



ANGLING  
ON THE FLY



# Amazon Peacock Bass 2010

A Jungle Fly Fishing Adventure

*November 5 - 14, 2010*

As I sit here on our flight back to Miami, I reflect upon my group's wonderful week of fishing in the Amazon. This was my third trip to the Amazon and was certainly a week that would show many more facets of this very diverse environment. Our group of eight included George and Doug from the Lodi area, Shiz from San Jose, Steve and Joan from Placerville, Wade from Los Angeles, and Jim and myself from the Sacramento area. At the outset, we had heard reports of severe droughts in the Amazon Basin and wondered where our group would be camped. On approach to Manaus, we peered down and saw boat after boat stranded high and dry because the water levels near Manaus had dropped to 35+ year lows.



Despite this fact, my pre-trip communications with our outfitter, River Plate Outfitters, assured me that they had a camp with decent water levels for us to fish. Apparently, after the media reports of drought on the Rio Negro, the northern region of the basin began receiving heavy rainfall. Water levels on many of the tributaries flowing from the northern state of Roraima were up and rising.



Upon arriving Manaus, we were informed by our ground host, Gabriel, that we would be headed for one of RPO's exclusive rivers – the Jufari River. We then boarded a Cessna Caravan float plane and our adventure began. As we flew from Manaus along the Rio Negro, it was amazing to see the drastic contrast of vast, exposed sandbars and extreme low water observed on the left side of the plane, and higher water and even blown out rivers flowing from the north on the right side of the plane. This was a lesson in itself,... it was a reminder

that the Amazon Basin is massive, and the myriad of micro-climates can yield dramatically different conditions in one part of the basin versus another.

After a 1 ½ hour flight, the float plane touched down on the Jufari River where our camp guides greeted us in their boats. We boarded the boats and motored 15 minutes upriver toward camp. At first glance, we noticed that the water levels looked ideal – exposed sandbars in some areas and the base of the trees were just above the water line. There was no sign of drought on this river. Once again, this was confirmation that River Plate Outfitters' mobile camp strategy is best able to adapt to the dynamic conditions of the Amazon.



Upon arriving camp the staff scurried over to greet us with welcome drinks and snacks. We all toasted to a safe arrival at camp and looked forward to a fun week of fishing on the Jufari. Our focus then turned to rigging our rods for the week of fishing to come. Based on the water levels, most rigged a topwater setup and an I-line setup. One of the biggest advancements in fly line design has been the RIO Tropical Outbound Short flylines. These lines are designed to cast the large flies and heavy leaders necessary for fishing Peacock Bass. The most common rod weight amongst the group was a 9 weight. This size is castable all day, and still provides the power to battle a trophy double-digit Peacock Bass. Group member,

Doug, commented that he tried fishing an 8 weight one day and was amazed that even a 4 – 5 pound fish would torque his rod to the maximum and would definitely feel under-gunned if he hooked a trophy fish. On the other hand, a few other group members fished their ten weights with RIO OBS 11 weight lines with chicken sized flies and said that it was just too much “work” to fish all day long. So, it was agreed that a 9 weight was the sweet-spot for a rod setup.



The next day our group commenced our first day of fishing and, throughout the day, was subjected to the weather extremes of the Amazon. In the morning, the heat and humidity was intense... it is so important that an angler's intake of fluids keeps up with this tropical heat and the acclimation of the body in this environ. Then, in the afternoon the clouds advanced and brought with them a mass deluge of rain. Yes, this was a reminder that we were in the midst of the world's largest rainforest. The tepid rainfall was welcomed as it cooled the air and made fishing more comfortable. Throughout our week, it rained heavily almost every afternoon. Although this weather kept the tropical heat at bay, it also yielded rising river levels throughout the week and would influence our camp locale throughout the week.



This week was a trip full of extremes... from scorching heat and humidity to heavy rainfall, drought conditions on some rivers to high water on others, and even the daily fish count through the week. In the earlier part of the week, we were on the lower part of the river. In the first couple of days, good numbers of fish were landed and a number of trophy Azuls were landed. Shiz landed 3 trophy Azul Peacocks on Day Zero of the trip. Most memorable, his first cast of the trip yielded an Azul Peacock of 12 pounds! Of course, he was fishing his trusty "Judy's F/T Clouser" in blue/white – a fly that has yielded him numerous trophy Peacocks on various trips to the Amazon.

