

# Burning Bright In Africa

PETE RYAN MAKES A BUCKET LIST TRIP TO AFRICA TO FLYFISH FOR "THE RIVER DOG WITH STRIPES", IN THE ONLY FORM OF FRESHWATER ANGLING HE KNOWS WHERE A DANGEROUS GAME RIFLE MIGHT BE PART OF THE EQUIPMENT.



A HAPPY ANGLER HOISTS  
A TROPHY TIGER FROM  
THE MNYERA RIVER

SORTS OF THINGS CAPTURE THE IMAGINATION of small boys. Most come and go, but some are so strong they linger for life, the pull so powerful that it's always in the background somewhere. For one boy it was a faraway place, a land so distant and exotic that just to dream of going there seemed a folly. For thousands of years its name has stood as a byword for adventure. Even today, the mere mention of it stops people cold, knowing the conversation has just gone up a gear, that something special is in the air. I defy anyone, anywhere, to find a more romantic word than this one: AFRICA.

Wonderful, cruel old Africa, unique in all the world. As more than one commentator has said, if you do it right, the

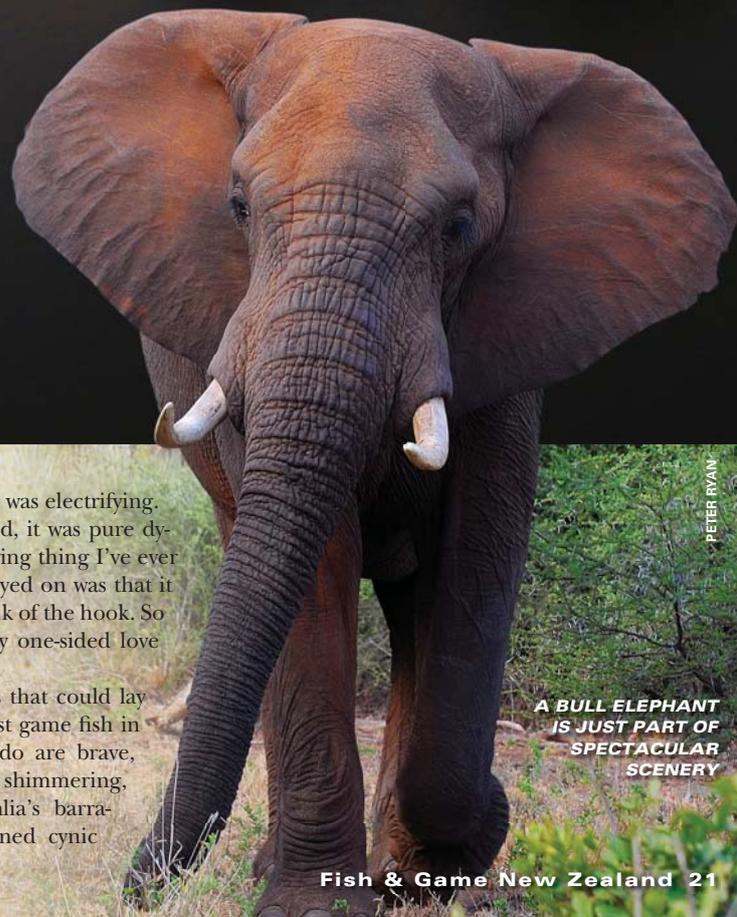


Dark Continent is still the last great adventure to be had for mere money. The journey is no casual undertaking. It has stretched marriages to the limit and you'll probably have to cross the street to avoid your bank manager for a while. As they say, welcome to my world. I've made the trip almost a dozen times now, proof that it's possible to live out just about any fantasy, if you're crazy enough. That record hardly qualifies me to give advice, but there are some lessons in there worth sharing.

The first trip was on a budget so laughable that even the toufts flogging souvenirs looked right through me. But I did manage to borrow a canoe and have a flick in a few places. Catfish aren't my

bag, but one small predator was electrifying. Hardly bigger than my hand, it was pure dynamite, the most intense living thing I've ever seen. The only reason it stayed on was that it couldn't reach past the shank of the hook. So began a strange and strictly one-sided love affair.

