

POLEDANCING IN THE JUNGLE: Rio Marié's Spectacular Peacocks

The Rio Marié is home to one of the most amazing sport fish out there, and reputed fly fishing journalist and photographer, Matt Harris, has sampled the hectic fishing there.

By MATT HARRIS



If I told you I've just been having a wild time thrashing around with an irresistible pole-dancer and a mob of enormous peacocks on steamy afternoons in the Amazon jungle, perhaps you might suspect I'd been smoking something psychotropic. Or perhaps licking a few of the local frogs. But if I told you that I'd packed more fly-fishing kicks into a week than you can reasonably expect to enjoy on most Atlantic Salmon rivers in a fly-fishing lifetime, perhaps you might sit up and take notice.

Let me explain. The peacocks of the Amazon jungle are not birds, but fish. Cichlids to be precise.

Don't be fooled: if the word cichlid conjures images of timid little "tid-dlers" nervously roaming the interior of a tropical fishtank, forget it. *Cichla temensis* – the Tucunare or Peacock Bass – is a big, truculent apex predator that prowls belligerently around the lagoons of the Amazon basin, seeking out trouble. These big, brawny hoodlums are larger than life: spattered in a psychedelic riot of red, green and gold, they will attack

just about anything – including each other – and are about as aggressive as anything that swims.

First-time peacock anglers are often astonished by the violence provided by even a humble little "borboletta" or butterfly peacock weighing in at just three or four pounds. These little guys are more than capable of giving a salmon or trout angler a very rude shock, and will happily break that precious new eight-weight rod of yours clean in half. Cross swords with a real trophy "Tucunare" of fifteen pounds and more, and be prepared for a savage brawl that often ends in heartbreak and splinters.

These pugnacious brutes thrive throughout the vast Amazon catchment, but the very biggest are to be found in a very remote region of the watershed, in a far-flung corner of North-western Brazil, close to the Columbian Border. The Rio Marié is a very long way from anywhere, and it is very tough to access, but it is chock-full of outsized monsters that really do justify the river's local nickname – Rio de Gigantes – the River of Giants.







The area is strictly preserved, and the only fishing operation on the Rio Marié is run by Untamed Angling (www.untamedangling.com). These guys have a huge amount of experience, having set up the fabulous Tsimane dorado-fishing operation in Bolivia, and they really know how to run a five-star operation deep in the jungle. The operation is based on a huge, live-aboard houseboat, and everything from the excellent food to the comfortable, air-conditioned cabins, is immaculate. Despite its size, the mothership has a remarkably shallow draft, and this allows it to move up and down the river accessing new spots every day of any given week using excellent state-of-the-art skiffs, equipped with poling platforms and stealthy electric motors. The operation is entirely catch and release, and is strictly fly-only, which not only helps to conserve the river's stocks but is also undoubtedly the most exciting and challenging way to catch peacock bass. If you want to catch a world record peacock bass on fly, then Rio Marié really is THE place.

Twenty pounds is considered a real monster in Peacock Bass circles, and

Rio Marié is stuffed to the rafters with them: In its first short exploratory season, Rio Marié produced more than 40 fish weighing over the magical twenty pound barrier, and in its inaugural full season, fish to a stupendous 26.5 pounds have been brought to the boat. When you consider that the all-tackle peacock bass record is currently a little over 29 pounds, you have some idea of just how remarkable the Rio Marie fishery is.

Now here's the best part: let me introduce you to my irresistible Poledancer.

You should know from the start that my Poledancer is not a scantily-clad Brazilian beauty shaking her stuff to make ends meet, but is instead a whopping great foam-headed, tinsel-clad, rattle-loaded fly, designed by US angler Charlie Bishrat.

Disappointed? Don't be!

Take this insane-looking creation into the jungle and it will provide more mayhem than you'll know what do with – and, as a bonus, it's all good, clean fun that you can tell your mother about.









The fly's ingenious hydro-dynamic design makes it writhe and wriggle in a way that is bordering on the indecent, and to the monster peacock bass of the Rio Marié, it is utterly irresistible.

If you want to tussle with the real leviathans, do your best to master casting the intimidatingly large 5/0 version. This monstrosity, fully eight and a half inches long, can push a huge quantity of water, and its erratic, zig-zagging action, reminiscent of the infamous "Zara Spook" topwater lure, seems capable of whistling up every last peacock bass in the jungle. It's a big fly to be sure, but work on your double-haul to get your line-speed up, employ a steely, fast-actioned rod and an aggressively tapered short-head fly-line like Rio's excellent Outbound Short paired with a short, manageable leader, and you'll be amazed at what is possible. Rather than the usual full-floater, try fishing a line with a short, intermediate clear-tip, which makes the big poledancer bite into the surface, helping it to really sputter and 'bloop' on retrieval.





