

The Wild One

By Pete McDonald

Photographed by Brian Bailey

October 2006

Cindy Garrison Goes Beyond the Bounds of Fishing



In the warm shallow waters of an island near the equator, on the bow of a beat up panga, a tall blond angler stands with her fly rod at the ready. She loads the rod with a double-haul and unfurls the yellow line, delivering a baitfish-pattern fly to her target. She strips it in and the fish reacts, charging the fly and inhaling it in a split second.

"Yeah! Yeah! Hah hah!" she screams, whooping and hollering as she brings her quarry boatside. Her name is Cindy Garrison, and she has just successfully hooked and landed a puffer fish.

This from the one-time Alaska guide, who pioneered fly-fishing for tigerfish in Botswana, who once wrestled a crocodile in Panama?



"I don't care if it's a 150-pound tarpon or a puffer fish," she says. "When I feel a tug on the end of that line I freak out." Since she hosts her own TV show, "Get Wild" on ESPN, one would expect her to be a little more jaded. But the prospect of being on an adventure, or on the bow of a boat, brings forth something in Garrison that cannot be contained. It is with this energy that she plows ahead, hoping her attitude will push people to look at

the sport beyond the just catching fish.

Force of Nature

The equatorial islands happen to be the Galapagos, one of the wildest places left in the world, 600 miles off the coast of Ecuador, where Garrison has teamed with Costa Del Mar Sunglasses to pursue striped marlin. On this day far offshore, the fishing is slow, with hours passing on end before anything appears in the trolling spread.

A striped marlin finally comes on the scene, lit up and looking to eat one of the smoking lures that it mistakenly believes is a baitfish. Garrison jumps to action at the sound of the screaming reel, and takes on the striper with a standup rod in the cockpit. The large pelagic leaps from the water a few hundred yards behind the boat, showing its displeasure, and the fight is on.

Garrison works the marlin until it is subdued. The first mate grabs the leader and brings the fish alongside the boat, and Garrison does something most anglers wouldn't. She strips. Down to her bathing suit, she grabs a mask and fins and jumps overboard to engage the marlin on its turf.

"It all goes together, the animals, fish, people," she says of her penchant for getting up close and personal with wild creatures. From her list of maladies and afflictions, she can detail her interactions throughout the



world.

There's the strange fungus she picked up when she jumped onto the back of that 12-foot crocodile in Panama. She has a scar on her arm after being bitten by a monkey in Thailand—and scratches from an over-aggressive tiger cub on the same trip. The boils she acquired kayaking in the Philippines have healed.

In the Galapagos she would contract Dengue Fever from mosquitoes, possibly while crawling in muck to see eye to eye with a giant turtle on the island of Santa Cruz. ("I love mud," she said to our guide. "Can I go wallow in the mud with him?")



This, more than catching fish (or hunting big game), is what Garrison is all about. When she goes on an expedition for her television show, she doesn't just pursue animals, she engages them, as well as the local culture of the area. She's eaten bugs in Asia, hunted to provide food for tribal villages in Africa, and hunted with Aborigine spears in Australia. And she does it all, well, loudly.

Garrison is the human embodiment of the power chord. Wherever she is and whatever she is doing, bystanders can expect to hear enthusiastic yelling and laughter. "I just get that jump in my heart and the adrenaline," she says. "Ha! Ha!"

Blazing Trails

Blame it all on her parents. Garrison and her three sisters grew up in Marin County, California, just north of San Francisco. But her time on her family's cattle ranch in Oregon ingrained the outdoor wanderlust she exudes today.

The entire family would escape to the ranch any chance they could, and take off on outdoor hunting, camping, and fishing adventures. "Whatever we did outdoors we had fly rods in our hands," says Garrison. "My sisters, my Dad. My Mom was a tremendous fly fisherman, as well. It got us addicted from an early age."

While her other sisters gravitated toward the corporate world in their adult lives, Cindy took it to the next level. "For me, I could never see myself doing anything but fishing for the rest of my life."

