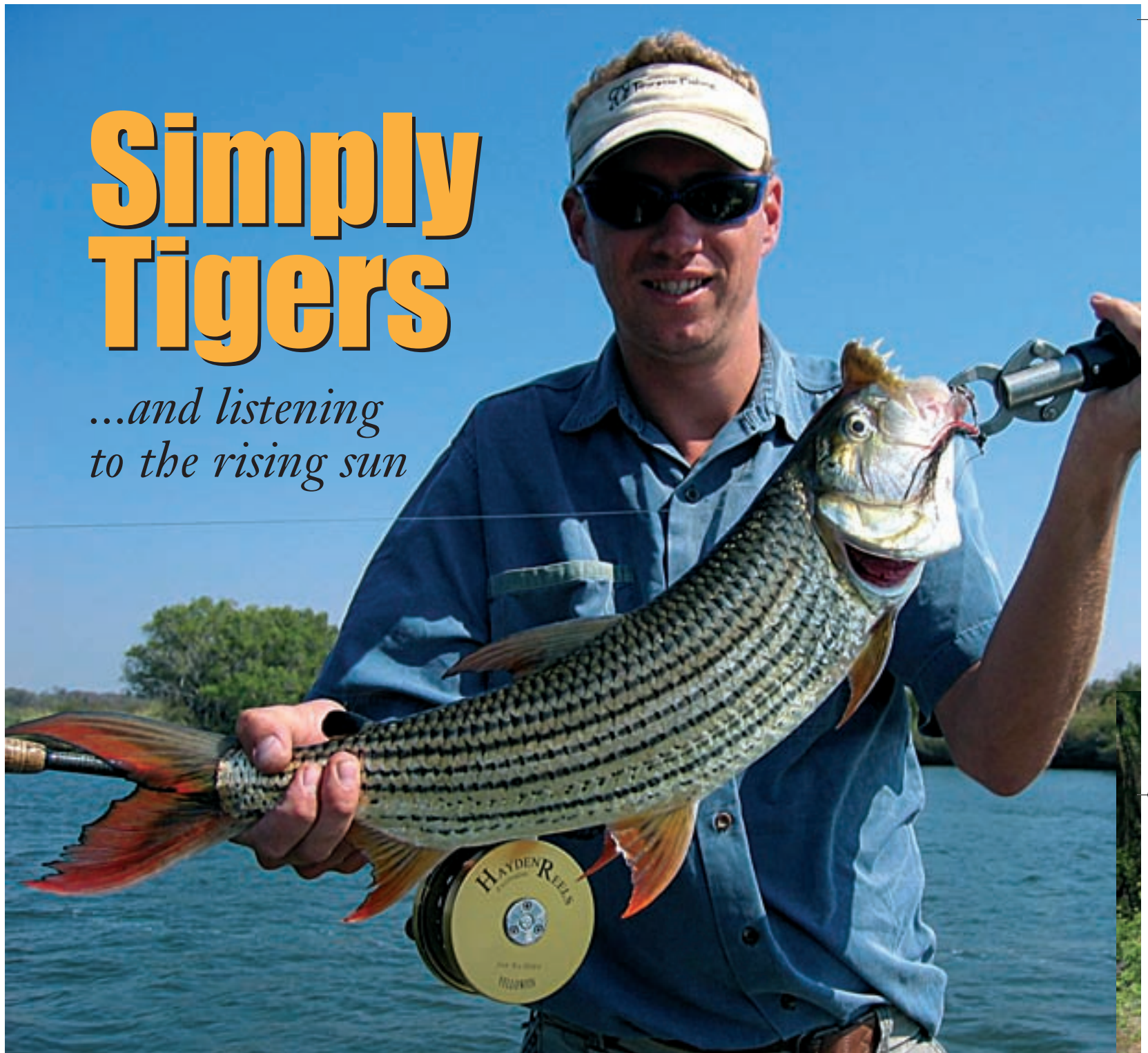
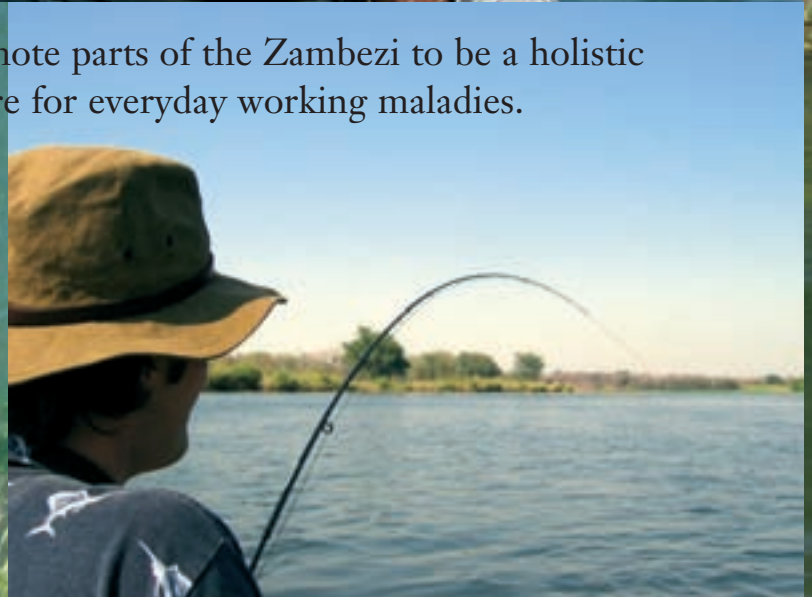