There are several species that could lay claim to the title of toughest game fish in the river. Argentina's dorado are brave, powerful, and exotic. The shimmering, gill-flaring leaps of Australia's barramundi can make a hardened cynic catch his breath.



PETER RYAN

**A BULL ELEPHANT IS JUST PART OF SPECTACULAR SCENERY**



PETER RYAN

A CRANKY OLD BUFFALO GLARING LIKE AN OUTRAGED OLD DRUNK FROM THE BANK

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A 5LB TIGER BITTEN IN HALF BY A LARGE FEMALE FISH

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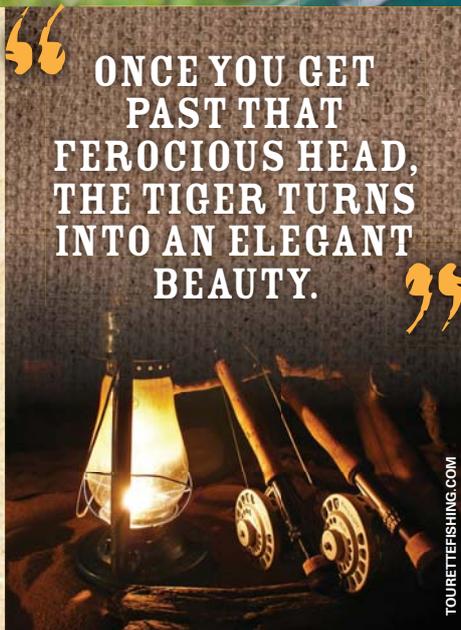
# WATER

POWER BUILT INTO EVERY line of their streamlined bodies, and shrewd ambush tactics hard-wired into muscular, powerful heads, they are formidable hunters.

For all of that, they have a serious challenger, *Hydrocynus vittatus*, the river dog with stripes. He has the same power, the same unblinking eyes always on the lookout for movement. It's his teeth that set him apart. Those brutal choppers are a nightmare, that mouth is so hard that a strike, even with weight, means nothing until it's clear you've fluked some purchase and got him on the reel. Much of the time he'll roll off the hook, bite clean through tackle, smash the line with his tail, or simply bust off. The world of Africa's tiger fish is so brutal that sudden and unremitting violence is the only survival strategy that works, and it's reflected in every aspect of his being.

Like so much of Africa, tiger fish are a paradox. Once you get past that ferocious head, the tiger turns into an elegant beauty. Large scales of iridescent silver are offset by soft lines of subtle black trim. Fins vary between blazing oranges, flaming yellows, and even a deep burning scarlet. Beauty and the beast in one.

The biggest are the goliath tigers of the Congo basin, fish that can go to just shy of 100lb. Few can afford the expense involved in chasing them, and it can be a dicey destination. You might have no problems at all, or you might need a multinational combat mission to get you out. The common tiger, *vittatus*, is the one most anglers pursue. Like trout, a seriously big trophy might go 20lb. On an everyday basis, the benchmark is 10.



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“ONCE YOU GET PAST THAT FEROCIOUS HEAD, THE TIGER TURNS INTO AN ELEGANT BEAUTY.”

They hunt in rivers that run eastwards, the Zambezi in particular. This includes some major lakes, Kariba and Cahorra Bassa. They are in Jozini Dam in South Africa too, and the Chobe and the Okavango Delta. There are other species in various northwest African countries, but they are unlikely to be the target of a first-timer.

The hot destination for tigers today is Tanzania, in particular the Mnyera and Ruhudji Rivers, where catching twenty pounders on fly has finally become a reality. These are an interesting species of their own, *tanzaniae* for the purists, second largest of all tigers. It took a special combination of circumstances to make that possible.

Keith Clover, tiger guide extraordinaire and director of Tourette Fishing, was largely responsible for pioneering these remote fisheries. “When we discovered these rivers in 2008, we knew they were special. The rivers are small, with lots of structure, which make them interesting to fish. The biomass is inversely proportional to their size. These are small rivers with incredible numbers of bait fish. This is a base on which top predators can thrive.

