

PERUVIAN AMAZON 2014



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I have always been interested in fishes. I fished with my dad countless times and spent a good portion of my youth slogging through creeks chasing anything that moved. I got my first aquarium when I was a sophomore in college. I was amazed by the variety of species available at the local aquarium shops (all non-chain shops back then). There were fishes of every size, shape, color, and demeanor and I set out to learn as much as I could about as many species as possible. This included reading and rereading Innes' *Exotic Aquarium Fishes* nearly every night. I even got a parttime job at one of the best aquarium shops that I have yet to step foot in, Tideline Aquatics (highly recommended) for anyone with an afternoon to kill in the Charleston, SC area, to feed my addiction to these fishes. The species that attracted me most came from South America. I loved the *Corydoras* catfishes and *Apistogramma* dwarf cichlids, the colorful tetras and oddly shaped pleco-like cats, and really everything in between. It became a dream of mine to one day visit the Amazon and seek out the species that had I read about so many times.

In late summer/early fall of 2013, the idea of a trip to the Peruvian Amazon began to float around. Brett Albanese, a non-game fisheries biologist for the state of Georgia, was looking into leading a trip and needed people to join in to make the costs more manageable. Brett had already done research into the area he wanted to visit and had contacted and compared various tour companies. After a couple of months of bouncing ideas off each other and firming up those attending, the itinerary was set. The group, consisting of Brett, Fritz Rohde, Matt and Katharine Hill, Ani Popp, Steve Walsh, and myself, would meet up in Iquitos on July 19th and we would spend two weeks at three different lodges on the Amazon and Napo rivers.



The group (left to right): Katharine Hill, Matt Hill, Segundo, Fritz Rohde, Brett Albanese, Steve Walsh, Ani Popp, Dustin Smith, and Ricardo. (Photo by Steve Walsh)

The tour company Explorama was chosen. This company offered multiple lodge sites, which would increase our exposure to the local species. We were assigned two veteran fish hunters, Ricardo and Segundo, and they would plan with us each day so that we could visit as many habitats and see as many species as possible during our time there.

Brett and I had both worked in aquarium shops growing up and shared a strong interest in the Amazonian species. This early interest in these tropical species led to our interest in North American native species later in life. My interest was primarily in smaller species such as dwarf cichlids and pencilfishes. Brett tended to be more interested in larger species such as Oscars (*Astronotus ocellatus*), Red-tailed Catfish (*Phractocephalus hemiliopterus*), and stingrays. But we all really just wanted to see as many species as possible and we were not disappointed.

After arriving and meeting up in Iquitos, Peru, we made our way to our first lodge, which was a one and a half to two hour boat ride downstream to near the mouth of the Napo River. From this lodge, we could access the mainstem Amazon, as well as some inland streams and lakes. We spent time in all three habitats. The Amazon proper is packed with catfishes. We were able to seine along a sandy island where we found several different species. Other highlights included

Photos by the author unless otherwise indicated.

Dustin Smith is a forensic chemist in South Carolina. As a long-time NANFA member, he has filled many roles over the years including BOD member and convention host, and has served on various committees and special projects. Dustin's interest in natives began with a photograph of an Everglades Pygmy Sunfish and has taken him throughout the southeastern United States and beyond in search of new and unique fishes. These treks have included trips outside of the US as well, to Costa Rica, Honduras, Peru, and Thailand.



Dustin Smith and Steve Walsh seining in the Amazon River by the sandbar. (Photo by Fritz Rohde)



Common Squirrel Monkeys. (Photo by Ani Popp)



Ani Popp with her Ocellate River Stingray (*Pomatotrygon motoro*). (Photo by Dustin Smith)

knifefishes, twig catfishes, and a freshwater puffer (*Colomesus asellus*). We also did some night collecting on the mainstem. We caught many of the same species but the freshwater dolphins, a gray species and a pink species, joined us, and this is one of the moments I will remember most. It is a little startling when a large animal breaks the surface to breathe

just a few feet away from where you are standing neck deep in water in the pitch-black night.

The lake provided larger species including pacu, piranha, Oscar, Peacock Bass (*Cichla monoculus*), Electric Eel (*Electrophorus electricus*), and Silver Arowana (*Osteoglossum bicirrhosum*). One of the most ubiquitous species in the lake was a large tetra called a Tucanfish (*Chalceus erythrus*). It is a large, brightly colored tetra that was very common around the lake's edges. The lake also contained one of the target species for the trip, the giant Arapaima (*Arapaima gigas*). Unfortunately, though we think we saw some breach, we never caught or got a good look at one.

The small streams were found along the paths behind the lodge. These paths wound their way through the rain forest and were home to at least two species of dart frogs and many other animals including various other species of frogs, toads, and tarantulas. We were advised to stay near the path since the deadly Fer De Lance viper was also common. The streams held many species that most interested me. There were multiple species of tetra, *Corydoras*, *Apistogramma*, pencilfish, and some small nicely patterned catfishes.

The next lodge was up the Napo River. This lodge was more primitive, lacking room walls and necessitating the use of a pit toilet. From here we could access additional inland streams and smaller tributaries. We saw many of the same types of fishes but most were different from the ones caught at the previous lodge. One of the highlights from this portion of the trip was catching two large spotted freshwater stingrays (*Pomatotrygon motoro*) during an afternoon of fishing after a long day of rain.

This lodge also provided access to the tour company's canopy tour, which included roped walkways between large trees. Another species of dart frog was seen in the tree tops and various species of birds were viewed from here too. On the walk back to the lodge, we were introduced to the bioluminescent fungi that covered one stretch of the forest floor. We were instructed to turn our headlamps off and stare up at the stars through the trees. Once our eyes had adjusted, we were told



Nellie the Brazilian Tapir. (Photo by Fritz Rohde)

to then look down. The forest floor shimmered much like the night sky as the glowing fungi speckled the ground.

