

TIGERFISH

For the past couple of seasons, “wireless” has been a buzzword on the Zambezi. Even the sound of “going wireless” is appealing in an edgy and exciting kind of way. To both virgin and experienced ears alike, the first suggestion of targeting tigerfish wireless draws murmurs of impending insanity. The mere thought of targeting tigerfish, gums stacked with razor-sharp teeth, without a steel trace to prevent bite-offs is more often than not disregarded without a second thought. But is there any merit in this new-fangled tigerfishing technique, or not?

As with all aspects of fly fishing, techniques are an ever-changing dynamic. Many technical modifications are often gladly accepted and incorporated into the realm of modern fly fishing, while others are rejected outright. There are yet others which, although not fully accepted and integrated into fly fishing practice, contain aspects that at certain times and under specific conditions can be adopted and followed to provide successful results. It is in this light that I view wireless tigerfishing. For many anglers, however, the issue of fishing wireless is a black and white one: it is either fully embraced or rejected. My views on fishing wireless place me in a somewhat greyish area. Apart from the obvious goal of drawing more strikes and landing more fish, there are further moral considerations that need to be taken into account when weighing up the pros and cons of wireless tigerfishing.

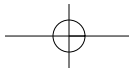


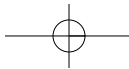
Photos courtesy of Tourette Fishing

Above: Luther Birdzell from Colorado with a great 14lb fish. Note the typical wireless hookup, with the fly finding purchase just inside the tiger's jaw, resulting in little, if any, damage to the shock tippet.

Unprotected Tigerfishing

Fishing wireless for tigerfish? Contributor **Keith Clover** takes a look at the pros and cons.



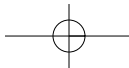


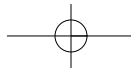
Over the past decade, the art of targeting tigerfish on fly has definitely shifted to more imitative fishing practices. In the past, tigerfish were often thought either to be in feeding mode, or not. This is partly true, for tigerfish do behave and feed differently on different sections of the Zambezi throughout the year. What we have come to realise, is that when in feeding mode tigerfish will often show a distinct preference for a certain food type. This is not to say that an aggressive fish will not rush a big flashy attractor pattern. It does mean, however, that fly anglers who make the effort to identify the predominant baitfish that the tigerfish are feeding on in any specific location and match their fly (colour, length and profile) to it, will more often than not out-fish their flashy attractor-wielding fishing buddies.

In keeping with this shift to more imitative tigerfishing techniques, a couple of adventurous fly fishermen began experimenting with fishing wireless. By removing the highly visible and rigid piano wire bite tippet and replacing it with a heavy section of hard mono, one can present smaller imitative tigerfish patterns far more naturally. Not surprisingly, the results were most pleasing and prompted more anglers to begin fishing wireless. What constitutes “pleasing” results, you may ask? Firstly, look at the number of strikes that you attract when fishing wireless as opposed to fishing with conventional piano wire. This must be weighed up against the number of fish landed and the number that swim off with a Stinger hook in the jaw when fishing wireless vs with piano wire.

In order to gain some inkling of confidence when first fishing wireless, it is interesting to take a closer look at a tigerfish’s dental structure. Figures 1, 2 and 3 (page 24) are useful in this regard. What you will notice is that unlike say, a king mackerel, in tigerfish the opposing teeth on the upper and lower jaws do not, for the most part, fit together precisely. The teeth are large, have rough edges and there are fairly large gaps between them. This has a number of implications for the angler who is fishing wireless. Firstly, it suggests that even when a tigerfish is hooked fairly deep in the mouth (i.e. with the entire fly inside and with the shock tippet running out between the teeth), it is not a given that one will be bitten off. This is obviously subject to the correct striking/hookup procedure being followed (which I will go into later), as well as a bit of luck to ensure that your mono is not caught between the occasional two teeth that do fit together precisely. Secondly, because of the tigerfish’s ferocious feeding method of attacking baitfish side-on in an attempt to mortally wound them with their deadly dental structure, when fly fishing the tigers are commonly hooked around the edge of the inside of their mouths, with a portion of the hook shank protruding between their teeth. The result is that your fly bears the brunt of the gnashing teeth while the tippet receives secondary damage mostly in the form of abrasion – hence the use of a hard mono for tippet

Below: This 13lb fish was hooked deep in the mouth. The resulting damage to the shock tippet is illustrated in the insert.





the job (some go as light as 30lb). I stay away from loop-to-loop connections when joining the shock tippet to my leader. When fishing wireless, my basic leader construction is 4 - 5ft of 15 or 20lb Maxima, joined via a double Uni Knot to 5 - 8 inches of 40 or 45lb hard mono respectively. Due to the nature of tying knots with a thick, hard mono, I avoid typical Clinch Knots when tying my fly to the shock tippet. I feel it detracts from the action of the fly and prefer to use a small, free-swinging loop tied close to the eye of the hook.

STRIKING - OR LACK THEREOF

There are two striking methods when fishing wireless, and I have yet to decide which I deem the more productive. The first method calls for little pressure being applied by the angler on the initial strike - no strip-strike nor proactive hook set. One controls the line on the deck with sufficient pressure to keep in contact with the running fish. The start-up inertia when the line gets onto the reel and the drag takes over is all that is used to set the hook. The lack of a positive strip-strike is to prevent shearing your shock tippet as you rip it against one of the tigerfish's teeth. It goes without saying that super-sharp hooks are crucial! I find Gamakatsu B10s to be ideal.



