

Goliath Tigerfish

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Tigerfish, giant (*Hydrocynus goliath*)

(Boulenger, 1898)
CHARACIDAE FAMILY;
also called
goliath tigerfish

The giant tigerfish is restricted to the Congo River system, Lualaba River, Lake Upemba and Lake Tanganyika.

It is overall silvery in color with no conspicuous stripes. A few broad stripes may show up under the scales after death. It has fourteen or more teeth in the upper jaw and very short gill rakers, less than one third the length of the gill filaments. The largest giant tigerfish may exceed 110 lbs (50 kg) but stories of fish weighing up to 132 lb (60 kg) have yet to be authenticated.

Its ferocious appearance gives ample indication of its predatory habits. This strong fighter is one of the great freshwater game fish species. It jumps repeatedly when hooked, will take almost any kind of bait including artificial, and is powerful even when taken on heavy tackle. A wire leader is essential due to the sharp teeth.



EM

Congo. A place on our planet that we don't know too much about even in the 21st century. A country with a horrific past and an unclear future. A country with immense natural wealth that is unparalleled, even in Africa. An expedition into this African country is a big challenge for experienced explorers. But in the eyes of all others, such an expedition is clear suicide. But sometimes you don't have a choice. Especially when you hunger for a fish that you cannot catch anywhere else in the world. Join Jakub Vágner on an adventurous expedition into the Congo River Basin. For that's the home of one of the strongest and most mysterious fish of our planet - the Goliath Tigerfish.

Expedition Africa: To the Congo

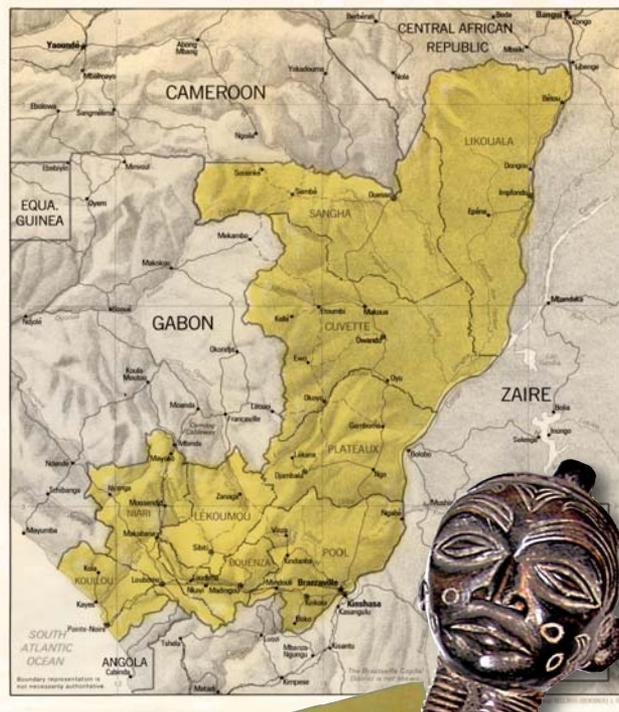
I planned the expedition to Africa for almost three years. I gathered all available information and I tried to put together an elaborate puzzle from slivers of information, which would finally lead me all the way to the tigerfish I've been dreaming about. But there wasn't too much trustworthy information, and most of the sources, of course, tried to talk me out of my expedition to Congo. In the end, there was no other hope but to turn to the Congolese Embassy. But when I told them that I wanted to travel to Congo in order to go fishing, they obviously thought I was completely crazy. They turned me away by saying that they certainly wouldn't be responsible for some crazy fisherman.

The author, Jakub Vágner, holds up an estimated 66 lb (30 kg) goliath tigerfish. The catch helped fulfill part of a 23 species catch-quest that Vágner embarked on in late 2007.



But by no means did I want to give up on my dream and so I investigated other possibilities of at least partially safe travelling in Congo. In the end I used the only available contact person, which was the experienced immigrant Michael, a mountain gorillas guide. It was the only option, and truth be told it was safer than undertaking the journey on my own. Subsequently I selected my most loyal cameraman, clarified the goal as well as the possible risks for him, and after a couple minutes of conversation it was clear that we would be flying to Africa together. The time was set for September which is the last month before the rains come.

