Trevally Ripped our Flesh

ON CHRISTMAS ISLAND, DESPERATION BECAME THE MOTHER OF INVENTION.

BY RICHARD CHIAPPONE

FOUR THOUSAND MILES FROM OUR HOMES in Alaska, my three traveling companions and I—all first-timers to Christmas Island—gawked out the windows as our Air Pacific 737 descended toward the impressively named but decidedly rustic Cassidy International Airport. Below us, white-sand shallows stretched to the horizon in the island's 150-square-mile lagoon, the feeding grounds for bonefish, milkfish, three species of trevally, and a host of other inshore fish just begging for someone to throw a fly at them.

write to fit. write to fit. write to fit. write to fit. write to fit. write to fit. write to fit.

WILL RICE

WILL RICE

Christmas Island (Kiritimati, in the local language) is one of 33 atolls that make up the Republic of Kiribati, which has the lowest overall elevation of any nation on earth, and is predicted to be the first to disappear when sea levels rise another couple feet. Situated almost on both the Equator and the International Dateline, Christmas Island lies 1,100 miles of open ocean south of Hawaii. As famous as the sport fishing has become on Christmas, the big jets don't fly there for the convenience of fly fishers or even the 5,000 local inhabitants; it's a refueling stop for flights from Honolulu to Fiji. Near the airport are the remnants of a gigantic World War II complex built by American armed forces to prevent the Japanese military from turning the island into their own refueling stop.

Customs and security checks behind us, Bob, Will, Debra, and I rode in the bed of an old Chevy pickup past clusters of small concrete block houses and thatch-roofed huts that made up several small roadside villages. Along the road, blooming plumeria trees glowed radiantly white; pigs and chickens loitered in the shade of coconut palms; skinny yellow dogs ran to meet impeccably neat children returning home from school. Just outside Banana Village, we turned onto a two-track through the saltbushes and down to the beach and the lodge, ominously named The Shark Place. We arrived just in time for cocktails and fresh hamachi—yellowtail tuna sashimi.

Missing, however, were the two other Alaskans in our group, Matt and Dave, who had been at the lodge a week before us. They hadn't returned from a day of bluewater fishing, and by the time the flaming sun slid down behind the breadfruit trees the lodge staff was as concerned as we were. When Matt and Dave finally staggered in, an hour after dark, their account of a dead outboard, a satellite phone left onshore, and the two-way radio their guide had forgotten to bring onboard sounded like a perfect example of chaos theory. Given Christmas Island's isolation (Tarawa, the country's capital, is on an island more than 2,000 miles away), they could have drifted halfway to Papua New Guinea before the closest Coast Guard base (in Honolulu) mounted a search wide enough to locate them. Luckily, a local fishing boat saw them waving and towed them in.

Being Alaskans, none of us had felt actual warm sunshine on our pasty white skin since the previous August. So we set out for the flats the next morning dressed in sun-proof hoodies and neck gaiters, sun gloves and billowing nylon wading pants. Climbing into the 40-foot-long outrigger canoe with our guides, we looked like lost Beduins, or maybe bandits intent on robbing a train with fly rods.

The big boat was used only for navigating the labyrinthian channels of the huge lagoon. All the fishing at Christmas Island is done on foot, wading the firm sandy bottom, a flats fisherman's dream. The bonefish were plentiful, if not huge, but very hard to see with scudding clouds obscuring the light off and

on all day. At times all we could do was stop wading and wait for the sun to break through. More than once, when the light flashed back on, we discovered bonefish so close that casting to them was nearly impossible, with the heavy section of the line still inside the guides and only the leader and six feet of the taper in the air. Still, we caught enough bones to keep it interesting, and had the pleasure of blundering into other flats species, including queenfish, golden trevally, and a couple of small bluefin trevally.

The critter that really sparked my interest, though, was the brilliant orange-and-brown patterned triggerfish. Triggers can grow to 20 pounds, are of course much easier to see than bones, and are often found tailing in the coral around the deep holes they excavate while foraging. Triggers will attack a small and very slow-moving fly—if you can set it in front of them without hanging up in the coral. Once you hook one, your troubles are just beginning: their rock-crunching teeth can cut through heavy stainless hooks like they're made of dental floss. And once hooked, a trigger's first exuberant run often ends with a dive into a hole or a small cave, parting the tippet on the razor-sharp coral. Still, I would happily spend a week fishing for nothing but triggers. At least I can see them without a guide, even on a cloudy day.

Despite the huge numbers of bonefish cruising the endless flats, the fishing remained challenging—partly because the clouds only grew thicker over the next two days, but also because the bones were at times as finicky as housecats, forcing us to go to smaller and sparser flies for more consistent hookups. But that's what makes bones such a great gamefish, that and the ability of even a 15-incher to put a bend in an 8-weight stiff enough to launch a 15-inch trout high into the trees. It's also nice to fish someplace where the flats are virtually limitless, knowing you'll never wade the same water twice during your stay.

