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Amazon Species Watch Peacock Bass

Scientific Classification

Kingdom:	Animalia
Phylum:	Chordata
Class:	Actinopterygii
Order:	Cichliformes
Family:	Cichlidae
Tribe:	Cichlini
Genus:	Cichla

Peacock bass [*Cichla*] is a genus of large cichlids, diurnal and predatory freshwater fish native to the Amazon and Orinoco basins as well as rivers of the Guianas in tropical South America. They are sometimes referred to in English by their Brazilian name Tucunaré or their Spanish name Pavón. Despite the common name and their superficial similarity, they are not closely related to other fish known as Bass, such as the North American Largemouth Bass [*Micropterus salmoides*]. The largest species in the genus [*C. temensis*], can reach up to c.30lb in weight and over 3ft in length. Other Peacock Bass species are smaller and are sometimes kept in aquariums, but even the smaller species require a large tank.

Until recently, the number of species had sat at fifteen [15], but following formal recognition in 2020, the newly identified *C. cataractae* increased the total to sixteen [16].

C. temensis

Native to the Orinoco and Rio Negro basins, as well as several smaller rivers in the central Amazon (Uatumã, Preto da Eva, Puraquequara, and Tefé), in Brazil, Venezuela and Guyana. Generally restricted to blackwater rivers and their tributaries.



Surprisingly, both the above are *C. temensis*. To the left, the speckled peacock or tucunaré paca and on the right, the three-barred peacock or tucunaré açu.

These fish, when not in spawning condition, are so distinctly spotted (with a fawn-like pattern of white spots running laterally along their sides), that they appear to be a separate species from the reproductively active spawners and are called 'paca' [also pinta lapa]. The names 'paca' and 'pinta lapa' come from the pattern's resemblance to the respective local names of a large spotted jungle rodent that English speakers call an agouti. As *C. temensis* enter their regional or particular spawning season[s] the white spots fade or disappear altogether, the brilliant gold, black and red markings take over and they are called 'açu'. [see progression of colour and pattern variation on the right]. Male peacock bass in the açu colour and pattern develop a distinct fatty lump on the top of their heads during breeding season [this subsides after spawning]. Scientists have shown that *Cichla* deposit fat in several locations prior to spawning. It is possible that this particular fatty deposit is an "honesty signal" of male fitness and condition.





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Also known as the 'Orinoco' Peacock Bass. This species is native to the Rio Negro and Orinoco River basins in northern South America and occurs predominantly in blackwater rivers. Despite the name it is not the only Peacock Bass in the Orinoco as the river is also home to *C. intermedia*, *C. nigromaculata*, and *C. temensis*. They tend to prefer more slow-moving and shallow waters and are more able to tolerate turbid waters than other species of Peacock Bass. They reach up to c.15lb and c.2ft in length. Adults are easily recognized by the three large gold-edged dark spots on the side of their body, a fourth spot on the tail and lack of dark markings on the operculum.

C. orinocensis



C. ocellaris



Sometimes known as the 'Butterfly' or 'Lukanani' Peacock Bass, it is a large species of cichlid from South America, and a prized game fish. It is native to the Marowijne drainage in Suriname and French Guiana to the Essequibo drainage in Guyana and the Branco River in Brazil. In recent years it has also been introduced to regions outside its natural range e.g., Florida, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, but some uncertainty exists over the exact identity, and at least some of the introductions may involve another *Cichla* species or hybrids. Reaching c.12lb and up to c.30in, these are often confused with the similar *C. monoculus*.

Native to Brazil's river basins, the upper and lower Rio Tocantins and Rio Araguaia drainage. They have also been introduced and extensively stocked in Brazil's southern regions. Uniquely marked as adults with five wide dark vertical bars they appear to occupy deeper habitats with more flow e.g. channels, while sympatric species are more often in smaller, shallower or lentic habitats e.g. lagoons.

