

LIFELIST ANGLING THE PERUVIAN AMAZON: AN EXPEDITION REPORT


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The Amazon. Home to over 5,600 species of fish, the world's largest river system is a dream destination for many anglers and nature enthusiasts. Inspired by all I'd learned about the Amazon from cartoons, textbooks, magazines, documentaries, and Jeremy Wade's *River Monsters* series, I began to seriously research fishing opportunities in the region shortly after my thirtieth birthday.

After some Google searching and a perusal of TripAdvisor reviews, I identified a very promising lodge located on the Amazon River near Iquitos, Peru. I pitched the trip idea via an email to my angling acquaintances in 2015 and six of us agreed to plan the trip for the following August. So I went ahead and booked a week at Otorongo Expeditions Jungle Lodge and purchased our airfare. I was thrilled to have committed to a two-week trip to Peru, but things can happen when you plan a trip a full year in advance. In April of 2016 I fell and fractured a rib. It was a miserable experience that greatly hampered my mobility and left me worrying how my misfortune would affect my ability to travel. In the months leading up to the big trip, my wife and I also decided that we would be going separate ways in life. Despite that conclusion we remain friends and, having already invested a lot of money in the trip, decided we would travel together as planned.

Fortunately, when August 4 arrived my rib had recovered and Joy and I hopped on the plane brimming with excitement. The flight from Detroit to Lima, including a quick layover and



Redeye Piranha (*Serrasalmus rhombeus*). Joy's first catch of the trip.

Photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Josh Leisen grew up hiking limestone bluffs and fishing the big rivers, backwater sloughs, and trout streams surrounding his Upper Mississippi River Valley hometown of Red Wing, Minnesota. He became seriously interested in lifelist fishing (the pursuit of new fish species via hook and line angling) while working towards his B.A. in Geography at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. In 2010 he moved to Columbia, SC, and completed his master's in Geography from the University of South Carolina in 2012. Then, after taking a few months to volunteer, travel, and fish in Central America, he returned to the Midwest. He currently lives in Gaylord, Michigan, where he works as a watershed project manager at the nonprofit conservation organization Huron Pines. Josh has traveled extensively in search of new fish species in the company of like-minded anglers from around the world. Check out his adventure angling blog, fish photo galleries, personal lifelist and more at lifelistfishing.com.



Sampling jungle rum on the way to Otorongo Lodge (from left): Joy Leisen, George Brinkman, Ken Tse, Michael Verdierame, Ben Cantrell, and Josh Leisen.

lunch at the Miami airport, went smoothly and our shuttle driver was awaiting us at baggage claim to bring us to Machu Picchu Suites.

After our lone night in Lima, and with the better part of a day to spend in Peru's bustling capital of nearly 10 million, we chose to explore the very much worthwhile Parque de las Leyendas Zoo. On the evening of August 5, we returned to the airport, we met up with fellow lifelist angler Kenneth Tse near the departure gate. Ken and I had exchanged emails, interacted on fishing forums, and commented on each other's Facebook posts for years, but this was our first face-to-face meeting. Ken joined Joy and I at an airport café and shared his amazing photos and stories from the Salcantay trek, Machu Picchu, and Cusco. We jealously looked at pictures of a tetra (*Acrobrycon ipanquianus*) he caught in the Rio Urubamba, in the shadow of Machu Picchu, and I made a note-to-self to bring micro-fishing gear to Aguas Calientes, which Joy and I would visit after our week in the jungle.

After a short flight to Iquitos we shared a taxi ride to Safari Hotel, where our group was staying. Ken was sharing a room with George Brinkman, who was already checked in, but Joy and I had a scare when the man at the desk said he did not have our reservation and there were no open rooms. We presented a copy of the online reservation confirmation but he merely apologized and said our reservation must not have been written down. This whole exchange took place in our clumsy Spanish because the desk attendant did not speak English. It was past midnight and, travel-worn and bogged down with luggage, this was not a pleasant development. As we discussed options, such as sleeping on the floor of Ken and George's room, the man at the desk finally said that there was indeed a vacant room, but there were no towels. "*No necesitamos toallas, sólo queremos una habitación!*" I said in exasperation. When we were finally let into our room, Latin music was blaring loudly from the adjacent casino, but thanks to travel exhaustion and the relief of having a room for the night it hardly mattered and sleep came quickly.

DAY 1: OTORONGO EXPEDITIONS LODGE

At 6 am we got up and made our way to the open-air breakfast lounge, which was warm, bright, and humid. Looking out over the malecón and beyond an expansive plain of grass we caught our first glimpse of the Amazon River. For a good portion of the year those fields are inundated, but we intentionally scheduled our trip during Peru's winter—the dry season—when fishes are forced to occupy river channels and are therefore much easier to locate and catch.

