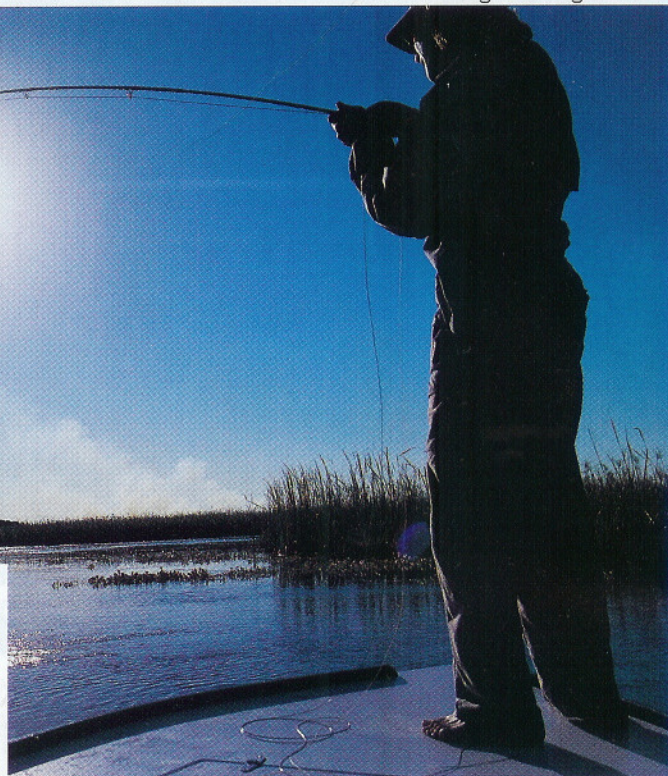


Devil in a Blue Lake

Obsessed with catching an elusive and vicious South American fish, the author traveled 5,000 miles to face his golden nemesis



the nickname "river tiger." Once hooked it is fiercely resistant to capture, a trait that prompted the legendary fishing writer A. J. McClane (one of the major studs of 1960s fishing porn) to call el dorado "one of the most brilliant aerial acrobats we have encountered."

And now, after traveling 5,000 miles by plane, bus, and rickety motorboat deep into the interior of the northern Argentine province of Corrientes, I was being thwarted by a disagreement with a type A fishing guide over a \$6 lure. Admittedly, there was a certain amount of local pride at stake. The brain trust back at my New York City tackle shop had insisted that I buy three sparkling-gold lures for the job. Sergio, however, had green, red, and white ones. Sergio's were tested past performers and had the teeth marks to prove it. Mine hadn't a scratch. But for four days his stuff had gotten me nowhere, and I was getting desperate.

At the beginning, I'd had no doubts about Sergio. Our first morning together, his boat, the *Redopla*, had seemed a fine dorado-hunting machine. The skiff had flown across the floodplain where the Corrientes and Paraná rivers meet, a two-mile-wide labyrinth of mud-brown water and root-gnarled islands.

An angler reels in a dorado at Iberá Marsh; left, the golden one, captured.

Our first action came early on. Sergio clipped a red swimming plug onto my line and pointed to a chute of fast water. I cast where he indicated, and a few seconds later there was a disturbance behind my lure. Something that looked like a two-foot gold ingot charged so quickly in the murk below that it seemed as if shot from a submarine. All at once, there was the swipe of a bright pink tail, a bulge in the water. Then nothing. El dorado had seen my lure, chased it, but had clearly decided *no más*.

And for two days, that was pretty much it.

Sergio was unduly solicitous during those fishless times—a tough and tender combination of Hemingwayesque hunter and Jewish mother. When a boy dressed in rags wandered out of the marsh with his arms wrapped around a catfish as big as a German shepherd, Sergio offered to buy it and cook it for me, Milanese-style. When a capybara, the world's largest rodent, forded the river with its cute, bowling-ball-size head sticking out above the surface, Sergio offered to shoot it. "Mwa!" he said, gesturing with his fingers to his mouth. "Delicious."

But he wouldn't budge on the golden lure.

"Give me the gold lure," I demanded.

"No," said my guide, Sergio, wagging his finger with Argentine don't-cross-me machismo. "It is not the time for gold."

Maybe I was delusional from too many nights of being fed fried catfish under a leaky tarp on the shores of a piranha-infested river. Whatever the reason, I had become fixated on the idea that Sergio—a big, warmhearted, extremely controlling kind of guy—was actively preventing me from realizing my boyhood fantasy of catching el dorado.

Let me explain. Long before I ever cracked the spine of a *Penthouse* or a *Playboy*, I fed my young lusts on a steady diet of exotic-fishing porn. A photo of a leaping salmon in *Field & Stream*, a spread in *Salt Water Sportsman* of a pole bent double under a marlin's weight—this was the

erotica taped to the back of my locker. And while unattainable things with fins were eventually replaced by unattainable things in bikinis, there was one fish that remained lodged in my subconscious through all the flowing and ebbing of my other passions. That fish is called el dorado, "the golden one," and I have wanted to catch and kill one all my life.

