

# River of Giants



Fly fishing the far northwestern reaches of the Amazon basin for world record peacock bass

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**T**here are very few fish swimming in freshwater that are quite as ferocious as the peacock bass. These pugnacious bruisers swagger around the lagoons of the South America's Amazon basin just looking for a fight.

Resplendent in a ludicrous "Fauvist" color scheme of red, green, turquoise and gold, bristling with outsize fins and replete with a baleful, underslung jaw and mean, beady little red eye, they're as outlandish as any fish you'll ever see. There at

least 15 species of peacocks and they come in a variety of sizes, but all of them fight like tigers. Tangling with a "borboletta" peacock of three or four pounds is a rude shock for most newcomers. But be warned, a real trophy of fifteen pounds or

more will hit a well-presented fly like a freight train, and do its best to pull your arms clean out of their sockets. These fish really do represent one of the greatest fly-fishing thrills available anywhere in freshwater.

Once regarded as the province of the spin-fisherman, an increasing number of intrepid fly anglers are targeting peacocks, and those in the know will tell you that some of the biggest swim in the remote waters of the Rio Marie. The Marie is a serpentine river meandering through a lost corner of the far north-western Amazon basin, on the border between Brazil and Columbia, and dutifully earns its local nickname—Rio de Gigantes – the River of Giants.

The operation on the Rio Marie is run by Untamed Angling, the same outfit that runs the fabulous dorado-packed Tsimane operation in Bolivia. Untamed really knows how to organize a jungle operation and they have struck gold with Marie. There are other fantastic fly-only peacock operations, including the magical sight-fishing opportunities available at the Rio Agua Boa, but if you want to catch an IGFA record peacock bass on fly, then Rio Marie is the place to consider. They know the rules!

The operation is in its infancy, but already, it has racked up more 20 lb peacocks on fly in its first season than many operations can boast in twenty years and more. All following IGFA rules for fly fishing and, if you know record hunting, that's a hard find in the Amazon jungle.

To give an idea of how special Rio Marie is, consider this: Larry Larsen, the dean of peacock anglers, has chalked up 32 fish of 20 pounds and over during twenty-five long years of peacock fishing, using mainly baitcasting gear. The Rio Marie produced over 40 fish weighing over twenty pounds ON FLY during its first short exploratory season and, during the inaugural full season, fish to a stupendous 26.5 pounds have been released. When you consider that the All-Tackle peacock bass record is currently 29 pounds, you have some idea of just how remarkable the Rio Marie fishery is.



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## Now Here's the Best Part

If you can throw them, the biggest peacocks in the Rio Marie will eat huge top water flies. And when I say huge, I mean huge. As in 10 inches long, on 5/0 beastly hooks.

My fly of choice is Charlie Bisharat's Pole Dancer. This ingenious piece of aero-dynamic mischief and hydro-dynamic popping bliss has caught me lots of fish – pike, dorado, striped bass, tigerfish, taimen and, yes, big peacock bass. Believe me, it is an absolute killer. Pole Dancers are available from any Umpqua retailer. However, buyer be warned, they are not cheap but they are utterly lethal.

The Pole Dancer comes alive in the water. It zig-zags like the famous zara spook top water plug, twisting and turning with a seductive writhing motion that fully justifies its name. The big 5/0 version – complete with an internal rattle - makes a real racket, boiling up a foam-flecked commotion that no self-respecting apex predator can ignore.

However, throwing them isn't for everyone. These flies are BIG and wind-resistant but, with practice, you can cast them as far as any other fly out there. Having a rugby-player's build certainly helps, but good technique and the right set-up is the real key. I'll admit, I was lucky in this regard. I stumbled upon the perfect outfit for throwing huge top water flies by sheer accident.

A fast, steely-action 12 weight rod is crucial and it must be incredibly light to cast all day. Some of the new 12 weight rods made by manufacturers like Hardy, Sage, Thomas & Thomas and G•Loomis, you would swear are eight or nine weights. For peacock bass, I also use a reel



## Untamed Angling

If you are interested in fishing this fabulous river, contact Rodrigo Salles at [www.untamedangling.com](http://www.untamedangling.com) or via The Fly Shop at [www.theflyshop.com](http://www.theflyshop.com). The operation is absolutely remarkable, with a team of universally excellent and likeable guides and staff, and food and accommodation that defies belief considering the remote and extreme environment.