Top: The author and a 13lb tiger which fell to a copper Clouser fished wireless. Note the hook position - the shock tippet is well away from the tigerfish's teeth. Sharp hooks are crucial to gain some form of penetration in the tiger's hard, bony inner mouth.

Above, from left to right: Figures 1, 2 and 3 - the gaps between opposing teeth are clearly visible in this sequence of photos.

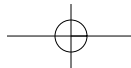
material. Thirdly, fishing wireless impacts on the methods used in fighting a fish, which in turn brings up a few moral/ethical issues.

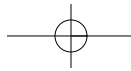
Before discussing these points, it is useful to understand a typical wireless setup.

BASIC LEADER SETUP

Targeting tigerfish wireless involves the simple task of removing your conventional piano wire bite tippet and replacing it with a heavy mono tippet; in essence a shock tippet as used in the salt. I prefer a hard mono such as Maxima Ultra Green in 40 - 45lb for

The second method requires a more positive strip-strike - as you would with conventional piano wire - in an attempt to achieve a more positive hook set. Here there is more chance of being broken off on the take since you could possibly strip your hard mono against the rough edge of a tooth. You may have





noticed that I refrain from using the term “bitten off.” One is more often broken off due to abrasion against the teeth as opposed to a clean bite. On my last Upper Zambezi Float Trip, one client, a hardened salt water fly angler, employed a solid strip-strike on all takes. He was broken off on the take three times over four days. He did, however, land more big fish than any other angler in his party who, due to their fresh water (read trout) backgrounds, were far more genteel on the take. Irrespective of which method you follow, it is crucial to keep your rod down and to resist the urge to lift into the fish on the take.

PLAYING THE FISH

Once the fish is on the reel, you can sigh as the job is already half done. If you are still in contact, the chance of a bite-off is extremely slim. What you must be aware of is that during the course of the fight, your hard mono will be rubbing against the rough edges of the tiger’s teeth and that your tippet may well be getting progressively weaker. This necessitates a change in fish-fighting tactics when fishing wireless. Avoid sudden changes in direction which will risk shearing your shock tippet against the teeth. This is most important when the fish is close to the boat and sudden bursts of speed or jumps may part a weakened shock tippet.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS

As with all aspects of fly fishing, ethical decisions should not be taken lightly, but once made there is room for change as one grows as an angler. I will briefly present some views on the matter which you can use as you will. Firstly, there is the risk of unnecessarily leaving tigerfish with hooks in their mouths. In my experience this is not a major problem. I’ve not noticed a significant increase in break-offs (if fighting fish is followed correctly) over the past couple of years when fishing wireless as opposed to fishing with piano wire. For obvious reasons there is a slight increase in the number of bite-offs. However, these present little chance of a positive hook set, and therefore a minimal chance of the tigerfish swimming around with your fly in its mouth for any prolonged period. The extremely hard and bony mouths of tigerfish, combined with their inclination to go aerial while violently shaking their heads, result in broken off flies being easily expelled.

What is of concern to me, however, is the added time needed to land fish when fishing wireless. This is allied to the possibility of a weakened leader as the fight progresses, and can in part be negated by using quality hard mono in a heavy size. One must, however, not go too heavy, as this would nullify the

reasons for going wireless in the first place. Correct low-impact fish handling, combined with educated revival practices will also go a long way to cancelling the potential of extra stress being placed on a fish when fishing wireless.

WHEN AND WHERE

This is possibly the hardest question to address in the wireless debate.

- Should you fish wireless when the fishing is tough and strikes are few and far between? If so, what happens if you are unlucky enough to be bitten off on one of the few strikes you get?
- Should you fish wireless all the time, but in doing so risk placing unnecessary stress on all the tigerfish you catch?
- Should you reject the wireless method altogether, even though the increase in strikes is noticeable when fishing wireless?
- What about first-time tiger anglers: will they have the composure to fish wireless, and if so, how will they handle it if they lose their first trophy fish to a parted leader?

As a basic rule of thumb, I prefer my clients to begin fishing with piano wire and only to switch to wireless when they are confident after landing a couple of fish. Also, if the water is off-coloured or there is a feeding frenzy taking place (during the barbel run or at certain times on the upper Zambezi), I prefer to fish with piano wire. At these times, fishing wireless doesn’t offer significant increases in strikes, and fishing with wire allows one to apply more pressure to the fish and to get one’s fly and fish back in the water soonest. In clear water conditions when you can actively see fish following yet refusing your offering, going wireless is often a trump card. Also, if going for species is your thing, fishing wireless will definitely result in strikes from a wider range of fish.

You now have the how, when, where and why targeting tigerfish wireless is becoming more popular among fly anglers. Now all that is needed is for you to get out on the water, give it a bash, and see how you feel about it. One word of warning, however – do not let the feat of landing a trophy tigerfish wireless stroke your ego. Although a fair amount of skill is needed, lady luck plays a big role in landing trophy tigerfish – no matter how you catch them.

“ONE WORD OF WARNING, HOWEVER - DO NOT LET THE FEAT OF LANDING A TROPHY TIGERFISH WIRELESS STROKE YOUR EGO. ALTHOUGH A FAIR AMOUNT OF SKILL IS NEEDED, LADY LUCK PLAYS A BIG ROLE IN LANDING TROPHY TIGERFISH - NO MATTER HOW YOU CATCH THEM.”