It's the end of August and, together with my cameraman Jirka, we are returning from filming in Amazonia. We have just completed a three-week expedition for one of the world's largest freshwater fish - the *Arapaima gigas*. We managed to capture several arapaimas weighing over 220 lb (100 kg), so we are returning home full of enthusiasm. But the words "we are returning home" are too strong. The airplane lands at the airport in Prague and we have 14 hours to greet our family and friends and pack everything we need. Everything is hectic. We barely warm up at home and we're already standing at the check-in counter once again. Our families say goodbye with tears in their eyes. We've done all of this many times before, but this time it's different. In the eyes of our family and friends we can really see fear and hopelessness. They bid their farewells as if for the last time. We are heading to places where we will not have any assistance in case of a crisis.



After long hours of flight we finally find ourselves over the African continent and we are getting close to our destination - Kinshasa. There is not a single cloud in the sky and so Africa is like in the palm of our hand. The comfort in the airplane is the last comfort we'll have for a long time, so we try to get as much out of it as possible. After getting off the airplane, the African reality hits us immediately. A drunken customs officer comes to us and leads us somewhere into a basement. He checks the visas and asks for a 500 dollar bribe as if it went without saying. Calmly, and with needed humbleness, we try to resist, so two other colleagues in uniforms arrive and explain that our visas have expired and that in a couple of hours they'll put us on an airplane back to Europe. But the visas have not expired, at least that's what we see in the passports in black and white. We are not surprised, however, as bribes are completely commonplace. After another hour of negotiations, we decrease the amount in half and we are led in front of the airport. Now we are past the point of no return and we see the horrific reality of Congo. We've seen poverty and destitution in India, Asia, as well as other African countries, but we've never seen anything like this. We are surrounded by malnourished children, many of whom have missing limbs, and people in a pitiful state are everywhere. We make our way through the crowd, have a hard time finding our baggage, but fortunately Michael and the local army take us under their wings at this point. They have the task of escorting us to our hotel.

Machine gun on the left, machine gun on the right — that's approximately what my attempts to look out the window during our drive

look like. After a half an hour we reached our hotel which is reminiscent of a jail, not only from the outside, but unfortunately from the inside as well. But the good news is that I saw the face of my friend Simon behind the massive iron bars. He arrived a couple hours earlier from England and was the third member of our expedition.

Morning Kinshasa greeted us with the classic hustle and bustle of a large city. We took in the new atmosphere, the new scents, and together with our bodyguards and Kally, an English teacher, we set out on an exploration of the hotel's surroundings. It's interesting to watch the people's reactions. Some were completely indifferent to our presence, others looked at us as a possible source of money, but there were many people that smiled and waved at us. As was explained to us, these people still fondly remember that the Europeans built schools, hospitals, and a different infrastructure

that today is completely demolished.

On the same afternoon, after a three-hour drive, we finally found ourselves on the bank of the mighty current of the Congo River. We were astounded. We've made films in the basins of other huge rivers, but the Congo has something mysterious. The river is more than three kilometers wide and up to 1500 ft (500 meters) deep in places. The current creates massive whirlpools and carries with it that which we were so afraid of — giant fields of water vegetation, mainly water hyacinth. This vegetation was introduced into the Congo during the colonization era and it found ideal conditions here. Kally calmed us down; apparently during the period of rain this is almost a continuous carpet where you can jump from one cluster to another. But what is a little for somebody else is a way too much for us. For now, we absolutely cannot imagine fishing in these conditions.

We traveled several more long hours and twilight began to set. Our boat was equipped with a 40HP engine that is definitely not one of the newest ones, and we didn't even want to begin thinking about what would happen if it stopped working. Every few moments large lumps of grass get tangled in the engine's propeller, and after another hour we were drifting through pitch black darkness. There was no flashlight on the boat and so our guides looked into the darkness just as unknowingly as we did. They obviously didn't know exactly where they were, which was truly an unpleasant feeling, especially in a country and on a river like this one. So we proceeded along the bank at the speed of a snail, and only at daybreak did we make it to our destination. We entered a beautiful black river which would become our harbor for the next two weeks. Here we fell asleep on the twenty-meter boat and dreamed of the toothy beasts of the Congo River.

