



Moving Upstream In A Jungle Tributary



This report on our trip to the Tsimane Lodges in the remote jungles of Bolivia begins with an answer to this question: “In our world of globe-traveling fly fishers with many over-pressured fisheries, why was this outstanding Golden Dorado and Pacu fishery undiscovered until 7 years ago?” The answer is there was a Mormon missionary serving the indigenous Indians in these isolated jungles in the foothills of the Andes mountain range. When he returned to the city of Santa Cruz, he mentioned to someone that there were many of these large, yellow/gold fish in the rivers. A fisherman familiar with Golden Dorado heard about the conversation and made a visit.....that’s how this saga of what has become one of the world’s hottest destinations began.

The key to this fishery is the baitfish, Sabalo. Not just a small minnow, the Sabalo (see below) can grow to as large as six pounds. They migrate by the millions, on their annual spawning run from the immense watershed of the Mamoré River, which drains into the Amazon basin. The Golden Dorado follow the Sabalo, both to feed and also to spawn in the headwaters of the rivers and streams in this region. The mass migrations of the Sabalo and Golden Dorado have similarities to many species of fish, such as the Pacific salmon in Alaska, with the exceptions that there is no salt water involved and the fish do not die after spawning.

Below, l to r: The Sabalo are an important food source for the native Indians. The natives are very adept with a bow and arrow – one of our native boatmen used his free time hunting schools of Sabalo while we explored a small tributary for Golden Dorados. He took four fish which would feed his family for a few days.



Upon arriving in Santa Cruz, the most important city in Bolivia with a population of approximately two million, we heard that a monsoon-type rainstorm was just concluding in the jungles we intended to fish. The storm had dumped so much rain that the runways we needed to land (grass/dirt) were so saturated that the planes could not use them. We had to spend one extra night in Santa Cruz to give the airstrips time to drain enough to accept our planes. So began a week of adventure in Bolivia that would be dramatically influenced by the weather.



Above - As we flew the 270 miles to reach the remote jungle area we would be fishing, we crossed over several rivers that were running solid brown. On the flight out, the snow capped Andes were visible in the distance (center). The boat trip from the airstrip to the lodge (above, right-center) confirmed how high and muddy main Secure River had become. We couldn't help but think, "Uh oh, could this be one of those times where you endure extended travel to get to a much anticipated fishing destination and really 'hit it wrong'." Right – the first day of unproductive casting in the muddy mess of the Secure River supported the thinking that we indeed had hit it very wrong.

Our group of ten split into three parts. Two groups of four were to rotate between the Secure and Agua Negra lodges, both lodges located on the Secure River, spending half their week at each lodge. The other two (our only couple) were spending the week at Pluma Lodge on the Pluma River, a major tributary of the Secure River.

After our first day of trying to raise a few fish from the muddy Secure River waters, our spirits were bolstered when we got a phone call from the foursome at the other lodge (this was the "Steve Group" – three Steve's and one Jim). They had fished a small tributary river and took over 40 fish, including several double digit sized Golden's (photos below). Jim H., below second from left, liked working the surface and commented, "the violence of the hit by a Dorado on a popper made me glad I was wet wading in water over crotch level."



All the rivers had fallen timber, some visible and some below the surface. Steve M. had a fish run under a submerged log and began jumping upstream with his line still heading downstream (below, left). A good guide saves the day, wading deep to get the line off the log and salvaging a nice Golden (below, right).