Each day, the weather deteriorated a little more. The flatness of the island allows a mostly unobstructed view in all directions, and by midweek, black skies smothered the horizon all around. Of course the guides—all locals with years of experience walking these flats—can probably spot bonefish blindfolded on a moonless night. But while it will certainly put fish in your hands, spending the day blind-casting to the guide's instructions—Cast! Thirty feet! Ten o'clock! Okay, strip strip!—isn't exactly what we traveled half the globe to do.

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write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both.

BOTH BY WILL RICE

BOTH BY DEBRA CALDERA

So, on the darkest morning we took a long drive to the open-ocean side of the island and a stretch of beach called the Korean Wreck, named after a ship that went aground in the 1970s. There, a small reef parallels the white sandy beach just a hundred or so yards offshore, and the shallow little lagoon between the breakers and the beach is paved with moss-covered rocks that attract milkfish.

By the time we waded into the lagoon, the rain was coming down in sheets. Even so, spotting milkfish was easy: hundreds of tails jutted through the surface as big schools grazed on the mossy bottom. Stalking milkfish was easy; they aren't nearly as spooky as bones. Casting to them was easy, too: the wind was offshore and mostly blocked by the low sand dunes and scrub brush. How hard could it be to catch one? A basic tenet of fly fishing is, the less willing a fish is to take a fly, the more worthy it is to fish for. Milkfish, which eat nothing but vegetation, make permit seem like the fish you'd stock in a pond for a children's fishing derby.

I cast one of the preferred milkfish patterns, a mere bit of green yarn, right into the middle of tailing fish 30 or 40 times, and 30 or 40 times it was ignored. And why not? Your fly, even when dropped precisely in front of them, is just another speck of drifting vegetation among countless thousands just like it. Fishing for milkfish is harder than casting to a Henry's Fork rainbow in the midst of a blanket baetis hatch.

Yes, the milks do get big, upwards of 30 pounds. And yes, they do put up a tremendous fight. Or so I'm told. By that logic, you might as well cast that *write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write fit for both. write to fit for both. write to fit for both. write*

grassy looking fly into a herd of dairy cows and hope one sucks it up with a mouthful of alfalfa. Though if you strip-strike a hook into the lip of a Holstein, you'll probably need more than an 8-weight to bring it to the net.

Under the careful tutelage of Moana—the senior guide and basically the godfather of fly fishing on Christmas Island—four of us cast all day in mostly pouring rain to school after school of milks and never touched one. Instead, we all caught bonefish on our little grass flies, mostly while stripping in line to cast again. One of our Alaskan friends caught a milkfish the week before, so we knew it was possible. Still, casting out and then performing the actions necessary to imitate a fleck of drifting spinach isn't quite my idea of fascinating fishing.

In fact, the memorable part of the day was finding out that the lightweight nylon windbreaker I'd brought along—we Alaskans had heard all about how unbearably hot it is on Christmas Island—had lost its waterproofing. When we set out on the two-hour drive back to the lodge, I was already soaked to the skin. With the roads mere paths between palm trees and scrub, and with no signs of human habitation anywhere outside the towns, our driver kept the accelerator to the floor at all times, the wind rushing down my neck and through my waterlogged clothes.

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Without a long warm hug from Will's wife, Debra, I might have become the first person to die of hypothermia at sea level on the equator.

Fishing for milkfish had proven a bit too sophisticated for me, but the offer of tossing a bucketful of chopped baitfish off the edge of a pancake flat and then casting a fly into a maelstrom of frenzied predators seemed about as classy as the popular Alaskan sport of baiting bears with stale donuts. The next day being cloudy, again, and not great for spotting bonefish, again, pragmatism prevailed, however. Adjusting our lofty principals, we waded to the edge of the flat, 12-weights in hand, and lost all ethical concerns when the channel exploded with GTs rampaging up the blood trail.

Giant trevally. Such a great name. I mean, would anyone travel thousands of miles to chum up a pygmy trevally? When we first started planning this trip, I asked a friend who had fished for GTs what he could tell me about them. "Nothing can prepare you for their savagery," he wrote back. I thought that sounded a little hyperbolic (the guy is a writer). But I was wrong. The four of us caught 15 or 20 fish that day, and every one took us far into the backing. At one point, Will lifted a foot-long queenfish to the surface foul-hooked in the tail. As he lowered the rod to strip in line, the fish squirmed and tried to dive. Big mistake. Will's rod bent double under the weight of a GT that within minutes peeled off 200 yards of backing and then cut off his entire fly line on coral on the far side of the channel. Among the eight anglers in camp that week, we lost five entire fly lines, cut three more lines in half, and broke two 12-weight rods. By the end of the week, various members of our group were wearing back braces, thumb splints, and in one case a cervical collar. On a map of Christmas Island is a place on the outside shore labeled Bay of Wrecks. It could have been named for us.

