

Jeff Currier *global fly fishing*

Fly Fishing for Vampires Tales from Venezuela

By Jeff Currier



Fangs seem natural on many creatures. We as humans accept the fact that many animals have them. Man's best friend has a set, as do cats, bears, coons, snakes and the list goes on. But do fish have fangs? Pike have teeth, and the ocean is full of fish with burly chompers from barracuda to snapper, but these mouthfuls of teeth really don't qualify as fangs. Well, after a recent adventure to Venezuela's Orinoco River, I met a seriously fanged fish. This fish has the sharpest, longest and the pointiest teeth of all. It is a fish that would scare Dracula to death! This spectacular fish, unknown to most the angling world, is the payara.

This adventure began like all Currier trips. I spun the globe hard, dragged my finger along and it stopped on northern South America. I rounded the region off to the nearest city, Caracas, Venezuela. I'd always wanted to fish Venezuela because I knew it held a great variety of fish species, in particular, the payara, a fish I'd dreamed of for years. After a quick call to my friend Brian Horn, a wild man that will join me anywhere, the tickets were in the mail. I was departing on a month long adventure of a lifetime in less than 4 weeks.

Planning and packing on such short notice wasn't easy. Venezuela, one of the world's fly fishing gems, has a fish for every fly rod line weight. Approximately the size of Texas, Venezuela is located on the top of South America, bordering the southern reaches of the

Caribbean Sea. It's east of Columbia, west of Guyana and north of Brazil. Its 1000 plus mile coastline is a haven for tarpon and snook. Just off its coast are many islands, also part of Venezuela, including the famous bonefishing destination, Los Roques, which can provide 50 fish days with bones up to 8-pounds! Venezuela's offshore fishery is one of the worlds finest, with opportunities to cast a fly to white marlin, Atlantic blue marlin, Atlantic sailfish, dolphin, yellowfin tuna, blackfin tuna and wahoo. Venezuela is also home to one of the largest river systems on Earth, the Orinoco. It is home not only to the payara but to more species of freshwater fish than an angler could imagine!

Naturally, I wanted a piece of it all. As usual, Mike Fitzgerald of Frontiers International was my first phone call for assistance in planning this escapade. Mike has forgotten more about fly fishing the world than other authorities in the business know. With his expertise and help from Joe Cod, also of Frontiers, Brian and I were set for the salty part of our trip. We were lined up for 4 days of fly fishing for white marlin off La Guaira Bank, and then a week at Los Roques for anything that swims the flats. Our remaining 3 weeks were to be dedicated to the hunt for payara in freshwater, but Mike couldn't help with this part. Our conversation went something like this, "Jeff we got out of the Venezuela jungle business. It's too close to Columbia. It's dangerous as hell and with all the other incredible destinations we offer, we just don't feel we need it", Mike hesitated a second, "but for a maniac like you Currier, it seems perfect. Good luck. Call me if I mean call me when you get back."

"Dangerous smangerous," I thought to myself, as I hung up the phone, "I've fished in El Salvador during a civil war. I've tiptoed through mine fields in Nicaragua for guapote. Ha! Brian and I will be fine. We'll figure it out when we get there".

As the wheels of our Sky West flight lifted from Jackson Hole, I gazed at the Tetons. What a safe place to live I thought. Why am I leaving? Then I thought about the jungles of Venezuela. Was it really going to be dangerous? In the past I had pulled off some pretty gnarly excursions and survived. Why would this be any different? And what would Colombian Guerillas want from two fly fishing gringos anyway? I was much more concerned about tarantulas the size of dinner plates. Yes I thought, everything would be fine.

That evening, as we boarded the final leg of our flight from Atlanta to Caracas, a man dressed in a cream colored T-shirt with a peacock bass across the front appeared in the aisle. Spotting him immediately and wasting no time, Brian excitedly addressed him; "There's a sport fisherman! You going for peacocks?"

"Actually I own a camp. I'm heading down to prepare for the season", he responded. "You guys going for marlin?"

