

WE MET THE OLD CHIEF TAKAKNHOTIRE AT A PLACE WHERE A LONG FINGER OF ROCK REACHED INTO THE RIVER LIKE A PIER. THE ROCK RAMP TILTED DOWN AT A SHALLOW ANGLE AND EVENTUALLY DISAPPEARED INTO THE WATER. NAVIGATION IN THIS STILL-ROADLESS REGION OF THE AMAZON IS MOSTLY BY BOAT. IT WAS EASY TO SEE HOW THIS GEOLOGIC “DOCK” WOULD HELP AVOID HAULING FISH, FRUIT, AND FRESHLY KILLED TAPIRS, CAPYBARAS, AND GIANT ARMADILLOS ACROSS SHALLOW MUD FLATS DURING PERIODS OF LOW WATER. IN HIGH WATER, THE CALM WATER IN THE ARMPIT OF THE RIVER AND ROCK INTERSECTION WOULD PROVIDE A SAFE HARBOR FOR DUGOUT CANOES, AND EASY ACCESS TO THE JUNGLE. IT WAS A LOGICAL PLACE FOR HUMAN HABITATION IN THE AMAZON WILDERNESS.

ROSS PURNELL

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RETURN TO THE

LIVING, DYING, AND FISHING DEEP IN KAYAPO TERRITORY

Xingu

The Rio Xingu is the largest clearwater tributary of the Amazon River. It flows south to north through the last remaining pristine tract of the Amazon jungle and is the best place on earth to catch payaras with a fly rod.



PUBLIC DOMAIN - PHOTO

Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett (above) and his son disappeared on the Rio Xingu while searching for the Lost City of Z. Takaknhotire (top) is the founder of the village of Kamoktidjam where Rio Xingu Lodge is located. He remembers a time before the Kayapo people had contact with the outside world.

LOST CITY OF Z

The Amazon region has a long history of exploitation, murder, mayhem, and conquest that in some ways is analogous to the American West. In 1541, Spanish explorer Francisco de Orellana set out from Ecuador in search of El Dorado—a legendary city of gold in the Amazon. Orellana's expedition down the Amazon River ended in the deaths of 140 Spaniards and more than 3,000 conscripted natives, but he was the first European to descend, name, and map the river and pass through a region already populated with many different native cultures. Afterward came centuries of exploration in search of gold, rubber, mahogany, and other resources that was often accompanied by slavery, executions, rape, arson, and mass exterminations due to introduced diseases.

The Rio Xingu is the largest clearwater tributary of the Amazon River and bisects one of the largest areas in the basin. It also one of the last places to be explored. In 1925 Col. Percy Fawcett—a British geographer, artillery officer, cartographer, archaeologist, and explorer—disappeared in the Xingu wilderness along with his eldest son Jack chasing tales of the “Lost City of Z.” Even in 1925 the Xingu region was a dense,

impenetrable, unknown, and still thought to be a hiding place of South American gold. Fawcett was likely killed by natives on the Xingu. Members of the Kalapalo tribe were the last to report seeing him alive.

To this day the Xingu is still unconquered and undeveloped, with large areas of native lands officially ceded to tribal organizations. The Kayapos in this area have never relinquished control of their land. That's the only reason it remains forested, pristine, with clear water full of the same fish that swam there 1,000 years ago. They are indeed fierce defenders of the Amazon.

RONKO

Takaknhotire arrived minutes before us in a boat loaded with a school teacher, a representative from the nonprofit Kayapo Project, and about 13 school-age children. The teens and pre-teens from four different families in the village of Kamoktidjam were all cousins to each other and all Takaknhotire's grandchildren.

Using Rodrigo Salles as an interpreter, Takaknhotire told me that in this place long ago there was a thriving village called Ronko. A “ron” is a type of palm tree that bears large nuts similar to coconuts, and a “ko” is a grove.



The payara (*Hydrolycus armatus*) is a species of dogtooth characid sometimes known as the “vampire fish.” They are native to the Amazon, Orinoco, and Essequibo rivers.

was left of Ronko was a high concentration of fruit trees: bananas, acai berries, Brazil nuts, and kamokti—a large fruit with soft flesh inside like a sweet, stringy mango or papaya.

Takaknhotire’s village—the closest human settlement—is called Kamokti-djam because it is the place (djam) of the large kamokti tree. What happened to the people of Ronko is lost to history. Maybe a flood forced them to move to higher ground, or their side channel completely dried up, or they were wiped out by war or disease. Even Takaknhotire doesn’t know. Takaknhotire doesn’t know how old he is, but he was a child when he first heard the stories of white people in the forest. He was a young warrior when he walked 150 kilometers downstream to São Félix do Xingu and first saw an outsider with his own eyes. By then the village of Ronko was already just a memory to be passed along as part of the Kayapo history.

