



## 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*.

**MASSIVE**, prehistoric, and the largest freshwater fish on earth! After a dramatic week and a titanic battle Welch finally claims his prize in the shape of a 150 kg giant freshwater stingray.



One of the numerous canalised sections in the maze of waterways which form the mighty Maeklong River.



Accommodation for the Maeklong leg of the expedition was in delightful log cabins set amidst a jungle backdrop.

# Epic battle with a prehistoric predator

THIS WEEK'S VENUE

## MAEKLONG RIVER, SAMUT SONGKRAM, THAILAND.

Created by the confluence of the River Kwai Noi and Kwai Yai rivers - the location of the infamous Death Railway Bridge of the Second World War - the mighty Maeklong River drains Thailand's central plains flowing for some 145 km through Ratchaburi Province and Samut Songkram before spilling into the Gulf of Thailand via a mile-wide estuary. Dense jungle bisected by numerous waterways, home to monstrous monitor lizards and circled by eagles, the murky waters are home to freshwater prawns, numerous catfish species and snakeheads; all of which are feasted upon by the world's largest freshwater predator - the giant freshwater stingray.

### IAN'S AIM

It's a giant freshwater stingray or bust!

### CONDITIONS

Typical rainy season conditions persist with scorching daytime temperatures breaking down into a late afternoon downpour.

### DESCRIPTION

Tidal in its lower reaches the Maeklong receives two influxes a day raising water levels by between three to five metres upstream at Samut Songkram where the murky waters drop to depths of 20 metres. It's a serious, wild and largely unexplored waterway.

### 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. For full details check out [www.fishsiam.com](http://www.fishsiam.com) or call 020 8816 7592.

**R**ICK had christened it 'Area 51' - a section of the mighty Maeklong River at Samut Songkram where he had his first 'alien' encounter with the prehistoric benthic predator, the giant freshwater stingray (GFS).

As Bill O'Connor and I sat in a jungle clearing with the moon illuminating the river in front of us, Rick proceeded to tell us the story of how he and top Thai angling guide, Boy, had spent months tracking down GFS and had finally encountered the first specimens in the upper sections of the lower river at Area 51.

The atmosphere was electric: monitor lizards were scurrying along the shoreline, snakeheads were crashing in the side channels, and the jungle chorus was providing an eerie backbeat to Rick's words.

The scent of DEET mixed with smoke and incense was heavy in the air and despite the heat the beer was ice cold! It was a truly magical evening.

To date captures from the Maeklong had

only been of smaller male fish averaging around the 40 kg mark with the occasional specimen pushing 60 or 70 kg and since those early pioneering days Rick told us how he and Boy had moved to the Bang Pakong river where they had encountered larger specimens - and where this adventure had started.

Flooding and massive weed rafts had forced us off the Bang Pakong after two days of intense fishing had brought only blanks and a lot of frustration.

Despite taking time out to grapple with a huge Arapaima the news from the FishSiam lads still carrying out reconnaissance on the Bang Pakong was no better; there had been no improvement during our absence, the river was still out of sorts and it could well be weeks before the excess water resulting from the Myanmar cyclone finally filtered through.

Given the situation Rick and Boy thought the Maeklong offered the only chance of us getting to grips with a GFS so





The strain is beginning to show and the lads hang on to prevent the beast I'm attached to from pulling me in.



I opened the bedroom door and froze – two pairs of eyes were staring at me; I'd disturbed their mating and they weren't happy...



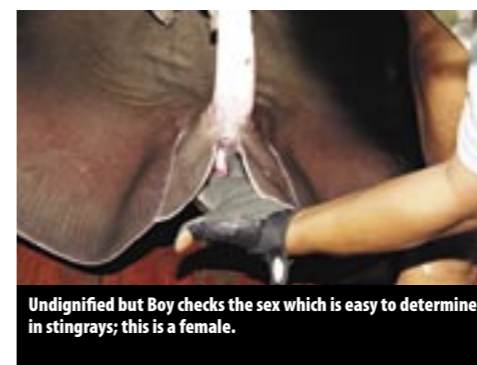
Boy finishes off the knot by blobbing the tag end of the fluorocarbon hook length with a lighter.



We're gonna need a bigger boat... Too big to get onboard Rick secures the tail and Boy ropes the nasal cavity.



The sting is made safe by wrapping and tying off with a length of cloth.



Undignified but Boy checks the sex which is easy to determine in stingrays; this is a female.



A picture speaks a thousand words. That'll be job done then!



Rick and Boy with the second fish of the day; a young female of around 45 kg.

» instead of going back to the Pakong we headed south, travelling past an eerie landscape of evaporation salt farms, coconut palms and banana plantations until we reached our accommodation which was in the form of well-appointed wooden cabins on raised platforms nestled amidst dense swamp alongside the river. The GFS here would be relatively small if we could get on them; but at least there would be a chance.

We sat up most of that first night talking stingray but after a short sleep I awoke feeling surprisingly refreshed and had an enjoyable breakfast of rice soup in the company of Boy. He then took me along a brief tour of some of the channels running through the swamp where we saw female snakeheads guarding their shoals of newly hatched fry in the crystal clear waters.

Heading back to the cabin to get changed for a day on the river I dashed up the steps to the bedroom and froze in terror as I almost trod on a pair of snakes which had rather inconveniently decided to start mating at the entrance to the room.

I wouldn't have been too pleased if someone had disturbed me in a similar situation and it was clear the pair were none too happy at my rather impromptu arrival and they reared up slightly and fixed me with their eyes.