In this region they reach c.11lb, with the average size around 3lb to 6lb They occur in great numbers throughout the entire year making for incredible fishing, loaded with action!

C. piquita



C. monoculus



Sometimes known as the 'popoca' or 'botão' peacock bass, this is another large species of cichlid, and a prized game fish. It is native to the Rio Solimões-Amazonas along the main channel and lower courses of its tributaries, Peru, Colombia and Brazil, including the Araguari and lower Oyapock rivers north of the Amazon. Also widespread in the lowland Amazon basin. This species is similar to *C. kelberi* and *C. pleiozona* in having three dark vertical bars on its side and presence of a pronounced occipital bar in the larger specimens.

They can reach c.14lb and a length of c.27in



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As a smaller species, newly described in 2006, the *C. Pleiozona* is distinguished by 3 dark vertical bars on its sides, pronounced occipital bar in mature specimens. Irregular dark bars on abdominal side. Cheek markings absent. A fourth dark vertical bar is typically present on caudal peduncle. General colouring is olive green dorsally, golden yellow mid body with white abdomen.

Native to the Bolivian Amazon basin, and the upper Rio Madeira [Rio Jamari] including Brazil. A stock introduced into the Rio Chagres drainage in Panama is also likely to be *C. pleiozona*.

Generally, these can reach weights of c.5lb at lengths of c.18in

C. pleiozona



C. melaniae



Another relatively small species reaching weights c.7lb and lengths of c.15in. Predominant habitat the river Xingu within the Brazilian river basin.

These generally display three prominent black vertical bars, slightly slimmer than other species and shows traces of medial bars between the three main bars. Numerous small black spots with light coloured margins are scattered along the body sides. *C. melaniae* is similar to *C. mirianae* except for absence of light spots on head and absence of midlateral ocel.

They tend to prefer Lentic [off current] lagoons and lotic [subject to river current] rock piles.

Another species newly described in 2006. They are native to the Brazilian River Basins: lower Rio Tapajós, Rio Curua-Una, lower Rio Xingu, lower Rio Tocantins and Rio Capim. They have also been introduced in other locations in Brazil's northeast.

Note: *pinima* is a Tupi-Guarani Indian word meaning white-spotted. The name was in use prior to the 2006 revision. These are distinguished by the three prominent dark vertical bars or blotches in adults. Dark markings on operculum are present. Juveniles have 4 or more horizontal rows of light spots. These may reach weights of c.17lb and lengths of c.20ins. They can be found along the shorelines, in amongst woody structure in low-gradient rivers.

C. pinima



C. cataractae



A new species of peacock bass from the Essequibo Basin, Guyana and Venezuela. [Donald Taphorn 2020]. Great to see this formalised as a new species, although in October 2019, these had been caught from members of our camp on the Essequibo at c.10lb, but we were unable to classify them.

C. cataractae is endemic to the Essequibo Basin where it typically inhabits rocky outcrops in river channels with swift current. The new species is sympatric with the more widely distributed *C. ocellaris*, a species that prefers lentic habitats. Their body is dominated by a series of three conspicuous dark blotches with the largest one below soft dorsal fin. Vertical bars on sides generally absent or faint. Formal size info currently unavailable.



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C. vazzoleri is one of the newly described [2006] species of *Cichla*. Named in honour of Gelso Vazzoler. Native to the Brazilian river basins including the mid-upper, middle and lower Rio Trombetas and the middle Rio Uatuma.

Distinguished by their yellow lower torso, shading to gold above, yellowish green to reddish cast to lower fins and blueish cast to upper fins. The Large ocellated blotches replace vertical bars in adults. Blotchy to speckled cheek markings present. More brilliantly coloured when spawning.