When we walked with his grandchildren, Takaknhotire shared jungle lore like how to weave a basket from palm fronds. The teens were harvesting bushels of ripe acai and kamokti. But their main objective was to collect the SD cards from the

trail cameras they had mounted in the area weeks before as part of the “Equipe da Bã” project that allows the young people to use new technology to document biodiversity, to fast track their own jungle knowledge in a nonconsumptive manner (i.e. hunting with a camera instead of a bow and arrow), provide metrics to outside scientific and environmental organizations, and also to train them for roles in ecotourism much like their fathers and uncles do as fishing guides on the Xingu. These young people can also use this and other technology to watch and guard the perimeter of their lands as they continue to be a bulwark against encroachment by illegal mining, logging, and poaching. Much of what was the Amazon jungle in Col. Percy Fawcett’s time is now deforested cattle pasture. The biggest tract of remaining jungle lies within Kayapo indigenous territory only because they protect their land and their way of life with inspiring dedication.

RETURN TO THE XINGU

In 2019 I made my first trip to the Rio Xingu with my friend Rodrigo Salles, who

had already achieved success in Kayapo indigenous land with his Kendjam project, started in 2013. There, a catch-and-release sportfishing program provides jobs for dozens of individuals as well as income for the community that goes toward health care services, education, solar panels for electricity, water purification, and other projects aimed at raising the standard of living and fulfilling the dream of a sustainable economy.

Villagers along the Rio Xingu learned how this outside income was helping the Kayapo people on the Rio Iriri (a Xingu tributary). They were eager to develop a similar program on the Rio Xingu to benefit their own village and their own children and grandchildren.

Rodrigo’s first exploratory visits in 2016 revealed that there was too much harvest going on in the Rio Xingu, particularly by fishermen who came by boat from outside the territory to essentially poach the natives’ fish, and sell it in markets downriver. Step one, Rodrigo advised, was better river security at the gateway to indigenous lands. A 24-hour guard post and armed patrol boat at Posto Kokraimoro immediately began to provide what is essentially a freshwater ecopreserve on native lands. In just a few years, populations of peacock bass, wolf fish, and payaras rebounded to a point of abundance, and Rodrigo decided it was time to bring a North American to the Xingu to see if the adventure and the fishing were attractive enough to inspire international fly-fishing travel.

On that first trip on the Xingu we slept in tents on a wooden platform near Kamokti-djam. The native guides came by boat from scattered villages along the river, and they stared in amazement when Rodrigo and I first unpacked our fly rods, reels, and lines. They had never seen anything like it. They were born in huts without electricity, grew up knowing only the river and the jungle, and their fishing expertise was with a single baited hook and handline. Fly fishing was foreign to them and new to this river.

We documented their way of life, and their unusual customs. The Kayapos along this river have a mystical relationship with a ferocious-looking fish called a payara. Men in this culture use the long vampire-like teeth from these fish to cut and scar their arms and legs. The scars are symbols of their masculinity and of their prowess as fishermen. The best fishermen have the most scars. Rodrigo documented this process in our 90-minute culture-heavy film *Blood Run: Fly Fishing with Amazon Warriors*, which you

can view on the FLY FISHERMAN magazine YouTube channel.

When we returned five years later with Joe Wolthius of Scientific Anglers and globe-trotting pioneer Jeff Currier, we saw that the community’s dreams of creating a viable non-consumptive business on native land were fully realized. Where we had once slept in tents—completely isolated from the outside world—there was now Rio Xingu Lodge (xingulodge.com) with spacious rooms, bathrooms with showers, and a comfortable dining room and cocktail lounge complete with iced drinks, and Starlink Wi-Fi. Instead of half-naked children playing in the dust, we now encountered children in school uniforms with a multi-lingual trained teacher.

On that first trip, the guides squinted in the sun. They took off their T-shirts and wrapped their heads in them to shield their eyes. The idea of being out in the sun during the day was foreign to them—for eons they had hunted in the shadows of the forest and ventured out onto the river only in the low light of morning and evening. They knew where the fish lived, but only how to catch them with bait.

Now the guides have actual hats, sun-shirts, and protective sunglasses. They know how to position the boats to give two fly fishers the correct casting angles, they know which flies and which lines work in which places, and they enjoy the cross-cultural connection with fellow fishermen. Five years ago the guides seemed uneasy releasing a delicious fish like a matrinxã—it could feed a whole family. Now they laugh and celebrate as they watch another fish swim away and they know their jungle and their families are better for it. They have access to health care, clean drinking water, solar panels, and most

▶ Watch *Blood Run: Fly Fishing with Amazon Warriors* on the FLY FISHERMAN magazine YouTube channel and get an up-close look at fly fishing for payaras in the Amazon.