My eyes widened. Could this be a connection for the freshwater and payara already, before we left the USA? Brian continued the conversation as the man passed our seats, "Yup, we got four days for marlin, a week at Los Roques and then off too the jungle."

The man stopped and tucked into an empty seat, "What jungle camp are you headed to?" he asked.

"We're not. We're just winging it", Brian responded, "Jeffrey here wants to catch a payara."

"What do you mean you're winging it?" He asked in a concerned tone.

"We're going to take buses as far into the Orinoco region as we can, then hire Indians with dugout canoes and go until the fishin's good!" Brian answered enthusiastically.

"Well, if you both make it out alive it will be a miracle. Come back and talk with me after take off, I might be able to save your skin," He responded sincerely and slipped back into the moving traffic of the planes aisle and headed for his seat.

"Oh my God! Jeffrey, did you hear what he just said? What kind of mess are you getting us into?" Brian asked with terror in his voice.

I couldn't answer Brian's question. My eyes were glued to the fasten seatbelt sign. The instant it went dark we bolted down the aisle towards the intriguing man.

His name was Glenn Webb. He was one of several owners of Laguna Larga fishing

camp on the Cinaruco River, a tributary to the Orinoco. Glenn had years of experience in the jungle and rainforest regions of South America and had settled on the Cinaruco River. He explained the Cinaruco had tremendous numbers of peacock bass (pavon), his favorite game fish. They were not the biggest, but they were the strongest anywhere.



Glenn didn't go on too long about the Cinaruco before getting back to the important issue, our trip. "Now what do you mean you fellas are winging it?" he asked.

I quickly explained that we were winging it because we didn't have the funds to back a camp or a lodge. I assured Glenn that we were aware of some of the dangers, but they were risks we were willing to take in our pursuit of payara.

Glenn respected the seriousness of our quest, and rather than telling us how foolish we were, he offered to help. "You know, I have a friend in Venezuela that really likes them payara. Last I heard he was checking out some new areas for big ones .real big ones . . . absolute monsters!" His voice echoed into the ears of the surrounding passengers, "Tell me where you're staying. I'll make sure he tracks you down."

I left my business card and itinerary with Glenn and a few hours later we were at a hotel overlooking La Guaira Banks. Though it was late we celebrated our arrival with a few Polars, the local Venezuelan beer.

Morning came quickly and soon we were serenaded by the hum of engines from the famous offshore boat, the Guarimba. Trailing behind, an assortment of hookless teasers danced in our wake. Each a different color, some with tightly wound ballyhoo, others without bait, but all strategically strewn out to tease a billfish to within fly casting range. As I watched vigilantly for the shadow of a billfish to appear from the depths, I couldn't help but wonder if there would be a message at the hotel from Glenn's friend about

payara.

After a slow day at sea that entailed one cast to a white marlin, we returned to our Oceanside hotel. Sure enough a message had been left. It was Glenn's friend and he wanted to meet for breakfast before we headed out fishing the next day.

The next morning we met Jim Johnston. Jim, an American originally from the Atlanta area, also had years of experience fishing the remote regions of the South American jungles but had chosen to live full time in Venezuela. He was all business. He asked us questions from how much time we had to how tough we were. As we answered, he punched keys and stared into a laptop computer. About the time he asked how efficient we were with a fly rod, he spun his computer screen into view and let out a chuckle. On the screen was an angler holding a 20-pound payara. It was the most incredible fish picture I'd ever seen.



For the next ten minutes Brian and I listened to a sales pitch. Jim was willing to take us on a payara expedition but he wanted a pretty penny. He assumed we were loaded because we were staying at an expensive hotel on La Guaira Banks and booked a billfish boat for several days. But Jim quickly realized he

was wrong. Brian and I were nothing more than trout bums pursuing the fishing trip of a lifetime because we were in the business of booking fishing trips. We were paying for our billfishing and bonefishing, but not nearly what the rest of the world would pay for such a trip. Jim realized that a special agreement needed to be made. "Guys, I can't give this trip away, but let me talk with my payara guides and we'll see if we can make this a bit more affordable. Let's meet for breakfast again tomorrow." Jim made the payara image vanish and closed the lid on his computer. "Hope you stick a marlin today."

