

FLY FISHERMAN



» Iron Lotus
Jig rig nymphing



THE LEADING MAGAZINE OF FLY FISHING

Utah's Trout
WILDERNESS

Hendrickson
100th
ANNIVERSARY

Amazon
GIANTS

THE LEGENDS ARE TRUE

Afghan & Iraq
VETERANS BOND
ON THE RIVER



The Quiet Sport



Photo | Ross Purnell


AT ONE TIME, the franchise logo on the front of this magazine said FLY FISHERMAN, *The Quiet Sport*. That motto struck a chord with an entire generation of fly fishers and it's still true today. Fly fishing can be a silent, soul-scrubbing sport, and as Chris Kassar writes in her story "Flags in the Wilderness" (page 42) it can also be a healing time to recover from the wounds of war, and listen to the sounds of the wilderness and your fly line zipping through the air. If you know a veteran suffering through their own aftermath of wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, or Vietnam, have them read this story. The VetEx program and fly fishing in general may be able to help them.

The "quiet sport" is also a reflective tradition laced with centuries of oral and written history. It's one of those rare endeavors where we learn from and recognize the pioneers who went before us, and where "old-timers" are revered and respected.

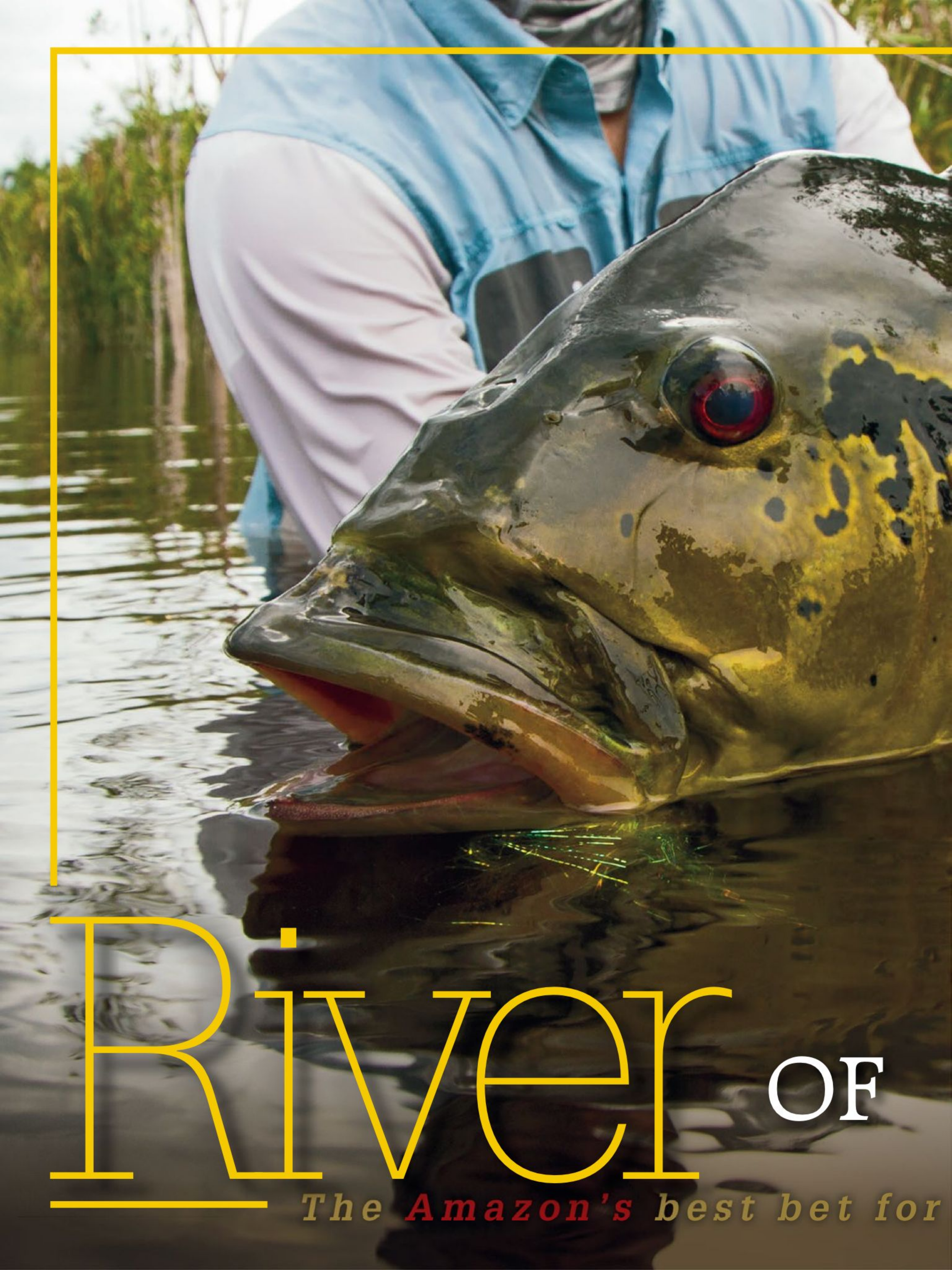
Case in point is Paul Weamer's story on the 100th anniversary of the Hendrickson hatch (page 36). It's a look back at how legendary tier Theodore Gordon taught Roy Steenrod to tie flies, how the original Hendrickson was created, and how the fly patterns we call Hendricksons today differ from the original Catskill patterns tied by the likes of Harry and Elsie Darbee, and Walt and Winnie Dette.