Weights may reach up to c.14lb at a length c.15ins

C. vazzoleri



C. mirianae



C. mirianae is another one of the newly described [2006] species of *Cichla*. Native to the Brazilian river basins including the upper Rio Tapajós drainage (Jurueña and Teles Pires rivers) and the mid and upper Xingu (Fresco, Batovi, Culuene and Suia-Miçu rivers). Generally, yellow/gold laterally, shading to olive green dorsally and on the head. Lower caudal fin red and dorsal shows signs of bluish tint. Distinguished by three prominent black ocellated blotches along its side and remnants of the juvenile lateral band connecting the blotches. Similar to *C. melaniae* except for absence of vertical bars. May reach weights of c.14lb at a length of c.20ins

The *C. thyrurus* is named from the Greek noun 'thyrorus', doorkeeper or porter. As a relatively recent classification, full detail of this species is unavailable, however, it is generally native to the Brazilian river basins including The Rio Trombetas and the Cachoeira Porteira, specifically upstream of its waterfall. *C. thyrurus* begins its life with vertical bar markings that are replaced by ocellated blotches as it matures into an adult. Other distinct markings include the fish's blotchy cheeks.

Whilst data is limited, research indicates that these may reach weights of up to 19lb and lengths of up to 30ins.

C. thyrurus



C. jariini



Native to Brazil, specifically the Rio Jari.

Probably the most similar to *C. temensis* with a greenish/gold head and lower torso, shading to gold mid-body and olive dorsally. Upper fins are dark and lower fins bluish. The belly is pale/white. A dark horizontal band extends from the eye [including the opercular markings] to the base of the tail. The three dark vertical bars are represented by rows of black blotches with light spots lining the margins.

There is little data available for this species, however research suggests weights of c.10lb and lengths c.14ins



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C. intermedia, often called 'Royal' Peacock Bass are a smaller species, native to the Orinoco River basin in Venezuela and Colombia. Its general colouring is, olive on dorsum, shading to gold on sides, abdomen pale/white with red lower and bluish dorsal fins. Adults are marked uniquely with a row of irregular dark blotches and six or seven vertical bars along the side just below the lateral line. Adults may have several small black blotches on gill covers. Light spots on side are absent. They can be found in both clear and blackwater. They can reach weights of c.6lb, with a length c.18ins.

C. intermedia



C. nigromaculata



C. nigromaculata is one of the newly described (2006) species of Cichla. Native to Venezuela and Brazil they can be found in the Rio Orinoco, Rio Casiquiare and Rio Negro basins.

They have an overall dark body coloration, shading from greenish/gold below to black dorsally. A bluish cast overlies the body colour. Upper fins dark, lower fins bluish. Further distinguished by three relatively narrow and short dark vertical bars and two lighter bars in between the darker ones. No markings on operculum. Whilst research suggests a length of c.12ins, no weight data could be found, but would estimate c.4lb

limited data & information available on this species although the *C. kelberi* is definitely one of the smaller species and is native to Brazil. Distinguished by the presence [in adults] of small light spots on the pelvic and anal fins, and lower lobe of caudal fin. It is similar however to *C. monoculus* and *C. pleiozona* in possessing three dark vertical bars on the side and the absence of black or ocellated markings laterally on head, and the presence of irregular dark blotches on anterior abdominal side. Data suggests weights c.9lb and lengths c.18ins

C. kelberi



Peacock Bass - General

The information contained in this publication is generally the best available at the time with many of the species not being caught in sufficient numbers to allow accuracy on sizes etc. It should also be noted that whilst their native habitats have been provided, there are countless reports of many of these species being caught elsewhere within the region.

Many common names are used for these fish, in Brazil, the country of their largest native region. The most popular of these is Tucunará which comes from Tupi, a native Indian language, and means "friend of the tree" as this Peacock Bass usually stays close to submerged trees to hunt and to protect itself and its nests. In Spanish, the generic common name for these cichlids is Pavón. Pavón, in Spanish, means "Peacock". Others include: 'Paru' Peacock [*C. thyrorus*] and the 'Lukanani' Peacock [*C. ocellaris*].

We will continue to update this publication as and when additional or more accurate data can be established.