

Silver King Paradise

Story by David Sartwell
Photos courtesy of Silver King Lodge



The 135-pound tarpon launched his whole body out of the water of the Rio Colorado, wildly shaking his head and shoulders, trying to throw the fly implanted in his jaw. We could see his huge gills flare open as he twisted his glistening

sides back and forth, tail-walking across 20 feet of water before crashing back to the surface, creating a hole in the Gulf of Mexico.

Just minutes before I had felt a little bump on the line as I stripped the

Clifford fly back toward the boat. It wasn't that arm-shaking slash you might expect from such a huge fish, just the feel of the fly and line changing direction as the silver king sucked down what he thought was going to be a langoustine treat. Instead of lifting the rod to set the hook, I yanked off a stroke of extra line, then a second yank, and pointed my rod parallel to the surface because I knew what was coming next.

This athletic wonder of a fish set off on a 200-yard, reel-screaming rush that challenged the drag of my old, faithful CDL wide-arbor Redington reel attached to a nine-foot Ugly Stick 10-weight fly rod. There was nothing I was going to do to change the direction of his first run. I just hung onto the rod and hoped I had enough backing on the reel.

"No way in hell," muttered Ralph Pino when the fish first started his run. My fishing companion from Gloucester, Massachusetts, had never seen a huge tarpon caught on a fly rod before. I must admit at that moment I wasn't too sure myself that this tiny wand and reel were up to the task of landing this gigantic yellow-bellied tarpon. However, I knew that I might have a chance if I had patience and didn't try to reel in the big fish too quickly.

Our guide Marvin from The Silver King Lodge eased the boat toward the fish as I furiously reeled in the gold-colored backing line. It was now going to be a long dance that had to be choreographed carefully between Marvin and me. We wanted to keep the line tight at all times to keep both tension on the hook so the tarpon couldn't throw it and pressure on the fish to wear him out. But because of my undersized fly reel, Marvin did not want to run the boat toward the fish at a rate I couldn't match as I tried to gain back line.

To play this fish, everything had to hold together: the knot that tied the fly line to the backing line, the Gudebrod dacron blind splice between the RIO 600-grain Leviathan sink tip and the Bimini twists that attached the 50-pound shock leader to



both the splice and hook. As the tarpon launched himself into the air for the second time, I hoped that I'd done everything right when I put the rig together.

Run after screaming run tested my arm and shoulder strength. With sweat dripping off me, we battled the fish to a standstill. Slowly he came to the boat. But just when we thought he was exhausted and could go no more, he leapt into the air, thrashing the water with his tail, soaking the three of us with Costa Rican brine. He settled down and came to us again. Marvin grabbed the leader, twisted out the battered fly, and let the magnificent creature slide back into the sea. The fish rolled on his side, stared at me with one dark eye for the briefest of moments, and then with a flick of his powerful tail dove back into the deep water from which he had come.

My friend Ralph Pino and I had come to Costa Rica to battle the giant silver tarpon that congregate at the mouth of the Rio Colorado. This wide brown river flows easterly along the border between Costa Rica and Nicaragua, emptying into the Gulf

Airborne

Whether using jigs, fresh bait or fly rods, these huge tarpon are hungry and ready.





Modern center-console boats with new Yamahas stand ready in the morning sun.



The dock on the Rio Colorado is a great place to relax at the end of the day.

of Mexico. We had flown from Miami to San Jose, Costa Rica, on Saturday afternoon. The next morning at 5:30 a.m. we hopped aboard a small plane and flew toward the rising sun over the volcanoes, across the jungle and dropped into a tiny airstrip next to the mouth of the river.

The Silver Lodge is a luxurious retreat carved into the jungle about a half mile upstream from the mouth of the river in the northeast corner of the country. The meals are superb, the rooms are large and comfortable with flat-screen televisions and Wi-Fi. We were pleasantly surprised by the waterfall swimming pool, hot tub, and massage rooms. The guides are friendly and knowledgeable and take you out in seaworthy center-connsoled boats powered by 150-

horsepower Yamaha engines.

