

ISSUE #9 | Q1 2020

# SPORTFISHING ADVENTURES

THE WORLD'S BEST FISHING DESTINATIONS

**USA**

*PYRAMID LAKE'S  
CUTTHROATS*

**FRANCE**  
*ENTERING A NEW WORLD*

**ERITREA**  
*THE RED SEA JEWEL*

**CENTRAL  
AFRICA**  
*GOLIATH TIGERS ON THE FLY*

+ INSTAGRAM ANGLERS, NEW TACKLE, LATEST IGFA RECORDS, FISHING ART & MORE...



CENTRAL AFRICA

# GOLIATH TIGERS ON THE FLY

Text and photos by François Botha & Edward Ghau







The goliath is the largest tigerfish species, with some specimens weighing close to 100lb.

Something stirs in all of us. We aren't always aware of it, but sometimes it takes a story, a photograph or a myth.

The phone rings.

Ed: "Francois!" Ed greets me in tone as if I am lining up for battle.

Me: "Edward, what's happening?"

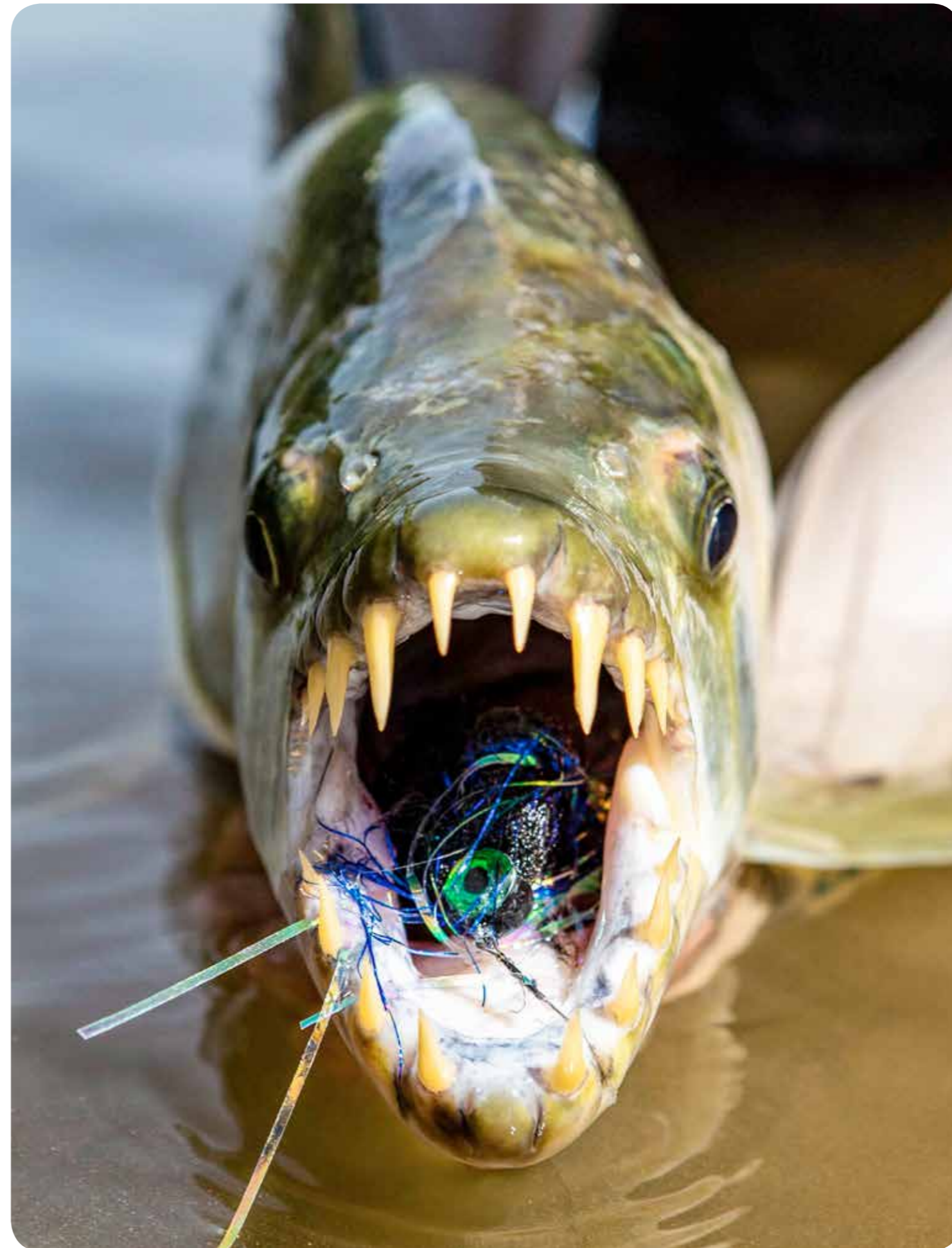
Ed: "I believe the saying goes watch what you wish for my friend" "It's on, we are going back to Chinko! Now the real work begins!"

