

Tigerfish

Africa's fiercest freshwater fish

by Dave Gibson

Tigerfish are the fiercest, most sought-after, and widespread freshwater game fish in Africa. Armed with interlocking razor-sharp teeth, when a tooth is lost another takes its place like a shark's. Muscular and streamlined, they hunt in large schools when young and groups of 4 to 5 when they are bigger. Sometimes ambushing goslings and swimming lizards, a tigerfish has been filmed snatching a swallow in mid-flight. Tigerfish in the Lower Zambezi River of Zambia can grow to be up to twenty-five pounds. It's unclear whether they were named after a tiger because of their orange tails, black stripes, sharp teeth, or voracious tendencies.

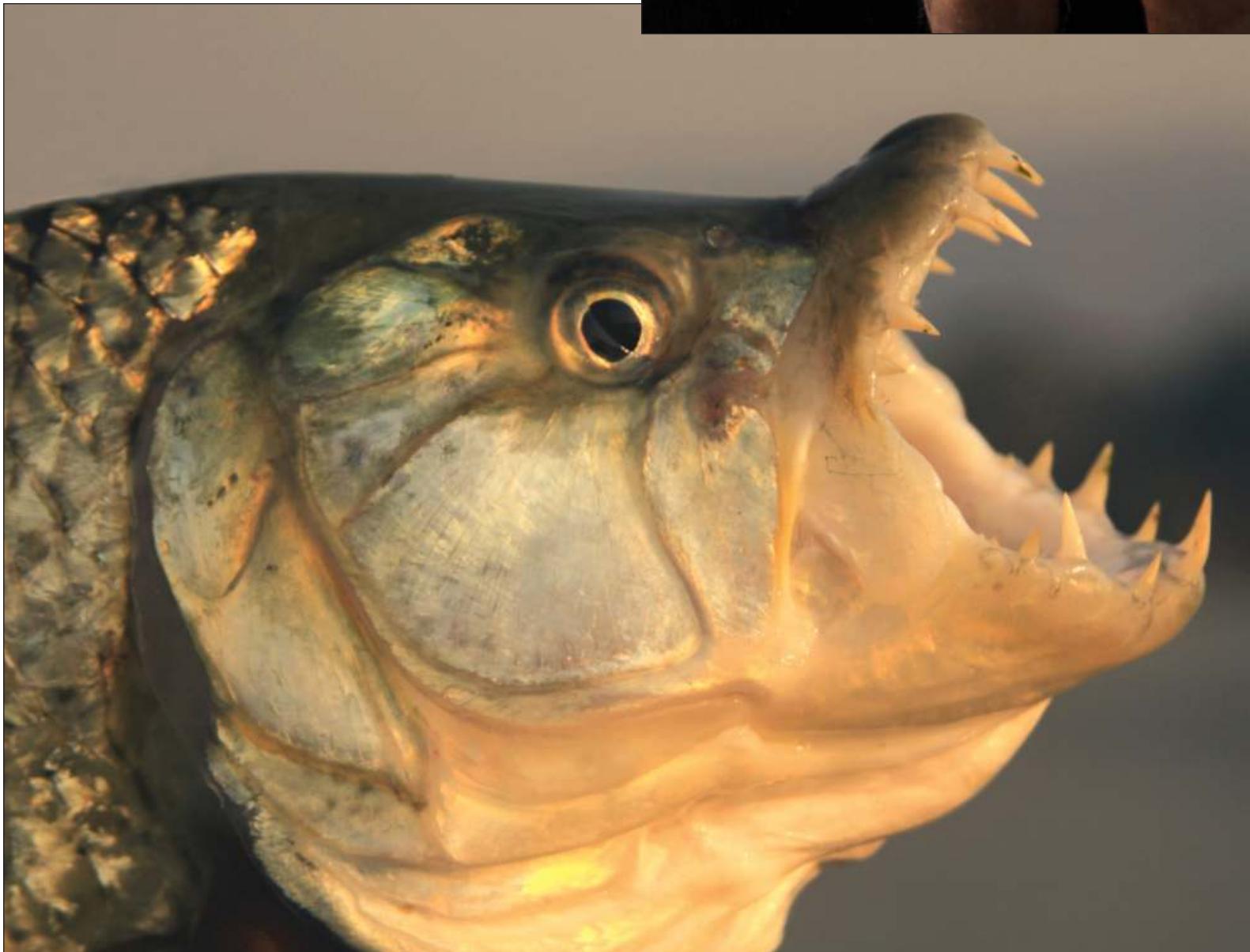
Everything in Africa, from the bees to its beasts, is bigger and "badder." Apparently the same doesn't hold true with their worms.

I could hardly thread the skinny annelid on my tiny hook while we angled for baitfish meant for a larger quarry. With baiting of hook accomplished, I asked my guide, Given, if there were any crocodiles in the vicinity because I wanted to wash the dirt off my hands from the worm bucket. He replied, "There could be one under our boat." I decided to wipe my hands on a cloth, except at the end of our session for a two-second cleansing in the river.