It was stalemate for a few seconds and with my bum, already like a pin cushion after needing antibiotic shots for a catfish spine wound the day before, I was not relishing the thought of a second

## 'I felt sick in the pit of my stomach and when Boy gave me the nod I wound down and felt the earth move...'

trip to a Thai clinic for a shot of anti-venom. I retreated backwards VERY, VERY slowly...

The morning was spent exploring the lower reaches of the river on another of the longtail boats and, after a pleasant tour of the famous Amphawa floating market and a few cups of the brilliant locally grown and roasted Thai coffee, we worked our way downstream past the temples, fish farms and ocean-going boats all the way to the Gulf of Thailand. The snakes had finished their gyrations by the time we returned and, after carefully checking under the bed, I lay down to get a couple of hours' kip before the tides were right for fishing.

I dreamed of temples and snakes, of stingray and Buddhas and was so far gone I hardly noticed the tropical deluge when it struck late afternoon. The first I knew was when Boy nudged me awake as the rain eased off and the sun began to break through again. 'Time for stingray,' he said. I was ready.

Our captain for the day steered the longtail expertly through the backwaters, past the old men chest-deep in the water throwing nets for snakehead and the boys rodding for prawns, past the monitors skulking in the undergrowth and past a multitude of craft ferrying everything from coconuts to cauldrons of Tom Yum to market.

Arriving at the legendary Area 51 it was clear why it was a magnet for GFS as the main river branched and formed a massive eddy alongside a long strip of barramundi farms. Natural food would wash into the eddy and with hundreds of barramundi being harvested and filleted for market every day the natural diet of prawns, catfish, snakehead and crabs was supplemented with masses of fish waste. Ideal fodder for rays moving up on the current and foraging at high water.

We moored alongside the eddy and set up with the 50 to 100 lb boat rods paired with Shimano

TLD multipliers loaded with 100 lb Power Pro braid to long 120 lb Sufix fluorocarbon leaders and 7/0 Owner SSW circle hooks. Weights were the same kilo leads made from reinforcing rods which we had used on the Bang Pakong and these were fixed to the main line by elastic bands to allow them to pull off during the fight.

Boy had upped the bait size compared to the small catfish livebaits we had used on the Pakong and, as I pulled the hook through a kilo catfish livebait, I thought of my old monster-bait using predator fishing pal back in the UK – John Synnuck would have been proud of me!

Boy had devised another different tactic too and in addition to legering we were going to try a revolutionary new technique which I am under pain of death not to reveal in detail; but in essence one of my rods would be trotting a float!

With baits cast out we sat back and waited for the tide which would bring the GFS on the feed. The echo sounder showed a steady 14 m off the main drag of water and high water a few hours later would see it hit 18 m. If we had not caught by then it would be all over.

A gentle pull on one of the rods alerted our attention and the reel gave line – a bite! Boy felt for the pluck and pull which would indicate a positive strike but it was steady and I wound in a crushed bait. After so long it was a bitter blow but at least it signalled the presence of fish in the area; as a result the adrenaline in the boat was on a high and when my float buried some 20 minutes later in a scene

reminiscent of one of the barrels disappearing in the movie 'Jaws' we just knew this time it would be game on.

The captain lifted the anchor; I pulled on a harness, clipped the reel to it and sat on the bench in the middle of the boat and braced myself as the float just kept going and going. I felt apprehension and fear, I felt sick in the pit of my stomach and when Boy gave me the nod I wound down and felt the earth move...

A rod which Rick and I could hardly bend was suddenly bent double over the side of the boat at an alarming angle and one of the lads grabbed me just in case I was pulled overboard. The fish stripped line in a series of totally unstoppable runs against an impossibly tightly set clutch and the roller guides creaked as the rod passed its test curve.

I hung on for five minutes until it all went solid as the fish clamped down hard on the deck 18 m below me. Now the job was to somehow apply enough pressure to shift it off the bottom and with Rick telling me battles with the big fish were often measured in hours I heaved and kept on heaving, making very little impression on the beast below.

Eventually I felt something give, at first I thought I'd lost it, then realised it had lifted off bottom and I started to crank line back onto the spool. With every sinew straining and sweat pouring from me I just kept pumping, gaining inches of line every few minutes with just the occasional run setting me back. Eventually it surfaced, Boy grabbed the leader, 'Big fish,' he said, 'Big fish' and it was clear I'd

just landed the first truly large female GFS from the Maeklong.

Too big to get onto the boat Boy threaded a strong, soft rope through the nasal cavity, the boys made the deadly sting safe with a wrap of cloth and we gently towed her ashore for the photographs. Some 150 kg and the size of a snooker table it was the realisation of a dream for me – the ultimate freshwater predator.

By the time we had safely returned her the light was fading rapidly, but the tide was still running and there was a chance of a second fish. Rick's rod tore off shortly after we got the baits back out and a young female of around the 40 kg mark was the result of a dramatic after-dark struggle – an incredible end to an incredible day.

As far as the trip was concerned it was mission accomplished with a night to spare; Bangkok was calling and for the team it was time to party...

For me this was the adventure to end all adventures.

Thailand and its people were delightful in every way and the food was to die for; Rick, Boy and the team at FishSiam know the waters, respect the fish and their environment and made my angling dreams come true.

There are further tales to tell of this incredible trip: of a lost monster GFS three of us couldn't shift, of Mekong Catfish and epic battles with Siamese Carp, of Method feeder fishing Thai style and of Brendan's boxer shorts but these and many more I shall have to tell another day...