



## IAN WELCH'S angling adventures

Here, in our unmissable 4-page slot, the UK's most cutting edge specialist coarse angler is the man to follow every week. Welch writes exclusively in *Angler's Mail*.

It wasn't what Welch had travelled all the way to Thailand for but it fought like a bulldozer, gave him a serious workout and after two days of blanking Ian was finally off the mark.



# In search of giants on the River of the Dragon

THIS WEEK'S VENUE

### BANG PAKONG RIVER, CHACHOENGSAO, THAILAND

Established in 1549 the town of Chachoengsao lies some 100 km east of Bangkok and is known locally as Paet Riu – a reference to the large fish historically caught from the river. The river itself is the Bang Pakong, or River of the Dragon, and is one of Thailand's five holy rivers traditionally used in ceremonies to mark the king's ascension to the throne. It originates at the confluence of the Nakon Nayok and Prachinburi rivers and winds its way through Chachoengsao province before discharging amidst mango forests into the Gulf of Thailand some 150 km downstream. The fish fauna is varied and largely unexplored but includes unknown numbers and sizes of a prehistoric benthic predator: the awesome giant freshwater stingray.

#### IAN'S AIM

To catch one of the largest and rarest freshwater fish on the planet: the giant freshwater stingray.

#### CONDITIONS

It's a sultry 36 degrees C (97F) but as it is the rainy season almost every afternoon brings a brief, stormy downpour. The bad news is the impact of the Myanmar cyclone has filtered through to the Thai rivers making them all but unfishable.

#### DESCRIPTION

Draining a watershed of some 17,000 square km the Bang Pakong is a serious waterway running through jungle, rice fields and mango forest. The lower reaches through Chachoengsao are tidal giving massive variations in depth and flow and fishing is largely dictated by lunar phases.

#### FISHING IN THAILAND

Ian fished with Rick Humphreys, Wuttichai 'Boy' Khuensuwan and the FishSiam.com team who offer a range of bespoke angling packages throughout Thailand including the unique opportunity to do battle with the largest known freshwater fish on earth. Visit [www.fishsiam.com](http://www.fishsiam.com)



The rafts of pak were massive, unrelenting and made fishing the mighty Bang Pakong all but impossible. It was a long way to travel from England to Thailand for a blank!



The hotel was superb and afforded great views along the river.

**BILLY O'CONNOR** has a lot to answer for. As the person I charged to create the RMC Angling website he was responsible for the development of the modern angling website – and angling forum - as we know it.

As a good friend he is now responsible for me falling in love with a country, a people, a lifestyle and a species of fish which will see me head to south-east Asia every year; if not permanently...

Having re-located his Internet business to Thailand a couple of years ago Bill promised he would sort the pair of us out a fishing trip as soon as he was settled, but I thought no more of it until an e-mail arrived from him a few weeks ago introducing me to another ex-pat, Rick Humphreys.

A passionate angler when he lived in the UK Rick had fished his way across much of Thailand and in the process had met up with and formed a friendship with the man who is arguably Thailand's top angler; Wuttichai 'Boy' Khuensuwan. Together the pair set up FishSiam.com a company dedicated

to promoting freshwater angling and fish conservation throughout Thailand.

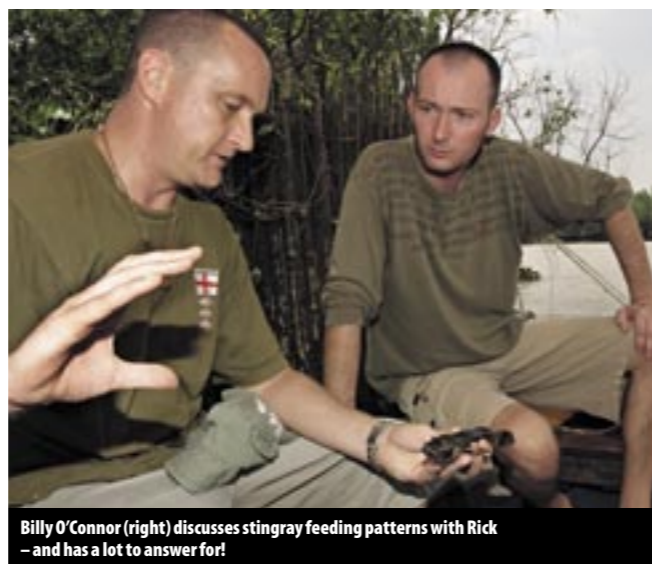
During the course of our communication it became clear that Rick was a man obsessed.

Despite the attraction of any number of incredible fish species to try for he had become totally fascinated with one of the most elusive and primitive of all freshwater fish. In a couple of months of pioneering angling and exhaustive research he, Boy and the FishSiam team had started to uncover a few of the secrets and crack a few of the myths behind the largest freshwater fish on the planet; the giant freshwater stingray or GFS for short.

