

PIRATES OF THE SOUTHERN SEAS

story by Peter Miller

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photo by David Cartee



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South Florida is host to a number of colorful, exotic guests in its freshwater ecosystem... the tropical climate allows non-native fish species to thrive. Butterfly peacock bass, native to South America, were stocked intentionally in Miami-Dade and Broward County canal systems, generating tremendous recreational and bio-environmental value. As an angler, there's no need to travel to the Amazon to catch one of the most ferocious, hard-fighting freshwater fish in the world.

The butterfly peacock bass was introduced into South Florida waters between the years of 1984 and 1987 by the Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission. During this time, 20,000 fingerlings were stocked for two reasons. The first reason was to reduce the growing non-native cichlid infestation - particularly the African spotted-tilapia. The second was to create a new recreational fishery. The stocking

proved a tremendous success in both regards. According to FWC statistics, the spotted tilapia populations have been reduced by up to 50 percent. Fishing for peacock bass accounts for nearly \$10 million and hundreds of thousands of recreational hours each year spent by anglers.

There are 350 miles of urban canals in Miami-Dade and Broward counties containing peacock bass. However, these fish cannot tolerate salinity and are extremely sensitive to temperature change. This is a natural barrier, ensuring the peacocks cannot overpopulate and push northwards. Generally speaking, the further south you travel, the better the fishing is... peacock bass are more active (and hungry) in warmer waters.

Your task in locating peacock bass is to find the structure. Culverts, bridges, canal bends, corners, and tunnels provide the best fishing. Also, if you walk along the shoreline

or cruise slowly by boat, look for the telltale spawning signs. Cleared out flat, hard-surfaced areas with small, orange fry suspended above it usually means a mating pair is close nearby. While they're in spawning stage, peacocks will fearlessly guard their bed and fry. They will not stray far from their mating area. In this scenario, sight cast, twitch your lure and try to provoke a strike. During spawning season, the males may have a large notch on their head, called a nuchal hump. When provoked, lit-up peacock bass, gills flaring, will inhale a jig faster than you can react, and might spit the hook. However persistence is key, and peacock bass will usually strike multiple times.

Peacock bass fight like a largemouth bass on steroids. They'll explode on a bait and take quick, strong runs - ripping drag. They'll often jump acrobatically with seemingly no regard for their surroundings. We've had peacocks

jump into boats and onto banks. They'll rattle their gills, and try to shake your lure... so be careful; this can result in an accidental hook in your hand. When peacock bass jump, bow your rod to the water and pray the hook doesn't pop loose. If you're fishing with multiple anglers, make sure to keep a bait in the water after one fish is hooked up. These fish are incredibly competitive, and you can often coax a second fish into biting, resulting in a doubleheader.

When landing peacocks, they can be lipped similarly to a largemouth. Take caution however, peacock bass have tiny nubs for teeth. After a few peacocks, you will have a serious case of "bass thumb." We recently caught a peacock over 6 pounds that shredded our guest's thumb... but he wore his injury like a badge of honor.

There are a few different tactics for catching peacock bass, depending on the situation.

If peacock bass are on their spawning beds, typically in the late-spring months, a bucktail jig dropped into their bed is irresistible. Curly tail grubs make nice added attractants. Slowly twitch the jig in their face. When fishing structure or casting in open water, small Rapala X or Shad Raps, Countdowns, Rat-L-Traps and YoZuri minnows all catch fish. We've had great success with white and gold lures. Other popular colors include perch and firetiger with vibrant vertical stripes. Speed is important. Work these lures as fast and erratic as possible... a quick retrieve is very important.

For the bait fisherman, small shiners are the easiest, and are a surefire bet. Shiners can be fished below a float, freelined, or weighed down with a small split shot. For hooks, a size 1 live-bait hook is light, will not weigh down your shiner and allows for a natural bait presentation.

A light spinning rod and a 2500 to 3000-

size reel coupled to a 15-pound fluorocarbon leader provides you with enough backbone, but still allows bait and lures to appear as natural as possible. For the fly fisherman, a 5/6 weight, 8- to 9-foot rod coupled with a short 6-foot leader and 12- to 15-pound tippet will do the trick. Clouser minnows and streamers in vibrant colors like orange, chartreuse, or tiger pattern all produce. As always with peacock bass, the faster and more erratic the retrieve, the more aggressive the strike.

I highly suggest you give this unique and exciting fishery a try. For your first outing, it's best to contact one of our local, South Florida guides. These guides primarily take guests on urban run-and-gun trips. This means walking the banks and sight casting to peacocks, as well as a variety of other species including snook and tarpon. You may also encounter other exotics like snakehead, oscars, mayan cichlids, and jaguar guapote.