

# Southern Royalty

by Riley Love



**WADING** out on a bottom of fine white sand. It's important to shuffle the feet and boost out any fresh water stingrays without prompting retaliation. There's time for a few last casts into the sunset. I can just make out the crackling of ice in my drink above the gentle murmur of water flowing around my calves, now my thighs. Like at home, the tributaries here all derive



names from the native aboriginals, Cuini, Xeurini, Unini.

The names have a different feel. The water is quite clean, there's no silt, no sediment. Yet, it's so stained with tannic acid, leached from the leafy hubris of the rain forest, that you lose sight of the pale bottom at a depth of around three feet or so. This is "black water" fishing, very much like fishing in a great pot of tea.

One cannot help but dwell philosophically upon the scope of this watershed, the water cycle on its grandest stage. From the snows of the Andes and the rains of all the Amazon basin, all the water there ever was flowing here more than anywhere else. Water particles that dwelled for eons down in the depths of oceans, frozen in Artic glaciers, water which anointed the pilgrims seeking its blessing in the River Ganges, that flowed in the blood of saints... swirling all around me, like a poem without an end.

She reigns supreme, the queen of all the rivers on the earth. Carrying approximately one fourth of all the fresh water on the planet her flow is greater than the next ten rivers combined. Her only peers are among the world's most prominent geographic features such as the Himalayas or the great Sahara. It is no wonder then... great sport fisheries abound here in the Amazon. The most important of these is peacock bass.

Fishermen from around the globe flock to the Amazon's many tributaries during the dry season to take advantage of the fish concentrating effects of low water levels. Since parts of the Amazon basin are either above or below the equator the time of the season varies. Generally it's consistent with our North American winter.

Peacocks are not direct kindred to our largemouth bass, although they may have connected prehistorically through a common saltwater ancestor. The largemouth [*Micropterus salmoides*] is cousin to the sunfish. There are at least 18 peacock species in South America; all are part of a worldwide population of Cichlid combining for around 1,400 species. Some of these you will see in your local aquarium store. Subspecies are limited in distribution so what you catch depends on the region fished. The most populous is the "butterfly" peacock [*Cichla ocellaris*]. This species has been successfully introduced into South Florida where a commercially viable sport fishing industry has grown around it. They also thrive in Hawaii and Puerto Rico. The biggest and baddest of the bunch is the "speckled" or black barred peacock [*Cichla temensis*].

They're drop dead gorgeous, green hued with bright orange trim. They're heavily weighted forward at head and jaws. It's like looking at a handgun with a small grip but scary big up at the business end.

It's a wonderland of fishes. A few bread crumbs dropped into the water during a shady lunch brings a myriad of lyre tailed and neon striped surprises, some yet to be named.



It's neither the beauty of the fish nor the magnificence of the Amazon that brings men here. This is what does:

## » "SHUH-VROOOM!"

Go ahead...try it, the sound deep in the throat. Now add some power, say a couple of megatons. That's the sound of the tsunami occurring when one of the big boys takes a huge top water prop with such might, even us big game saltwater guys are awestruck. Force so great, it warps the fabric of space-time in a way only described by Einstein's Theory of Relativity. Reel's drags set too tight to pull line off by hand are suddenly shrieking as line spins out and rods, seeming so heavy going into travel cases, are treated like toys. This is why we come. It's a hoot to meet fishermen experiencing this for the first

time. They come off the water with a high from the experience.

## » RECORDS FALL

Records standing for many years, argues that we've seen the maximum size of a species. This is not how the mind of the fisherman works. Beginning as children only imagination limits what we'll encounter as our line descends through the magic interface between worlds. Inside, in a place never growing up, we believe fish greater and more terrific than ever await us in the depths.

The all tackle record for peacock bass of Gerald Lawson's stood at 27 pounds since 1994. This was bested this February by Bill Gassmann of Des Moines, Iowa with a fish weighing 28 lbs. 40z. It was 37 inches long and a girth of 25 inches. Bill is an avid bass fisherman and on his first



weaknesses won't survive to tell the tale. Swapping stock trebles out to 4/0, 4x strong hooks, or similar will spare you the heartbreak of losing that really good one. Special attention should be given to the split rings. Some, picked off the tackle store's shelf would test at less than 20 lbs. Stainless steel models, testing closer to 100 lbs. are your friends. Better hardware, a little extra paint and lures hit the water sporting more upgrades than Dolly Parton.

Top water plugs are on top of the list. These are not the same ones we use in the States. They range around seven inches long and look like they were spawned one wild Saturday night in a torpedo tube and painted by Alice's Mad Hatter in his manic phase. A little computer browsing will take you to the Luhr Jensen's website as

well as High Roller's and Caribe's. I bought mine from FishQuest's online tackle store. Their prices compared well and they overnighted them to me promptly.

Peacock bass take walking plugs, like the Zara Spook really well. These stay in the strike zone longer and probably have a better hook-up rate. Smaller fish will hit many baits larger than themselves but the big prop plugs target larger fish more selectively and so if they're your targets you'll spend a lot of time "ripping" monster props across the surface. Newer models have become more streamline and lighter than previous ones, diminishing the physical demands of working them all day. After a week of this you'll be getting ripped.