Joy, Ken, George, and I met Ben Cantrell for a quick breakfast, including lots of coffee. Ben—who I hadn't seen since our Ozarks fishing trip and the NANFA Convention in June 2015—showed us photos of cichlids and tetras he'd caught the



George Brinkman with a Dorado Catfish (*Brachyplatystoma rousseauxii*). (Photo by Joy Leisen)

previous day in the Iquitos area. Seeing Ben's photos increased our excitement to wet lines. In a few hours we'd be fishing the Amazon!

We checked out and walked to the Otorongo Expeditions office to settle up and wait for Michael Verdirame, whose flight schedule had been thrown off due to delays. He made an early morning flight and we set off shortly after 8am. We piled in, with our luggage, into three tuk-tuks—ubiquitous three-wheeled motor cars—and rode down to the marina. We then transferred into the Otorongo Expeditions fast river boat.

Even near Iquitos—nearly 2,300 miles upstream from the Atlantic Ocean—the Amazon is more than a mile wide. As the boat drifted away from the dock, I dipped my hand in the warm, murky water—a recognition of having finally arrived after two decades of wistful daydreaming about this river. The boat sped downriver past tropical rainforest and thatch- and tin-roofed homes perched above mile after mile of steep and muddy river bank. We pulled out our fish literature and geeked out over all the potential fish species awaiting us. Halfway to Otorongo Lodge we stopped at a rum distillery, which included a tour of the operation and free samples. After tasting an assortment of rums, we purchased a bottle of the ginger-honey variety and continued downriver to the lodge, which is tucked a couple hundred yards up a small tributary creek.

When we got off the boat, Anthony Giardenelli, the owner of Otorongo Expeditions, and his pet parrots welcomed us to the lodge and the staff showed us to our rooms. Our party wasted no time assembling travel rods and tying rigs during a sudden downpour. The squall passed quickly and we were all eager to get out on the water and start fishing.

We were introduced to our guides as we walked back down to the dock. Joy and I would spend most of the week fishing, laughing, and having an overall good time with Homero. He grabbed some fish for cutbait—knifefish and *Leporinus* caught with a cast net—and the three of us hopped into a small aluminum boat to fish the creek.



Joy with a suspected *Duopalatinus peruanus*. The first fish of the day on August 7, 2016.

We started with small hooks baited with pea-sized cutbait and attached to a wire leader. It did not take long to get bites. Joy got the first fish—a nice Redeye Piranha (*Serrasalmus rhombeus*). Minutes later I got my own Redeye Piranha—species #301 on my angling lifelist. Homero paddled slowly up the creek and we dipped our baits between the branches of fallen trees, which held many fish but also led to frequent snags. My next couple of fishes were both small, long-whiskered catfishes (suspected *Pimelodus blochii* and *Pimelodella cristata*).

Anthony approached us from shore and tossed us some nasty new bait—palm weevil larvae. These giant, yellow, undulating grubs were distinctly foul-smelling and rather disgusting but the fish could not resist those oily morsels. After catching a few more small catfish, we noticed large fish swirling at the surface along a deep hole on the outside bend of the creek. Homero said these were rising pacu and recommended we slap our bait on the water surface to imitate the plopping of dropping fruits a few times before letting them sink. We only caught more small piranhas and catfish before we snagged up and likely spooked the pacu.

Schools of silvery baitfish were attacking our bait near the surface and so we switched to micro rigs (size-24 hooks with tiny morsels of cutbait or weevil). The tactic paid off and Joy and I both landed White Sardina (*Triportheus albus*) before switching back to normal rigs. Homero suggested we plunk the bait into shallow water beneath the shadow of a submerged log for cichlids. Over and over something grabbed my bait but I kept whiffing the hookset. It started to get dark and the equatorial sun sets early, so we headed in for a tasty dinner of rice, piranha, and plantain chips. A couple of us even ate grilled palm weevil larvae. They were crunchy with a smoky flavor—not the best thing I've eaten but certainly not as bad as I had expected. After using the grubs as bait, though, I don't think I could have handled eating a raw, living palm weevil larvae.

After dinner our party split into two motor boats to try night fishing for catfish on the banks of the Amazon River. Joy, George, and I fished with our guides from a bank just up river from the creek mouth. George soon hooked up with an amazing catfish, which would be the only Gilded Catfish (*Brachyplatystoma rousseauxii*) of the trip. I fished downstream and chucked my line out as far into the Amazon as I could. I sat on the bank holding my heavy rod under the brilliant Milky Way, looking across the river to the Southern Cross and feeling the thrum of the swift current tugging my braided line. I soon felt a distinct tap-tap-tap and waited patiently for a stronger take, but that light tapping continued until the line went still.