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Rio Xingu Lodge employs native guides and divides its annual net revenue with local tribes to fund community projects and improve the local standard of living.

importantly they have jobs inside their own lands. They don’t have to leave their homes to find work in mines or in other extractive industries. Their quality of life has skyrocketed in just five years, in great part due to Rio Xingu Lodge and other eco-tourism opportunities that are developing alongside it in partnership with the Kayapo Project (kayapo.org).

THE FISHING

The main attractions on the Xingu are



payaras aka “vampire fish” with their ferocious daggerlike teeth and heart-stopping feeding habits. *Hydrolycus armatus* are widespread in the Amazon, Orinoco, and Essequibo basins, but in most places they are notoriously difficult to catch on a fly because they are solitary and live and hunt in deep or fast water, often right below rapids. Most important, there just aren’t many of them. However, something is different about this one portion of the Rio Xingu. As the rainy season approaches in October and November, the water levels rise and payaras become relatively abundant. Locals consider it a migration. It’s unknown whether the fish congregate in this section of river to spawn, or if they are merely following a baitfish migration. Whatever the reason, there are more fly-fishing-accessible payaras in this clear, rocky section of the Rio Xingu than likely any other place on earth.

When Rodrigo and I first fished here in 2019 we used 10-weight rods and Scientific Anglers Tropical Titan Custom Cut sinking lines to plumb the depths. We cast straight across current, counted to 20 while the line sank in the current, and we retrieved slowly to keep the flies down. The strikes were ferocious, and we struck back with one, two, sometimes three tarpon-style hook-sets in an attempt to find purchase for the hook in that mouthful of teeth. That’s still the primary method of getting your photo taken with one of these Instagram-worthy fish.

But over the past few years, Rodrigo has found that payaras will also annihilate poppers at the surface. Big poppers that push a lot of water and make a lot of noise are the best. Rodrigo prefers NYAP poppers from Fulling Mill. These were originally developed for giant trevally in the Seychelles, but Rodrigo uses them in fresh water with a slow steady pull to get the line straight, and then a huge yank on the line (rod tip low) to make the popper “chug” loudly. The explosive attacks are heart-stopping but it is a lot of work to make long casts with a popper that size, and actively retrieve it like that. It can wear your arm out. I recommend switching to the popper only in the first hour of the day and last hour of the day or when you see fish actively attacking prey near the surface.

The Rio Xingu flows from the south to the north in the southeastern part of the Amazon watershed. It’s the largest clearwater tributary of the Amazon, and accounts for about 5% of the flow of the world’s largest river. Its average annual flow is about 185,000 cubic feet per second.



Traditional Kayapo face and body painting mimics patterns and shapes from nature and is inspired by animals like turtles and jaguars or the mottled light and dark shadows found under the jungle canopy.





Jeff Currier (Scientific Anglers hat) has caught 487 fish species on a fly rod. Four he added at Rio Xingu are machete payara, red pacu borracha (*Myloplus asterias*), and corvina. Matrinxã (bottom right) are common along brushy shorelines and take trout-size dry flies.

To give you a visual image, that's about 10 times the flow of the Yellowstone River. It is wide and shallow in most places with a hard bottom and rocky outcroppings, cobbled islands, occasional granite-sand beaches, and slow oxbow side channels.

The payaras lie in wait in the deepest slow holes, often right below rapids or constrictions in the river. But the river is full of strange and exotic species. Hundreds of fish species known to science were first discovered here—and more are still being discovered. Both times I fish the Rio Xingu I was also in the company of Alec Krüse Zeinad, the author of the book *Peixes fluviais do Brasil* (Brazilian River Fish) a 360-page full-color tome that is the bible of fish identification in the Amazon basin. This is where he did much of the research for his thesis, and where he prefers to sport

fish when he's looking for payaras. Alec has likely caught more than a thousand different species using bait, lures, and conventional tackle in the name of science.

Another companion on our 2024 trip was Jeff Currier, a world traveler who has caught and documented more than 487 species with fly tackle. Currier came to the Rio Xingu not for the payara—he already caught that species on the Rio Orinoco in Colombia on a harrowing trip where he risked life and limb to catch one fish.

Currier was there for the variety, looking to add to his species list, and there's possibly no better place in fresh water to catch a wide variety of fish. One of the fish Jeff needed—and heard were plentiful here—is a type of drum species known locally in Portuguese as corvina (Sciaenidae family).

