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THE STRIKE

As soon as the fish takes, grab the line, point the rod straight at it and yank the line back or 'strip strike' as hard as you can two or three times. Then concentrate on controlling the line and getting it on the reel as quickly as possible. Never try and 'trout strike' and set the hook with the rod. You cannot generate enough pressure to set the hook and it is highly likely the two of you will part company. If in doubt or if you have run out of line to strip, run backwards while continuing to point the rod straight at the fish. If you try and set the hook sideways, you will lose the power as the rod bends. Loose line is a recipe for disaster and will immediately wrap itself round the rod butt, reel handle, your finger (painful!) or anything else it can find. There can be very few things in the fishing world as awe-inspiring as a GT charging down a fly. It's like watching a jet fighter hit the afterburner as it accelerates to ludicrous speed. The fish then planes up in the water like a submarine blowing its ballast tanks and that bucket mouth opens engulfing anything in its path. As it surfaces, most of its head clears the water and often you have sense of being eyeballed. It is a sight that keeps me awake at night. The only thing that beats a GT attacking a fly is a *bunch* of GTs attacking the fly. In the early days on Cosmoledo in the Seychelles we would have gangs of fish tearing around our ankles. I remember seeing one fish hit my fly and as I tried to catch up with it, two more were trying to eat the fly out of the side of its mouth!





Full curvature of the rod

FIGHTING A GT ON A FLY ROD

I learned the secret to fighting these terrors of the flats from one of the best, Andrew Parsons, in Mozambique many moons ago. Andrew was the father of coastal GT fishing there and his philosophy is to 'give that fish horns'. For those not familiar with this expression, when translated from South African fish-speak (yes, it is a language, I have checked) it means 'hook and hold'. If you give a GT an inch in a fight it will take a yard, not unlike a tuna in blue water. You have to crush its spirit in the first five minutes by giving it everything you have got. What ensues is really a tug of war.... and the odds are pretty even.

In real terms this means: give it as little line as possible. Pump and wind, constantly changing the angles on the fish by pulling in the opposite direction of travel with the rod at the side of the body. Keep the rod low and lean back using the whole curvature of the blank, employing as much of the power in the butt section as possible. Never move the rod above 45 degrees or you will lose purchase. There is no room for a trout high stick here or they will quite simply destroy you and your gear by ripping the line straight through the nearest coral bommy. On the flats I also like to use Billy Pate's famous 'low blow' style he developed for tarpon. As the fish swims away, pull its head down into the flat while also knocking it off balance. The battle can turn out to be an even fight as the GT can go side up and use its surface area as a drogue while swimming around you in circles.

This style of battle has casualties, normally lines and rods, but occasionally anglers. While fishing off the Astove channel in the Seychelles a few years back, myself and a couple of other intrepid anglers smashed four rods and cut three lines in a little over two hours. One rod smashed itself into seven pieces and we had to cut it off the line to conclude the battle. Each fish that came out of the channel was over 100lb. I began to wince every time we hooked up, as we knew something was going to break. We landed one we estimated at 120lb and a fork length of 136cm. It was carnage!



LANDING AND RELEASING

Once you have managed to fight the fish to a standstill, check where the hook hold is, first and foremost. You will find a lot of good guides will try and get out to the fish and get a hand to it before it starts thrashing around in shallower water where it might damage itself or attract unwanted attention from other predators. This is a crucial stage as the last thing we wish to do is damage these majestic creatures. Ideally, you have been using a barbless hook which causes less physical damage and also eases the hook removal, even if it is buried deep. Some believe that barbless hooks result in fewer fish landed, while others appreciate the challenge and value causing less hooking damage to these epic beasts. I actually believe that a barbless hook penetrates better, giving you a more solid hook hold.

The best way to handle GTs is to grab the leader and then get a grip of the base of the tail (or caudal peduncle). Once you take away his motor, he is a bit stuck. But be warned, the caudal peduncle has sharp scutes on it so a glove is necessary to hold it securely and prevent cutting up your palm. Bradley Hyman once described these fish as being the 'high school bullies' in that once you get hold of them they actually give up. Unlike a tuna or a bonefish, a GT tends to lie relatively still while you slip the hook out. This is probably due to the exhaustive fight. If there is a tidal current, make sure to hold the GT face-first into the flow of water. In general, a fish's gills



only work if water is flowing in the mouth and out the gill flats (or operculum). Gills do not work if a fish is moved backwards in the water – it is actually counterproductive for the fish in terms of reviving it from the fight. They may be big, brutish fish, but nevertheless they need to be treated with respect and care.

Nine times out of ten they are hooked in the corner of the jaw or somewhere around the jaw line due to the nature of the take. However, occasionally they take it deep into the gill rakes, and in this instance the best thing to do is to cut the fly off the leader. If the fly is easily accessible from the gill plate and there isn't excessive bleeding, *very* gently insert a pair of pliers in through the gill plate and gently remove the hook backwards. Never put your hand inside a GT's mouth unless you wish for some nasty puncture wounds to your wrist. If the hook is deeply-lodged in any part of the mouth or oesophagus, it is better to cut the line and leave the hook in place rather than digging around vital organs, such as the gills.

