

Catching sandsharks on fly

by Sean Mills

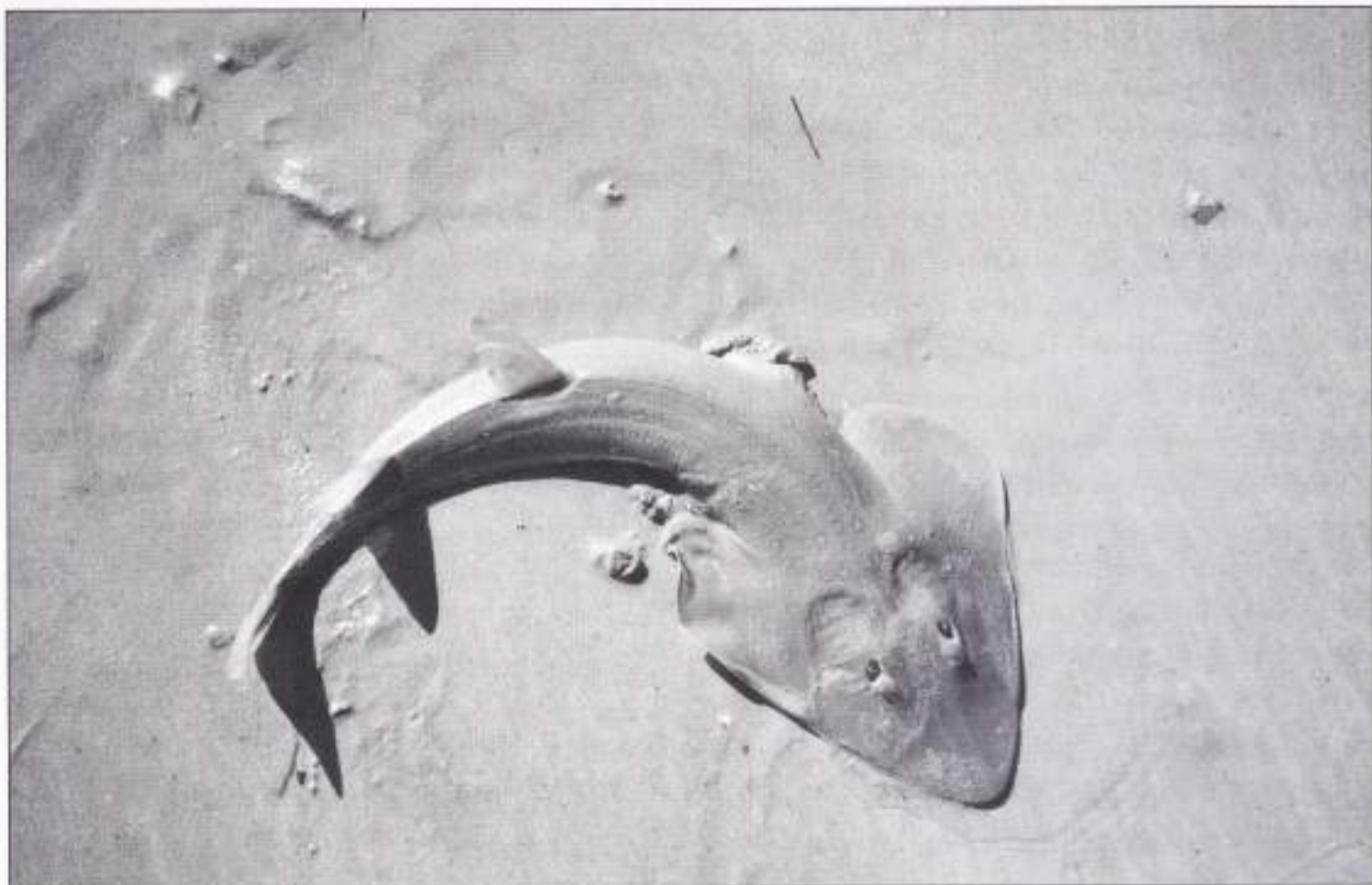
A light westerly wind was blowing as my cousin, Brett Mallory started to strip the line off his reel in preparation for a few casts. I followed suit while admiring the beautiful view. The venue was Club Mykonos at Langebaan on the Cape West coast and we were both looking forward to a few fish. The water looked good with the tide coming in and the waves gently running up the sand and pebble-strewn beach. The sound of the surf always creates a feeling of warmth in me and I was feeling really relaxed. A woman walked past with her Maltese poodle and I waited for her to exit the danger zone behind me.

I tied a 4 kg tippet to my leader and selected a white balsa popper from my fly box. I could hear from the swish of Brett's fly line that he had found his rhythm and I looked up to see the line shooting gracefully out into the surf. The housing units were to our right and the beach extended for five hundred metres to our left until the rocks took over. The beach itself looked quite steep at first but eventually tapered into a gentle slope that told me that this was probably not the best spot to fly fish (shallow surf and game fish don't normally mix), but it was just great to cast a line not knowing what might be out there!