On Day One, the stars aligned for me somehow and I finally hit a personal-best on a beautiful Azul that was cruising in 18 inches of water. While Shiz and I were focused fishing to some busting fish on the left, our guide Zaza suddenly spotted a pair of trophy fish off the right side of the boat. I quickly backhanded my fly line and Reducer fly (tied by Rob Anderson) in front of these fish and, in a blink of an eye, my line went tight and screamed off like a bonefish on a flat. This fish got on the reel and peeled off 20+ yards of backing while the line was rooster-tailing across the surface. EPIC! I was fortunate to be able to direct him away from snags and finally bring him to hand. The power of a fish this size is incredible... I was completely dripping with sweat and my heart was racing. I had landed fish to 19 pounds on previous trips, but I peered at this fish as Zaza boga'd it and thought... could it be



possible that I have hit a new personal best? YES! Zaza confirmed that it was a tad over 20 pounds! It was truly a highlight moment in my angling journeys. To be blessed with a Peacock Bass of this size is truly a gift.



We camped on the lower half of the Jufari this week. The first thing that many of us noticed was the difference in topography from other rivers our group had fished in the past. We noticed that many of the trees were quite short in height. It was explained that great expanses of this region were flood plain and this affected the growth patterns and cycles of the trees. It was quite apparent that the trees growing on high bluffs that were above the flood water line tended to be the tallest and most robust. Then, the lower lying areas would have very sparse younger trees. Another observation on this trip was

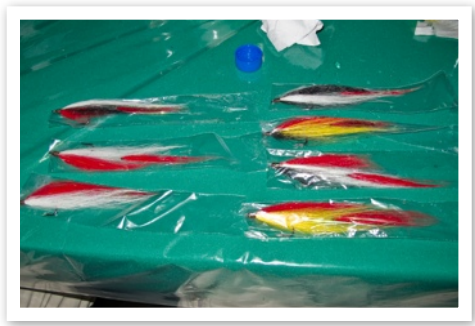
the abundance of bird life that we saw around the river. We saw a variety of birds of prey, herons, Macaws, and Parrots. The most comical were the Parrots, who always flew in mated pairs and were quite noisy as if they were a bickering couple debating whether to go right or go left to get somewhere. In addition, we had sightings of otters, dolphins, caiman, crocs, turtles, and a variety of other species.

On Day Two and Three of our trip, the river continued to rise and the camp was moved upriver in hopes of finding lower water levels and better fishing conditions. To our surprise, the water levels upriver seem relatively higher than they were downriver. Apparently, the river and its braids were narrower in this region and less able to handle the influx of rainfall from upriver. The river level rose above the base of the trees in some areas and this affected our fishing. On these two days, our group's daily fish count was the lowest of the trip with 20 – 30 Peacock Bass landed per boat. However, each day an angler or two would land a trophy double-digit Azul.

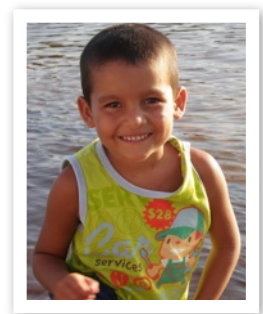


As our week progressed, we got to know our camp manager, Pelado, much better. It is always intriguing to get a local perspective on the Amazon and its fisheries. Pelado had more than two decades of guiding anglers in the Amazon before being promoted to a camp manager with RPO. His time guiding fly anglers developed his knowledge of fly design. The end result yielded a unique fly that he developed to imitate a Barracuda, a fish that Peacock Bass love to eat. At first glance, it looks like a simple skinny version of Lefty's Deceiver. However, it was explained to us that the key element to

this fly was its movement through the water. Many baitfish designs these days produce a jigging action, which in many instances produces fish quite consistently. However, Pelado explained that Barracuda move on a level plane through the water column, not up and down. Finally, Pelado incorporated an extended red tail to the fly – a key marking on the Amazon’s Barracuda. Thankfully, Pelado was willing to tie some of these for our group and they were very effective throughout our trip. The highlight for this fly was when 72 Peacocks were landed on one single “Pelado Fly” on Day Three.



After relatively slower fishing around the upriver camp for a couple of days, it was decided by Heraldo, Pelado, and the guides that our camp should be moved back downriver to the first camp site. The guides agreed that the fishing was going to be better downriver where the river braided out into a multitude of channels and lagoons. The layout of the river downriver reminded me of the CA Delta in some ways. A webbed network of waterways that created myriad of holding and feeding lies for fish.