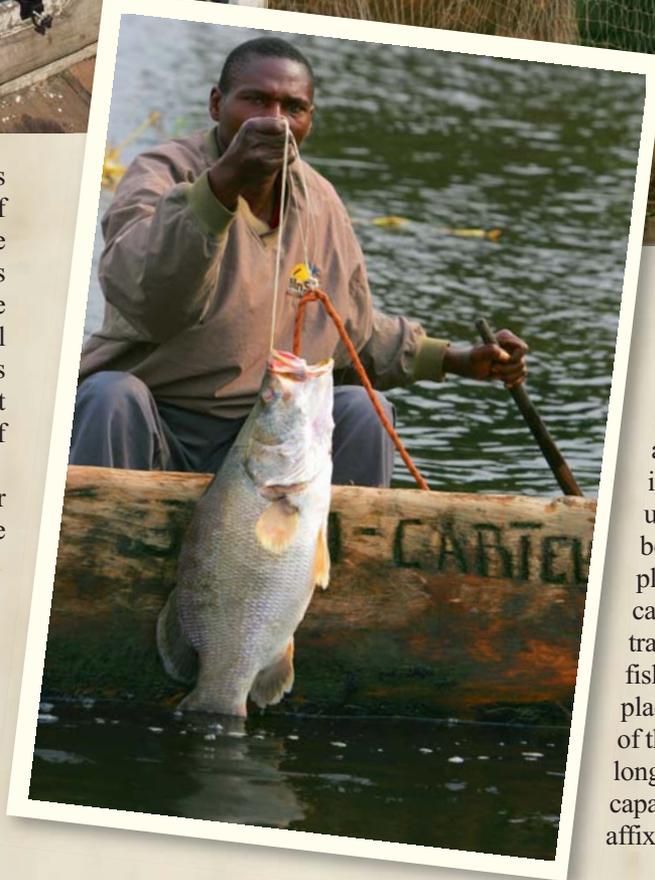


It was interesting for the author to watch the people's reactions. Some were completely indifferent to their presence, others looked at them as a possible source of money, but most of the people smiled and waved at them. As was explained to Jakub, these people still fondly remember that the Europeans built schools, hospitals, and a different infrastructure that today is completely demolished.



The first afternoon of the chase, as well as the first steps in the footsteps of a legend, were in front of us. We were trying to catch a fish that is as mysterious as the river itself. It is the largest of the five types of tigerfish living in tropical and sub-tropical Africa. The aboriginals call it mbenga, binga, sakoi or songa. It is a perfect killing machine, a relative of the Amazon piranha.

We met native fishermen and after some brief bargaining we bought some bait fish that we had never seen before. Just like us, our guides had no experience with fishing for tigerfish. They are fishermen but they fish with nets, and nets only rarely stop the surgically sharp tigerfish fangs. It's clear that these would be two weeks full of trial and error, and hopefully also of some success. We did what our instincts tell us. After traveling several kilo-



meters upstream, we stopped in strongly turbulent water, at a point between still water and the current. We dropped the anchor into the water. The anchor was more like plates of iron welded together. It sank to unimaginable depths, and before the boat stopped completely, an entire 100 meters of cable was in the water. Kally translated for us that tigerfish are fished for near the surface, so we placed our bets on the experience of the local fishermen. We chose a long rod and a reel with a line capacity of 300 meters/yards. We affixed a float/bobber, a swivel, a





one meter long steel leader which ends with the assembly of two 3/0 hooks. This looked frightening, but it has been time-tested already in the eighties, when Douglas Dann undertook pioneer expeditions to fish for tigerfish with just a rod. The successful striking and capturing of this freshwater giant is very difficult. Reportedly, only two to three fish

out of ten are finally captured.

Everything was finished so there was nothing left to do but wait. We savored the atmosphere of the surrounding scenery, which was by far not as varied as the nature of its larger sister, the Amazon. Even so, we couldn't get enough. We were experiencing a strange feeling. We were waiting for the bite of a

fish that is the soul of this river. No one knows exactly how many of them live in open nature. Much water has flowed by since the eighties and even then it was very rare to catch this fish. We released one rod a couple of meters behind the boat and the second into a distance of thirty meters. Unfortunately it didn't take long for us to meet our main enemy.

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The main nuisance to fishing are the giant patches of water hyacinth that get tangled up with the anchor cable and fishing lines. They are small, medium or even entire islands with a size of several dozen square meters. They have been known to float by with cattle standing on them.

A giant patch of water hyacinth got tangled up with the anchor cable and subsequently also with the fishing lines. We put everything back into the original state but the situation kept repeating over and over. We barely finished cleaning the cable and another batch of grass was barreling down on us again. They were small, medium or even entire islands with a size of several dozen square meters. And I am not even talking about the fact that the water was full of small plant twines that were under the surface and constantly got tangled up with the hook. You have to constant-

ly determine the position of the float with the rod, otherwise it is immediately wrapped in a green mass. Even so, you can barely keep your lure in the water continuously. Every ten to fifteen minutes we had to take the entire assembly out of the water and clean it completely.