I'd recommend an exceptionally stout leader – I used 7 feet of 60lb fluorocarbon leader all week at Rio Marié, and, unlike many other anglers, I didn't suffer any breakages or lose any fish to underwater structure. The heavy-duty leader allows you to set the big, thick-wired hook VERY hard, and also gives you some much-needed security when locking down as a big peacock goes rampaging towards the nearest sunken tree.

Keep the rod low to avoid breakages, and use the butt end of the rod to put maximum pressure on these malevolent brutes. I cannot over-emphasize how strong these fish are, and you really want to invest in all the muscle that modern fly-fishing kit can offer you if you are not going to be just another “Harry Hardluck” story, bemoaning the one that got away over a few consolatory caiparinhas that same evening.

You don't HAVE to go slinging huge topwater flies around to catch these fabulous fish: Head guide Gerson Kavamoto's elegantly simple, synthetic hair streamer is a great choice. Light

and aerodynamic, It's a comparative breeze to pop into the keyhole gaps in the bankside vegetation. Many of the 20+ pounders that have been recorded at Marié have fallen to Gerson's creation.

I started off my week by using Gerson's pattern, and my good manners were duly rewarded in the shape of a huge 23 pound fish that was not only my heaviest peacock bass to date but also the biggest of my week and one of the largest of the season.

I was utterly thrilled, but as all anglers know, fishing is not simply about catching fish: anyone who LOVES their fly-fishing will know that a fish caught off of the top is worth any number caught on a sub-surface pattern

The day after I'd caught my trophy with Gerson, I decided it was time to have some fun. While my boat-partner Rodrigo – co-director of the Untamed Angling operation and a hugely experienced peacock angler - fished with Gerson's tried and trusted streamer, I brought my big Poledancer out to play.









I was confident my approach would pay dividends: the fly makes an astonishing commotion, and in the dark, tannin-stained waters of the Rio Marie, it is an infinitely louder “Dinner Bell” than any streamer. The first cast had everybody in the boat entranced, as we watched the big fly twisting seductively across the surface. The fly had been on the water perhaps five seconds when the water exploded violently, and the fly was unceremoniously devoured by a stunningly beautiful “Paca” peacock well into double figures.

For the next hour or so, the fishing was astonishing. Don’t tell him I said so, but Rodrigo is an excellent fisher – he casts beautifully and accurately, and he’s caught a million peacock bass. However, on that special morning, his conventional sunk streamer just couldn’t compete with the big pole-dancer. The huge surface pattern seemed to conjure a fish out of every little nook and cranny I cast it into, and in almost no time, it had caught me five magnificent peacocks all weighing well over ten pounds each. Rodrigo, meanwhile, had added just one to our tally on his orthodox tactics. No matter: Rodrigo is a generous

and experienced fisher, and he was clearly enjoying the mayhem that the big popper was creating as much as I was. Our indigenous boatman Adalberto laughed infectiously at the huge detonations of spray every time a big tucunare clattered into the surface lure, and we were all consumed by a mixture of euphoria and glee as the big fly worked its magic. Finally, just as Rodrigo accepted a big Poledancer fly from out of my box, the fun came to an abrupt end: a savage rainforest storm came whistling down from the mountains, far to the West, erasing the jungle shoreline in a dense white curtain of savage, stinging rain.

The Rio Marie’s level came up very fast, and dirty, rising water is not conducive to good peacock fishing. Luckily, the rains soon abated, and two days later, the water began to fall and clear.

Now, the big poledancer fly really was irresistible. Out early with my hugely likeable young guide Allan (guiding on his own for the very first time), and our brilliant and experienced indigenous boatman Charles, we explored the waters in and around the spawning Ipaca lagoon.



UNTAMED AMAZON

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As well as a clutch of smaller fish, we managed “Gigantes” of 15.5, 17.5, 19.5 and 21 pounds. Each fish came from out of the dark tannin-stained depths to crash the big fly with more violence than I have ever seen in a freshwater environment. Every take was an unforgettable, nerve-shattering combustion that was exciting as anything I’ve ever experienced with a fly rod in my hand, and it was a day I will never forget. I was really thrilled for young Allan, who was the toast of the guides that night.

There is nowhere else like Rio Marié. No other fishery is potentially so capable of dominating the big fish lists for a given species. Untamed Angling have done a magnificent job in 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, fishing fly only and employing only strictly enforced single barbless hooks. For the 2016 season, IBAMA have permitted Untamed Angling to access 700kms of the Marié, as opposed

to the 250kms they have been able to fish so far, which will further decrease pressure on these magnificent fish, potentially allowing anglers the thrilling prospect of fishing virgin water every day of every week.

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. I cannot recommend it highly enough. Rio Marié is one of the most exciting fly-fisheries on the planet, and if you like your fly-fishing a little on the wild side and chock-full of mayhem, I strongly urge you to go there – preferably with a poledancer or two in tow.

Contact:

Rio Marié is run by Rodrigo Salles, and all details can be found at

<http://www.untamedangling.com/>

In the US, the operation is represented by Mike Michalak’s excellent and highly professional outfit, The Fly Shop:

<http://www.theflyshop.com/>



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