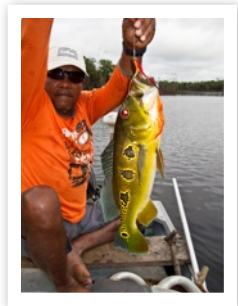


One evening, Heraldo said he wanted to introduce someone to me. We walked past the staff quarters of the camp toward a boat that looked like it was out of a book called the “Amazon Queen”. As I approached, a man name Manuel held out his hand with pride and a smile. Manuel was one of the “gatekeepers” for RPO on the Jufari River. He was a citizen of the nearby village of Caju and his primary responsibility was to continually patrol the river in his boat and ensure that no other competing outfitters were encroaching on RPO’s exclusive river. In addition, he also was given the responsibility of ensuring that the local fisherman were not harvesting Peacock Bass from these waters and following all rules agreed between RPO and the village of Caju. RPO purchased the boat and motor for

Manuel, provides the fuel, and pays him to be the full-time monitor of this part of the river. This was, yet another, example of the amazing logistics and support that RPO provides to ensure that their rivers yield a good fishing experience for anglers, while employing and supporting the local communities.

On this trip, our group learned about the logistical, political, and conservational efforts that go into securing an “exclusive river program” offered by RPO. Most anglers view an “exclusive” program as the important fact that their additional paid cost ensures that no other outfitters will be “sharing” the same fishery. As important as this is, there is so much more to RPO’s exclusive river program than just yielding a quality fishing ex-

perience. Our host, Herald, and camp manager, Pelado, shared with us the fundamental purpose and principal of RPO creating an exclusive program. RPO has various rivers that are exclusive to their camps only and in return RPO works intimately with the local communities along these rivers to support their livelihood in return for them allowing us to fish “their waters”. This interdependent relationship of RPO and the local communities provides support for these communities through stipends and material goods such as boats, motors, pharmaceuticals, infrastructure, etc. RPO recognizes that these rivers belong to these communities and respects their livelihood from the same by supplementing the people with goods and services. In too many places around the world, we see exploitation of native people and their resources. So, it is with great respect that I commend RPO for operating with appreciation and giving back to these communities. It turns out to be a win for the local communities, RPO, and anglers alike. This week, our group would be fishing the waters near the village of Caju.



Throughout the week, our group compared fishing notes and a common theme emerged. The now higher water allowed many of the smaller Peacock Bass to reside around submerged structure such as the base of trees or low lying branches. It was these areas where many Butterfly Peacocks would dart out and pounce on your fly. The closer you could present your fly to the structure, the better chance you were going to get a grab. Steve topped the week with a gorgeous 8 pound Butterfly Peacock.

Next, this week of fishing seemed to be fickle at times when fishing subsurface,... with the fish wanting just the right presentation. Jim and Wade discovered earlier in the week that often the Peacocks wanted a “falling-fly” presentation. Specifically, the presentation would be a few strips of the fly, followed by a long pause that would allow the fly to fall as if injured. Most often, the fish would grab on the drop. Another discovery was that, when you got a fish following your fly back to the boat and not committed, you could sometimes produce a strike by “fluffing” the fly next to the boat. It was amazing how many times a fish would slam the fly when you teased it next to the boat. Finally, this week revealed another required tactic to hook these Peacocks. It felt as if we were sometimes getting short strikes or tail-grabs. We would feel for the grab, set the hook, and then only have the fish on for a head shake or two. It was at that point when we realized that it was helpful to visually watch your fly as it was retrieved back to the boat. As soon as you saw a fish dart at your fly and/or your fly disappear, SET THE HOOK. It was amazing how many more fish would be hooked and landed by employing this tactic. The most amazing part of this tactic is that most often we never felt the grab when these fish ate the fly.

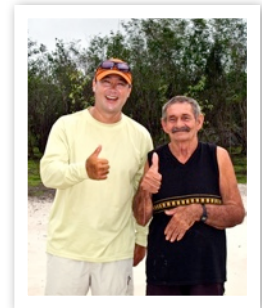


This week's conditions yielded some of the best topwater fishing that my group has ever experienced. Now, I know that this sounds counterintuitive, but often when the sub-surface bite would get slow we would switch to topwater and get immediate grabs from the Peacock Bass. Jim focused much of his fishing this past week on topwater and fished a variety of topwater flies that proved effective. We each had excellent topwater action around structure-lined areas with a Saltwater Popper (UFM), Ron Dong Crease Fly, Bisharat's Pole Dancer, Haskin's Magnum Gurgler and SubZero, or Popovic's Banger. I have no explanation for why rising water conditions would produce better topwater fishing, but I guess this yet another one of the Amazon's fishing mysteries. So, this confirms the need to be thorough in your fly selection and be flexible in your approach when fishing the Amazon.



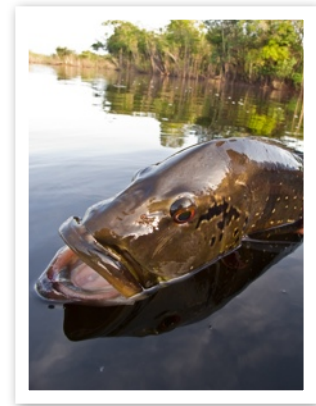
The final days of fishing downriver produced some very consistent action. Each boat reported in each day with solid numbers of Peacock Bass landed. The group spread out on the lower region of the Jufari and it was a rare occasion that we would cross paths with other boats in our group. This is an experience where you feel truly remote... almost, as if this jungle river was your private fishing playground.