I reeled in to check the bait and found it missing. After adding a new chunk of fish, I cast again and it didn't take long for the nibbles to continued. This time I set the hook into a fish. It was small, but there was definitely something there. From the dark water I lifted a writhing, twirling, slimy, and nearly blind fish known as the Canero Azul or Blue Whale Catfish (*Cetopsis coecutiens*). This scavenger is a relative of the dreaded candiru, the tiny parasitic catfish reputed to have the nightmarish ability to squirm its way into human orifices when given the chance. [Editor's Note: A common myth that has been generally debunked.] I snapped a few blurry pictures, let the fish go, and tried to wipe its thick slime from my hands. It was time to call it a night, so we headed back to the lodge. Our group convened around the dining room table with Anthony to plan out the next couple of days. We decided that in the morning we would head into a lagoon called Cumaceba Lake to fish for Peacock Bass (*Cichla monoculus*) and spend at least one night camping on an adjacent tributary river to target catfish after dark.

DAY 2: CUMACEBA LAKE AND JUNGLE CAMPING

We all rose early and filed down the dock with gear in hand for our first full day of fishing. We climbed into the big river boat that would be our second home during our week on the Amazon. To our great satisfaction, Anthony provided plenty of hot, strong coffee. We also ate hard-boiled eggs and fresh bananas and took our anti-malarial pills.

One of the guides took a smaller motor boat and towed two small aluminum boats up the river alongside the big river boat. After an hour we left the Amazon to head up a large, fast-flowing tributary and eventually we arrived at the mouth of the small creek leading to Cumaceba Lake. The Otorongo Expeditions crew took advantage of the daylight to set up camp, so we spent twenty minutes fishing the river, which was flowing fast and choked with wood. Joy and I used our heavy rods with heavy sinkers and big chunks of cutbait. We spread out along the bank and made short casts into a deep eddies. The bite was slow under the high sun so I propped my rod against a stump, with bait clicker set, to wait for some action. A brilliant assem-



Paddling our way up the creeks to reach the lagoons was difficult but we were rewarded with many fish.



Cumaceba Lake seemed familiar, like the backwater sloughs I grew up fishing along the Mississippi River. We caught Peacock Bass, Trahira, catfish, piranhas, and other characins and cichlids.



Joy with a nice Trahira (*Hoplias malabaricus*). These toothy fish are like the Bowfin of the Amazon.

blage of butterflies swarmed a spot where someone had peed. We had light nibbles on our lines but I didn't catch anything there. Joy, however, did manage to hook and land a nice new catfish species (suspected *Duopalatinus peruanus*).

With camp set, we grabbed our light rods and select gear and hopped into the small boats, which we paddled like canoes. We navigated up the creek, which was wide near the mouth but became progressively more narrow and difficult to pass as we neared Cumaceba Lake. Several times we had to step out and shove, lift, and wiggle the boats over or through log jams. It must have been more than a mile and it took over an hour to reach our destination. Cumaceba Lake is a long, narrow body of water surrounded by dense rain forest. Downed trees cluttered the perimeter of the lagoon, providing great fish cover and creating challenging casting conditions. Despite being a continent away, this Amazon backwater felt familiar. It reminded me of the murky, wood-choked sloughs of the Upper Mississippi River Valley, where I grew up catching Bowfin (*Amia calva*) and bullheads. But instead of Bowfin there were Trahira (*Hoplias malabaricus*) lurking in the shallows. Likewise, the niches of centrarchids and cyprinids in North America are replaced in the Amazon by a variety of cichlids and characins. Catfishes thrive on both continents, but are much more diverse in South America.

Ben and Ken hooted and hollered as they hooked into their first Peacock Bass. Homero paddled Joy and I around from downed tree to downed tree and we cast inline spinners close to shore and reeled them in through the cover. My first catch was a Tucanfish (*Chalceus erythrurus*)—a beautiful characin with huge gold scales and blood-red fins. I missed my next few hooksets, and then decided to try cutbait. It didn't take me long to catch a Horsehead Pimelodid (*Goeldiella eques*) and a Black-tailed Brycon (*Brycon melanopterus*). Joy landed her first Red-tailed Brycon (*Brycon cephalus*) and Red Piranha (*Pygocentrus nattereri*) on bait before we switched back to lures.

Casting close to shore with inline spinners of various sizes and colors got us into several Trahira. They would strike hard and fight doggedly, and would not stop once they were pulled out of the water. Our fish-gripping tool, which clamps down on the lower jaw, was indispensable. Casting spinners was also effective for Redeye Piranha, my first Peacock Bass, and Joy's first Barred Sorubim (*Pseudoplatystoma fasciatum*). We got hung up on the tree branches often, but Homero patiently paddled us in to retrieve our lures every time.