On her 23rd birthday, Garrison decided she was going to be a guide in Alaska. She headed North with \$80 in her pocket. She hooked on as an apprentice at one fly fishing lodge, only to quit after realizing they never intended for her to do anything beyond cleaning toilets.

"I said to myself, 'I can go quit and go home or I can stay and get a real job.' I didn't want to fail," says Garrison. She hitchhiked around Alaska for two weeks, calling every lodge she could think of to try for a job. She got one, the first woman ever hired at that particular lodge—even as a cook—and guided in the Great Wilderness for six years.



"Then I got bored," she says. So what did she do? She moved to Botswana and developed a fly fishery for the African tigerfish.

Eye of the Tiger

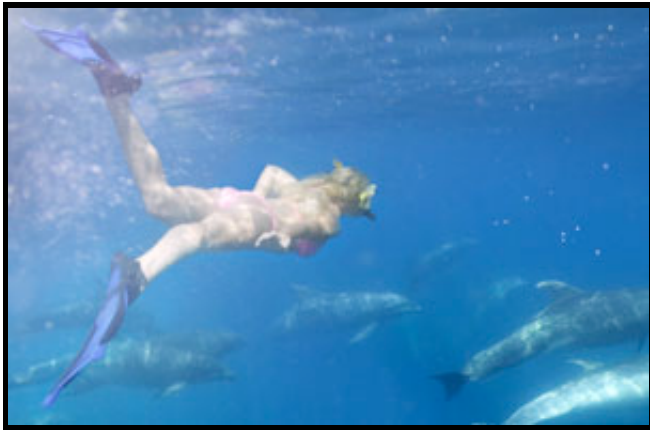
"Hello Lefty, this is Cindy Garrison. Any interest in coming to Africa with me?" This is how Garrison tried to get her idea off the ground. She called the legendary Lefty Kreh, who didn't know her, and anyone else she could think of to come and cast a fly in Botswana. Finally, she hooked a big name—Ed Rice, the founder of International Sportmen's Exposition, and a well-known personality in fly-fishing circles. "We went fishing and kicked ass," Garrison says. And from the successful trip she planted the seeds to establish Safari Anglers, which still runs tigerfishing trips to Botswana today.

At one point, Garrison held the world record for tigerfish on the fly. Tigerfish are harsh, aggressive predators with vicious sharp teeth protruding from their mouths. In stalking them, she had to endure confrontations with crocodiles and hippos. Hardcore stuff, and a part of who she is.

Yet, there's that another part, the one that shows itself in the Galapagos. Back on the bow of the panga, Garrison is teaching her friend Kelly Cruickshank how to cast a fly. On her first cast with a fly rod in her life, Cruickshank, a banker, hooks a small grouper. "Oh my god!" she screams, and Garrison echoes her. Garrison helps her strip in the fish, and the two jump up and down on the bow as if Cruickshank has set her own world record. The scene illustrates one of the basic themes of Garrison's message.

"It's not true that if you're not an expert you won't have fun," she says of the snobbery that tends to course through the sport. "You just need to be good enough to catch a fish."

This vibe, as much as anything, is why Costa Del Mar Sunglasses brought her to these islands in the first place. "Cindy has this unbelievable ability to inspire people to plug into their passion and follow their dreams," say Al Perkinson of Costa. "It's an important and powerful gift."



On another day in the Galapagos, again trolling for marlin on a shelf far offshore of Santa Cruz, the boat runs across a huge disturbance on the surface. It is a pod of dolphins—over a hundred in all, and they rush over to the boat in a leaping, boiling mass. The dolphins take position on the bow, rising and falling with the water being pushed aside by the boat's sharp forefoot. The captain stops the boat to allow his

passengers to absorb the moment, and the marlin spread lies limp behind the drifting boat, the fishing prospects gone bleak. As the dolphin leap and flip mirthfully around the boat, Garrison stands on the gunwale in the cockpit and does what you'd expect her to. She screams, and dives right in.

[Discuss this article in our forums](#)