

Iron Lake full of *plecostomus*

By Fishin' Frank
Water LIFE Mentor

What do you do when relatives come to town and it is blowing 15 mph out of the west? Head up river of course. The Peace River was picked as the back drop for several Tarzan movies so if you like 'getting away from it all,' go where Tarzan swam fighting fierce croc-a-gators. I swear sometimes, when I am up river, I can almost see Tarzan swinging from tree to tree.

The Peace River does not start out jungle-looking, at first it is more like the Charlotte Harbor mangrove lined shores. It is not until you pass Harbour Heights that it starts to change. Palm trees line the shore, marsh grass fills bays with small creeks that run their winding way back for miles, the palms start giving way to the lilly pads and cypress trees. Slowly you notice vines crawling across trees and stumps, gators lying in wait, painted turtles and soft shell turtles slip into the water, wading birds nest whole islands.

The other thing that is changing as you move up river is the bottom. It is no longer soft sand and mud, it is rock, sand, and fallen trees. These line the bottom, so go slow and stay close to the outside bends of the river. Snags, or *sawyers* as the old timers called them, drift down with the current. Watch the surface for rolling dips in the current, for these are tell-tale signs of a snag.

When Robert's (he works at the store, in case you didn't know or have been on another planet for the last 10 years) Aunt Suzy, came in from California. Robert his nephew Taylor and I took Suzy on a trip up river to Iron Lake. It is a lake just off the Peace River entirely surrounded by

cypress trees. The mouth of the lake is known for tarpon fishing, so we headed up there first to try for a bronze king – tarpon are 'silver kings' at the Pass but this far up river tarpon are golden bronze because of the water color. Not finding any tarpon we headed into the lake. It was a bright hot sunny day with a wind out of the west. The lake looked like a mill pond, and all over fish were ringing the surface.

Thick hairs filter what goes into the fish's mouth



The fish were hanging in the water vertically, head up and tail down



The plecostomus has a large dorsal fin and sweeping tail



Iron Lake is a left turn off the Peace River above Horse Creek

Every where we looked we could see a fish touch the surface and make a small ring. We were casting a small you-zuri on one rod and on the other rod a jerk bait, trying to figure out what kind of fish they were. When we finally got right over them we could see in the water that there were thousands of catfish. Robert took the landing net and held it in the water while we idled forward. They were so thick he was catching them in the landing

net. But they weren't ordinary Florida catfish, they were different.

This was a very cool looking fish with a large dorsal fin and sweeping tail, and what looks like a suit of armor. They were the South American *plecostomus*, probably released into the wild by people from their fish tanks. Now, after breeding for years, these fish are thick in parts of the upper river. They must create some problems for native fish, but this invasive species are primarily scum eaters.

Their mouths have fine stringy filters over them and they can suck the slime off of ... well, anything. So I guess you could say our day on the river was great, but the fish we caught 'suck.' The bright side of the story is these fish have been found in the stomachs of tarpon and snook, so we know they are being eaten by the game fish. It is amazing what you can find in the waters of southwest Florida.

Fishin' Frank can be reached for questions or to book a guided fishing trip at 625-3888

Kids Cup Tracking Report

Fish #30. originally caught on 28 Apr., 2007 and re-released the same day at the 2007 Kids Cup Tournament at Harpoon Harry's, Fishermen's Village, Punta Gorda,

was re-caught June 23, 2008. The fish was caught 1 mile south of Alligator Creek. The fish had travelled a distance of 4.07 nautical miles. When released in 2007

the fish measured 552 mm but the length measurement was not recorded when the fish was re-caught. The fish had been at large 422 days before being re-caught.

MERCURY
#1 On The Water

Mercury Inboard / Outboard Service and Repairs WE'll make it RUN!

www.allfiberglassrepairs.com
Scott Steffe Owner

1726 Steadly Ave
Punta Gorda

Fabrication • Spot Repairs
Major Structural Repairs
Professional Quality Awl Grip Finishes
Gel Coat • Detailing and Brightwork
Free Estimates • Mobile Service
Marine Hardware, Quicksilver Products

Shop 941- 575-8914
Home 235-2243

ALL FIBERGLASS REPAIRS

Custom Work is Our Specialty