As we approached a log jam in some deeper water I switched over to a silver and black Rat-L-Trap. Big fish were swirling at the surface, adding excitement to each cast. I got a solid hit, and knew right away it was a good fish. It dove for a second, putting a good bend in my rod and pulling line off the reel. Then it swam up and jumped over and over again, vigorously shaking its head. I could see the amazingly vivid color of



Tucan Fish (*Chalceus erythrurus*) caught on a spinner at Cumaceba Lake.



Highback Piranha (*Serrasalmus serrulatus*).



Monoculus Peacock Bass (*Cichla monoculus*). (Photo by Joy Leisen)

the beautiful fish and with each frenzied leap I worried the big cichlid would toss the lure. But the hooks held and I continued to battle the fish right into Homero's net and into the boat! I was ecstatic to catch such a fine specimen. We took several photographs and released the fish to fight another day.

Joy and I both caught some big pike cichlids on Rat-L-Traps, too. Then a squall blew in and we had to seek cover along the shoreline but still got soaked in the deluge. We didn't stop fishing, though, and Joy landed a small pacu and I got several more brycons and my first Red Piranha. When the rain let up, about a half hour later, our boats convened in the center of the lagoon for a lunch of peanut butter sandwiches and bananas. We decided to head back to camp, but casted along the way and caught a few more Trahira and piranhas. One of those piranha turned out to be another new species for me, the Highback Piranha (*Serrasalmus serrulatus*), which was deeper-bodied and more silvery and compressed than the other piranhas.

Joy had helped Homero paddle us up the creek in the hot sun (by far the harder direction), so I helped Homero paddle back down. It was a pleasant return trip and we thoroughly enjoyed the scenery around us—lush vegetation, a colorful evening sky, dancing dragonflies, and birds and squirrel monkeys moving about and making noise in the canopy overhead.

Back at camp we all ate spaghetti on the boat and passed around a couple bottles of Cusqueña beer before rigging up for some night catfishing. The Granulated Catfish (*Pterodoras granulosus*) bite was hot, and I think we all managed to add this species to our lifelists. I also caught a wide-mouthed little catfish known as the bocon (*Ageneiosus inermis*). To mix up the species, we also crossed the river in the small boats and dropped lines into the swifter current there. The new spot paid dividends, as Joy and I both landed some nice Duckbill Catfish (*Sorubim lima*). The mosquitoes were out in force, but with long sleeves, long pants, and a buff over my neck and chin, they were not too bothersome. The fish bite, however, was fairly slow and we were all getting tired. We eventually reeled up, crossed the river, and climbed into our mosquito nets to sleep. Well, at least to try and sleep. My allergies kept me up all night sneezing and sniffing. But eventually morning arrived.

DAY 3: LITTLE CUMACEBA LAKE

The plan for our second full day was to head back up the creek, but take a split into a smaller lagoon that I'll call Little Cumaceba Lake. It was still challenging to maneuver up the small stream and past the woody debris, but it was a much shorter journey than the path to Cumaceba Lake. While we waited for the boat ahead of us to pass obstacles in the creek, Joy and I took turns dipping micro rigs into the shallow creek. We each caught a couple of new tetra species (*Moenkhausia megalops* and *Tetragonopterus argenteus*) and juvenile Amazon Cichlid (*Cichlasoma amazonarum*).

When we reached Little Cumaceba Lake we fished close to shore, targeting areas with large wood and switching between



Joy with a big Granulated Catfish (*Pterodoras granulosus*).

artificial lures and cutbait. We both caught lots of Brycon and several more Trahira. The new species Joy caught at Little Cumaceba Lake included Black Prochilodus (*Prochilodus nigricans*), Silver Dollar (*Metynnis argenteus*), and Pink-tailed Chalceus (*Chalceus macrolepidotus*), which I failed to catch. We both landed the Saddle Cichlid (*Aequidens tetramerus*) and Wonderful Flag Cichlid (*Mesonauta mirificus*) on cutbait and I landed a Yellowtail Freshwater Barracuda (*Acestrorhynchus falcirostris*) on an inline spinner.

Early in the afternoon we made the call to head back to camp. Anthony led our group on an overland short cut through the jungle while the guides brought the canoes back down the creek and met us near the main river, where we saw hatchetfish and other small species. When we got back to camp, Joy and I decided to stay there and fish for catfish while the other members of our party went back to try for those hatchetfish and other micro species. Our decision to stay paid off. I tossed cutbait into the confluence of the creek and the main river and within seconds I had a good run and hooked into my first Red-tail Catfish (*Phractocephalus hemiliopterus*). This is an attractive species, with contrasting black and cream on the flanks, striking red fins and a broad, honey-brown head covered in black spots. This was probably the species I most wanted to catch on this trip, so I was extremely pleased to catch one. On my next cast, I quickly caught and released another one. Then Joy gave it a try and caught her own Redtail Catfish. We ended up with six Redtail Catfish within the span of an hour, including one I estimated at about six pounds that would be my largest fish of the trip. From the same location I also caught another beautiful catfish, my first Leopard Catfish (*Leiaris marmoratus*).