The GFS has long been considered a vulnerable species and is listed as such on the IUCN Red List. Threatened by both industrial and agricultural pollution and with its breeding migrations disturbed by dam building the massive, nomadic benthic predator is the final frontier when it comes to freshwater fishing; the last great



Thailand is a deeply Buddhist country and we could not fish on the holy Visakah Puja day so paid our respects at the local temple.



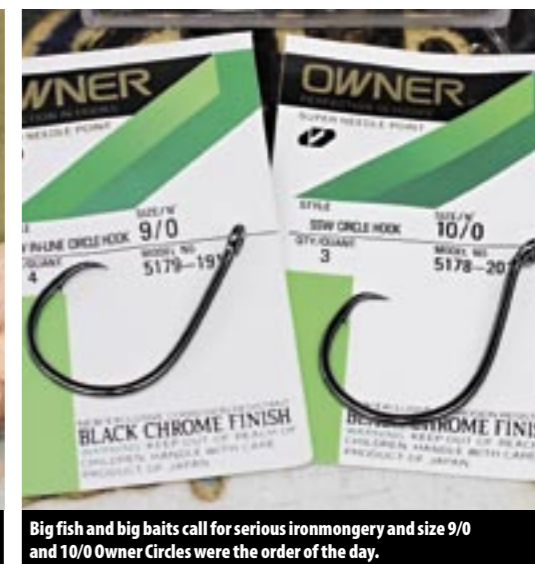
Billy O'Connor (right) discusses stingray feeding patterns with Rick – and has a lot to answer for!



I went native with the wonderful Thai food - thankfully for Rick there are alternatives!



Made from reinforcing steel rods and weighing a kilo but needed to hold station in the seriously powerful Thai rivers.



Big fish and big baits call for serious ironmongery and size 9/0 and 10/0 Owner Circles were the order of the day.



Rigs were baited with local catfish species and fished on fluorocarbon hook lengths.



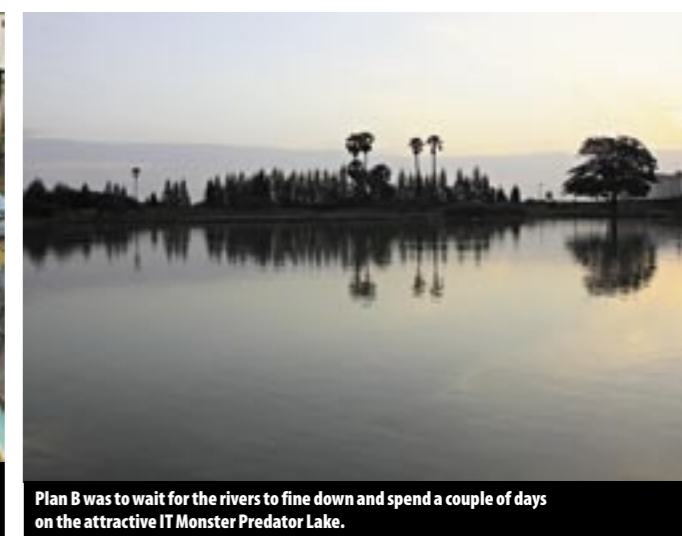
Despite their massive size stingray can give very tentative bites so Q feels the line for evidence of a take after the rod tip has bounced.



The gear was more suited to a big-engined, ocean going, modern marlin boat than a small wooden punt! I wondered if it were overkill...



Long tail boats are universal on the Thai rivers and in the hands of the local team offer good, stable fast and highly manoeuvrable fishing stations.



Plan B was to wait for the rivers to fine down and spend a couple of days on the attractive IT Monster Predator Lake.

» adventure left to anglers.

A prehistoric relic it inhabits some of the wildest and remote waters on earth including the Mekong, Maeklong, Ban Pakong, Chaophraya, Tachin and Tapi Rivers in Thailand where it is thought to reach weights in excess of 1,000 lb feasting on a rich diet of fish, molluscs and crustacea.

Rick's enthusiasm was infectious, I was immediately hooked by the tales of epic battles with monsters amidst some of the most breathtaking scenery and wildlife in the world. And with Rick having just completed a couple of major GFS captures to order for National Geographic magazine I was convinced he could put me onto one too. Prime time is on and after the full moon every month so I booked flights to coincide with the next phase, hastily arranged vaccinations for a whole range of nasties and headed, via the excellent Qatar Airlines service, into the unknown.

Bangkok is one of the most wonderful cities on earth and I was a little disappointed not to be able to spend time there but the schedule was pressing and after meeting up with Bill, Rick and Boy at the airport we headed straight off to the Wangtara Hotel in Chachoengsao, base camp for the first part of the adventure, where my room overlooked the mighty Bang Pakong.

The first full moon day in May is Visakah Puja, the most important Buddhist festival of the year, celebrating the birth and enlightenment of the Buddha and as such we could not fish and upset

local tradition. Instead we joined the crowds at one of Thailand's most impressive and important temples, Wat Sothon Wararam Woravihan, paid our respects to the Buddha and sought blessing for our quest.