Simply Tigers

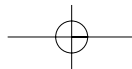
...and listening to the rising sun



Keith Clover finds tigerfishing in remote parts of the Zambezi to be a holistic experience, and the perfect cure for everyday working maladies.



Top: The author with a 6lb fish taken when fishing to structure in the main Zambezi channel, upstream from Sekoma Island camp.
Above left: Releasing a tiger that fell to a black Clouser with additional lead weighting.
Above right: Tiger on! Fishing off an Indian canoe in a section of deep and quiet water above the Mambova Rapids.





recently watched an outdoor show on television that got me thinking. The host was presenting his views on the five outdoor sounds he rates among the finest. Being an American programme, it focussed on their indigenous animals. It went something like this, in descending order: the clashing antlers of deer during the rut; wild turkeys calling in the spring; the high-pitched whistle from a mature elk bull; a screaming fly reel on the flats; and lastly, the rising sun. Other than the LSD-laced creators of Teletubbies, I doubt whether any of us has ever physically heard the sun rise. The point the presenter was making, however, was simple. When we are in the bush or on the water without everyday sensory distractions that bombard most of us during our daily working life, we can focus our senses, wholeheartedly, on the natural environment surrounding us. Thereby if not literally, then figuratively, we can listen to the sun rise. In risking comparing the relatively infant art of fly fishing with the age-old, life-giving rising of the sun, I do believe a wonderful analogy can be drawn between listening to the rising sun and simplifying our fishing. And in so doing, truly connecting with our piscatorial adversaries and the environment they inhabit. This point was pleasantly brought home to me on a recent guiding excursion on the upper Zambezi.

THE VENUE – SEKOMA ISLAND

After meeting with my clients, we spent a good half an hour transferring an array of tackle and electronic equipment including GPS, fishfinders, thermometers and two-way radios onto our boat which was to transfer us to Sekoma Island, our fishing camp for the week. Having fished these waters extensively over the past six years – privately and with clients – I was looking forward to some world-class tiger action. It was late September, water levels on the upper Zambezi were low, but clarity was excellent and water temperatures were heating up – all conducive to good fly fishing.

Surrounding Sekoma and Ilombe Islands are a myriad channels, interspersed with rapids (including the productive Mambova Rapids), glides, deep runs, deeper holes and an assortment of bankside structure. These are the most productive tigerfishing waters during the low water months of September and November, but they do present a major difficulty. Conventional boats, even the shallowest running aluminium craft, cannot gain access for risk of destroying outboard motors in the shallow, rock-laden channels. Jet boats, which are used by a couple of the operators in the area, can gain access to stretches of this water, but accessible water diminishes as the water levels drop.

The first day of the safari dawned, and we decided to fish the deep channels, reed-banks and drop-offs on the main Zambezi. These areas are usually most productive during June and July when the waters recede from the floodplains into the main channel, but we were optimistic that they would still produce. On arrival at fishy-looking waters, with fishfinders beeping as though in competition with the swamp boubous, we began fishing in earnest. A couple of drifts, many casts, more beeps, and some solid fish later, it was time to

Left: A heavily weighted black and red Clouser, fished deep and slow in the rapids off the eastern point of Sekoma Island, was responsible for this fine specimen of 11lb.



move off. And as the day continued, more fish were landed, more leaders tied, more flies destroyed and more GPS coordinates entered. I will admit to playing devil's advocate for the sake of this article, as 99% of the time this would constitute a perfect day's fishing on the Zambezi. Our experiences over the following days are, however, some of the fondest of my career.

As we had already landed a couple of good fish, and my client being relaxed and adventurous, we decided to spend the second morning fishing and exploring the rapids and waters surrounding Sekoma and Ilombe Islands in an Indian canoe. What an experience it was. Our tactics were to focus on the rapids and runs, with their accompanying deep holes, eddies and differing current speeds. Paddling down-and-across the rapids, we entered the quiet, swirling waters behind the bigger rocks which marked the heads of the respective rapids. If the rocks were big enough and offered adequate protection from ever present, if not visible, crocs, we would

gaining some semblance of control over the enraged fish, Duncan watched in awe as an 11lb fish burst out of the water at the tail end of the rapid. A memorable fight ensued before the fish was landed, weighed and released. A couple of casts later a smaller fish, in the region of 8lb, was landed.