Another full day at sea and an evening with a few Polars passed quickly and we found

ourselves sharing breakfast with Jim once again. "Okay gentlemen, here's the deal. This trip is only going to cost you gas and food, but you have to be my guinea pigs."

"Guinea pigs!", Brian exclaimed.

Jim continued, "We're going to explore a fishery that has never been fly fished. I want to see how you do. I want to see the potential for booking clients there in the future. It's where I was three weeks ago, where I took the big payara picture. The only one in three days. It was muddy then and it could be again. We could easily get skunked, especially if all you do is fly fish. I have plenty of bait-casting equipment. If the flies don't work you can use it. I fish too. I'm not a guide. I'm just sort of a host. I can't sit and stare at the water all day without casting."

It was obvious Jim didn't want to be trapped with a couple of wimps. He was giving us the straight scoop. He continued on, "There's also some risk involved. My payara spot is about twelve hours south of Caracas. We're gonna drive there and fish three days. Then you are going to accompany me while driving supplies to Laguna Larga, where Glenn lives. It's a long interesting drive, about half way to Brazil along the Colombian border. It's not safe. People are frequently held up, robbed and even kidnapped and killed. I'd never drive it alone." Jim went on giving us truthful details, allowing us an opportunity to bag the whole thing if we wished, "Normally clients hop on a charter out of Caracas and fly to the landing strip at the camp. Not us, we'll cross the Llanos. Where there are more anacondas than people. It's a wild place." Jim went on as if he hated the thought of such a drive. "When we get there you'll have a week of pavon fishing thanks to Glenn. I hope you got a few fly rods with you. Pavon break them like toothpicks!"

The invitation to join Glenn in Laguna Larga was an added bonus. "We're in!" Brian and I exclaimed before Jim could go on any further.

Brian and I had two more days of chasing marlin, then a week at Los Roques. That gave Jim time to get things ready while we finished off the Frontiers part of our trip. Although we never boated a marlin, Brian hooked into a blue on his 14-weight that burned a memory into our minds forever. The same day I battled a white marlin on my 12-weight only to lose it when the fish grey hounded towards me in the transom of the

boat. The bonefish of Los Roques were much easier quarry. For seven days we released more bones than any other place we'd fished in the Caribbean and trolled up several wahoo and tuna to provide us with sashimi every night.

Our saltwater fishing was fabulous, but before we knew it Brian and I were tossing our backpacks into the back of Jim Johnston's souped up Toyota Land Cruiser at 3 am in the center of Caracas. Soon our long drive was underway, and while Brian slept in the back seat amidst a pile of gear, Jim and I chatted through the wee hours of the morning.

We passed through small towns separated by farmland and watched as Venezuelans went about their business in a laid back kind of way. As we continued south towns turned to villages and distances between them grew. The land became wet with ponds full of piranha scattered everywhere. Before we knew it, Jim had driven nearly nine straight hours with nothing more than a couple of stops to grab a cold drink and stretch, nearly emptying both his regular gas tank and his extra.

We were in the town of Sta Maria de Ipire. Here we gassed up for a mere 40 cents a gallon and stopped at a roadside restaurant for lunch. Normally the standard meal when in Central or South America is chicken, rice and a beer. You can always count on chicken being fresh because everyone has them loose in their yards, but this outdoor roadside restaurant had a special, capybara. The capybara is the largest rodent in the world, and a delicacy in Venezuela, not only for jaguars and anacondas, but also people. I had eaten it in Belize years ago and didn't particularly care for it. This time it was so good we took doggy bags to nibble on for the rest of our jaunt!

Four hours later we got our first view of the Orinoco River. "That, that, th... That's a rrr . . . rr. . river? It, it, it can't be! A river can't be that big!" Brian's voice cracked from shock. "How are we going to fish that thing?"

