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# THE RIVER

OF THE

# SILVER KINGS

Tarpon  
Fishing In  
Costa Rica

By Riley Love





ABOVE: Angler on a Wintry Lake, by Chinese painter Ma Yuan from the Song Dynasty, sums up the author's feelings on fishing.

RIGHT: Fly fishing is a popular and challenging way to battle tarpon.



Still think of the old painting from time to time. In a quiet, intuitive moment it will spread across the whole frontal view from the Captain Kirk's chair of my mind. Renown historically as the first record of the fishing reel, I described it in an article on the evolution of modern fishing years ago. But that is not why it comes to mind.

"Angler on a Wintry Lake," by Ma Yuan (1160-1225) of China's Song Dynasty, was a masterpiece in its day. Such a simple piece of art. The fisherman huddles against the chill in his boat, rod in hand, dwelling in quiet solitude. There is only the mild swirl of current about the boat's hull to create any sense of action. Therein why it haunts: the

simplicity of expression of a man who sought out this lonely moment. He is one with the unkind wind, the gray sky, the flowing water – these elements. Minimal, stoic, eloquent expression – he becomes an element himself. Better to be fishing here and now than to be anywhere else in the world. Separated by 900 years, a culture and language from the far side of the globe ... he is me.

The boat rocks lightly, sitting in the outgoing current of the Rio Colorado as it meets the mild roll coming in from the Atlantic. Watching towering purple rain cells dropping dark curtains against the edge of the distant horizon, it's easy to give one's self over to meditative contemplation.

Again, the angler becomes an element too. Brown river water demarks like a knife's cut against the salty green, pushing out for miles. We pass with its flow.

#### ELEMENTS

We are here to reckon with the monarchs of this domain: tarpon, the "Silver Kings." True lords, they are alone at the top of the food chain in this environment. Like all gamefish they are creatures of cycles. This time of the late fall takes them out of the river's mouth and into the ocean. The rainy season begins the end of May and resolves in December. However, the eastern coast of Costa Rica receives significantly less rainfall than the Pacific side, particularly in this window of

time in October. During the dry season, tarpon and snook are taken more in the rivers and lagoons. Very small tarpon, less than 12 inches are found there. They arrive after an amazing journey. They are known to spawn far offshore in deep water. Then very small planktonic leptocephalus larvae, shaped like a tiny eel and almost transparent, complete a 20- to 50-day period of traveling with currents into these brackish waters to continue their development. They reach sexual maturity in 6 to 13 years, when they are about 4 feet long. They are thought to live about 55 years. One captive fish at Chicago's Shedd Aquarium died at age 64. Thus, a grand dame might have seniority to the angler she encounters.

There is other fishing here in Costa Rica. Farther offshore, pulling for tuna is productive. There are guapote, the "rainbow bass," and machaca in the lagoons. But the tarpon fishery began development in the early 1970s and accounts for most of the travel to this area of the country's Atlantic coast. Barra de Colorado is the 31-mile-long wildlife reserve that includes these rivers, canal, lagoons and marshes. There are several in Costa Rica, which also dedicates 25 percent of its country to national parks, more than any other country in the world. There is the small community of Barra with a grassy airstrip.

It is said that nothing can kill a tarpon except a shark, or a temperature change greater than 22 degrees in less than 72 hours. Those elements don't exist here. Other things



  
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While Costa Rica and much of the world has changed over the last 40 years, Silver King Lodge has remained a model of organization and a pleasure to call home base during a tarpon trip. You'll need a good place to recover after a hearty battle with one of these big fish.



can happen to tarpon ... and six of them had landed in a Cessna Caravan this morning.

Forty years of fishing trips to Costa Rica has produced a sense of melancholy over the accelerating changes, particularly to the mountainous Pacific. There's beauty that still halts the pulse, but the advent of heavy equipment within recent decades has altered the native aspect. But there is little new expansion here along this part of flat eastern coastal plain. The tarpon lodges are the mainstay locally. The elements remain.

It's been years since my last visit to Silver King Lodge. It hasn't changed. A model of organization, it still runs like a Swiss watch ... that's dated isn't it? It runs like an Apple Watch Series 5.