Over the next four days we were submersed in an angler's/naturalist's nirvana. Setting off in our canoe at first light, we drifted past feeding elephants, saw spotted neck and Cape clawless otters feeding in the tranquil backwaters, and laughed as surprised African darters clumsily dropped off water berry trees into the river below. The accompanying fly fishing was of the finest I have experienced in recent times. Most sessions resulted in more than one quality fish being landed and released, with a fair share of rats and mice (5lb and below) to complement. A particularly memorable session, fishing off the canoe in fast, shallow water (no more than 2ft in depth) midway down the Mambova Rapids, resulted in seven strikes in as many casts.



disembark from the canoe and fish off the outcrops. If this were not possible, the eddying water pushing upstream was adequate to keep the canoe in a suitable position from where we could cast. It was on the second cast of the first rapid of the day that Duncan Harrison, from the UK, was stunned into the reality of tigerfishing as a hefty fish smashed his fly and proceeded to run off 20 yards of backing in a couple of adrenaline-charged seconds. Trying desperately to follow instructions to keep his rod tip down, while at the same time

On another occasion, I was in the process of landing a modest-sized catfish that had fallen prey to a heavily weighted black Clouser, when a pair of tigerfish in excess of 10lb appeared out of the depths and began rushing the distressed catfish at my feet. I frantically called my client, 3 yards to my right, to cast at these aggressive fish. The bigger of the two nailed his fly as it hit the water and promptly spat it out on the first jump. The second swiftly pounced on the injured fly and a wonderful aerial display followed.

The most memorable fish of the trip, 15lb plus, was hooked in a section of deep and quiet water in between two sets of rapids. Drifting this stretch in the morning and noticing some aggressive surface activity, Duncan made a short cast behind a submerged rock. His fly was met with gusto on the drop. The fish took off like a steamtrain and was soon trailing 40 yards of backing. After 15 wrist-burning minutes, Duncan had the fish within 6ft of the canoe. It was with a sickening sensation that we watched, in slow motion, the hook pull and the magnificent brute slink off into the Zambezi abyss.

TACKLE AND TACTICS

On a purely academic note – flies that consistently produced results were black Clousers with a sparse amount of red bucktail tied under the wing and a fair amount of peacock herl tied on top. Large, black Strip Leech patterns with gold Cactus Chenille bodies, and all-black Zonker baitfish imitations tied palmered-style, also shaped well. The majority of fishing was done using DI 3 sinking lines. DI 7 lines were needed to get

down in some of the really deep, fast-flowing waters. If not casting directly to structure or likely-looking lies, eddies and holes (all similar to what you would look for in a trout stream), blind-casting was across-and-down. Casting across fast-flowing turbulent water, mending the line as it bellied out, and then stripping into and out of the fast-flowing water enticed positive strikes. And lastly, casting directly down the cusp between the swift turbulent water of the rapids and the slow, deep water eddying upstream and allowing one's fly to get right down, followed by a steady yet relatively slow strip retrieve upstream, produced excellent results. The limited space on an Indian canoe forces one to seriously consider choice of tackle. There is no room to cart excessive tackle and equipment. Other than the compulsory cooler box and camera, a small day pack containing leader material, wire tippet, BogaGrip, pliers, a selection of flies, spare spools, binoculars, first aid kit and a bird book were all that was needed.

Although I believe a competent angler should be familiar with all angling disciplines, each discipline complementing the other in some form, the art of fly fishing remains for me the most raw, uncluttered and unadulterated. The lack of heavy rods and multiplying reels ensures that contact between angler and fish is at its most primitive. This being said, it is human nature to hoard and collect, and fly fishermen often display above average symptoms of this trait. There is no doubt that today the scientific aspect of fly fishing is fast merging with the "artistic." The multitude of gadgets, new and innovative fly-tying materials, guidebooks, research material, state-of-the-art tackle and electronic equipment available to the modern fly angler has resulted in more sport fishermen catching a continuously depleting stock of fish. However, in embracing the technological advances made available to us, I fear at times we are distracted from the task at hand. Fundamentally this task being to catch fish, but on a more holistic level ...connecting with nature, escaping the monotony of working life, rekindling friendships and, hopefully, listening to the sun rise.

The author specialises in guided sportfishing safaris, and can be contacted at Tourette Fishing on (033) 344-2250 / 084 622 2272.



Main picture: Last light fishing the rapids, the location of the previous day's battles with catfish and tigers.

Above left: The sleek lines and powerful jaws of a well-conditioned Upper Zambezi River tiger is evident in this photograph.

Above right: An 8lb fish that took the fly as it accelerated on the drift from the slower eddying water into the main current.