Looking at the river alongside the temple it soon became clear there were problems, major problems. The recent and devastating Myanmar cyclone had resulted in the gates on the Thai reservoirs being opened to run off excess water and in addition to high levels the surge had brought weed through – masses of it. If you thought a weed cut on a UK river made for tricky fishing then imagine it on a gigantic scale with weed rafts the size of football pitches constantly flowing past and, because the river is tidal, flowing back again a few hours later! Rick was bullish but we all knew it wasn't good and a sumptuous lunch on a floating restaurant was spent with the guides discussing tactics to combat the floating 'pak'.

As a long-time lover of Thai food UK-style I was in my element sampling the real deal and impressed even the locals with my appetite for spicy local cuisine, especially the wickedly hot Som tam green papaya, chilli and crab salad. Despite living locally Bill and Rick would rarely sample anything other than 'falang' (western) food; it's a sign of ever-increasing globalisation but thankfully for Rick and Bill KFC deliver and drive through McDonalds exist even in remote Thailand!

We were on the river shortly after first light the following morning and after greeting our guides for

the day, headed by 'Q', waited as baits were stowed, engines tested and last minute preparations made. After a brief delay as a python caused havoc in Q's chicken shed and had to be caught (yes, really) we set out on one of the flat-bottomed 'long-tail' boats so common throughout the region. Colourful, stable and powered by massive engines with tiny props on long maneuverable stems they make rapid progress through even the shallowest water.

Marks had been carefully selected by Rick and Boy after months of painstaking research and they had produced fish for the National Geographic team the week before but now it was all change and it was a very different river. We were going to fish right through the day well into darkness and I had packed sunscreen, DEET and plenty of water. Rick's delightful partner, Nimh, was going to deliver lunch and the forecast looked good despite it just coming into the rainy season.

The 80 to 100 lb class boat rods and Shimano TLD multipliers loaded with 100 lb Power Pro Braid were rigged up with long 120 lb Sufix fluorocarbon hook lengths terminating in size 9/0 and 10/0 Owner SSW circle hooks. Weights were constructed from reinforcing rods, weighing up to a kilo, to hold bottom in a serious current and were attached via elastic bands allowing them to break off easily in the event of snagging. Baits were small local catfish species weighing up to 8 oz and these were dropped off over the deep, sandy marks stingrays love to feed over; their big underslung mouths being equipped with powerful jaws and crushing

pads to effortlessly grind shrimps, crabs and whole fish.

With the need for constant re-positioning due to the weed nuisance it was difficult to keep baits fishing effectively throughout the tide but one pull on the rod top early on had Q feeling the line for a bite as, despite being the size of a snooker table, the bite from a GFS can be very tentative and easy to miss. It was a false alarm and the only positive indication during a delightful but ultimately frustrating first day on the river.

We had hoped the second day would bring an easing of the weed problem but, despite mooring on bends which deflected the worst of the problem and anchoring up behind a second boat to act as a barrier, it proved equally as bad.

Prospects improved slightly in the evening with a relatively quiet spell of water at prime time between tides and for a fleeting few moments time seemed to stand still in the half light and it all looked really good. Sadly it didn't last and we powered home against a majestic backdrop of illuminated temples beaten again and beginning to wonder if the timing and the Gods were against us.

Over food that evening Rick and Boy decided it was time for Plan B, we would give the river a few days to run off and hope the reservoir gates were due to be shut. Q and the local team would keep us posted on river conditions and we would head onto a lake up country at first light the next morning to get a much needed bend in our rods. It was a

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real blow to have to admit defeat so early on but the GFS is a nomadic and enigmatic creature and conditions have to be so right to find them in an area and feeding.

Our destination the following day was the IT Monster Predator Lake in Ratchaburi Province and arriving at dawn the next morning I was warmly greeted by Boy who had travelled up the night before to pre-bait a few spots. By the glint in his eye and the warmth of his handshake I knew we were on for a few fish.

Urging extreme quiet he pointed me at a margin area he had been trickling mackerel sections into for the past hour – I could see the tail pattern of a big fish feeding on the mark and within seconds of dropping a freelined bait onto the mark my line tightened and started to peel off the spool; I struck and hung on as something almost pulled me off my

feet with the power of its first run.

With a Fox Spod Rod, fixed spool reel and 80 lb braid I was on slightly more familiar ground – with the tackle at least - and clamped down to slow the run before trying to ease the fish back. It was a bit like playing a bulldozer and the short bursts of power were like nothing I had ever experienced. After a few minutes the bull-like black and white head surfaced with a bright red tail a metre or so behind – an Amazonian Redtail catfish and a good one too.

It had been an incredible fight and it was a stunning beast but not really what I had travelled 10,000 km for. However the day was young and it was a start but little did I know that the Som tam was about to hit the fan - it was about to go off big style and the next two days were to realise all of my wildest fishing fantasies...