Unlike the mythological South American city fashioned from pure gold, el dorado the fish is very real and made of solid muscle. Uncompromisingly golden in color, it is so savage that attempts to raise it in captivity have sometimes resulted in cannibalistic bloodbaths. Its Latin name, *Salminus maxillosus*, means "the troutlike fish with the massive jaws," and with its two rows of razor-sharp teeth, the fish, somewhat fittingly, has earned



An acrobatic dorado surfaces; left, the beast up close.



So I left him. Terrible as it felt to betray Sergio, I traveled 200 miles north to the Pirá Lodge, one of several ritzy new dorado-fishing compounds abutting the emerald green Iberá Marsh, one of South America's largest wetlands.

My hands were trembling with excitement when the Pirá guide beached our boat, for I could see dorado flashing everywhere in the Iberá's crystal waters. I tied on the one gold lure I had smuggled off the *Redopla* and cast it into the confluence of two fast currents. Dorado tails slapped the water right and left, sounding off like a string of firecrackers. I cast more and more frantically, whipping my head every time I heard another one jump. Suddenly, I felt myself jerked forward. I looked ahead and saw my line straighten. Then the water exploded in gold. A dorado shot three feet into the air, shaking its head violently. It jumped a second time and a third time. On the fourth jump, it turned, looked at me, and spat the lure all the way to shore as if to say, "Feh."

I lost two more, each one bigger than the next. My golden lure had bite marks all over it.

On my tenth cast, five different species swarmed, including the carplike sabalo that grabbed my lure and wrapped itself around a downed tree trunk. "No!" I cried. I was almost ready to wade in after it when a gang of dorado and piranha converged on the sabalo, tore it to shreds, broke my line, and made off with my lure. Like Sergio, my Pirá guide had all kinds of lures, but nothing gold. None of them worked. My mind drifted to my reserves of bullion—two gold lures that Sergio had snatched from me and tossed unceremoniously into a bucket. There was no other choice but to return to him.

I rendezvoused with Sergio the next day under a bridge on the Corrientes River. And when I said, "Please, Sergio, please give me a gold lure," he saw that I was close to inconsolable.

"All right," he said, "try this one." He handed me a seven-inch number with dumb yellow eyes, bristling with hooks.

Nothing happened at first. We floated with the current for two hours, getting ever closer to the village of Esquina, where my trip would end. The clouds from the previous night's storm burned away, revealing all the

Casting for dorado at Iberá Marsh, a South American fishing mecca.

green-blue glory of Argentine big-sky country. I could see Sergio itching to snatch the gold lure away. But just as my resolve was wavering, the lure was stopped dead in its tracks. Then the line went slack. I was about to slam down my pole in disgust when Sergio shouted, "No, he's there! Reel, reel, reel!" I cranked in the line as fast as I could. The line tightened and then angled under the boat. We both turned and watched the water part as the dorado burst out in a rage, so close we could hear the hooks rattle against the lure's plastic. Sergio poled the *Redopla* around and cleared the line from the keel. Then the dorado showed what it had in speed. It took off in a flying run down the river and then went airborne again.

I can't say it was the biggest dorado ever. Not by a long shot. But what I *can* say is that of all the fish I've ever hooked, this seven-pounder was the only one that was more exciting in real life than it was in a *Field & Stream* centerfold. It jumped, it ran, it tail-walked, and it dove more

times than I could count. And when it finally came boatside, pulsing gold with its pink fins flickering—beaten but somehow not defeated—there was no question about what to do next. Sergio, sensing my decision, slipped the hooks gently from the fish's teeth. After holding it briefly for a photo, he put it back in the water and then watched it shoot down into the darkness.

From that point on, the lure rocked. Twelve fish hit it, four of which made it to the *Redopla's* gunwales. And Sergio's pride in the lure grew. He praised it as if it were his own.

That evening at Sergio's father's house, El Dorado the lure, peeled of most of its paint and bearing the deep gouges of combat, was passed hand to hand around a table piled high with catfish kebabs and giant rodent steaks.

"It's a very good lure," Sergio said. "You should take this lure home and frame it next to your photo."

I thought it over. "Maybe you should keep it." —PAUL GREENBERG



WILD ATLANTIC SALMON

THREE OTHER FISH WORTH THE HUNT

THE ATLANTIC SALMON OF THE KOLA PENINSULA

Naturally occurring Atlantic salmon are extremely rare and can be found today only in the most remote corners of the globe,

such as the Atlantic Salmon Reserve, on Russia's Kola Peninsula. The reserve boasts one of the largest populations of wild Atlantic salmon in the world. Get your name on the

waiting list now, however—it gets 800 applications a year for just 400 fishing slots.

THE MAHSEER OF INDIA

"He who lands him can say he is a fisherman." So said Rudyard

Kipling of the mahseer, which swims the snow-fed rivers of the Himalayas as well as the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu. Its population has thinned in recent years, but excursions to the Mahakali

River can still produce a fish worthy of Kipling's praise.

THE GOLIATH TIGERFISH OF THE CONGO

Armed with a mouthful of inch-long teeth, this relative of the piranha resides

in the Congo River, where it has been known to snap at the genitals of bathing Congolese. If you can bag one of these, you'll never have your manhood called into question again. —P.G.