Catching a big trout quietly sipping dry flies is the skin of a sport that is both deep and layered. But if you catch that trout with a fly you tied, matching a hatch you've studied and pursued, and using a fly that has been passed down through generations of fly tiers, it brings a sense of fulfillment and achievement that can only be compared to a graduate degree in fly fishing.

But of course fly fishing isn't always learned solitude, at times it is raucous adventure with the best kind of friends—your fishing buddies. If you've ever rappelled into a canyon to fish, flown in a chopper over the Russian tundra, or set the hook on a high-flying mako shark, you've felt the adrenaline, and enjoyed the sights and sounds of a sport that is sometimes worthy of excessive hooting and hollering.

On page 46 John Sherman shares his adventures in the Amazon rainforest hunting for 20-pound peacock bass with a fly rod. Not exactly a quiet sport, but a worthy one nonetheless as peacocks are among the most stunning freshwater fish in the world, and fly fishers on the Rio Marié are helping to protect 480 miles of river basin (and the associated rainforest) as a catch-and-release, fly-fishing only peacock bass preserve. The indigenous people of the region will benefit from the influx of cash and jobs in a low-impact sustainable business, and the giant peacocks of the Rio Marié will survive for future generations. 

Ross Purnell, editor
 ross@flyfisherman.com
 Twitter: @rossflyfisher
 Instagram: rossflyfisher
 Facebook.com/flyfisherman



River OF

The Amazon's best bet for

> JOHN G. SHERMAN
Text & Photos

▶ The remote wilderness of the Rio Marié is an untapped fishery with little historic harvest, and it has recently been protected with catch-and-release, fly-fishing-only regulations. According to Brazilian biologists, it has the highest numbers of 20-pound-plus peacocks in the Amazon.

MY HANDS WERE STILL SHAKING, AND MY RIGHT ARM FELT AS THOUGH I HAD LOST A GAME OF TUG-OF-WAR WITH A PIT BULL.

In my jet-lagged mental state, I was having a tough time comprehending what had just happened. Two hours into my first day in the Amazon, I had already landed a 19- and a 20-pound peacock bass, and lost another fish that was much larger. Most big peacocks lose themselves in submerged woody debris, but this one broke a 4/0 tarpon hook in its powerful surge toward freedom. Where on earth was I? The Rio Marié, a little-known tributary of the Amazon that was in 2014 preserved by Brazil and local indigenous authorities as the largest fly-fishing-only, catch-and-release fishery on the planet.

Giant

20-pound peacock bass



► **Butterfly peacock** bass in the Rio Marié range from 2 to 7 pounds and represent about 80 percent of the peacock catch.

Junkyard Dogs

Peacock bass are the junkyard dogs of the jungle. They'll attack any perceived intruder, destroy your fly, and pull harder than any bass you've ever dreamed of. If you give them an inch of line, they'll take 20 feet and head right back into deep cover. This explosive hand-to-hand combat leaves fly fishers with line burns, elevated heart rates, shredded fly lines, and broken hooks.