As GTs go—giant trevally can grow to more than 100 pounds—the ones we caught were fairly small, mostly in the 10- to 20-pound range. That's really just as well. After the initial thrill of realizing you've set your hook into a fish that even sharks avoid, the battle with a heavy GT becomes something like a weight lifting competition: lots of grunting and not much action. My friend Bob needed more than half an hour to land one weighing upwards of 40 pounds. At one point, Will and Bob and I had three GTs on at once, fish going in three directions, us slipping and tripping trying to stay untangled, Deb madly attempting to capture the hilarity on film. Three grown men splashing around up to our hips in water, hooting and laughing, rods bent double, was a refreshing reminder of what fishing meant when we all first tried it so many years ago, back when the fish on the ends of our lines might have been bluegills or bullheads or chubs. In a word, it was fun.

Our last day on the island, the sun shone brightly. It was going to be a great day for bonefish. But for our last hurrah, Bob and I chose to hang up the fly rods and go explore the deep blue sea, trolling from the back of the outrigger canoe with lightweight spinning rods and lures the size of the bonefish we'd been catching.

Bob hooked up first, and brought a nice yellowfin tuna almost to the boat. That's when we found out why our lodge is named The Shark Place: only the head of Bob's tuna remained. The next hookup (also by Bob) was a big wahoo that put up a hell of a fight, and became great ceviche later that evening. And then we both hooked up in a double that turned out to be two heavy yellowfins, and both fish were hooked badly: Bob's was foul-hooked near the pectoral fin, and mine had the tail hook of the big Rapala in its mouth and the front hook snagged in its gill plate. Anyone who has hooked a large fish aft of its mouth knows that the fish has only to tilt its pectorals, and the harder you pull the more it planes away. With two big tuna circling under the boat and crossing our lines over and over, it took us an hour and half to get them both in.

If not for the aching muscles, joints, bones, and titanium hardware Bob and I both have bolted to our spines, I'm sure it would have been quite comical. Let's just say we've never paid more for fresh ahi in our lives.

Christmas Island has everything a fisherman of any level of sophistication could desire. For serious fly fishers, the bonefish can be satisfyingly difficult at times, the milkfish delightfully impossible. For those with a sense of humor and lots of extra tackle, a bucket of chopped bait will bring in all the giant trevally and comic relief you can stand. And for knuckle-dragging troglodytes, like, say, me, take 800 mg of Ibuprofen, cinch on your back brace, and find out what a 50-pound tuna feels like on the end of a light spinning rod.

A helpful hint: In most lodges there's generator electricity only in the day, but on Christmas Island it runs only at night. You might consider packing a heating pad. ■

Rich Chiappone published his first story in Gray's *in 1991. His most recent collection was* Opening Days: A Fly Fisher Writes, *from Barclay Creek Press. Chiappone teaches in the MFA program at University of Alaska Anchorage and lives with his wife and cats on the Anchor River—where none of the fish eat grass.*

If You Go

Christmas Island is one of the world's most remote destinations with actual infrastructure dedicated to fly fishing. There is only one airline, with one flight weekly in and out. Meaning: most anglers will want to use a reputable outfitter to arrange travel and accommodations.

We booked through Fly Water Travel (www.flywatertravel.com), and their service was excellent in every detail, from handling the details of plane connections between Honolulu and Kiribati to providing extensive lists of what to bring. The Shark Place Lodge (aka Christmas Island Outfitters), was also well-run and professional, with rustic accommodations in the best nostalgic and sentimental fashion. Think of the old fishing camps in northern Ontario, with patchy Linoleum floors and yellow light bulbs hanging from the ceiling. The lodge hosts eight rods per week, two to a cabin. Each cabin has running water and electricity, a refrigerator, and electric fans. Breakfast and dinner is in the dinning hall: think fresh tuna sushi, cooked reef fish, local lobster, and mantis shrimp, along with chicken or pork. Between the cabins and the kitchen is a palapa the size of an airplane hangar with comfy sofas overlooking the gorgeous shell beach, where you can unwind after a day of fussy milkfish or rampaging GTs and exchange stories over cocktails from the fully stocked bar.

The guides were excellent, and included both Peter, the thoughtful and helpful head guide, and the famous Moana, whose fly patterns and techniques have made him a near legend among fisherman around the globe.

Christmas Island is one of those once-in-a-lifetime experiences that you'll want to keep having over and over.