Another highlight at the Napo Lodge was the number of monkeys, including Squirrel, Saddle-backed Tamarin, and White-fronted Capuchins. The Squirrel Monkeys were out in force the morning of our arrival and put on a show as they gathered and ate bananas. Unfortunately, it rained nearly one whole day at this lodge and the accessible streams and backwaters were quickly and thoroughly covered so the group only spent a few days there.

After spending a few more days back at the mainstem Amazon lodge, the group moved further upstream closer to Iquitos to the more modern lodge. This lodge was more like a hotel than a lodge. The rooms had air conditioning and hot water and there was a pool. There was also a lodge pet, a Brazilian Tapir named Nellie that took a shine to one of our group members. She followed us everywhere and did not fully understand the impact that an animal her size could have on a group attempting to capture fishes from a small stream.

This lodge, like the others, had trails that meandered through the forest. At dusk one night, we hiked through these trails to see the many tarantulas and odd insects that show themselves at dusk. The size of the spiders and the sheer numbers were spectacular. After a couple of leisurely days at this lodge fishing and relaxing it was time to head out in different directions. Fritz and I flew to Cusco to spend a couple of days at Machu Picchu and the remainder of the group made their way home.

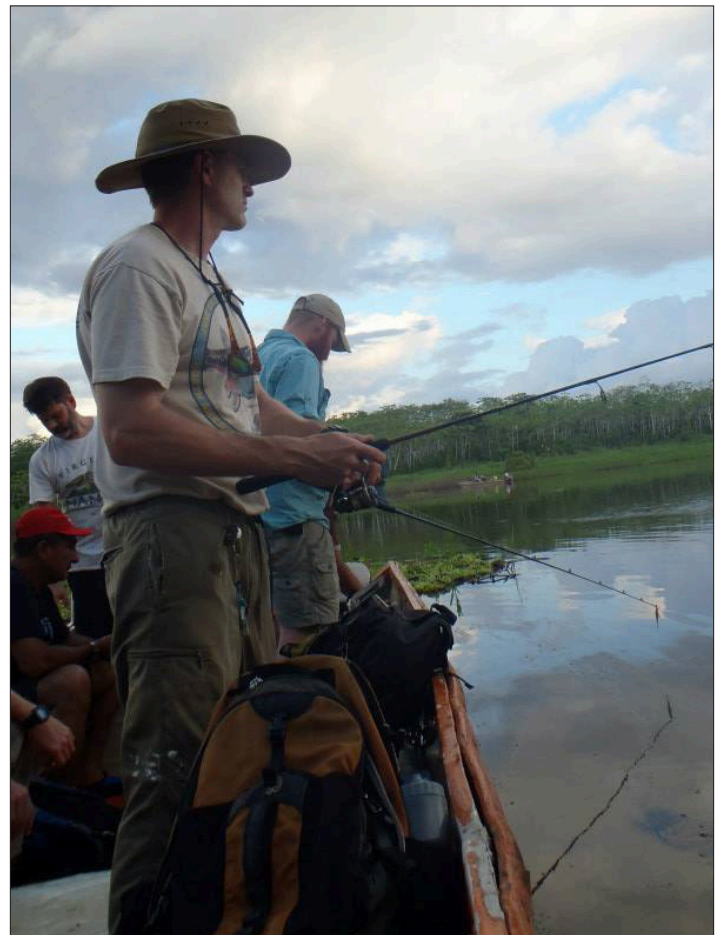
Brett had described this trip as a trip of a lifetime and he was right. We saw over 200 species of fish in the two weeks that we spent in the Amazon, many of which I had studied while reading Innes' book way back in college. We saw many animals that I had only read about in books and we were exposed to a culture that is very different from our own. Between nights boating on the Amazon staring at the Southern Cross, to a night swimming with the dol-

phins, to being exposed to riverside homemade rum, and everything in between, this is a trip that none of us are likely to forget.

I would like to thank Drs. Benjamin Frable, Nathan Lujan, Mark Sabaj Perez, and Don Taphorn for providing correct identifications of fishes I had misidentified.



Identifying the day's catch. (Photo by Matt Hill)



Our first afternoon, fishing hard. (Photo by Fritz Rohde)



From top: Marbled Headstander (*Abramites hypselonotus*), Flagtail Prochilodus (*Semaprochilodus insignis*), Blackfin Halftooth (*Hemiodus microlepis*), Zebra Knifefish (*Gymnotus pedanopterus*), and *Apteronotus bonapartii* (female).

From top: Banded Dwarf Cichlid (*Apistogramma cf bitaeniata*), *Tenellus trimaculatus*, *Hypoptoma cf gracilis*, Redtail Freshwater Barracuda (*Acestrorhynchus lacustris*), and *Burjurquina* sp.



From top: Ranger Pleco (*Pterygoplichthys weberi*), Vampire Tetra (*Hydrolycus scomberoides*), Head-and-Tailight Tetra (*Hemigrammus ocellifer*), Striped Headstander (*Laemolyta taeniata*), and Golden Shad (*Pellona castelneana*).

From top: Driftwood Catfish (*Centromochlus heckelii*), Mourning Tetra (*Brycon pesu*), Spotted Hoplo (*Megalechis cf thoracta*), Amazon Puffer (*Colomesus asellus*), Whiptail Catfish (*Rineloricaria* sp.), and Bluntnose Knifefish (*Hypopygus lepturus*).