Ken and Ben returned after catching some new micro species, and wanted to get their own Redtail Catfish. Ken had caught this species before in Thailand but it would be a new species for Ben. Unfortunately, the bite had slowed but Ben did



Duckbill Catfish (*Sorubim lima*).



Black Prochilodus (*Prochilodus nigricans*). (Photo by Joy Leisen)



Wonderful Flag Cichlid (*Mesonauta mirificus*).



Yellowtail Freshwater Barracuda (*Acestrorhynchus falcirostris*).



Jungle Catfishing Camp.



Josh with his biggest Redtail Catfish (*Phractocephalus hemioopterus*) of the trip. (Photo by Joy Leisen)



Josh Leisen catches a Redtail Catfish with the help of guide Homero. (Photo by Joy Leisen)



Joy with her first Redtail Catfish.



Leopard Catfish (*Leiarius marmoratus*).



Kenneth Tse, Ben Cantrell, and Otorongo Expeditions guide Yamil, right before Ben caught his lifer Sorubim, fell into the water, and sustained a nasty injury.

catch his lifelist Barred Sorubim, a species that I would fail to catch on the trip. As he sat in the boat attempting to take a picture, fish in one hand and camera in the other, he leaned back a bit too far and rolled backward out of the boat. The catfish stuck him in the shin with its pectoral spine and was still attached when Ben climbed back into the boat. His guide removed the catfish, and Ben, soaking wet but smiling, posed for a photograph with the fish. It reminded us all that we were in a very remote area. Ben was lucky it was just his leg, and not a more vital area, that took the hit. Only after about six weeks of discomfort did Ben go to the doctor and find out that the pectoral spine had broken off inside his leg and migrated to the other side. He had to have it surgically removed.

As the sun began to sink we loaded into the big boat and returned to Otorongo Lodge for a delicious dinner. The cold showers felt so luxurious after a night of jungle camping and two days of hardcore angling in the tropical heat. It was time to get some sleep and recharge, for we would head out early again the next morning.

DAY 4: THE QUEST FOR THE PURPLE CICHLID

Our fortune with the weather held and we awoke to another sunny day. Anthony brought us to a different lagoon, this time



Campfire-smoked Red Piranha (*Pygocentrus nattereri*) and rice for lunch.



Compressus Piranha (*Serrasalmus compressus*).

via a southerly tributary of the Amazon River, to fish for a different type of cichlid that we referred to as the “purple cichlid. (see front cover)” I didn’t know what it would look like, and Joy and I tried plopping small chunks of cutbait into woody debris in the shallows all morning long without finding out. I think George was the only member of our group to get one, but we did manage to add several new species to our lifelists.

We caught lots of mojarritas (*Tetragonopterus argenteus*) on micro hooks to use for bait, and then went a few hook sizes larger to target cichlids. While the cichlid bite was slow (we managed a few Saddle Cichlids, which we had caught the previous day), there were piranhas everywhere and we landed a few new species including *Serrasalmus sanchezi* and *Serrasalmus compressus*. I hadn’t realized there were so many species of piranha, nor how challenging they can be to identify. I should note that many of the identifications made in this article are my educated guesses based on limited literature and available photos, and based on feedback from those who know these fish better than I do.

Around one particular tree we saw a big school of sardinas and tried for them on micro gear. It didn’t take long for us each to catch them, and they turned out to be a new species, the Angled Sardina (*Triporthesus angulatus*) (see front cover). We also got into lots of Black-finned and Red-tailed Brycon, which we found were very common fish throughout the slow-water habitats we tried fishing.

For lunch, our guides smoked piranhas and catfish wrapped in banana leaves over a campfire. The whole fish came out a rich mahogany color and tasted delicious, served over a bed of rice and vegetables.

We fished the sluggish tributary channel through the afternoon, enduring a blazing hot sun to pick up a few more species. Joy got a Threespot Leporinus (*Leporinus friderici*) and a Raphael Catfish (*Platydoras costatus*). Homero also joined in on the fishing and picked up an Oscar (*Astronotus ocellatus*)



Raphael Catfish (*Platydoras costatus*). (Photo by Joy Leisen)

that had been lurking beneath a floating mass of vegetation. I caught a mix of Trahira, piranhas, Saddle Cichlids, Brycons and one new lifelist species, Manduba (*Ageneiosus atronasus*) before Anthony made the call to return to the big boat and move on.