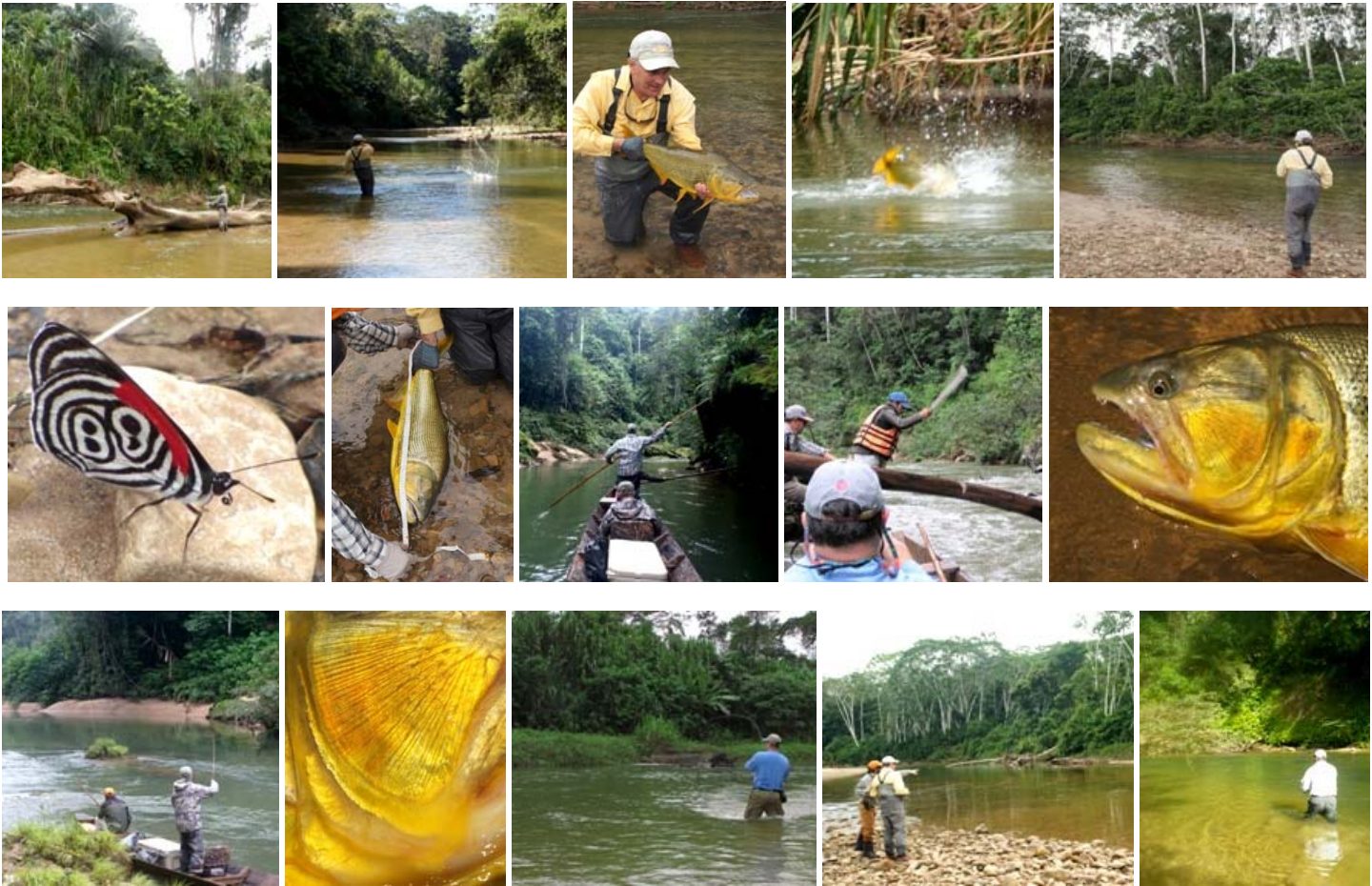


And so the direction of our trip was set – a focus on the smaller jungle tributaries. Generally, these were beautiful streams, often with the tropical jungle encroaching right to the banks. However, the options were limited – there was not an abundance of these tributaries that had the chance of fishing well. Working our way up these smaller waters required two native boatman and our guide per pair of anglers. When we encountered rapids too swift or steep for our dugouts to maneuver with all of us in the boat, the boatman and guide would drag the boat up the rapids while we walked around.



Until our last day when the sun broke through bringing a welcome warmth, the order of the day for most of us had been to fish in waders. The temperatures were in the 60's without the sun. And, we had periods of light rain

most days. Photos with sunlight were most likely taken the last day as there were only a few short periods previously with the sun breaking through. The sunlight also brought out a spectacular array of colorful butterflies (below). The colors in the gill plates of a Golden Dorado are stunning.