Be re-assured: You don't NEED to use huge top water flies to do well at Marie, and you will catch plenty of big fish with smaller, subsurface flies, but if you can master throwing big top water flies, you will have an experience you will NEVER forget.



with a cantilevered handle to keep the furiously spinning handle away from the body when playing many fish in a day, and the spool can be batted very quickly to get all loose line onto the reel so that the strong steady drag can be brought to bear on the fish.

The line I use for casting poppers was a happy "accident" – a short-head floater with clear intermediate tip. The clear tip pulls the fly INTO the water's surface, but the big buoyant head of a 5/0 Pole Dancer can't be sunk. Instead, it spurts a half gallon of water into the air every time you strip the fly back towards you. Varying the length of time you allow the sink-tip to bed in below the surface can radically vary your presentation. A longer sink means a bigger "BLOOP", which draws fish out from hiding, while a shorter wait puts more spray up in the air. Throw in all the seductive, gyrating mischief that Charlie Bisharat's ingenious design provides and you are equipped for trouble.

I'll be honest, for the first few days at Rio Marie, I respectfully did what I was told. Excellent head guide Gerson Kavamoto told me if I really wanted that 20 pounder, I should leave the top water stuff in my box and fish with streamers. Keen to keep my guide on my side, I dealt with the monotony. The streamers got the job done. Gerson's light, easy-to-cast design, complete with a rattle and a savagely sharp "Semi-circle" hook has been proven over a season and a half on the Marie. This pattern really works and has a string of trophies to its name.

One late afternoon with Gerson, we managed to pull out a stupendous beast of a peacock weighing in at 23 pounds on the streamer and I was elated both because I had caught the fish of a lifetime, and also because now "the job was done" and I felt that I could start experimenting with top water flies.

The next few days were a revelation. The morning after I'd caught my trophy with Gerson, I fished with Rodrigo Salles – a brilliant and experienced fly-fisherman. While Rodrigo fished with a large, well-proven deceiver fly, I brought the big Pole Dancer out to play. The first cast had us all seduced. As the big fly started to make canoe sized wakes and BLOOPS across the surface, it was almost instantly crushed by a stunningly beautiful "Paca" peacock of around twelve pounds.

For the next hour or so, the fishing was astonishing. Rodrigo is an excellent fisher – he casts beautifully and accurately – and he's caught a million peacock bass. However, his subsurface streamer couldn't compete with the big Pole Dancer. I caught five magnificent peacocks all weighing between ten and fifteen pounds, while Rodrigo caught just one before a savage rainforest storm came whistling out of the west to put an end to our fun.

The river started to come up fast, and as most seasoned peacock anglers will tell you, rising water almost always spells the end of the action. Fortunately, the rain stopped almost as soon as it had begun. Two days later, the river started to fall and clear and the big Pole Dancer came out to do some Brazilian samba once again. This time, the big top water fly really delivered. Fishing with my hugely likeable young guide Allan on his very first day in the job, we managed fish of 15.5, 17.5, 19.5 and 21 pounds. This is fishing that, as a reasonably experienced peacock angler, I could barely dare to dream of.




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Every take was a savage, heart-stopping detonation that was earth-shatteringly violent. To me at least, these huge eruptions were worth a dozen takes subsurface, and they were as exciting as anything I've ever experienced with a fly rod in my hand.

Rio Marie is a remarkable fishery and I know few other fisheries that are capable of so completely dominating the big fish lists. I am confident that this river will produce many IGFA tippet-class records for peacock bass in the next few years. An All-tackle World Record ON FLY is a distinct possibility since they encourage fishing by IGFA fly fishing rules. Also, working to keep the river "fly only" helps conserve the fishery, and Untamed Angling are to be congratulated on working with IBAMA (The Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) and the local indigenous communities to protect and conserve this precious resource. They are limiting the fishing pressure to a small number of anglers every week, and have come to strictly employ only single barbless hooks, so that the fish are able to be returned unharmed to the water. It is one of the most exciting fly-fisheries on the planet, and I urge you to go there – with a Pole Dancer or two. – 



Claws Feisty



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