George Walters related huge success with a new topwater bait from Tail Walkers Lures. "I literally caught 16 straight butterflies with the same lure," he said. "They couldn't lay off of it. I finally had to retire the thing to replace its hooks. I wouldn't go back without several."

peacock trip with friend Sean Woods. He used a Luhr Jensen Big Game Woodchopper in the "Clown" pattern. I met Bill as he was coming out through the Hotel Tropical in Manaus. They'd caught a lot of big fish, several over 20 lbs. His fish was flown to Miami and the new record is pending. There's good reason for the kid inside us to live on.

## » GEAR

It was astounding to meet a second record breaker the next day in Manaus. The all tackle record for Butterfly peacocks, set in January of 2000 at 12lbs. 9 oz. by Tony Campa, was absolutely shattered by George Walters of Charlotte, North Carolina. His topped 16 lbs, 2 oz.. He used a High Roller, Rip Roller in the orange "Halloween" variation. A self described "pond fisherman," George received this trip as a 65th birthday gift and called it, "a dream come true." His fish was also kept for verification.



Subsurface lures are mainly big minnows and bigger minnows. They should only dive to two to three feet, otherwise they aren't serviceable. The Yo-Zuri Crystal minnow is consistently a good bait at 5 1/4 inches long and then larger models from Cordell Red Fin, Bomber Long A or Monster Peacock Bass Lures are right size and armed with larger, heavier hooks. On our most recent trip subsurface walking plugs such as the X-Rap SubWalk really performed well, attracting trophy size fish. Lipless baits like the Rattle Trap are excellent options. The smaller version's hooks are too small. With peacocks, like many species...the bigger the bait, the bigger the fish.

The next class of baits to be sure to bring are old reliables...spoons. They work everywhere. Luhr Jensen has a number of creative variations and Tony Aceta models are really popular. For me, the indispensable spoon is the venerable Johnson Silver Minnow. Sizes up to 1 1/8 oz. are recommended.

Last but hardly least...jigs. Unlike usual jigging technique, they're retrieved more like other lures in a horizontal plane just a couple feet below the surface. Weight is in the 1/2 to 1 oz. range and all designed with large strong hooks and frequently, small rattles. Many have a secondary skirt attachment presenting a longer profile to the fish. This is similar to the common fly fishing method of attaching a second fly for balance and attractiveness. Similar to peacock flies these jigs are brightly colored and typically have shiny, metallic trim, sporting lots of 'bling'. Jigs will catch fish everywhere are a go-to bait when things are quiet.

Antonio Martinez was the host at our camp on the upper Ciuni River. He guided on this water for 15 years before managing this branch of the operation. He related

that jigs become preferred baits when peacocks head onto their nests in November. Anglers key on the nests at that time and often as late as March when an abrupt rise in the water level can trigger a "false spawn." As water rises he recommends switching more onto subsurface lures and when it goes low to tie on the top water plugs again.

## » BAD HOMBRES

This is the reception committee for your soft baits and plastic skirted bass jigs. Peacock bass are reputed to be uninterested in worms and other softies. I've tried them before and the bottom line is...it's hard to know. There are just too many critters with teeth in the water down there. You'll spend your day reeling in half worms and cleaned jig heads. Wire leaders are more useful than soft baits...leave the plastics stateside.

When you go down to Brazil after big fish, go heavy. No, this doesn't mean that it's all right to go off your diet. Fly fishermen use rods, leaders and shock tippets similar to those used for tarpon.

Braid lines are strongly preferred in the range of 50 lb. test or better. Overkill, you say...unsportsmanlike...unmanly as Ryan Seacrest knitting a lace dolly...catch more fish with lighter fluorocarbon!

Okay then, time for a little fishing story. After meeting Bill Gassmann and George Walters, I was gratified to have brought the same lures they'd used for their record breakers. On the first day my guide was keen to use the big "Halloween" orange Rip Roller above everything else in my box. I'd brought just one. After ripping the surface for a while, "SHUH-VROOOM!"

It was a Hiroshima grade strike by a 20 lb. class peacock. Although I'd carefully wound mono backing on my old trusty Shimano Calcutta to prevent "digging in" by the braided line, sure enough it happened. For the first time ever right at the edge of the



pool the wind had bitten in deep and when the screeching reel suddenly seized up, that 50 lb. braid lasted exactly zero-point-five seconds before snapping like sewing thread...it was the last I ever saw of that big peacock or my only orange Rip Roller.

Peacocks are reputed to lack any shyness for lines or leaders. I had tied 50 lb. fluoro leader on each of my lines but our guide evoked his "I'm the local pro" veto power to eliminate them. "A big fish will break this," he explained snipping it away. They used a simple double loop of the braid as a leader to the lure. The basic



Powered by Life By Sure-Life

- Catch & Release is the ONLY fish holding & transporting formula scientifically proven to significantly reduce mortality.
- Catch & Release is ENDORSED by millions of surviving gamefish for over 25 years.
- Sure-Life formulas are formulated by scientists for the true "Stars of the Show", THE FISH, not paid pros.
- Catch & Release is TRULY Patent Pending.
- Sure Life products DO NOT CONTAIN harmful irritants that cause extreme excitability, or damage the mucous and gills of the fish.