After a run through la boca, the

mouth of the river, we make drifts in 20 to 60 feet of water. They don't make this run at night and you understand why. Part of the year they will anchor up there and let lures work their action in the strong current. Each boat was well equipped with bait rods, spincasters with jigs and a fly rod if you didn't bring your own. The baits were kept up in the middle of the water column to avoid gafftopsail catfish and stingrays on the bottom. Intermittent pauses with a bait rig produce more local "sardines" of several species.

Sojourning farther north, we make drifts in sight of the Nicaraguan border. Things are relatively quiet these days. There's a dull electronic hum, since clocks don't tick anymore, counting down the moments until Daniel Ortega and the Sandinistas next turn for

a dose of popular revolution. Unnatural elements.

Democratic Costa Rica, on the other hand, has been the most stable society south of the U.S. border in the Americas. It's sometimes called the "Switzerland of Central America," both because of its pastoral beauty and political peacefulness.

Tarpon drive me as nuts as politicians – rolling and gulping air on the surface even when they have no interest in feeding ... as sincere as a campaign handshake. They have an airbladder attached to their esophagus, which is similar to lung alveolar tissue. Richly vascular, it can transfer the oxygen from air into their bloodstream. This "air breathing" gives them an advantage in brackish, low-oxygen-saturated water environments while they are developing. A study on adult fish that enclosed

them in a lidded structure where they could get oxygen only from the water found they still flourished. The conclusion is that as adults they persist with this gulping as a learned but unnecessary behavior. I have decided they do it intentionally, as a prostate exam-type finger thrust through my optic nerves into the cerebral cortex.

The boat continues its hypnotic rocking. The gravity of the sun and moon has brought in the tide- elements since the formation of the world, oblivious to the dealings of man. But the tarpon sense this and it's time for a big-league strike. A rod bends in a spine-breaking U, and the reel screams. Los Reyes de las Plata, there's nothing quite like the Silver Kings when their buttons are pushed. It's on in an instant and a thousand liters of ocean surface is torn into water molecules. You get a 10-second crash course on hydrodynamics, subchapter ballistics. The argent glint from the sunlight on the jewelry of their giant silver scales takes the breath away. Chromatic elements.

Megalops atlanticus was named by French zoologist and parasitologist, Achille Valenciennes of the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle in 1847. He had been charged with the Linnaean classification of the animals described by Alexander von Humboldt after his expeditions to the Americas at the beginning of the 19th century. Fossil records of their forbears date back 100 million years to the Ypresian stage of the Paleogene period.

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You might think you're in good shape from working out at the gym, but these big tarpon will remind you who's boss ... and it's not you.

This nitpicking historical reverie was a result of a brain trance-like state from physical assault, 45 minutes into the ass kicking I was receiving from this fish. I was covered in sweat and my head was spinning much further out – way past these innocent bits of antique reference. I was getting '60s flashbacks and hearing Jimi Hendrix play “Purple Haze.” She hadn’t heard about all the “skill” I’d developed over the years and my workouts at the gym. After we finally released her, I demonstrated my crab-walk technique to the beer cooler. At least that “element” proved useful.

There have been several large polls of professional fishermen in recent years ranking the top sportfishing

species of the world. In the biggest overall, tarpon ranked No. 2 behind blue marlin, and ahead of the mako shark. Among fly fishermen only, the tarpon came out on top. As a population, these were the largest tarpon on average I’d encountered anywhere in the Americas. Seventy percent of the fish we hooked were over 100 pounds. The big fish in our quick three days of fishing was 180. This was trophy fish water for damn sure.

The word Colorado means “colored red” in Spanish, doubtless from the silty content of this watercourse. But for those who have given themselves over to the elements of its flow, we will ever think of this river as El Rio de los Reyes de las Plata – “The River of the Silver Kings.” 

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**RILEY LOVE** is a physician and writer living in Kentucky. Some of his first steps brought him to the water’s edge and he has been traveling the world to fish ever since. Beginning with the lakes and streams of the Midwest, he is part of a three-generation tradition of discovering back-country destinations for sport fishing on multiple continents.

After 50 years of fishing travel, his only goals are to go somewhere new and try something different again this year. He also has a home in Key Largo, Fla., where he regularly fishes and also scuba dives. He has published more than two dozen articles on a variety of subjects but his chief interest is the fact and fiction of fishing. He is a member of the International Game Fish Association and The Billfish Foundation.