The sight of the Orinoco was extraordinary. Its size was startling. We were 300 miles upstream from its mouth yet its width exceeded four miles. It was gigantic! In the distance, a mountain range rolled along the entire southern horizon. It was a magnificent site.

During the next hour we unloaded our belongings into a small hotel in a riverside village. Our rooms were average for the remoteness of our location. A couple of roaches scurried away as we entered, but nothing serious. The only spiders were web spiders and although directly over our beds, it was obvious they would remain there. As the spectacular pink sky gave way to darkness we rendered our gear for a fish we'd only read about. We enjoyed the first cool period of the day after being cooped up in a car. As the few lights of the village began to shine the electricity gave out. In an instant it was pitch dark and we suddenly realized how far we were from the modern world.

About the time the electricity kicked back on, Jim, who went looking for the guides, returned. "It's all set. Jose and Luis will pick us up at 7 am. We're gonna catch some payara." Jim stated with confidence. "Let's knock back those capybara scraps and get some rest."

We did just that, and 7 am came in a snap. Like any scheduled event in South America, the official meeting time meant nothing. Jose and Luis arrived shortly after 8 am. They had two boats. One was a Jon boat with a 20 horse and the other, to my disbelief was a 14-foot Boston Whaler. The reason for having two boats was simply so that if there was any sort of mechanical failure or other problem we had a chance to return to our launch. The Orinoco was no place to be stranded.

The launch was a sight to behold. First of all, I couldn't believe that there was a launch. Secondly, I couldn't believe how much activity went on at the edge of this distant river. There was a refrigerator truck on the ramp surrounded by dugout canoes. The Indians in the dugouts were selling their previous days catch. Among these were two larger motorized boats selling fish they had transported from further upstream. It was an incredible sight. Most of the fish being hoisted into the refrigerator truck were various types of catfish, along with a number of interesting fish such as piranha, pavon, freshwater rays and corvina.

When the truck drove away, the fishermen of the village, now with a few bucks in their pockets, turned to watch three gringos about to go fishing for fun. For them it must have been a surprising sight. As Jose prepared the boats, I watched Luis try to explain over and over to the Indians what exactly we were doing. Jose loaded the boats with spin

rods and two huge coolers of beer. I hoped this wouldn't turn into a drunken trolling trip for our guides.

Brian, Jim and I went with Jose in the now crowded Whaler while Luis and a neighborhood kid manned the Jon boat. We led the way beginning with a marvelous trip across the 4-mile wide Orinoco River. Although it didn't appear to be, the current was tremendously strong and we needed to angle the bow almost directly up stream and accelerate at full throttle or be swept downstream. During the crossing I asked Jose the depth of the river. He estimated nearly 300 feet!

Thirty minutes later we had crossed and were headed upstream. We ran into a group of Indians fishing from dugouts. Luis pulled next to them in his boat and asked about the fishing and if they'd seen payara. At first there was little cooperation. Stern looks showed the Indian's dissatisfaction at having outsiders fishing their waters, but hard faces turned quickly to smiles as Luis reached into the cooler and passed out beers to the fishermen. Suddenly all the fishermen had information for us. The importance of the beer became very evident.

"Oh we haven't seen any payara today but yesterday they were everywhere," one of them explained to Luis in Spanish, pointing upstream.

"Gracious. Asta luego!" Luis thanked our new friends and on we went. We motored for at least another hour before taking a sharp left up into another river. This river was huge compared to any Rocky Mountain tailwater but in comparison to the Orinoco it was a trickle. Unlike the Orinoco, which was muddy, this was a black-water river. Black-water is just as it sounds. The water looks black, but is actually clear water over a dark river bottom. It looked very fishable. After one more beer with some river folks, we arrived at the first stop.

The water was deep and moved swiftly against a steep embankment. Brian and I both chucked 10-weights. I threw a floating line with a huge popper and Brian launched a Teeny 300-grain line with a bulky tarpon fly. We cast towards the bank where a thicket of brush drooped past the river edge. Jose had not seen fly fishermen before so Brian and I spent the first 30 minutes advising him on how to hold the boat as we drifted down

stream.