During this week, I had the fortunate opportunity to meet the founder of the local village of Caju. He was visiting our camp because he was awaiting the delivery of some pain medications for his broken arm. He looked to be in pain, so I offered him some pain meds to hold him over until the delivery boat arrived the next day or so. He graciously thanked me with a genuine smile and a handshake. And of course, I thanked him for allowing our group to fish his local waters.



Throughout the week of fishing, it was often commented by the group and that the most "fun" fish were the Pacas. These are the younger, juvenile stage of the mighty behemoth Azul Peacocks. We all agreed that these fish, pound for pound, fought much harder than the Butterfly Peacocks, but yet fishing for them was quite different. Often, we found the Pacas out toward the middle of a lagoon or along the current seams of a channel. Sometimes, we would see Pacas busting bait in the middle of the lagoon and fish to them run-and-gun style. When you found them, often you could hook 5 – 10 of them

before they moved on. George and Doug had some strong fishing sessions, with most of these Pacas ranging in size from 2 – 5 pounds. However, Shiz topped the week with a Paca that weighed in at almost 10 pounds! It was an amazing event that unfolded with the fish being spotted in 18 inches of water. We saw the wake of this large fish cruising along the tree-line of a flat and Shiz made a perfect presentation leading the fish. The wake of the fish turned into a swirl as the fish lunged toward Shiz's fly. Then, all hell broke loose as the fish went on a long run, typical of a shallow water fight. Then, the fish turned back toward the boat and found a submerged snag to try to free itself. Our guide Deco, quickly saw the disaster unfolding and motored up to the snag and carefully unwrapped the fly line. Soon after, Shiz landed this beautiful Paca and we celebrated this awesome fish.



The final count for our week of fishing was 1,418 total Peacocks landed, including 12 Azuls of double digit size. Everyone in our group landed a trophy Peacock during the week. Different from other trips in the past, this week's fishing for trophy fish was much more of a "flats fishing" style of pursuit. Often, we could spot the fish in a lagoon or flat by the wake that it pushed while cruising. The guide would then pursue and position the boat for a shot at the fish. This added to the suspense and made it much more of a visual and technical game. I can personally account for a number of "blown shots" on my part for various angling errors – stepping on my running line, lining the fish, etc. However, if an angler properly delivered the fly it would usually get eaten.

Steve and Joan were the strong finishers for the week by landing 12 and 19 pounders on the last day of fishing. They were both fishing a red and yellow Pelado Fly – another testament that sparse flies fished very well on this trip. After recapping the trip with our group, it was noted that the required fishing tactics and productive flies this past week were very different from previous trips. This spoke for the need to be flexible, creative, and tenacious in your approach to fishing for Peacocks. By the end of the week, our group was fishing sparse subsurface flies to stay in the action. Some of us, were even going to the extent of modifying our existing flies by cutting out material and reshaping them to get a slimmer profile. This confirmed the need to have a variety of flies on any trip to the Amazon. For sure, on my next trip this coming January I will have a good selection of sparser flies, including the Pelato Fly.



In final, more than anything,... this turned out to be a most memorable week of fishing with friends. We had a solid week of fishing, but I most remember the good times and laughter we shared throughout the week. It was the perfect week of travel, fishing, conversation, and memories. I eagerly look forward to my next adventure with these friends.

Good Fishing to All,  
Keith

### Keith's Tackle Setup:

Rod: Sage Xi3 990-4  
Reel: Sage 6080  
Fly Lines: RIO Tropical Outbound Short WF9-F (floating); RIO Tropical Outbound Short WF9-F/I (clear tip); RIO Deep Sea 400 (fast sink tip)  
Leader Material: RIO FlouroFlex 44# and 52# (sub-surface); RIO Max 40# (topwater)

### Top Producing Flies:

#### Topwater

Bisharat's Pole Dancer  
Saltwater Popper (red/white)  
Ron Dong Crease Fly  
Haskin's Magnum Gurgler  
Popovic's Banger

#### Surbsurface

Thalken's Cruiser (Peacock, Mullet)  
Anderson's Reducer (Baby Peacock, Jacunda, and Night Rider)  
Lefty's Deceiver (red/white, red/yellow)  
FT Clouser (blue/white)  
Bisharat's AirHead (red/yellow)  
Fuch's Agitator  
Pelado Fly (red/yellow, red/white)