During the Southern Hemisphere's late spring and summer months of September through December, when rainy season floodwaters recede and lakes and rivers are low and clear, that is the best time of year to pursue tigerfish. October, November, and December can be as hot as the fishing on the Zambezi River along Lower Zambezi National Park. Fishing pressure is light. I couldn't help thinking to myself that if this was the United States, there would be fishermen and boats everywhere. All caught tigerfish must be released which has



DAVE GIBSON



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resulted in a not only exotic but fantastic fishery.

With our baitfish cut into strips and secured to a sharp hook and wire leader, we cast our lines planning to drift in the current with bait on the bottom. At once the surface of the water exploded and by instinct I went to set the hook, only to lose my first all too brief encounter with a tigerfish. I would learn that you need to let the fish take the bait for around six seconds before reacting. The technique is identical to deep sea fishing and gives the tigerfish a chance to swallow the bait. If you wait too long you risk injuring the fish. In three hours of fishing, we had a few bites but no fish.

After days on the river, it seemed that I had seen a thousand hippos. In reality, there had only been a hundred – the same ones in the same spots everyday. Elephants abounded and once two charged our boat! Fish eagles were prevalent and we even beached our boat next to shore watching a pack of wild dogs disposing of an impala on the Zimbabwe side.

Over a week's time, consisting of five hour morning outings and three hours in the afternoon, we averaged four tigerfish per day. Most of them weighed between eight and twelve pounds. The strength of the tigerfish and associated rod-bending action was attention-getting, and they proved to be every bit as aerobic as trout. The big ones tended to jump less, preferring to strip line in downward tugs to the bottom. The best one landed tipped the scales at seventeen pounds! At camp I'm told that the heaviest "tiger" they had ever heard of being pulled from the river was twenty-two pounds. The majority of the tigerfish were hooked by my guide but I was all too happy to enjoy the battle when he handed me the rod!

Only one more morning remained of the fishing trip and my enthusiasm and desire to catch fish hadn't waned one bit. After all, when would be the next time I would have a chance to experience great tigerfishing? Solid bites came and went with me missing the fish each time. Instead of getting better at the sport, I was becoming worse. Either I tried to set the hook too soon, or when I did wait the correct amount of time, I still wasn't getting a good hook-set. We usually targeted channels with calm ripples which often brought results. High winds were the enemy, but after coming up empty, we headed to open water where the breeze kicked-up small whitecaps. My



DAVE GIBSON

guide Given and I were desperate for a fish.

Then it came! With only a half hour left to land another tigerfish, my line began to steadily leave the spool. After failing to hook up so far, I thought it wise to stand for a better angle to set the hook in its

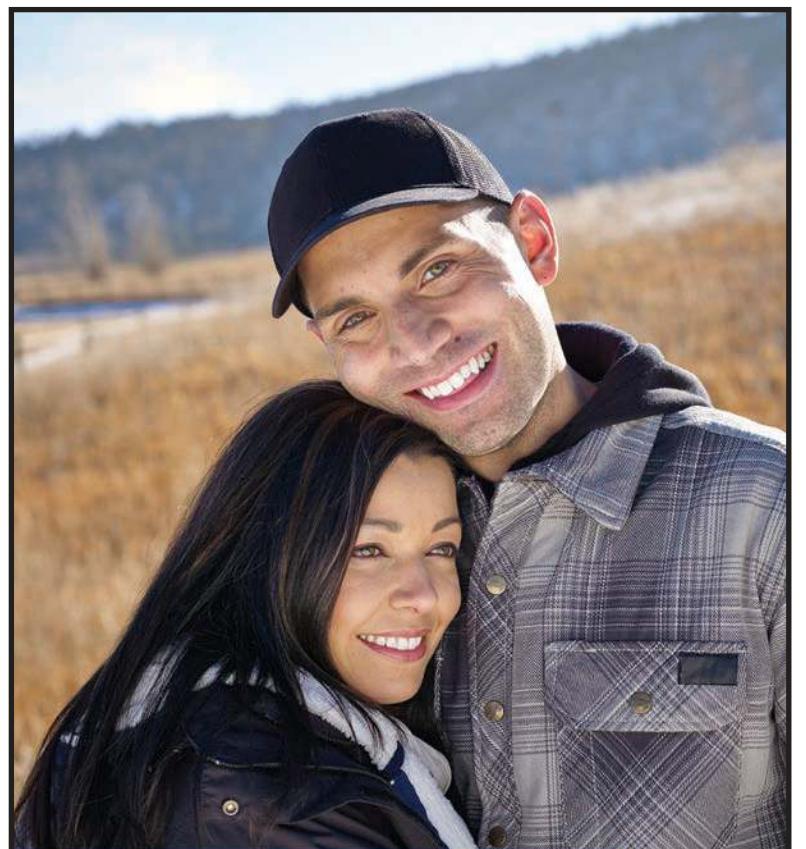
bony mouth. One thousand one, one thousand two, one thousand three, one thousand four, one thousand five, one thousand six, and I yanked my pole back as hard as I could. Connected with what felt to be a big fish, I loosened my drag and cranked the handle of the reel.

Way off in the distance, a "tiger" cleared the water by six feet. Several runs and leaps later, he was by the boat and scooped into

the net by Given. Proud to have caught it myself, it was the second heaviest of the trip at 15 1/2 pounds.



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