► **The Rio** Marié has dark, tannin-colored water, but stays fishable even after heavy rain events. In the dry season it is often clear enough for sight fishing.

But when you land one, the intoxicating colors and patterns of the fish, and the beauty of the Amazon rainforest make you realize that the Rio Marié is one of the last great untouched fly-fishing destinations on the planet. It doesn't hurt that it's also the best place to land a 20-pound bass on fly tackle.

The Rio Marié starts in Colombia and it snakes its way through the northwest jungles of Brazil, where it

ultimately joins the Rio Negro more than 500 river miles downstream. The entire length of the Brazilian Rio Marié is inside the Indigenous Territory of Medio Rio Negro I and II. This remote territory was formerly used by only local indigenous tribes for subsistence fishing, but was opened to limited angling exploration in 2008 through 2012. In 2014, the Brazilian government and native communities in the watershed granted 10 years of exclusive access to Untamed Angling—operators of the highly successful Tsimane and La Zona golden dorado camps in Bolivia and Argentina. This collaboration—enacted by law—created a 480-mile-long sustainable peacock bass preserve where the local people and the environment can benefit from the kind of tourism that leaves a minimal footprint.

I first heard of the Rio Marié from Mike Michalak, owner of The Fly Shop at Redding, California. Mike knew I was an obsessed largemouth and striped bass angler, and he was putting together a group for the inaugural exploratory season of the Untamed Angling operation. I signed up with my regular fishing partner Todd Alday from Tucson, Arizona, and six other Californians.

After a full day of travel from the West Coast through Miami, we overnights in Manaus, Brazil, then flew 350 miles in a float plane into the Rio Marié.

Quick Facts:

Distance: Miami to Manaus, Brazil: 2,408 miles

Latitude Longitude: -1.089799, -67.808406

U.S. Booking Agent: The Fly Shop at Redding, California (flyshop.com)

Local Outfitter: Untamed Angling, Buenos Aires, Argentina (untamedangling.com)

Best Time: The "dry" season of September through November, which is also springtime in the Southern Hemisphere



River OF Giants

It's hard to grasp the enormity of the Amazon rainforest until you've seen it by air. Once you're inside the Marié basin, you see nothing but green in all directions during 3+ hours of flight time. The basin shows no signs of development—no signs of human habitation at all, actually.

Today it still represents the Amazon rainforest in its raw, untainted state. The river today looks just the same and fishes just as it did 200 or 400 years ago.

Reboot

Starting a trip with two fish near the 20-pound mark meant that either I was going to have the trip of a lifetime, or else face some rough patches to balance things out. That's just how my mind works.

Sure enough, that night and the next day we experienced torrential downpours that lasted for nine hours with an intensity I've never before witnessed. After several inches of rain, the river began to rise, and it kept rising for the next five days, finally cresting on day six when we were leaving the lodge. In my experience in all types of freshwater fishing, rising water in a river is one of the toughest times to fish, but despite the fact that the Rio Marié rose ten feet after our arrival, the river was always fishable. Water visibility never dropped below two feet, and we were able to fish every day with confidence.

Even in the worst water conditions of the season, boats were reporting catches of 4 to 30 peacocks per day, with giants up to 20 pounds hooked nearly every day. It made my brain swim trying to imagine what fishing would be like in "perfect" conditions.

On most days the mother ship moved up- or downriver from 15 to 20 miles to find virgin water for the next day of fishing. The Marié is considered a "black" river with tannin tea-colored water, and it is home to oxbows, tributary creeks and rivers, lagoons, and sandbars that present many different fly-fishing scenarios. It's rarely the same river from one mile to the next. From sight fishing in lagoons and over white sandbars (which turns to blood red under a few feet of water), to dredging in deep holes with heavy lines, to fishing poppers off a prime ambush point, the Marié has something for everyone.



Beastmode Flies & Tackle

There are many ways to approach the big bass of the Rio Marié, but we used 9-foot, 9- and 10-weight Sage SALT, Xi3, and ONE rods rigged with floating, intermediate, and fast-sinking lines, and we used all three setups daily.

Lines. Given the heat, tropical lines were crucial. We used RIO Outbound Short Tropical floating lines for casting large surface flies and the popper/dropper setup. We also used Outbound lines with a clear intermediate head and Hatch Intermediate lines. For sinking lines we used 400-grain Hatch Tropical Sink Tip or Rio Deep Sea sinking-tip lines.