We were met at the landing strip by Rose Anne Cody, a Gloucester, Massachusetts, native and retired school teacher who runs the lodge. We took a short boat ride upriver to the lodge, got a quick breakfast and were in a center-console by 9 o'clock. We headed downstream until we got to where the swift current of the river slams into the ocean water, making up some impressive standing waves. Later in the week when the wind picked up to 20 knots, the ride in and out became an adventure in itself.

Over the next three days we caught 11 tarpon, quick-released at least 15 more that we couldn't get to the boat, and landed two big barracuda. We laughed at our words when we said *only 100 pounds* and *tarpon* in the same sentence to describe a couple of our fish.

On the last afternoon we were drifting along in the outgoing current just off the bar that marks the exit of the river into the Gulf of Mexico. On my second cast I saw the line move slightly to the right an instant before I felt him. The strike was not

a vicious slam; it was more like he had inhaled the imitation and then was simply swimming away.

I slid my hand up the shaft of the rod, grabbed the line and yanked it back toward me, setting the hook as hard as I could. As the line tightened, I yanked it again, driving the hook deep.

Up he came, a silver-sided acrobat twisting and shaking as he flashed in the Costa Rican sunshine. A sheet of rainbow-laden water droplets flew off as he rose out of the ocean. All five feet of muscle launched skyward as if he had a booster rocket on his tail. He stretched out to his fullest as if by extending just one extra inch he could throw the hook from his maw.

"Stick him again," hollered Marvin. But it wasn't necessary. The barb was deep in his jaw. My reel was singing as the tarpon dove toward the bottom 30 feet below and then charged off north toward Nicaragua. Pino cleared the deck for the fight we knew was coming. Marvin spun the boat to get the bow pointed toward the fish as I slipped on the fighting belt and moved as quickly as I could toward the bow. The fish continued to strip line off the reel at an alarming rate.

Then I saw the angle of the line decrease. He was going to come up. I have fought enough of these big fish to realize this is when they most often throw the hook. They go airborne and then they whip their heads from side to side, and if the line is held tight, the hook rips out when they swing their head away from the boat.

The trick is to bow the rod toward the fish while he is in the air, hoping that the barb on the hook is deep enough to hold while at the same time the line is slack enough to not create tension when he shakes his head away from you. That is easy enough when you are just thinking about it, but hard to do when a 150-pound silver king is three feet in the air at the end of your line. The natural but self-defeating tendency is to lean back on the rod and apply pressure.



Wildlife along the river

Up he came for the second time. He was all business as he broke the surface. Although both Pino and I had seen it a number of times by then, it was still a jaw-dropping thrill to see a fish so large tail-walk across the water and then disappear in a crash. Once again he ripped line from the reel as I leaned into the rod and applied pressure, trying to tire him out by continuously pulling him in the direction he did not want to go.

He was on for at least 20 minutes before I started to make headway. Lift the pole...grind the reel. Lift the pole...grind the reel. Over and over I repeated the action, slowly, ever so slowly working the fish back to the boat.

I saw the silver flash as he ran beside the boat only about five feet below the surface. If I thought he was going to finally come easy, I was mistaken. Once he saw the boat he was off on another run. Again it was lift and grind, lift and grind, lift and grind.

After 45 minutes we were both tired. I was drenched with sweat and salt spray in the humid 85-degree sunshine. He rolled up on his side as he came to the boat. Marvin

reached over and, with practiced ease, deftly twisted the circle hook out of the corner of the mouth of the tired fish. He gave the exhausted tarpon a gentle push with his hand. With a flip of his tail the silver king splashed us all once more and headed down into the deep blue water of the Gulf of Mexico.

Costa Rica remains a safe haven for visiting fishermen. The airport is easy to negotiate, the customs people are friendly and the whole operation is efficient. You can find more information about the lodge at www.silverkinglodge.net or phone (978) 335-0755.

David Sartwell, a Vermont native, is an avid fly fisherman, skier, hunter, gun dog trainer and photographer. A former professional bear hunter and bird-hunting guide, Sartwell has written hundreds of articles and columns in a variety of newspapers and magazines and his work has appeared in several books.

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