Take everything you know about Africa, fly-fishing, the normal and forget it. Now imagine a river, hidden away in the geographical center of the continent, undisturbed by man and forgotten by the world. A secret river that flows clear, meandering through an endless landscape of forests and savannahs and over ancient polished volcanic rock. Beneath the surface, a fish that is supposedly impossible to find. A fish both terrifying and beautiful at the same time. The most prized and difficult to catch game-

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A fish both terrifying and beautiful at the same time. The most prized and difficult to catch gamefish of the world, the goliath tigerfish.

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Absolute trophy of a Central African goliath tigerfish. Catching such a fish on the fly is real challenge.





fish of the world, the goliath tigerfish.

One of my life's greatest ambitions was to find the place that everyone thought doesn't exist. Many questions surrounded my initial trip in 2014 to Central Africa where, after a lifetime of searching, I had finally found a place where you could successfully target goliath tigerfish on fly. Was it a fluke? Would they still be there? Was there something even greater left to discover? There were so many questions but only one way to find out.

Edward Ghau, my partner in

this ambitious undertaking, had somehow managed to get a shipment of crates containing two inflatable boats, motors, and complete mobile camp with inverters, solar panels and more, from South Africa to Kenya, Cameroon and finally Bangui with one day to spare upon our arrival. We had to assemble all the gear in Bangui, buy everything from kitchen utensils, groceries and even PVC glue in the capital and interview a surprise addition to our trip from the ministry who thought that he was going on a weekend field trip. We had to load all the contents into a chartered Beechcraft 1900

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Nile perch are common when searching for tigers. They're a great «by-catch», if you can call them that way!







and fly to the Chinko Reserve, across the entire CAR to the East. The next step was to rally with our crew members pack everything into Landcruisers, and traverse an old bush road for a day before finally arriving on the banks of the river. Ahead of our six-week 220km float trip down the Chinko.

As we pushed off with grossly overloaded boats and hardly any space left for even a bottle of water, the questions immediately arose again. Ed had interrogated me about what I had found for months leading up to the trip and my secret was about to be revealed. What I never told anyone about the findings of

“ Within a few minutes we saw the first goliath rolling on the surface. About five casts later and... bang! ”

my first trip was how many fish I had really caught and where to find them. Ed eagerly went about casting at all the “normal tigerfish” lies until we arrived at a pool with a very particular structure. “Here”, I said to Ed, “this is where they live and within a few minutes we saw the first goliath rolling on the

surface. About five casts later and... bang!

There was a hard hit on my fly and it returned with the tell-tale sign of a slimed-up leader. “Goliath” I said. It wasn’t long after that that we found ourselves on a section of river that looked familiar but I just couldn’t put my finger on it. We drifted into the middle of a pool surrounded by giant trees, rocky banks and a big sandbar that disappeared into the green loom of the clear forest river. We made a few casts toward the shaded corner of the pool and within seconds I saw something appear behind my fly momentarily, there was a strange flash and then

a violent take. “Im in!” I cried as the huge fish breached and everyone was gob smacked. A dogged battle ensued and after some nervous moments we landed a beautiful 100+ cm goliath tigerfish. It was a surreal moment when I came to the realization that it was the very same pool where I had caught my first goliath on fly many years before.