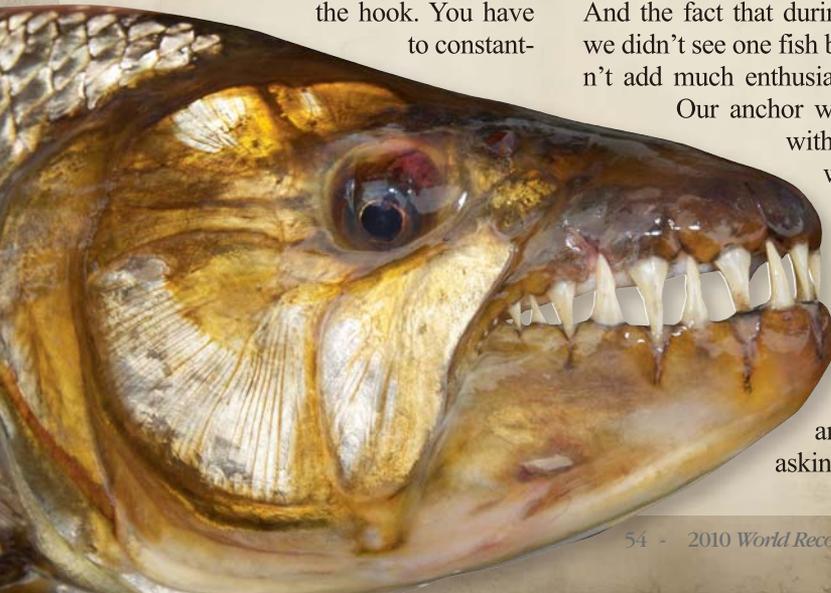
The following days passed by in much the same way and to tell the truth, I have to say that I've never been so frustrated fishing as I was on the Congo River. We weren't actually even fishing. We felt more like gardeners in a horror dream about bloodthirsty mutated plants. And the fact that during the entire time we didn't see one fish by the surface didn't add much enthusiasm to our mood.

Our anchor was a bag of sand with a thin cable from which had cut all of our hands and it was harder and harder to get good bait fish. The local fishermen realized we had money and so they were asking up to \$10 for

one bait fish. We didn't have any time left to try to catch bait fish as we were putting all of our energy into the foggy dream of capturing the gigantic tigerfish. And it was clear from the catch of the net fishermen that it wouldn't even make too much sense. Only a couple of small fish were caught in their long nets and it was clear that there are not too many kinds or numbers of fish in the river.

We had gone five days without a bite, despite absolutely maximum effort. Every morning we hoped for a miracle; we started the day full of new enthusiasm, but the afternoons were always the same. We returned to camp like whipped dogs, totally exhausted and defeated by an untamable river full of hated hyacinth. Several times our rods were thrown through the air out of our frustration and we both agreed that we had never experienced such extreme fishing anywhere. On the other hand, we knew how great a challenge was in front of us. Only a few people in the world have managed to catch a tigerfish with a rod, and relatively long ago.

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of the Congo River – the goliath tigerfish! A beautiful battle followed as the predator demonstrated his aerial acrobatics several more times and after another fifteen minutes he finally tired beside the boat. One of the crew members took a homemade gaff, but with my natural resistance to this tool, I automatically rejected the possibility of gaffing. Only then I realized how risky it could be to drag such a fish onto the boat. The fish had 32 large razor blade sharp teeth and a hospital was many hours away. But at that moment my desire for the fish was stronger than any self-preservation instinct.



The First Catch

On the sixth day we were finally rewarded. The drag of my reel was as tight as a fifty kilogram line can bear, but even so it started spinning as if the reel was about to explode into individual parts. The speed of the pull was shocking and comparable with the fastest predators of the sea. I remained stunned and for a while I actually didn't know what I should do. Simon jolted me into action. A silver torpedo cut through the surface and for the first time we saw the mythical legend

I leaned over the edge and waited until his toothed jaw was as far away from me as possible. I didn't wait a second longer and I raised the fish by its tail on board. With the enthusiasm of my life and also with huge respect I held more than twenty kilogram (44 lb) specimen up to the camera's lens for a photo.