Late in the afternoon we set up on a big mud bar that allowed us to cast into several great looking spots. Unfortunately, for us, local commercial fisherman had strung nets from bank to bank every few hundred yards, preventing fish from moving into the area. We caught some big Red Piranha, but quickly decided to move on. We tried a spot closer to the channel mouth, where some emergent vegetation grew up through some moderate current. Anthony explained this would be a good spot to catch Sorubim, which ambush prey in this type of habitat. We dunked live baits into holes in the vegetation, but Joy and I failed to find a fish. Ken, however, caught his lifer Barred Sorubim, which was his most-wanted fish heading into the trip.



Ken Tse with his first Barred Sorubim (*Pseudoplatystoma fasciatum*).



Joy caught this Three-spot Leporinus (*Leporinus friderci*) on cutbait. (Photo by Joy Leisen)

At dusk we crossed the Amazon and had a bit of a scare about halfway across. The small boats, which were tied to the side of the big river boat, got caught in a whirlpool and took on some water. George and his guide, riding in a smaller motorized boat, also collided with some floating wood, underscoring the potential danger of navigating the world's largest river in the dark. All of us, and our equipment, arrived unscathed at the north bank of the river, where we stopped to fish for catfish. Joy quickly caught a good-sized catfish on a big chunk of cutbait—a Piramutaba (*Brachyplatystoma vaillantii*, known as the Manitoa in Peru). I cast my line into the dark, letting the strong current sweep my bait downstream. Within moments I felt a nibble, waited patiently, and then set the hook into my first White Thorny Catfish (*Centrodoras brachiatus*). Not a very large fish, but another lifelist species—my thirtieth of the trip and we still had two and a half days left!

DAY 5: CATFISHING THE AMAZON RIVER

We decided to devote an entire day to catfishing on the mainstem Amazon River. This time we headed downstream and crossed the river to fish a long, deep outside bend. The sunrise was gorgeous, with the sun peeking through a gap in the clouds. As we approached our spot, and throughout the day, we saw both Pink River Dolphins and Grey River Dolphins! It was awesome to see them in the wild, even though their presence tended to spook the fish.

We stopped the boat at a huge sand bar. The setting was surreal. Just downstream from us huge portions of the river bank had calved off due to erosion, trees and all, and so half-



Porthole Shovelnose Catfish (*Hemisorubim platyrhynchos*).

submerged trunks and tree crowns filled the eddy. We casted cutbait amidst the trunks of these trees, and the water was surprisingly deep. Anthony warned us that we'd need to horse fish away from those trees immediately when we hooked up or they would swim into the cover, become snagged, and most certainly be lost.

We tried boat fishing, too. I dipped cutbait down along the sandbar, in only a foot or two of water, as we paddled out to deeper water and hooked a neat looking catfish, the Porthole Shovelnose Catfish (*Hemisorubim platyrhynchos*). Then Joy got a small Flat-whiskered Catfish (*Pinirampus pinirampu*) before we could move. Despite the two quick species, we kept heading out to deeper, swifter water and tied off on a tree trunk. We sank our baits to the bottom and felt immediate nibbles, and Joy and I pulled in a combined dozen or so Blue Whale Catfish. They would hit as soon as, and sometimes before, our baits reached the bottom. The sky was ominous and a heavy rain was obviously approaching, so we retreated to the cover of the big river boat and waited out the storm. Fortunately, the deluge let up after an hour and we resumed fishing through a lighter rain. Joy and I started from the shore again, and she caught a Bloch's Catfish (*Pimelodus blotchii*) and her first Port-

hole Shovelnose Catfish. Then I got a strong run. I set the hook and pulled hard, forcing the fish up from the bottom and away from the snags. It was a good-sized fish, and I was able to pull it ashore. It was my first Piramutaba! After a quick photo shoot, I handed the fish off to our camp chef. I also landed my largest Granulated Catfish (*Pterodoras granulosus*) from the sand bar, but otherwise the bite was slow.

