

Jau catfish can exceed 100lbs in the Amazon.



00

CATFISH OF MATO GROSSO

RICHARD LOPEZ

I now live part of the year in Manaus, Brazil, smack in the middle of the Amazonian rain forest. Since I first set foot on Brazilian soil my thoughts had been mostly on catching an arapaima, not in the stock ponds of Thailand, but in Brazil where nature intended them to live and not export too. Okay I know that we all fish for non native fish particularly when we fish for the wels, other than the carp and trout, probably one of the most widely introduced fish on the planet. Still there's nothing like catching a fish on its home soil. I soon located and caught my first wild Brazilian arapaima of 175lb in an area where they can be legally fished for. Other than on private land, wild fish are protected in Brazil.

My other ambition was to catch a piraiba, the giant catfish of The Amazon. Information on this migratory fish is very limited and so are the number of anglers that have had the chance to catch this elusive fish, reputed to grow to over 10ft in length and weigh in excess of 500lbs, one of the largest catfish in the world, second only to the Mekong catfish. The fish of local legends, so little is known about this species, it is believed that there are more than two related species of this fish, and that it migrates hundreds of miles each year to spawn. Nobody really knows as it's so difficult to study the movements of these fish. A few anglers have had some success outside of Brazil, my good friends Joe Taylor and Nick Berridge have been involved in pioneering the piraiba fishing in Surinam. But I wanted to find a location in Brazil. Nearly everyone you ask knows where there are giant piraiba, most will tell you in the deepest water of the Amazon, and nearly always where the two major

Amazonian rivers, the Negro and the Blanco meet. When asked if they can point me in the direction of anyone that has caught in those areas the answer is nearly always the same "No, but they are definitely there" The trouble with Amazonian Brazilians it seems that the words "I don't know" (eu nao sei) is not in their vocabulary, or they just want to be helpful to a point that you end up either wasting your time or simply running around in circles.

I had been fishing mostly for peacock bass with some success, they are a great sporting fish and more than capable of smashing 50lb braid on their first strike. My luck changed by a chance meeting with a like-minded angler, whilst enjoying a local tackle shop's Wednesday evening happy hour (barbeque and beverages after normal closing time) Here, anglers meet and chat amongst themselves in a relaxed and (for those who stay until late) intoxicated state. I suggest that happy hour should be made compulsory here too. This person through a farmer and landowner acquaintance had just gained permission to stay and fish within an Indian reserve. I was informed that the waters within the reserve had produced big catfish in the form of redtails, jau, and the piraiba. It is very rare for someone to get permission to set foot, let alone stay and fish within an Indian reserve.

Unfortunately because of work commitments in the UK it wasn't possible for me to visit the reserve until last August. The reserve lies just south of Amazonia in the state of Mato Grosso, it is a huge region, covering hundreds of square kilometres, with a number of tribes sharing the reserve. This particular village is situated at the junction of the

three rivers that form the Xingu river, a wonderful place with wonderful fishing, and is only reachable by river or air.

The journey starts at Heathrow, flying to Sinop, Mato Grosso, via Sao Paulo and Cuiaba. From Sinop we fly for just under the hour to the village in two small, single engined four passenger airplanes. The Indian chief allows up to eight visitors on his land at any one time, which is normally made up of five anglers and three guides/helpers. Because of the length and width of the makeshift dirt landing strip, only small planes can land there, that's why two small planes are used to carry the anglers and supplies instead of one larger one.

The accommodation is simple, sleeping off the ground in a single man tent. You have the choice whether to sleep inside or outside one of the communal huts within the native Indian village, I personally preferred outside as it was much cooler. The food is usually something we have caught, for those that do not eat fish there is nearly always chicken on the menu, and for those that do not eat fish or chicken, there is always plenty of rice to go with your rice. Joking apart, anyone with a particular dietary requirement can be catered for (with advance warning). Oh I nearly forgot, alcohol is strictly forbidden within the reserve. Alcohol, Indians and sharp objects are not a good mixture.

There are two species of catfish: the redbtail and the jau that grow to over 100lb and the piraiba that grows to well over 200lb within the reserve. All three species

can be caught using the same method. A large dead or live bait fished on the bottom of the deeper runs, but with a little fine tuning you can even be a bit selective.

The redbtail catfish is a beautiful looking fish with its broad heavy head, dark grey flanks with a white belly and that beautiful bright red tail. The redbtail moves out of the deeper water at dusk to hunt in the shallows. A bait presented in shallower water close to the deeper runs during dusk often results in a take or two. Once these fish clamp down on a bait they rarely let go, sometimes you can land fish that have not even been hooked, they have just been holding on to your bait! The redbtail will pick up a bait and run. Once hooked it will nearly always go directly for the nearest cover. All you can do is hope that you can stop it. There are fish that will run towards the deeper water and you may have to follow them by boat, there you will have the best chance of subduing them. With all the big three, fishing is done from an anchored boat. A buoy should be attached to the end of anchor rope allowing you untie the rope to follow the fish without having to lift the anchor. Plus you can return to the exact same position by just picking up the anchor rope again.