We didn't get started fishing until 11am, but by 1pm Brian and I had landed only one fish. It looked like a chub with a mouth full of teeth and it jumped like a trout. Even Jim who had been tossing various musky plugs was empty-handed. During the two hours of our labored casting Jose occasionally interrupted and said, "Payara here, we must troll," finally Brian and I decided it was time to troll.

Normally I would never give in to trolling, but in some circumstances you must. We needed to see a payara because at that particular moment we were wondering if they really existed. We used huge lures, the size of nice Snake River Cutthroats. They were orange Rapala CD 21's. The one I clipped onto 60-pound-test steel leader had holes plugged with epoxy. I could only hope they were made from the fangs of payara. We trolled fast, and as I let the lure out behind the boat it felt like I already had a fish on. I sipped from an icy Polar as I held the rod in my right hand. For extra security I clamped my knees around the butt of the rod. Brian did the same and in less than five minutes was fighting a small fish. He had hooked a black piranha the size of a huge bluegill. It had come for a look at the monster plug only to be snagged in the back. It was extremely upset and its jaws snapped viciously. Jose handled the fish carefully and showed us its teeth (He must of thought we were stupid gringos!).

We snapped a few photos and we were at it again. I grabbed another Polar (Remember, we're trolling) and hung on for my turn. I felt the lure bounce along the bottom when suddenly I was jolted. My Polar crashed to the hull of our crowded Whaler and line peeled from my reel. A silvery-blue fish exploded from the water behind the boat. I battled the tail-walking fish for several minutes before Jim was able to clamp the Boga Grip securely between its protruding fangs. We had our first payara!

We snapped an entire roll of film of this striking fish. Before I released the fish we shot more pictures of it in the water while it regained its strength. At last it thrashed and took off. A puff of blood dirtied the water where the fish had been. "Crap." I said, "The fish was bleeding badly."

As I stood up I realized it wasn't payara blood. It was mine. I had held the fish a second

too long. When the mighty payara took off, a tooth grazed me and tore a ¼ inch gash in my thumb. I was lucky. After a few minutes of pressure it stopped. Had it not, Jim would have opened his suture kit, an item that goes on every fishing trip to the jungle.

Jose teased me a lot the next hour with the old “I told you so” talk. Meanwhile, Brian and I trolled up eight payara during the next hour. I handled most of them and kept my fingers attached. We kept two for dinner and released the rest. It was probably the first time a payara was ever caught and returned on this river. Now convinced that payara were in the area, it was time to go back to the fly. I re-rigged my 10-weight with a Cortland Decent 350-grain sinking line and tied on a left over white marlin fly about nine inches long. We dredged the depths for two more hours without a strike until it was time to turn in for the day.

On the way out, folks in dugouts that we met on the way in waved goodbye. As we passed one group, they waved us over. They were on a school of sardinata, a colorful shad-like fish in the 1- to 3-pound range, and wanted us to catch some. Brian and I broke out our 8-weights and threw Clouser Minnows to the boiling fish and quickly connected. We each landed a dozen or so during the 20-minute blitz.

The trip back to our put-in took only an hour because we were traveling with the current rather than against it. Once the boats were trailered up, Luis led us to a friend's house to cook dinner. Our host was delighted when we produced fresh payara, enough not only for us but for her family also. As we waited for her to prepare the meat, we discussed the matter of catching payara on fly. From what we'd seen the first day, payara were difficult quarry. It seemed getting the flies deeper and stripping faster would be important. It would also help to find them more concentrated and in shallower water.

The next morning we headed back to our payara hot spot from the previous day determined to get our flies down deeper. Along the way however, we hit a few places on the Orinoco that Jose remembered seeing payara leaping completely out of the water chasing baitfish. These were turbulent areas, created by enormous boulders that dumped into 100-foot long back eddy's. It looked like a good place to pitch the flies because it was shallower than the water we'd been fishing. It truly looked like a place where fish would concentrate to feed. We had no luck. Jose suggested we try again in

the evening.