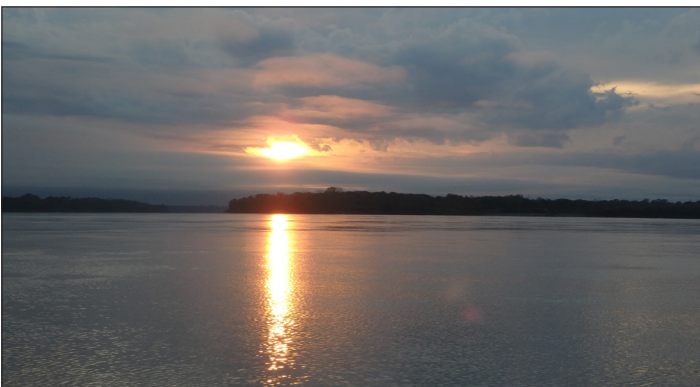
The rain and wind eventually let up enough to paddle back out onto the river in the small boats. We continued to catch Blue Whale Catfish but were able to find some spots where these pesky and unusual fish were not as prevalent. I was pleased to hook and land a very attractive Zebra Catfish (*Brachyplatystoma juruense*). After getting hung up on snags quite a few times we headed back to the big boat. Anthony rounded up the others and we moved upstream a few miles to try a different spot. We ate a quick lunch and most of us opted to fish together from the river bank. We caught a mix of catfish species, including Zamurito (*Calophysus macropterus*), a suspected *Duopalatinus peruanus*, Bloch's Catfish, Duckbill Catfish, Blue Whale Catfish, and the Candiru Acu (*Cetopsis candiru*). The Candiru Acu, which only Joy and Ben caught, was similar to the Blue Whale Catfish but



Vampire Fish (*Hydrolycus* sp.) cast netted and used for bait.



Blue Whale Catfish (*Cetopsis coecutiens*): a common species and a pest when fishing with bait. (Photo by Joy Leisen)



Sunrise on the Amazon River.



My first Piramutaba (*Brachyplatystoma juruense*). (Photo by Joy Leisen)



Zebra Catfish (*Brachyplatystoma vaillantii*). (Photo by Joy Leisen)



George Brinkman's Raspy River Stingray (*Pomatotrygon scobina*).



Michael Verdirame hoists his big stingray (*Pomatotrygon* sp.).

whiter, more slender, slimier and much more squirmy, agile, and creepy to hold. Ben's even vomited quite profusely as he struggled to unhook and photograph it.

The largest fishes of the trip were caught that evening. Anthony, fishing from atop the big river boat, hauled in a big Redtail Catfish that probably weighed about 15 pounds. Michael and George both got into some big stingrays, of at least two different species, Raspy River Stingray (*Pomatotrygon scobina*) and an unidentified species of the same genus. We ate one of them for dinner that evening and its soft flesh, marinated in spices, was quite tasty. Ben was able to land a pair of nice Leopard Catfish. He fished hard despite his fish-spine leg injury.

DAY 6: OSCAR IN THE JUNGLE AND LAST CALL FOR CATFISH

We crossed the river again on August 11 and disembarked from the big boat to climb up the bank and hike our way through the jungle to a shallow, weedy pond where Anthony said we would find Oscars and other cichlids. Joy, who had packed her own machete for the trip, was pleased to have a chance to use her tool and she helped the guides clear the way.

The pond was a few hundred yards long, only twenty or thirty yards wide, fairly shallow, and choked with all sorts of aquatic vegetation including the very impressive Giant Water Lily (*Victoria amazonica*). At the first spot Joy and I tried we had to cast our cutbait past the dense vegetation to reach open water. We had several bites, and lost a few fish as they became tangled in the weeds and got unhooked. Joy did land a Trahira before I hooked a very nice Oscar. This time I held the rod high and reeled fast so that the fish basically water-skied on its side over the weeds. Half-way in, it muscled down and dove into the weeds. It became entangled but the fish was still hooked and I could see it there, hung up in the dense weeds just out of reach. The substrate was far too soft and squishy to walk out there, so I yelled out in Spanish "*Necesito un palo largo!*" Homero hurriedly delivered the perfect long stick. He expertly placed the end in the mat of vegetation near the fish, twisted to gain hold, and then pulled the whole mat of aquatic plant, fish and all, within reach. I lipped my Oscar and carried it away from the water's edge.

With the disturbance of the site caused by landing my fish, we moved to a new location where the giant lily pads grew closer to shore. Joy caught a couple Oscars of her own. These Oscars were lifers for us, but the others in our party had caught them before in southern Florida and so were focused on other species. A few pike cichlids were caught, and we caught a new tetra, *Ctenopoma hauxwellianus*, on micro gear. Anthony also caught a few small Electric Eel (*Electrophorus electricus*) from the far end of the pond.



Ken Tse at the Oscar pond, double-fisting a standard and a micro rig simultaneously.



My first Oscar (*Astronotus ocellatus*), caught in its native habitat. (Photo by Homero)



Our last sunset over the Amazon River, August 11, 2016.