Flies. In the black tannic waters of the Rio Marié, bright chartreuse, yellow, orange, and red flies were the most effective. Top patterns for us were Morgan Thalken's Peacock Cruiser with a rattle (size 3/0) and orange/yellow or chartreuse Rob Anderson's Space Invader (size 2/0). Rob's flies were easy to cast and caught a lot of fish, but the rattle in the Peacock Cruiser seemed to trigger larger fish for us, particularly in tinted water.

Tippet. Terminal tackle for this slugfest is the most crucial part of the equation. We used 6 feet of straight 40-pound-test fluorocarbon directly from our fly line to our flies. This gorilla tactic was a necessity to help turn and extract these giant fish from surrounding cover. You must clamp the line down immediately after the hook-set, and try to keep them out of the heavy brush. If you can beat them down early in the fight, your odds improve exponentially.

This heavy leader setup also stresses the other parts of your system, with your fly line and rod taking a lot of strain from muscled fish that hit and run more like a powerful running back than any other gracefully leaping fish you might have encountered.

This fishing can wreak havoc on your fingers, so Buff Stripping Guards or sun gloves with stripping finger protection are crucial. The sun this close to the equator can be brutal. We used Simms GT Tricomp shirts and Arapaima pants, and consider 30 UPF clothing—including a hat, sun gaiter, and polarized glasses—to be as critical as the rods and reels.



► **There are** two guides per boat on the Rio Marié, and they operate new 20-foot skiffs with poling platforms and iPilot Minn Kota bow-mounted trolling motors.

With the high rising water, the guides often used pencil poppers, or woodchopper lures without hooks as teasers to “call” the peacocks out of the jungle into our casting range. Once a fish showed itself by rolling behind or flat-out annihilating the teaser, the guide pulled the teaser from the water and then we delivered the fly in its place. This tactic was successful on many occasions, but there were other times when we could not switch the fish from the teaser to the fly.

I’m familiar with this bait-and-switch technique, so I was eager to see if our California Delta popper/dropper system would work as well or better. It works for striped bass in California, so why not for peacocks in the jungle? We used a large surface fly (4/0 Pucker Lips) with a Deceiver-style trailing fly (Rob’s Night Rider) tied 3 feet from the bend of the first hook. The Pucker Lips attracted the peacocks, but 90 percent of the time they devoured the subsurface Night Rider. This popper/dropper eliminated the need for a bait-and-switch, and was highly effective during our week. This wasn’t the easiest rig in the world to cast, but it was worth it.

Speaking of discomfort, peacock bass fishing wears you down. At home, I take great pride in being to cast a 9-weight rod all day long with T-14 line and 3/0 to 5/0 striper flies. But it’s different in the Amazon. First, you are casting shorter than in a

typical Delta striper situation, so there is less retrieving and more casting. And with peacocks you must strip the fly much faster than with other types of bass. This means you end up making a lot of casts, and your body feels it by the end of your week.

We experimented with a number of different retrieves, and found a steady, fast retrieve with 2- to 3-foot pulls was the most effective in normal conditions. In extremely dirty water, we slowed down the retrieve and added some pauses to give the fish more time to see the fly.

Spotted Peacocks

In the Rio Marié there are two species of peacock bass. Over 80 percent of the catch consists of butterfly peacocks (*Cichla orinocensis*), which for us were normally in the 2- to 7-pound range. The rest were spotted peacocks (*Cichla temensis*), which are the largest of the 15 known peacock bass species. Spotted peacock bass on the Rio Marié average over 10 pounds, and we hooked into a handful of them every day.

The average size of the spotted peacocks separates this river from any known river in the world. Based on fisheries studies conducted by The Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA), there is no other river in the Amazon with this density of 10-pound-plus peacocks. The world record spotted

peacock is 29.1 pounds, and there is good reason to believe that there are fish much larger than this in the Marié. On our week there were four fish over 20 pounds landed, including the largest peacock of the season caught by Tim Larsen of San Jose, California, that weighed a staggering 24.2 pounds. In the five weeks of the 2014 season there were an unprecedented 24 client-caught peacock bass over 20 pounds, making it unquestionably the best place in the world to break that 20-pound barrier.