It is shaped much like our North American red drum (redfish) but it's nickel silver with just a bit of black spotting where its dorsal fins attach to the body. They congregate in the same deep holes where payaras like to hunt, they take flies, and they are delicious. On the way back from fishing late one evening, the sun was dropping behind the hills and we had engine trouble. The outboard fell silent and we were overcome by a loud rhythmic drumming or thrumming sound. At first I thought it might be the howler monkeys we heard a few days earlier but our guide smiled and pointed down below the boat. "Pesca," he said. It's the fish. The school of corvina below us were creating a chorus of evening drumming that carried through more than 50 feet of water and resonated in our ears.

Jeff got one on that trip, but oddly was

one of the last to do it. He also managed to get something called a machete payara (*Rhaphiodon vulpinus*). It has the same sabertooth face as a regular payara but is much longer and more slender than a regular payara. Totally different species. There's another one in the Xingu called a redbtail payara (*Hydrolycus tatauaia*)—they are caught on fly each season but we didn't manage one. Another common catch in those deep payara holes is a type of whiskerless catfish called palmito. Unlike most other catfish, these fish strike flies and jump energetically when you hook them. I have landed them with fresh bite marks on them, so I'm not sure if they are jumping in reaction to hook pressure or because piranhas are attacking them from below.

Once you get out of the deep holes, the species and fishing strategies change completely. In the mornings and evenings (of course) you strive for payaras, but throughout the day one of the most popular strategies is to use the paddles to just drift strategically along the riverbank with both anglers casting close to shore—especially around and under overhanging branches and downed trees. It's not too different from drifting a trout stream in the Rockies. The guy in the front uses a 6-weight trout rod and a foam dry fly like an Amy's Ant or a Chubby Chernobyl—with an optional nymph dropper. The guy in the back can do the same or fish cleanup with a Clouser Minnow or some other streamer that imitates a small silvery minnow.

If the boat makes a quiet approach you'll see individual fish or schools rising, and you'll time a cast accurately to drift

right to them.

Matrinxã (*Brycon amazonicus*) are omnivores and feed on insects, seeds, and other plant matter and they are almost always right along the bank in shallow water that can only be described as trouty.

There are many species of pacu in this habitat as well, and they school up more than the matrinxã mostly because their food sources like fruits and nuts are often concentrated. One of my best pacu came while drifting. As we approached a large flowering tree, we could see white petals falling to the water and maybe 50 or more pacu downstream gulping down the flower petals just like trout feeding on PMDs. It seemed like a "can't miss" feeding frenzy so I fired a cast right into the center of the group, "lining" a number of fish. They all stopped rising, clearly alarmed at the sudden appearance of a foreign object. The water was suddenly placid as my white-winged Chubby drifted through the water behind the tree. I thought I had blown it. The reaction was overwhelmingly negative. But then a solitary silver pacu decided that the Chubby was just too juicy to refuse—it plucked the fly from the surface, turned its broad body to the side as I set the hook, and it scattered dozens of other fish as it bolted downstream.

You'll also catch pacu borracha or rubber pacu (*Tometes* sp.) with this method as well as and numerous other species. If you love drifting for trout, you'll love this and it's also a great way to see the riverbank wildlife: hyacinth and scarlet macaws, capybaras, black caimans, turtles, monkeys, and if you're lucky, bigger predator species like

river otters, anacondas, and jaguars.

If you drift the same banks and use a sinking swimming fly like a Clouser or a Sparkle Minnow you'll catch bigger matrinxã, peacock bass up to 6 or 8 pounds, and I once got lucky and caught a small payara.

Anything can happen on the Rio Xingu. The week before Thanksgiving 2024, a fly fisher at Rio Xingu Lodge was floating a side channel, saw a commotion in a creek mouth, cast his Clouser Minnow, and caught an 80-pound redbtail catfish that was hunting the creek mouth. The river likely has the biggest remaining population of indigenous catfish in the Brazilian Amazon. While fly fishers do occasionally catch the magnificent black and white surubim catfish (*Pseudoplatystoma reticulatum*) the bigger cats like jau, redbtails, and piraíba are genetically designed to live in deep, dark water far from the sunlight and they hunt mostly by smell.

As Jeff Currier can attest it's a place where anyone can catch new species or be surprised almost every day. The Amazon is known for its diversity, and the Xingu is perhaps the greatest testament to that. More than that, it's a place where you can walk and talk with native people in their own land—people who fight proudly to preserve the river and their culture in ways that can be shared and appreciated by visitors. They love to welcome guests to their lands, they enjoy sharing what they have, and all of them—from the young ones in school uniforms to the old wizened chiefs—have the same appreciation for wild fish and wild rivers as you and I do. 🐟