Satisfied with the spot, we hiked our way out that afternoon and returned to the lodge for lunch. Joy decided to chill out and do some reading while I headed out for a few hours on the creek in front of the lodge. I caught several small Duck-bill Catfish and Bloch's Catfish, my second Manduba, and a mix of piranhas but did not get any new species. At dusk, Ken and I joined Yamil and Homero in the small motorized boat and fished the mainstem Amazon one last time in the hopes of more catfish. We started at Oran village, and I caught one White Thorny Catfish (*Centrodoras brachiatus*), but there was

so much woody debris both at the bottom and floating down the surface that it was nearly impossible to fish and we kept getting snagged in the swift current. So we moved to one last spot, the same location we fished on the very first night of our trip, and I got one additional small catfish (another suspected *Duopalatinus peruanus*). I wasn't sure if we would have time to fish the following day because we would be returning to Iquitos around lunch time. With 38 species on the trip so far, I was more than content, and I certainly wasn't expecting to catch ten additional species the following morning.

DAY 7: LODGE CREEK LIFELISTING

We awoke to yet another beautiful, sunny day on our last morning at Otorongo Lodge. We had a full breakfast at the lodge this time and Anthony announced that we would not be leaving for Iquitos until 2 pm, which left us with a few hours to fish the lodge creeks from shore until about noon. Then we'd have lunch and time to pack up our gear before departing.

Anthony told us about a small creek (only a few yards wide) behind the lodge that had several new species to chase. Joy was fished out and wanted to enjoy a leisurely morning around the lodge, so I fished with Ken and our guides, and George later joined us. Ben and Michael headed onto the big river for one last catfishing trip, which paid off for them as they caught some good-sized Barred Sorubim and Zebra Catfish.

Fishing the small creek was highly productive and Ken and I boosted our species counts. I started with a small Panther Martin spinner tipped with cutbait, and slowly retrieved it or even jiggged it through the deeper holes. I splashed the water surface with the tip of my rod to draw in curious Trahira and was rewarded with a small one that was definitely not the same as the others I'd been catching. We called these the Red Trahira (*Erythrinus erythrinus*) and Ken and I both got them. I also got a small Trahira of the more familiar type before switching to a size-24 hook to fish for the schools of tetra I saw.

Tetras eagerly hit the small fleck of cutbait and I soon added two new species, the Golden-Silver Tetra (*Moenkhausia chrysargyrea*) and Two-spot Astyanax (*Astyanax bimaculatus*). Then Ken caught a Golden Trahira (*Hoplerethrinus unitaeniatus*), so I switched back to a larger bait and soon got one of my own. We continued moving until we reached a new spot upstream and spent the next of couple hours catching dozens of tiny fish from a small pool, but we also got a few larger cichlids. My catches there included a False Black Tetra (*Gymnocorymbus thayeri*), a Bandtail Tetra (*Moenkhausia dichrourea*), a Scale-eating Characin (*Roeboides myersi?*), a Glass Tetra (*Moenkhausia oligolepis*), and a Colletti Tetra (*Moenkhausia collettii*). I also hooked a big male Amazon Cichlid and a new pike cichlid (*Crenicichla lucius*). That put me at 48 species, essentially doubling my expectation for the trip. All of those species were from just three orders: Siluriformes, Characiformes,



Red Trahira (*Erythrinus erythrinus*).



Two-spot Astyanax (*Astyanax bimaculatus*).



Golden Trahira (*Hoplias unitaeniatus*).



Myer's Scale-Eating Characin (*Roebooides myersii*).



Glass Tetra (*Moenkhausia oligolepis*).



Lucius Pike Cichlid (*Crenicichla lucius*).

and Perciformes (all of the Perciformes being members of the family Cichlidae).

The time had finally come to pack up and leave. We tipped our guides, said our goodbyes, and hopped in the fast boat for our three-hour ride back to Iquitos. While the others had plans to get together and fish the Iquitos area the next day, that was Joy's birthday and we decided to spend a day exploring the city.

After our day in Iquitos we flew through Lima to Cusco, a beautiful city set in the mountains that felt a world away from Iquitos and the Amazon. There, Joy and I explored the streets, plazas, and market of Cusco, and then we took the train through the Sacred Valley to Aguas Calientes. We fished the Rio Urubamba, where Ken had caught his tetra, but the river seemed eerily devoid of life and consequently we did not catch any more fish species on the trip.

The next day we got up before dawn to hike up to Machu Picchu from Aguas Calientes, which was an amazing but difficult trek that, in the high altitude, made us feel we'd earned our visit to the Incan ruins of Machu Picchu. It was a spec-

tacular way to cap off what was probably the most amazing adventure I've ever taken.

For more stories and photographs, and to view my full angling lifelist, check out my adventure angling blog and lifelist gallery at lifelistfishing.com. Ben's pursuit of fish (including his stories and photos from this trip, with numerous species not pictured in this article) is chronicled at bencantrellfish.blogspot.com. Ken details his fishing adventures around the world at muskiebaitadventures.blogspot.com. His Peru trip posts feature photos of many fishes not included here.

lifelistfishing.com
The pursuit of new fish species on hook and line.

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