



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*.

AT AROUND the 180 kg mark it was a truly huge giant freshwater stingray and captors Ohm and Q are joined by the rest of the crew as the fish is measured, filmed and then released back into the depths of the Bang Pakong. Welch witnessed it all and hoped his turn would come.



Bang on form for giant freshwater stingray

THIS
WEEK'S
VENUE

BANG PAKONG RIVER, CHACHOENGSAO, THAILAND

The Bang Pakong, or River of the Dragon, 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 Nakhon 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

It's an unexpected return trip to the incredible Bang Pakong to help the FishSiam team film an episode of the *Megafish* TV series with National Geographic and we have to turn up a massive giant freshwater stingray for the cameras!

CONDITIONS

Blisteringly hot sunshine, blue skies and daytime temperatures well into the 80s bode well for the expedition and with a good run of tides scheduled it all looks very promising.

"YOU'VE just got to drop everything and get over here to Thailand to help me catch some giant freshwater stingray!"

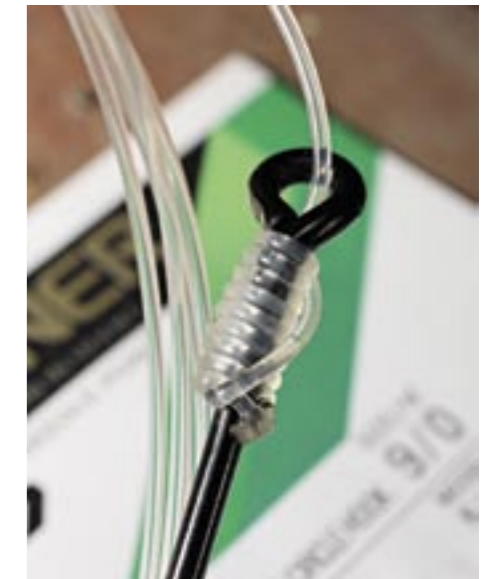
The request from FishSiam.com boss Rick Humphreys came totally out of the blue and caught me unawares, as Rick and his team are more than competent at catching stingray to order without any help from the likes of me.

The reason behind the urgent request soon became apparent. National Geographic TV were scheduled to film with FishSiam to produce an episode in their brilliant *Megafish* series. The show, hosted by top US fishery biologist Zeb Hogan, explores the myths, legends and indeed solid scientific facts surrounding the largest freshwater fish on the planet.

Rick could certainly get on the fish, but a mate who was a UK fishery scientist with experience of GFS, who could handle a camera - both in front of and behind the lens - and who could lend a bit of moral support as well as some muscle was the order of the day, hence the call!

I put the phone down, looked outside my office window at the thick layer of frost crusting the trees, and gazed at my weather station which had not risen much above freezing in the past fortnight.

The wind outside had a touch of easterly, the pits were frozen and the rivers, apart from the odd dace or grayling, were not fishing. A quick



A 130 lb fluorocarbon hook length tied with a cut and heat-blobbed knotless knot to a size 9 or 10/0 Owner Circle SSW hook is at the sharp end of the tackle.

online check showed Thailand was hot and sunny. Notwithstanding the fact I had a good friend in need, it was not a hard call to make!

It didn't take me long to check the airlines and find a flight and within a few minutes of Rick's call I had e-mailed him with my arrival details.

Contrary to popular belief Thailand is not an expensive destination, and providing you ignore direct flights with the likes of BA and Thai Airlines and search for indirect routes you will find some terrific deals. I'm totally sold on the Middle Eastern airlines and have used Qatar Air and Etihad which offer service as good as any I've experienced (and vastly better than BA!) and I'm happy to have a stopover of an hour or two in Doha or Abu Dhabi if it's going to save me £400!

This time around I got a return deal for under £350 and with food and accommodation in Thailand costing almost nothing my ten-day adventure was going to cost me much less than a week at a top UK holiday resort!

A big hug from Rick and a high five from Thai friend Q at Bangkok Airport and we were on our way. I was shattered after an 18 hour journey and about to spend the whole day on the river after one of the most powerful fish in the world, but boy it was good to be back!

Our first stop was not the river but the famous Thai commercial fishery Bungsamran on the outskirts of the city. I'd fished there last time I was over but today it was not a session but a visit to the excellent on-site tackle shop to stock up on 150 lb fluorocarbon leaders. Rick and the Nat Geo team had been fishing hard for the past week and, with a few rays to 60 kg punishing tackle, supplies were getting low.



Base camp on the Bang Pakong, and unlike 2008 the river was carrying very little pak and was in excellent shape.



The prawns we used as bait were about as far removed from the prawns I use as bait back home as possible. With massive shoals of these lobster-like beasts in the rivers it's little wonder the fish thrive.



I cursed my luck as I retrieved a catfish livebait which had been crushed and spat out by a stingray; I was devastated.



Ohm starts to apply some serious pressure on the fish and Rick supports him just in case the stingray takes off and pulls him overboard.



The cameras kept rolling as the light started to fade and the mammoth battle went into its third hour.



The fish surfaced relatively quickly in shallow water but Q couldn't hold it and it dived again.



Jeb uses both toes to anchor the lines as he ties a Bimini Twist to connect the fish to a heavier rod.