“The area is isolated, so there is no pressure from subsistence fishermen or poachers. It's a game concession, which means controlled access, and enables us to implement cutting edge fishery management strategies. The area is home to big game, so anglers are treated to Africa as it was.”

For obvious reasons, good gear is important. Tigers don't hit like a freshwater species. As with dangerous game, the trick is to take the initiative and keep it, never allowing the fish time to start dictating events to you. They are a five second proposition. What you do in those first few moments, and whether you take the fight to them or make the mistake of trying to keep up, usually determines how it will go.

The must-have flyline is a fast sink, which is the standard rig in many places. It must get the fly down quickly to where the bigger fish tend to hold. A lot of this will seem weirdly familiar to the across-and-down school of big river trout fishermen, but with less finesse and a lot more fistfight. A minor point worth checking is that your flyline can handle warmer waters. If it was made purely for cold water fishing, there is a slim chance it could go all noodly in the tropics.



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PETER RYAN

YOUR BOAT WILL START TO FEEL VERY SMALL IF A NERVOUS MOTHER HIPPO GETS INVOLVED

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THE DENTAL IDENTITY OF AN AFRICAN TIGER FISH

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**D**OESN'T HAPPEN OFTEN...BUT FOOLING around with a reel full of limp spaghetti will make for a tough day. Trust me on this. Clousers, or baitfish patterns, in black or black and red would be a good place to start, but changing fly size or colour to match light and water quality often helps. Some guys have had success with ties that look to my eyes a lot like baby tiger fish patterns. Clover is far more expert than I'll ever be and has his own advice on equipment.

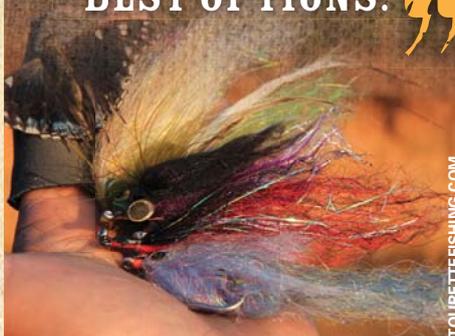
Says Clover: "Best all round rig? Loomis GLX Cross Current 9 weight. Shilton SL6 reel, 300G Tropic Express sink tip on intermediate running line. On the business end, 30lb leader attached to the flyline, with braided loop on the flyline side and bimini twist on the leader, loop to loop. We knot this to a 20cm piece of 35lb knottable TF Tigerwire."

Clover is, as you may have guessed, pretty serious about fishing. I'm almost too afraid to ask about flies. "Natural" brush flies and deer hair baitfish patterns," he advises.

Just a small observation – the way joins are tied really is critical. If the join is too large, or attracts attention in some way (as bubble trails tend to do), it may bring other tigers into the fight and they will do your fish a favour by simply biting the leader off. Don't ask me how I know that. After a while it's easy to become convinced that nature, perhaps sensibly, doesn't want you to actually catch a tiger fish.

As with a lot of opportunists, presentation counts far more than matching local prey species closely. When tigers are running hot, they will

**NATURAL BRUSH FLIES AND DEER HAIR BAITFISH PATTERNS ARE CONSIDERED THE BEST OPTIONS.**



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take most things that move the right way...and if they're not, even a real baitfish, like the flashy little kapenta, can fail miserably. Assuming everything goes to plan, a very fast strip – even a double-handed one with the rod held between the legs – might help set the hook properly.

African anglers tend to flare up at any suggestion that their beloved tiger has an equal in South America's dorado. Guys, who have fished for both, often can't split the difference. No, it's where they live that sets tigers apart. They often share the river with crocodiles, and these are not like the cute little caimans of South Ameri-

ca. There may be hippo too, and, if you put the boat too close to a cranky hippo (assume they are all cranky), life will get very interesting and possibly much shorter.

It's one of the clichés of Africa that hippo kill more people than the Big Five put together, though who actually collects these statistics is a mystery. True or not, out on the river your boat will start to feel very small if an unhappy bull or nervous mother hippo gets involved. Your radar needs to be just that bit better in Africa, and tiger fishing is the only form of freshwater angling I know of where a dangerous game rifle might be part of the equipment.