With the knot fixed in place I held the fly line in my left hand and flicked the rod back with my right hand. The line looped back and I flicked it forward again before letting line slip from my left hand. I then stopped it dead in its tracks and sent it backward over my right shoulder and waited for it to extend behind me. As the line shot forward, the loose line started moving through the eyes and this increased the length of the cast to over twenty metres. The rest of the leader soon followed and the fly extended and landed in the surf. I felt at peace, the rod had become an extension of my hand and done its job well. I was in a beautiful part of the world in a private resort, all expenses paid with excellent company, what more could I possibly ask for? Well, there was one thing actually. A fighting-fit elf or leerfish would do nicely, I thought. We worked our way slowly along the beach towards the rocks casting our lines as far as possible into the surf before stripping in as quickly as possible. I changed to a Lefty's Deceiver while Brett tied on a Crazy Charlie. As we approached the dark-coloured rocks, we started getting knocks from something we thought might be small leerfish.

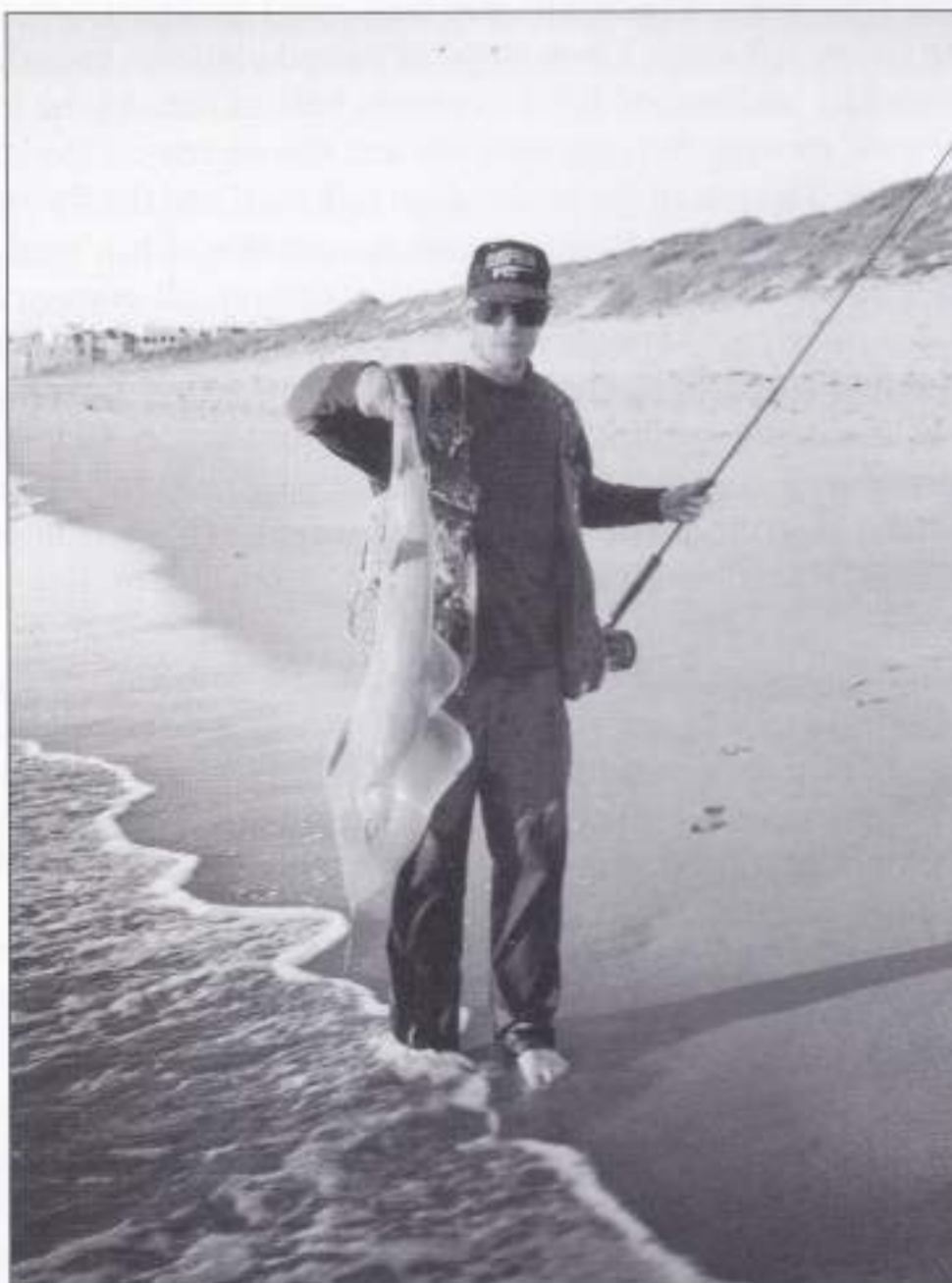
Brett had been wading near the rocks and motioned me towards him. As I drew near, he showed me that there were big fish very close to him. Sure enough, despite the poor light, I could see the distinctive shapes of sandsharks moving around gracefully, stopping to rest on the bottom every now and then. Brett had already been showing them his Crazy Charlie and I changed to a similar fly. I had never heard of sandsharks, or guitarfish as they are otherwise known, taking a fly.