The first catch infused new blood into our veins. We managed to catch three more specimens, but the majority of those fish eluded us. We tried both loose and tight reel drag, but we were not able to figure out a successful technique. The question is whether such a thing even exists. Most of the time we pulled out only a cut up baitfish, and we were not able to comprehend how it was possible that with the brutality of the pull the tigerfish did not hook itself. In the end our score was 12 bites and four caught fish with a maximum weight of almost 30 kilograms (66 lb). On departure day, however, I lost a real monster. The script is the same. The reel's drag started spinning with maximum revolutions, but the pull was more brutal than ever before. We were not able to slow the fish down even a long time after the hook-up. At one moment the line cut through the water and the predator jumped above the surface more than one hundred meters/yards to the right of the boat. I was at a complete loss as to what was happening. It was moving with such speed that the braided line didn't even manage to react. Madness broke out. Everyone was screaming at one another, the crew cut away the anchor cable but suddenly the brutal pull gave way. I pulled only the empty rig onto the boat. I was speechless. Simon kept repeating one unprintable word in English and our guides swore

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loudly in the language of their ancestors. Jirka turned off the camera and is dejected like the rest of us. We just lost the catch of a lifetime. Simon and I agreed on 50 kilograms (110 lb), but Kally and the guides only shook their heads silently. They have found similar fish that were dead, but they apparently never saw anything like that before. After that day I've become completely fascinated with fishing for tigerfish and I am going back to the Congo in December.

Back for More

It's the end of February and we headed back to the African continent. We planned the expedition carefully during the past few months and we sent another container with the necessary equipment for the camp and the entire expedition to the Congo. This time we had expanded our team to include my girlfriend and an underwater cameraman. There was peace and quiet at the airport when we landed. We were welcomed by Kally, who was surrounded by laughing customs officers. After a couple of minutes we were led to the front of the airport with our bags. We bought the necessary raw materials in Kinshasa and we departed from the local Yacht Club towards the black river. I was once again enthralled by the scenery of the Congo River and I re-discovered why the Congo captivated me so much. We

had a new boat and a strong new engine, so the journey was a joy. I didn't have to fear that the engine would break down every ten kilometers, so I feasted my eyes on the scenery and I watched the awe of the people that were seeing the majestic Congo for the first time. It was a short dry period, so there was much less grass and water hyacinth on the water. That was the best news of all. After four hours, we arrived at our destination. Already from afar we were being waved to by a group of children that was frolicking around on the bank of the Mai-Ndombe village at the mouth of the river with the same name. We entered another world. Mai-Ndombe is the only tributary in a section that is hundreds of kilometers long and the nature there looks completely different. As the natives say, these are the last remnants of the rainforest in this part of Congo. After another

two kilometers we arrived at the newly built base camp. Several dozen people from the village were already waiting for us, calling "Žakob" almost in unison. It's nice that they remembered my name even after several months. The only thing they own are old huts with straw roofs and they spend every day trying to get at least something to eat. In spite of this, not one of the things that I had left here last year was stolen or destroyed. At this point I would like to at least partially refute some of the opinions held about this country. The Congo is certainly a country with a strange past, but it is a country where the people are hospitable and kind.

From the first day on the water it was clear that the fishing would be much easier and probably much more successful

than last year. The wind wasn't nearly as strong, the water level was low and we didn't have to wage endless battles with floating hyacinths. We were on the water in our first hour when I explained to the entire team what to do at the moment the fish bites. I wasn't even done talking when the first brutal pull came. After a twenty minute battle the fish was by the boat and for the first time in his life, the petrified underwater cameraman was filming a freshwater fish that he was truly afraid of. His words said it all. "I've filmed white sharks as well as tiger sharks, but never in my life have I had so much respect for a fish." Our first fish weighed an incredible 25 kilograms (55 lb).

In the course of the following two weeks we had 24 bites and we managed

to catch eight tigerfish. We were not successful in baiting any monsters this time around, but the largest mbenga weighing 37 kilograms (81.4 lb) was the fulfillment of the entire expedition's goal.

I would never have believed how a single second could change a life. When I close my eyes, I still see the massive body of the giant that is smashing through the water with its open jaw. One single second in which you are willing to turn your fishing and personal life completely upside down. A second where "mbenga fever" settles into your heart and brain! I will keep coming back to the Congo until I meet the gigantic 50 kg (110 lb) fish. It's a challenge that's unparalleled anywhere in the world of freshwater fishing!



The Biggest of All Time

Raymond Houtmans caught this enormous 97 lb (44 Kg) goliath tigerfish (*Hydrocyonus spp.*) on Saturday, July 9, 1988 on 10-lb line in the Zaire River, North of Kinshasa, Zaire, Africa. The catch still remains the All-Tackle world record for the species.

He caught the fish on the rig above. A double single-hook rig with a small nose snare/bridle for the live-bait's nose. A swivel was placed above the double-hooked live bait and then a float was attached to the line to watch the tigerfish strikes.