Like the day before, Brian and I worked the water diligently. We knew the payara were there but couldn't hook up with the fly. Jim gave us a bit of hope when he jumped one but it quickly diminished with each fruitless cast. At noon Jose suggested a boat ride to explore a place he'd seen on his map but had never fished. The break sounded perfect.

We motored slowly through a flooded forest for nearly an hour. It was an interesting and beautiful ride. Howler monkeys squealed and tried to discourage our intrusion into their territory but it looked too fishy to leave. Occasionally there was enough room to make a cast and we took turns doing so. Each spot produced a small pavon of about a pound. Eventually we arrived at the lagoon Jose had noted on his map. For the next hour we continuously had our flies chewed up by black and red bellied piranha. We also caught the standard pavon and the butterfly pavon as well as a fish that neither Jose nor Luis could identify. It looked like a barracuda but it had an adipose fin. A rare catch indeed!

Our fun came to an abrupt end when two armed Indians paddled into the lagoon directly toward us. At the time our motors were cut and Luis was holding his boat against ours. Although we didn't realize it, we were trespassing on their fishing grounds and it was not a laughing matter. As Luis made contact with the approaching men, I reached for the Polars. Like waving a white flag, I prepared to underhand each man a beer as they got close. At first I wasn't sure they would accept them because the man in front was firmly clutching a well-worn double-barrel shotgun. Much to our relief they took the beers and lowered the guns.

We were lucky. In the jungle there is no law and some natives place little value on human life. Luis and Jose spoke with the men for some time in Spanish. Although I didn't understand much, I could see the tension in the men's faces. Gradually the mood lightened and before their dugout separated from our boats we were at peace. Luis gave them several more beers and Jim gave them some jigs, an item they appreciated more than the beer. We watched as they paddled directly to a spot and hand-cast one of Jim's jigs to the base of a submerged tree. On about the third toss the water erupted and the man landed a 5-pound pavon. We cheered at the performance and left.

It appeared that luck was on our side from then on. Jose took us back to the Orinoco to try again at some of the rapids we fished earlier. As we approached we watched hundreds of sardinata leap from the river trying to avoid certain death from below. Gulls and terns bombed the water. The payara were here and in a feeding frenzy.

Jim shouted, "Get em boys! I said I love to fish but I've always wanted to see a payara taken on fly. I'm not going to get in the way." This was one of those evenings Jose told us about. Several casts and minutes later my 10-weight was doubled over in battle. The surge was greater than any experienced while trolling and following an exciting fight in which my fly line became entangled in one of Jim's dangling lures; I landed a spectacular 12-pound payara with two inch long fangs! After photos, I released the impressive fish. When I stood to hi-five everyone the Indians we'd met the first day were in sight. Although they couldn't understand releasing the fish they gave us a thumbs up, knowing we had achieved our goal.

The fly that worked was a 5/0 Clouser custom tied to look like a baby pavon attached to 40-pound solid wire. It wasn't easy to cast but the rig produced a total of four payara, all in the 9- to 12-pound range. The next day we fished entirely on the Orinoco in all the fast water spots that Jose knew of. Brian and I each landed another pair while Jim's plugs took at least five. During the day Luis trolled up many fish including an 18-pounder!

The sun set brilliantly at the end of day three as we crossed the Orinoco for the final time. At the same time, a beautiful full moon rose from the east. The Orinoco region was saying goodbye, leaving us with another unforgettable image.

At 3 am Jim, Brian and I left for the long adventurous drive to Laguna Larga, on the Cinaruco River, another 300 miles up the great Orinoco drainage. It led to another extraordinary week of fishing with more stories of adventure. We landed three different species of pavon, some up to 10-pounds, as well as more payara, piranha and other interesting fish. And Jim was right, pavon do break fly rods like toothpicks!

Jeff always seems to end up fly fishing in fantastic locations! If you would be interested in a trip to Venezuela for either saltwater or freshwater, call him at 1-800-570-3270 or E-

mail him at jeff_currier@hotmail.com