We carried on down the river for several days, foregoing miles of what we considered to be unproductive shallow water in search of the deep pools where we knew we would find the Goliath. We had a mixed bag of success with several Goliath, Nile



Releasing a tigerfish caught from the raft.





The spartan conditions during this trip were definitely worth it, with goliath tigers, common tigerfish and Nile perch being caught.



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The enormous fish stopped next to the boat, looked us up and down and proceeded on its journey.

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Perch and common tigerfish seen, raised, hooked, jumped lost and landed.

No one had expected the fishing to be so good and we could now almost predict where and when we would encounter the next goliath but, somehow Edward and I felt like something was still missing. In the shallow stretches of water that we thought didn't hold goliath, we started targeting a few of the barbuss species that we aptly call "river buffalo" due to their enormous size and sort of herd mentality. We had the trusty nymph rods out and we began casting at

an exceptionally large river buff that was moving up the rapids towards us.

After a few casts I stopped and had a second look at this fish that now within poking distance of the boat and as the fish turned Ed and I yelled in unison "it's a goliath!" The enormous fish stopped next to the boat, looked us up and down and proceeded on its journey. We were dumbstruck. At that moment Ed said: "In my wildest dreams, I never thought I'd see a free-swimming goliath Francois" To which I replied "Ed, I probably know more than anyone else about catching





The world record goliath tigerfish is a 97 lb fish caught on the Congo River in 1988.







A chunky Nile perch for the author.

these fish on fly... and I just realized I know nothing.” And it didn’t end there. Once we knew what to look for we started encountering goliath in every imaginable situation, holding in tail outs, rolling on the surface around bait balls, even swimming up to a running motor to see what it was. Mike started experimenting with all sorts of exaggerated fly patterns that he tied up on banks of the ri-

ver. He would complete a few flies, tie one on, amble down to the river and say: “it’s the witching hour boys”. Mike favored a certain approach to catching these fish and on one occasion, he hooked a goliath so big, that after blazing 70 meter run, we knew the chances of landing that leviathan became very slight and, sadly, the fish was lost. It did however prove that there are goliath in that section of

river that might be too big to target on fly... and isn’t that what we all want?

Nearing the end of our trip, we moved along the river like skilled hunters, picking fish lies and finding meter plus goliath in the most unlikely of places. Crazy ideas turned into eureka moments that left you wondering whether you could sustain a heart attack from the intense shock that

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We left the Chinko realizing the enormity of what we had experienced.

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overcomes you when you have had an encounter with a goliath. We had caught more goliath tigerfish on fly than we could have ever imagined but, the goliath definitely won the war. They parted fly lines, pulled the loops off them, bit through 50lb wire, snapped rods and generally just annihilated us. One of our best sessions was when we had just caught the biggest fish of the trip from a backwater lagoon in a way that blew our minds. We carried on down a narrow outlet that didn’t hold much promise. I was sorting out a line tangle when a fero-

cious attack on the dead drifting fly destroyed me. Three more big goliaths smashed us up in the drift of that innocuous little channel. How do you explain something like that a fisherman that knows what it takes to just get one hit from a goliath? That is the impossible.

We left the Chinko realizing the enormity of what we had experienced. For the entire journey of more six weeks and 220km, we did not see, hear or find a single sign of another human being. A magical system of mother nature





To organize such a trip, a lot of thinking has to go into logistics as you can see!





that in many respects is perfect because man has been taken out of the equation. Make no mistake, the surrounding land has suffered heavily through poaching and cattle herding and the Chinko was nearly lost had it not been for the conservation efforts of African Parks and the Chinko Project. In the last eight years they have expanded the borders of the reserve to 20,000 square kilometers and is free of cattle and poaching and conflict. A significant uptake in wildlife and the discovery of previously unknown species to the region like chimpanzees, is only part of the ambition to protect an entire drainage

system from its source to the major confluences. But the hardest work lies ahead. Relying solely on donations and a mandate for expansion, the Chinko Project and African Parks are always in need of contributions from people and business alike to achieve the greatest conservation effort the world has ever seen.

Edward and I will be heading back to the Chinko in November to start building a camp that will host but a few people per season and make a meaningful contribution to the conservation effort. Our greatest adventure has yet to begin ➡

## TRIP CONTACT

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