Whether by boat or on the bank, getting a tiger in doesn't mean the heart rate goes down. You can't simply leave it at your feet while everybody does high fives. Perhaps I'm imagining this – they tend to be supercharged moments – but tigers seem very aware of moving objects when they are out of water. They may lie calmly, but will remind you of this if you put anything near those teeth. When you release one, there is often the strange feeling that he's letting *you* go unharmed.

I've never understood angling as a macho thing. Sharks are dangerous, but shark fishing isn't. Marlin are horribly hard work, but nearly all the risks lie with the deckhand, who grabs the leader, not the tired sport in the chair. Tiger fish and the places they live are the exception to this rule, and it doesn't pay to forget it.

I asked Keith what advice he'd give a visitor making a bucket list trip, and his response is worth framing.



BUILT FOR SPEED WITH TEETH THAT CAN SLICE THROUGH TISSUE LIKE A SCALPEL, TIGER FISH SHOULD BE HANDLED WITH CARE

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**“Make** SURE YOU ARE FISHING the best area at the right time of year. Different parts of the Okavango River, upper and lower Zambezi, and rivers in Tanzania peak at different times of year and that’s the difference between success and failure. Nothing worse than travelling half way around the world to find out you’re two months too early or late. Use operators who understand tiger fish and particularly flyfishing for them. There are plenty of game lodges that offer tigers simply because the fish are in the rivers they are based on. Many don’t know the timing or tactics.”

To understand these fish is to understand something of the continent itself. The tiger is Africa in miniature. If you want, you can catch him somewhere easy to reach, somewhere with 4WD tracks everywhere, and boats trolling all over the place, or you can chase him where he and his river are still wild and free. That’s not a snob judgement. There is a reason to chase the big ones that has nothing to do with trophy value. On the whole, they will only be found in places lightly touched by the modern world – in other words, the Africa of imagination.

This was meant to be a story about fishing, and perhaps it is, but it also turned out to be a kind of love song. We all have some place that has meaning to us, even though that meaning might be hard to explain to anyone else.

The camp staff will have been up long before the dawn, and the remains of last night’s fire

**“THEY WILL ONLY BE FOUND IN PLACES LIGHTLY TOUCHED BY THE MODERN WORLD.”**



fanned back to life. The darkness is still heavy as you sip a strong coffee, and from it come quiet voices and the occasional soft laugh. Depending on where you are, those voices could be Zulu, Shona, Sindebele, even KiSwahili. The late winter air is dry and cool on the skin.

There’s a muffled clank of gear being readied for the boat and somewhere down by the river a splash as a bull hippo charges back into the water from his night time grazing. As first light steals over the far horizon, vervet monkeys and hornbills begin to stir, and somewhere in the

distance a bushbuck barks deep in the gloomy riverine tangle. Just after daylight, there’s the wheezy alarm sneeze of an impala with the scent of last night’s leopard suddenly in his nostrils.

Later, upriver, there might be an elephant holed up in the riverside bush, or a cranky old buffalo glaring like an outraged old drunk from the bank. In a truly remote area, there might even be the distant roar of a lion on his way to the thickets. The Swahili speaking peoples render the lion’s long roar and finale of descending grunts as “*Nchi ya nani. Yengu. Yengu. Yengu.*” Whose land is this? *Mine. Mine. Mine.* Later you might see his spoor on a spit of red gold sand, the track still crisp in the slanting morning light. These moments are some of the most peaceful I have ever known and are as much a part of the experience as the fishing itself. More so perhaps, because without them I would not go.

There’s a little boy who lives in our house, two if you count me. Right now he can’t be separated from his fishing rod and, if that stays with him, then I know exactly what we have to do. One day I’ll take him to Africa, with all the begging, borrowing, and ransoming it entails. It will be my best gift to him. Unlike a material possession, that experience can never be taken away, can never be lost or sold.

To do tigers right is to do Africa right, and that will echo through the rest your life. But understand one thing first. It will never let you go.

*Ed: This is an extract from Peter Ryan’s upcoming book Wild South – hunting and flyfishing the Southern Hemisphere (Bateman Publishing, 2013).*