Ohm takes a breather – and a glass of Thai whisky – to steady his nerves for the second half of the fight!



The rod is locked at full test but the fish is still not moving; the cloth prevents the rod from cracking on the gunwale.



The boys lunge to secure the fish in the twilight and make no mistake at the second time of asking.



Transatlantic fish biologists on the move: job done on the Bang Pakong, Zeb Hogan and I prepare to move down to the Maeklong.

VENUE information

DESCRIPTION. Draining a watershed of 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 angling packages throughout Thailand including the unique opportunity to do battle with the largest known freshwater fish on earth. For full details check out www.fishsiam.com



» After a breakfast stop with enough chilli to really wake me up, we hit the town of Chachoengsao and the Bang Pakong – Thailand's River of the Dragon. By now I recognise the section as well as my local River Kennet and I saw straight away it was in perfect trim; running nicely and carrying little of the 'pak' weed which had destroyed my chances last time I fished there. Base camp was at Q's house and after catching up with Ohm, Jeb and the rest of the local lads it was straight onto the boat to make the most of the tide. I was confident something would happen, and joked with the lads that the Buddha pendant I'd bought after the capture of my big stingray, and had blessed by monks on my last visit, would bring us luck now I had brought it back home! The lads, and indeed their ladies, had been bait snatching all morning and we had a bucketful of various small catfish species, Archer fish and prawns as bait. The prawns were particularly impressive, the size of small lobsters and of the type which would cost you upwards of £10 as a starter in a UK restaurant. Yet here they are everywhere and easily caught – no wonder the stingrays thrive! Tackle was a 50 lb class boat rod coupled with a Shimano TLD multiplier and 150 lb mono to a long 130 lb leader and a size 9/0 Owner SSW circle hook. Leads were around a kilo and baited rigs were dropped mid river to await stingray

moving up with the high water. Rick, Q, Ohm and I checked clutches and then settled back. By lunchtime it was clear it wasn't going to happen, so we pulled off and split up for the afternoon tide with Rick and I heading upstream with Jeb to try a different mark well away from the main area, but with a track record for producing the occasional big fish. With a lunch of searingly hot som tam, a couple of beers, warm sunshine and no sleep for over 24 hours I fell asleep curled up on the bank... 'GO, GO, GO!' I was rudely awoken by Rick's shout and before I knew what was happening I was bundled into Jeb's car and we hit the tarmac at a frightening speed tearing downstream in a mad dash to reach Q and Ohm who had just struck into what felt like a very big fish. Rick called the film crew en route to alert them to the action and we reached base in time to see Q, in a tiny boat, being pulled across river by an unseen monster. We bundled into the 'mothership', gunned the engines to get to him and pulled him onboard. Ohm took over and applied some muscle to the fish with Rick acting as anchor to stop him being pulled overboard. Zeb and producer Johnno, along with the rest of the film crew, pulled alongside – lights, camera... ACTION! Despite the fact it felt like a very big fish it didn't take long for Ohm to get it moving and within 20 minutes the beast surfaced, only to dive strongly again before it could be secured.

“The adrenaline rush was so intense - I was shaking.”

This time it went deep into the silt in one of the shallower areas and became immovable; it was now going to be a lengthy tug of war. After an hour of solid pressure Ohm took a quick breather and a glass of Thai whisky to steady his nerve and Jeb cut the line to reattach it to a heavier class of rod which would allow Ohm to apply more pressure. Watching Jeb furiously tie one of the trickiest knots in angling with a monster of a fish attached was nerve wracking but the job was done and Ohm was soon back on the rod. The stalemate lasted another hour and the light was beginning to fade by the time Ohm managed to lever it off bottom again. This time there could be no mistake and with the camera still rolling the final stages were played out in the mosquito-ridden shallows and as the fish surfaced it was secured by Q, and the sting on the tail made safe by tying it flat into its grooved housing with a cloth. Measurements gave a weight estimate of 180 kg, some 30 kg heavier than the fish I had landed last year, and an impressive fish to get on film; anything else on the trip after this would be a real bonus. The Buddha was back – and in style! We were out shortly after first light the following

morning to find the river carrying a little more rubbish and the fishing decidedly tricky, but I had a tentative take on a catfish livebait just before the end of the tide. The adrenaline rush knowing you could shortly be attached to the largest freshwater fish ever hooked is so intense it is difficult to function and I was shaking as I got into position, braced myself and wound down... into nothing. The bait had been spat out before I was on it. I was devastated. The late tide brought nothing but news from Rick's partner, Boy, that fishing on the Maeklong River at Samut Songkram was promising as numbers of small male fish were showing and he reckoned a big female was long overdue. We decided to pack up, drive through the night and start again the following morning. So after an all too brief celebration of the capture of Ohm's big fish at a local restaurant we packed the tackle, stowed the cameras and headed south. The Maeklong had been kind to me the last time I fished it and I had a strange feeling it would be so again. I rubbed the Buddha pendant around my neck and drifted off into a deep, deep sleep. ■ Next week, part two of Ian's stingray adventure.

FREE NET!

MEET Ian Welch at The Big One, Farnborough on Sunday, March 1 and get this superb 36 in. Korum latex net and 6 ft carbon handle. It's FREE when you take out a subscription to Angler's Mail at our stand, and you can also save over 10 per cent on the cover price!