The jau, prefers a rocky bottom and deep broken water, find that and you have a good chance of finding them. A stocky muscular fish and brownish in colour, they are not the best fighter compared to the other two, short powerful runs are the norm, but they soon run out of puff. The jau will feed throughout the

The legendary piraiba – one of the biggest species of freshwater fish on the planet.



A redbtail catfish, probably the best looking cat in Amazonia.



day and night, I have personally not found any time of day better than another.

The piraiba, is the giant amongst them all. With a broad flattish head, grey in colour with a white under belly. The upper and lower rays of the caudal fin are extended into long filaments but are only found in juveniles and sub adults, these are lost on reaching adulthood. The piraiba is a very powerful fish, once hooked it will generally run out of the deeper water where it was hooked, and has to be followed by boat. The bigger fish, **WILL** de-spool you. Once you have caught up with it, especially again with the bigger fish, it will often take you back to the deeper water. Once there it will hug the bottom towing the boat up and down. The fights can last over an hour, even with heavy tackle. The best way to land a piraiba once it's ready, is to tow it to the shallows, preferably a beach or sand bar. Waller gripping as you would do for the wels catfish is the best way of landing all three species of catfish. All of them have pads instead of teeth very similar to those of the wels. The jau will be most obliging, the redbtail, once it has been persuaded to open its mouth will promptly clamp down on your gloved hand. The piraiba unlike the other two has an under slung lower jaw. Thus making the chances of having your arm blooded much greater when gloving or handling the fish.

Tackle for all three of these catfish species is much the same as I use for boat fishing on the Continent for the wels catfish, with the exception of a wire trace if the piranha are active. I use boat rods,

my preference being the Shakespeare Ugly Stik type of rod that uses glass fibre as well as carbon in its construction. This is more than capable of taking the knocks and bangs of boat fishing. Rods made solely of carbon fibre are not as robust. Although after saying that, the Sports Trek Boat Travel rod by Fox looks like it would stand up to that sort of punishment, and I will be giving it a go on my next trip, plus it has the advantage of packing down to only 21 inches! At the cheaper end of the market Ron Thompson markets a boat rod called the Hardcore 2, the fittings as you would expect from a rod retailing at around a third of the price of the Ugly Stik are not of the best quality, but the blanks are excellent for big catfish. A rod that's around 7 foot long and rated 20lb to 30lb, with a forgiving tip and a powerful middle and butt section is my preference when using braid. The braid I use is 65 kilo dyneema, loaded on to a couple of old lever drag Penn 25 GLS's. I also have a couple of Shimano TLD 15's as back up. I do not like level winds when using heavy gear, the simpler the reel is the better, less things to break. Spares for broken reels are impossible to find deep in the rain forest. Trace materials are either 24 inches of 100 kilo Kevlar or 200lb crimped nylon coated wire with a 200lb rated swivel at one end and either a size 6/0 or 8/0 Maruto Eagle Wave hook at the other, with a 6 or 8 oz lead to hold the whole thing on the bottom. All terminal tackle other than the wire trace can be found on the Catfish Conservation Group online shop.

During my visit, it was decided to test fish one of the many lakes that can be found within the reserve, these lakes were formed by the rivers flooding in the rainy season then left isolated during the dry season. This particular lake, held the legend that a fire breathing dragon lives there. Such was the belief that the legend was true that no Indian had dared enter the area. The Indian chief was keen to see for himself whether the legend was true. In all, four anglers, the chief and four of his men went along. Part of the way from the river to the lake had to be cut through thick forest and the 2 kilometre journey took well over an hour. On a short break in the journey the chief told me about the dream he'd had the night before, he told me that everything would be okay, and that we would not find a dragon living there. I told him that I was sure he was correct and that all would be as it was in his dream. Once we reached the lake we fished for a couple of hours,

and lure caught giant trahira, trahira, peacock bass and loads of piranhas. The lake also held a large number of very curious spectacled caiman crocodiles, which swam up to investigate us whilst we were wading in water up to waist deep, I am positive that they had never ever seen a human being before. The chief was so relieved when he found that there wasn't a dragon living on his land (at least not at home when we visited).

Other than the catfish there are giant trahira and payara that grow to specimen sizes within the reserve.

In all the reserve is a wonderful place, with wonderful people and brilliant fishing. There are few places in the world where you can find so many different species of specimen sizes and lots of them. If anyone wishes to know more, or would like to visit and fish the reserve I can be reached at:

richardlopez@btinternet.com