The problem is that their mouth was on the underside of the body facing the ground and the eyes were on top of the head. This could create a few problems. A few of the sharks would break away every so often and follow the flies. So, if they were following them, they obviously wanted to eat them, I reasoned. Brett was getting very frustrated by this stage as he could not get them to take his offering. Most of the fish looked between two and four kg, but a bigger fish kept appearing from time to time. I knew that sandsharks fed on mud



Above: The camouflage expert - one of the sandsharks landed by Sean Mills on the Cape west coast.

Right: Sean Mills with a fly-caught sandshark.



prawns, marine worms and small fishes and I felt that a fish imitation could get a more aggressive response. Because the sun was starting to set, I thought a gold-coloured fly could do the trick. I selected a streamer tied on a #4 long shank hook with a gold tinsel body. I cast the fly past a good-looking specimen and pulled it gently past its head. No response. Just as I was about to try a different pattern, the big sandshark swam past me. I flicked the fly past it and retrieved slowly. The response was instantaneous. The big head turned around and engulfed the fly. I did not wait for any further encouragement and promptly set the hook in the fish's hard flesh, not really knowing if I had hooked it in the mouth or not. The big fish did not appreciate this and set off on a long run towards the open ocean, which was fine with me. Line peeled off the reel at a steady pace but not enough to warrant concern. With two hundred yards of backing I could concentrate on enjoying the fight.

The shark was very strong and set out on short runs in all directions, but seemed unwilling to head for very deep water. The Rimfly reel has a very loud click-drag system and I had disengaged this because fly fishing is supposed to be a relatively silent sport. I had stuck blocks of foam to the back plate with double sided tape to stop the spool from overwinding and the system worked brilliantly. The shark would swim for ten metres in one direction and then head in another leaving a big curve in my eight weight Stealth. After five minutes of heavy pressure using the rim of the reel to apply drag, I managed to get the fish into shallow water and I stretched out my free hand to grab its muscular tail. This evidently woke it up, and it shot off at alarming speed taking around thirty metres of line along with it. Wow! I was not expecting this. Having eventually coaxed it back into the shallows again, I tried to grab its tail with much the same result. This fish was clearly at home in the shallow water and I was going to have my work cut out to land it. The fish eventually started to tire and I managed to beach it. It was the same colour as the sand with white and brown rings all over its muscular body. The head was shaped like a spade with the caudal fins blending in perfectly. In fact it looked more like a design for a stealth bomber than a fish. I picked it up by its tail while Brett did the honours with the camera. The fish looked well over a metre in length and felt nice and heavy. I wanted to return it as soon as possible without injuring it so I decided not to weigh it. It could have weighed between 5,5 to 7 kg but its weight was not important to me. I had hooked it just to the right of its thick lip which was good enough for me to count it as a fair catch. It would have been more conclusive if I had hooked it inside the mouth, though.

Taking the hook out was easy as I had flattened the barb beforehand. Back in the comfort of our chalet, I looked up sandsharks in my reference books. The lesser sandshark was the one I had caught and they grew to over 25 kg. Imagine hooking one that size on an eight weight fly rod! The giant sandsharks found in Natal, however, grow over a hundred kg. What are the chances of getting a fish that size on a fly rod?

Another beautiful, hot day dawned and I was soon wading along the beach towards the rocks where I had found the fish the previous day. The tide was low, however, and I could not see any fish in the clear water. "Oh great, they must have heard that I was coming," I thought to myself and just then there was a wriggling sensation under my right foot. I nearly jumped out of my skin as a large sandshark shot towards deeper water. Why had I not seen it? Then I trod on another one which also swam away at speed. After taking a very close look, I soon spotted three fish lying under the sand with just their eyes and breathing spiracles indicating their location. As the next small wave came in, one of the sharks moved to another position and two more shifted in the sand. These fish were obviously resting on the bottom and not feeding and I teased them with a

Crazy Charlie, bouncing it over their heads, but with no response. As the tide came in they became more active and one chased after a Mud Charlie I waited for it to move over the fly, then counted to three and set the hook. The fish was only about three kg but it took off at speed and dived into a deep sandy gully that headed out to sea. I played the fish for a good few minutes and eventually beached it while a few surfers watched from the top of the rocks. I took a quick photo and released the fish.

Over the next hour I managed to land another bigger fish before calling it a day. The last fish had taken a white and red marabou streamer fly. Both of them were hooked in the lips and not actually inside the mouth. For the fish to bite the fly, they have to first move over it with their flat, wide heads before they can swallow it. This makes it difficult to hook them properly in the mouth. In order to be certain of hooking them in the mouth, one would have to wait until the fish moves off with the fly, which is unlikely. It is better to wait until the fish moves over the fly, count to three and then strike. If this is done, there is a good chance that the fish will be hooked in the lip or mouth.

I have been told that sandsharks have been hooked on surface poppers before. If this is not conclusive proof that sandsharks really take flies, I don't know what is! Sandsharks are found on all sandy beaches and in estuaries and river mouths throughout the coast of South Africa. You can try a variety of saltwater patterns for them and they are best caught with a seven or eight weight outfit.