SureLife.com

To Look at Our Fish Care Videos Visit us Online at [www.Sure-Life.com](http://www.Sure-Life.com)

Visit our website at [www.sure-life.com](http://www.sure-life.com)  
 SURE-LIFE LABORATORIES CORP. Box 590 • Seguin, Texas 78156  
 OFF: (830) 372-2239 • Email: [surelife@worldnet.att.net](mailto:surelife@worldnet.att.net)  
 Jesus is Sure-Life



principle to remember is this, with most bass the smaller ones fight harder pound for pound than the large ones but with peacocks it's the opposite. A twenty pound fish is more than four times as formidable as a five pounder.

The most important aspect of which reels to bring along are the gear ratios. These are full days of long casts and rapid retrieves to add a vibrant, "ripping" action to big prop baits. It's a lot of work and the last thing you need is to be mechanically disadvantaged by small gearing. 7:1 is the way to go. Peacocks do not make lengthy runs; so large spools are not needed.

Six to seven foot rods are typical. If you're traveling to big fish country, medium heavy is the lightest one you'll want around. Heavy is better. Advances in three piece travel rods have changed what people bring. When traveling by float plane large rod cases and tight weight restrictions can be a problem. Our outfitter, River Plate Anglers provided two bait casting rigs and all the 50 lb. braid for each fisherman to eliminate some of the need to carry so much gear.

### » OUTFITTING

It is, of course, a sign of aging to see something not as it is but as it was and how much it has changed. Twenty five years ago upon our first peacock trip to Amazonia, we traveled by riverboat, sleeping on bare mattresses on open decks. Quite comfortably too, awakened only by the occasional thwack, of a shoe thrown at your head and an epithet salted, "stop that snoring," from a fellow angler.

Hotel Tropical in Manaus is like Grand Central Station during the season, with scores of peacock fisherpersiones teeming in and



out daily. They flow out to the myriad lodges, boat operations and in our case mobile floating camps, which had not even existed before. Touring the docks at Manaus or Barcelos, luxurious air conditioned riverboats wait by the dozens with names like "Mr. Peacock," or "Black Water Explorer." Most operators book through numerous agents. We used FishQuest. They did a good job and I would use them again.

River Plate Outfitters provides six floating tent (in our case aluminum huts), which can be moved to low water areas not accessible to deep draft vessels. They are moved most days to hit new areas of lagoons and backwaters along numerous rivers of the region.

In the evening, upon return to camp, a drink is waiting and then well prepared food in the dining tent. I couldn't begin to guess how many recipes for breads and cakes Antonio Martinez's wife has up her sleeve. The rooms are air-conditioned and the generator runs all night. We flew for two hours by float plane without seeing a road going into camp.

This runs like a well-oiled machine...most of the time. There are things fishermen just can't control, like the weather...or the government. Some anglers coming to our camp got snowed-in at the Atlanta airport enroute and this cost us an extra day in Manaus. Coming out, Brazil's President commandeered the float planes for a day so we made a long run to the airport in Barcelos by fishing boat. We ate lunch there with fishermen from Russia, traveled from the far side of the globe to try for peacocks. Yes, things have changed. The international community has discovered this world-class fishery. **BW**

**97% PURE TUNGSTEN**  
DISCOVER THE FEEL

## FLEA FLICKER WACKY JIG HEAD

The Flea Flicker jig makes the bait shake and wiggle uncontrollably on the fall, causing reaction strikes from non-aggressive fish



"Because the flea flicker is 97% pure tungsten you will get more feel out of this wacky jig head than anything else on the market. It is crucial to feel what kind of structure is down there; the flea flicker allows me to do that. I can skip easily around docks and shake it next to dock poles. I can find the chunk rock and gravel under docks and thus be more productive throughout the day."

-Brent Ehler  
FLW Tournament Pro

The concave head traps air on the fall, creating a unique vibration during the drop



Hand Poured Tru-Tungsten Stinger & Dart worms are ideal to fish with the Flea Flicker



**TRU-TUNGSTEN**

for dealer enquiries call 800-980-3738

fishharderco.com

**Mittatchii**  
SUPER SHARP WIDE GAP HOOK

**LAKE FORK TROPHY LURES**

### Lures With An Attitude!

4", 5", 6" Hyper Worm\*

5" Hyper Freak\* & Baby Hyper Freak\*

4" Hyper Finesse Worm\*

\*patent pending

**PARALLELUM**  
Advanced Fishing Lines

- Ultra Knot Strength
- Near Invisible
- Longer Casting
- Extreme Low Memory
- Long Durability
- Silky & Smooth

**FLUORO HYBRID FH**  
14lb

Possibly the world's best and most unique fishing lines, including "FluoroHybrid" (fluorocarbon/copolymer) and "PowerSilk" (low stretch copolymer monofilament).

1000 E. U.S. Hwy. 69 • Emory, TX 75440  
1-800-408-2028 • www.LFTlures.com