

White steenbras on the fly

By Gerard Barnardt

Ever since I caught my first white steenbras on a prawn at age six I was fascinated with their very distinctive take and their ability to provide a solid run. They were once prolific in the many estuaries along the Garden Route, even more so than the grunter. Sadly, their once copious occurrence has now diminished to such an extent that they can only be caught in a few specific spots along the Garden Route. However, with the passing of stricter legislation (and the hopeful enforcement thereof) things might take a turn for the better.

Your first problem when targeting white steenbras is finding them. They tend to stick to the edges of sandy flats that are situated near deep water. While grunter would normally feed on shallow flats, white steenbras prefer to feed around the edges on the down-current side. They also feed in channels between flats and this is normally the spot to look for. A good tactic when finding such a spot is to cast the fly up current and onto the flat and let it drift over the edge and into the channel. This is often an opportune time to solicit a take with a small strip of the fly.

To narrow one's search I've also found that steenbras prefer the lighter colored sand flats to the darker brown muddy ones. The reason for this is probably their preference for sand prawns (also known as pink prawns) to the mud prawn variety. Sand prawns prefer the white or tan colored sandy areas and this is where you will most likely find white steenbras.

Tides do play an important role when targeting salty critters and this is especially true when your target happens to be white steenbras in estuaries. The reason for this is that they prefer feeding around sandy flats and such areas are tidal in their likelihood of producing a constant food supply. I fish on both a pushing and receding tide and just position myself depending on where the down current area of the flat would be. Of course, you need to experiment to find the best spots as white steenbras do move with the tide.

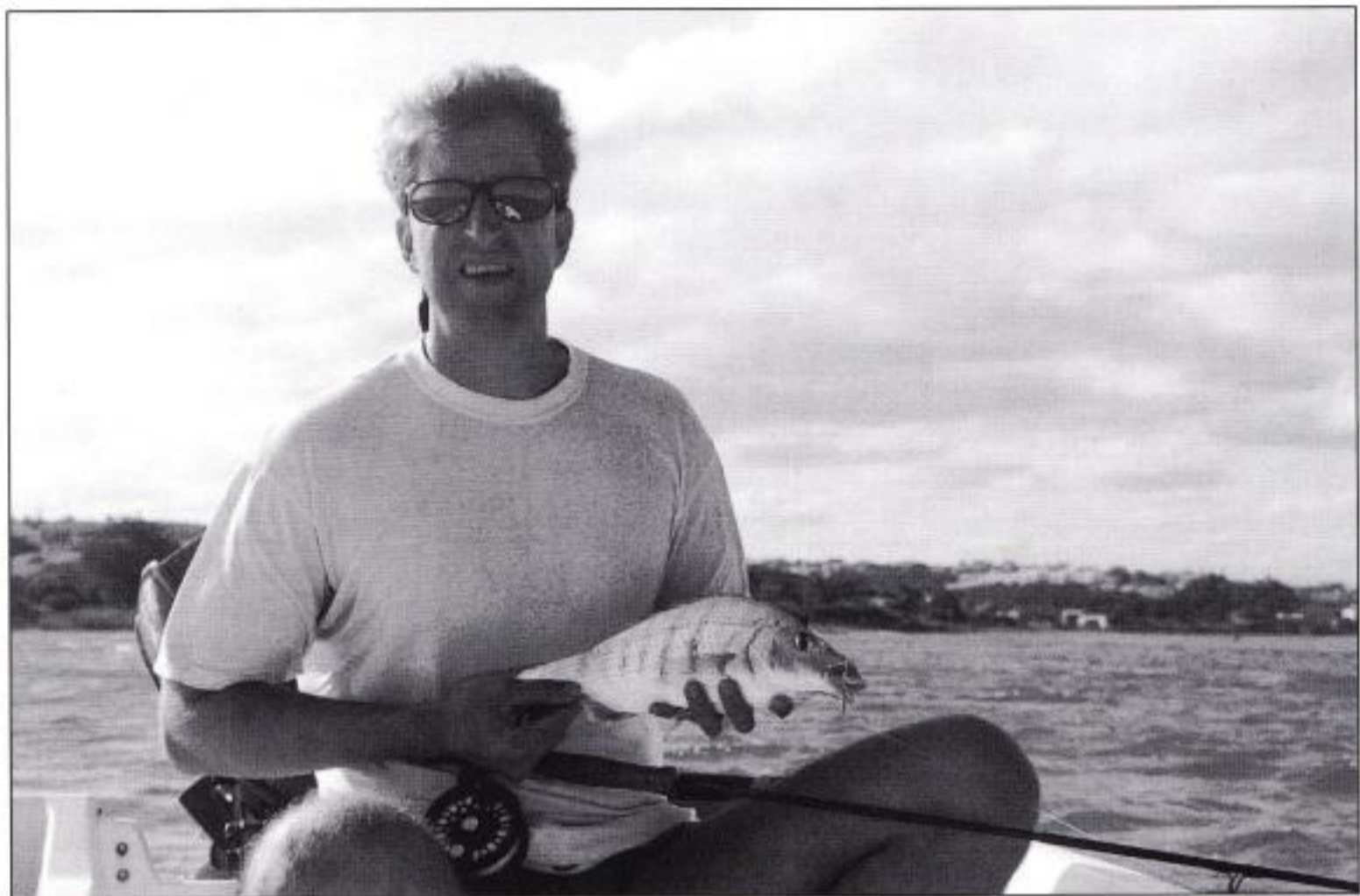
Tackle

I prefer a 6wt, fast-action rod. Couple this with a reel with a smooth drag and loaded with 200 yds of backing. I prefer an intermediate line but a floater will also suffice if you use weighted flies. My leaders are pretty standard. I use blood knots and I construct them as follows:

5ft of 30 pound mono for the butt, 2 1/2 ft of 20 pound mono for the mid-section, then 1ft of 12 pound mono and 1 1/2 ft of 8 pound fluorocarbon for the tippet section.

Flies

I have fished with a variety of flies and have had various degrees of success. These days I prefer Clouser Minnows tied on #4 hooks. Colors vary but my favorite is chartreuse over white. Other colors that have proved successful are orange over white, pure white and red over white. It's important to use small dumbbell eyes, as too much weight will give the fly an unnatural movement. In addition, I prefer to attach the fly with a loop knot that provides movement which is more natural.



Gerard Barnardt with a white steenbras caught on the Stilbaai estuary on a chartreuse Clouser Minnow.



A grunter, also caught at Stilbaai.

The future

I still recall the prolific bounty of fish that inhabited the picturesque estuaries along the Garden Route. I was lucky enough to have seen them in their splendour years even though they were already sustaining the enormous fishing and ecological pressures of mankind. Those years were careless times with the fish being plentiful and the number of new anglers growing by the day.

There has been a misconception that the diminished fish resources in our estuaries are a direct result of the fishing pressure to which the fish are exposed. Although this is in part true, I think that we are overlooking a greater evil. It's called sedimentation and is the result of excavations needed to build roads and property developments. Like a cancerous growth, sediments slowly suffocate our estuaries not only killing the food source of our estuarine fish but also adversely impacting on their spawning grounds which leaves little chance for sustaining the population, let alone growing it.

As a last thought I would urge you to give regard to the plight of this species and make sure you release your catch unharmed.