The Pacu day! We experienced, while fishing in Northern Argentina, why the Pacu is a great sport fish on a fly rod. Even though they are fished for with flies that imitate small fruits, berries, and nuts, their eats can be dynamic and their battle determined. Many call them the “jungle permit” because their shape is similar. John and Jack went far upriver on a tributary river the last day, much further than anyone had gone earlier in the week. They had a truly “world class” Pacu experience with two of their fish within a half-dozen pounds of the IGFA world record. John’s comments on the experience: “We landed 5 Pacu and lost 2 others fishing a fly that imitated a ‘nut.’ We fished below a spot where nuts we’re dropping from a tree to the water. Any cast in that zone hooked a fish. The two largest Pacu were about 18lb.” Jack added that “the five fish landed were a total of about 75#.”

Below, l to r: John with Pacu on - the fish. Teeth of a Pacu are flat across the top, almost human in appearance. Jack and guide with a large Pacu.



Bolivian Jungle Grand Slam: at right above, that smallish silver fish, the Yatorana, is significant because, combined with a Golden Dorado and Pacu, completes the Grand Slam in these waters for John.

Each of our three groups had different fishing results. Overall, we took 12 to 15 fish that were between 15 and 20 pounds. The “Steve’s” foursome referenced above who had the 40+ fish day, had decent fishing numbers and fish-size and took more than twice the number of fish as our other foursome (John, Jack, Jeff, and myself). In fact, they had a solid fishing trip, unless you compare to the results had by Jack Edict on a previous trip (who was the only member of our troupe to have been to Tsimane before, twice) - Jack had a day where he and his partner took 17 Golden Dorados that had an aggregate weight of around 300#. The foursome I was in had some memorable highlights, but also some very tough days. Watching an angry 15+ pound dorado come flying out of the water 20 feet away with its gills flared is definitely a memorable fly fishing moment, especially if taken while wading a small stream.....and we did experience that thrill. And, Jack and John’s Pacu day was very special; but overall our results at best could be termed average (or worse). Hitting it worst of all was Beanie and Mark Wilson and those who went to the Pluma lodge. That watershed did not have the small tributary options that the rest of us used and, as already reported, the main rivers were blown out. Fishing was tough for them all week with only a few decent fish taken and one giant catfish taken on bait by their guide – below, left with Beanie.



Above: Some fish were taken from the dirty water areas – John, center and c-right, with fish on and before release; Mark at right. But fish taken in the heavy muddy waters were hard to come by. Jeff stated while taking another shot at the main river on our fourth day: “Casting here is doom and despair.”

Below, l to r: When the sun came out, the caiman (South American crocodile) could be found sunning themselves and brilliantly colored butterflies were abundant. The top predator in these jungles is the jaguar – very fresh prints were encountered on the sandy beach.



Above: the indigenous Indians live a very basic life and it seemed out of character to see occasional solar panels on thatched roofs. Middle – handlining the main river for catfish was an important way to put food on the table. However, stimulated financially by an interest in the success of the lodges, the Indians protected the Golden Dorado. Airplanes arriving on the grass runway was a highlight in the villages and large groups turned out to watch planes arrive and take off.

Below: given their remote locations, the lodges were comfortable and the food good. Anglers stayed in stationary tents with their own bathrooms. The central lodge had a dining area and gathering spot for drinks and pre-dinner hors d'oeuvres which were a nightly highlight.



The group: kneeling l to r – Jim Hine and Steve Simco. Standing l to r – Steve Pillsbury, Don Muelrath, Jeff Reinke, John Landis, Jack Edict, Steve Mitchell, Mark and Beanie Wilson. Thanks to all for their photo contributions to this photo essay.

And, for the grand finale, a photo of the muddy Secure River which had not cleared measurably as we left.



Steve P. may have captured the essence of our trip with this somewhat cryptic comment: “There are fishing trips with some adventure and adventures with some fishing. Bolivia was neither and both.”

Don Muelrath, Fly Fishing Adventures

www.flyfishingadventures.org

888-347-4896