Why are there so many giant peacocks on the Rio Marié? There are several theories: The river is so far from anywhere and is home to relatively virgin fishing conditions. The vast majority of these fish have never seen a fly or a lure. With this lack of fishing pressure, there is a correlating lack of harvest of the big peacocks for food consumption or sport. If a big fish is taken out of a river, multiple smaller fish often replace it. Without high numbers of small fish, the ecosystem produces a high percentage of giants. It’s survival of the fittest, and only the most predacious and strongest fish survive. The Marié isn’t home to huge numbers of peacocks, but it’s home to giants.

Spotted peacocks come in two seasonal varieties. The “paca” is a non-spawning spotted peacock that is darker in color and has faint black vertical bars and dozens of light white spots on its side. Paca are incredibly strong and we often found them in the main river and at the mouth of lagoons.

“Acu” are the spawning or post-spawn spotted peacocks that can be highly aggressive in either guarding their nests or their young. The colors are more vivid, with dark black vertical bars and much more green, yellow, and orange hues on the flanks and cheeks of the fish. The white spots are very faint or invisible. Large male acus have a large bump on their heads. We encountered spotted peacocks in both the acu and paca stages, and many that were somewhere in between.

Jungle Operation

I was impressed with the Untamed Angling operation, especially considering I was there for the inaugural season. Normally there are a few glitches with a start-up camp, but the food, service, guides, and fishing were all top-notch. Clearly this outfitter has a wealth of experience hosting fly fishers in remote jungle locations. I guess

River OF Giants

I shouldn't have been surprised, given the excellent reputation of Untamed Angling's other destinations.

Each boat carried an indigenous guide who had excellent navigational knowledge of the river and the whereabouts of the productive fishing areas, as well as a seasoned English-speaking Argentine or Brazilian fly-fishing guide who were all expert fly fishers who worked other venues for Untamed Angling, and knew the intricacies of fly fishing in the jungle.

Together the duo operated a custom 20-foot skiff set up with push poles, poling platforms, two large casting decks, and new iPilot Minn Kota bow-mounted trolling motors. The guides worked in tandem, one controlling the boat with the remote-controlled motor and the other throwing the teaser or instructing the anglers. Even though these guides had only been working together for five weeks or so, they made excellent teams.


The guides also documented each catch—measuring and weighing all spotted peacocks over 10 pounds—to monitor all the possible effects the operation might have on the fishery. The record keeping and scientific observation is all part of the exclusivity agreement with IBABA, and works toward the sustainability of the fishery for everyone involved.

The Marié fishes best during the dry season, from late August to December, when the river is historically at its lowest levels. Even in the dry season we learned you can still experience the true meaning of a rainforest, and rising water can happen any week of the year.

In addition to peacocks, we caught piranha, piraiba catfish, and dogfish, which look like a kind of freshwater barracuda. Some other groups also tangled with arowana and wolf fish, but the peacocks are really the primary attraction. As for other wildlife,

we heard howler monkeys, and saw macaws, toucans, herons and egrets, bats, freshwater porpoises, and river otters.

With the high water and blooming flowers of the Amazonian spring we also saw huge numbers of bumblebees, honeybees, and butterflies. The ecosystem supported by the rainforest is a spectacle that must be experienced to be truly appreciated.

Whether you are a seasoned peacock bass angler looking for the biggest trophy of your life, or if it's your first trip into the Amazon, the Rio Marié is one of the most remote, pristine places on earth, and it won't disappoint. I can't wait to get back! 

.....
John G. Sherman is the West Coast sales representative for Simms Fishing Products and Hatch Outdoors as well as a freelance photographer and writer. He lives in Discovery Bay, on the banks of the California Delta.



Quality flies at great prices

Fly line, leaders, tippet

RIO, Wulff, Frog Hair, Umpqua

Fly Rod Building Supplies

Blanks, Flexcoat, Thread,
Guides, Lemke Reel Seats,
Custom Cork Grips

Waders & Wading Boots

Chota, Aquaz

Fly Rods

Redington, Thomas & Thomas

Reels

Redington, Sage, Galvan

Fly Tying Supplies

Dai-Riki, Gamakatsu, Tiemco,
Spirit River, Danville

www.shop.jcookflyrods.com



TURNEFFE FLATS
Belize

Meet our residents.

888.512.8812 www.tflats.com reservations@tflats.com