

A FRESHWATER FISHERMAN IN THAILAND

Peter Jaggs was born in Billericay in England and has spent the best part of the past twenty years in Thailand. He has visited every province in the country and fished freshwaters in most of them.

As a boy, Peter served his angling apprenticeship giving stunted Roach and miniature Perch, Jack Pike and specimen Minnows a hammering in the farm ponds, park lakes and tiny streams located around the Essex countryside. Most of these epic fishing expeditions took place whilst he should have been at school.

Over the past two decades, the unbeatable combination of the laid-back lifestyle, Thai women and especially the superb angling in Thailand has brought him back to his favourite country for extended visits varying in length from six months to two years whenever finances have allowed.

Peter has caught nearly every species of freshwater fish to swim in Thai freshwaters from Marbled Goby of a pound in weight to Mekong Giant Catfish over five feet in length and tipping the scales at over eighty pounds

Despite a brief interlude in his fishing career where a lust for gigantic specimens took over from the pleasure taken in a simple day's angling, Peter prefers the solitude of fishing alone and the beauty of a location is now far more important to him than the presence of monsters in a crowded fishing park.

These days you are most likely to find him float fishing for wild Catfish or casting a lure for small Striped Snakehead by a deserted, overgrown backwater in a rural up-country province.

A FRESHWATER FISHERMAN IN THAILAND

ALSO BY PETER JAGGS

From Beggar to Butterfly

Blundering around Isaan

Peter Jaggs



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With thanks to my Mum for all her help
scanning the illustrations and other highly technical stuff

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INTRODUCTION

This book contains fifteen chapters which include illustrations and detailed information about the habitat, angling methods and baits used to capture the twenty-four types of fish most regularly caught in Thai freshwaters. Of course, there are many other species of fish to be found in the inland waters of Thailand, but a book comprising all of them would be impractical. Because of this, the text covers the two dozen commonest species that the newcomer to fishing in Thailand is most likely to encounter.

When I first started fishing in Thailand, I looked in all the bookshops for a guide to freshwater fishing in this wonderful country. Much to my surprise, nothing existed. I had done plenty of angling in England, but I was a complete beginner to fishing in the inland waters of Thailand. I didn't want anything too technical. I was hoping to find a simple guide that I could put in my fishing bag, that would allow me to identify, tackle-up and give me some idea of the baits to use for the different species found in the fishing parks and natural waters that I had begun to frequent.

More than twenty years later, I was browsing the bookshops again. It appeared that there was still not such a book available. This really surprised me, because freshwater fishing had, by now, become an extremely popular sport amongst *farang* residents and holidaymakers in Thailand. Because of this, I thought that I would use my two decades of angling experience in Thailand to write this book myself. Over the years, I have helped many friends on their holidays to catch plenty of big fish in Thailand, and I see no reason why the fishing methods and secrets that I have learned should not help the reader to an improved understanding of fishing in

Thailand, together with bigger and better catches.

This is not so much a beginner's book as a newcomer's guide to fishing the freshwaters of Thailand.

There are many expert Thai fishermen about, and as all anglers know, there is no substitute for local knowledge. Unfortunately, you will find that the normally kind and helpful Thai people are famously tight-lipped when answering questions about bait, tackle and rigs. They are not being unfriendly. Thai people tend to look at things from the fishes point of view, and it is actually looked upon as rather bad karma to show someone the deadliest methods to enable them to fill nets full of fish. Besides this, why should anyone give away angling secrets that have taken centuries to develop to a *farang*, anyway? You will also notice that when you ask, whatever species you intend fishing for is present in a water whether it swims there or not. This is the Thai sense of humour. I have spent many days spinning for Snakehead fish that simply did not exist, or casting out huge balls of bread mix for Mekong Giant Catfish that were not in the water at all. This is something you will have to get used to.

Sometimes, angling in fishing parks in Thailand can be very frustrating for the European angler who is used to having his own swim that another fisherman would not dream of encroaching upon. On a crowded day in a fishing park in Thailand, lines are crossed and tangled as a matter of course, then retrieved and unravelled with a smile and no ill feeling. This is the Thai way. Such behaviour on a Carp fishery in England would probably get you banned, or a black eye at least. Of course, there are still many quiet and peaceful waters and fishing parks off the beaten track in Thailand where the lover of solitude can fish by himself.

As well as technical information on species, tackle and baits simply explained, I have also included what I hope is an evocative short story about a day's fishing for each species. I included these stories because I know that all us fishermen love a good angling yarn. As well as providing the reader with some valuable tips, I hope that these fishing adventures will give the newcomer to freshwater angling in Thailand a taste of what he can expect when fishing the diverse freshwater venues of this amazing and beautiful country.

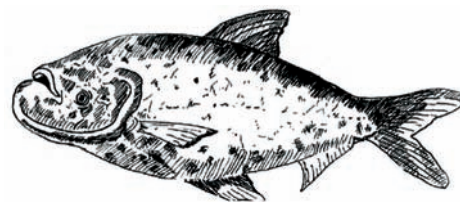
Peter Jaggs, Bangkok

PART ONE



THE FISH

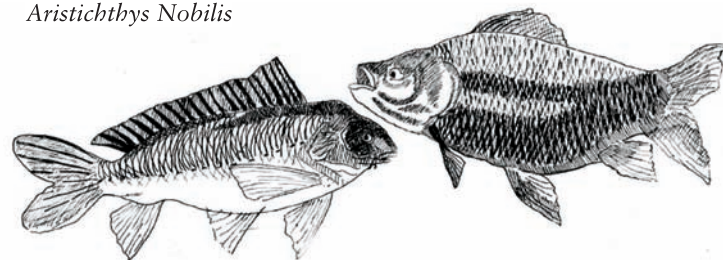
CARP



BIG HEAD CARP

Pla Chin

Aristichthys Nobilis



COMMON CARP

Plai Nai

Cyprinus Carpio

SIAMESE GIANT CARP

Plai Cabo

Catlocarpio Siamensis

The three large species of Carp illustrated here are the ones that the newcomer to angling in Thailand is most likely to come across. The fishing methods are very similar for all of these species, and the same baits will catch all of them in waters where they are present.

The Common Carp is known as *Plai Nai* by the Thai people, and was originally a food fish, raised by fish farmers. Strangely,

this fish does not reach the large weights that Common Carp do in European waters. The Siamese Giant Carp is native to Thailand; it is also found along the Mekong River, and is known as *Pla Caho*. The Big Head Carp is known as *Pla Chin* by the Thai people.

All these three species of Carp are normally bottom feeders, and prefer areas with soft, muddy beds. They are all very strong fighting fish—especially the Siamese Giant Carp—and will test the angler's skill and strength to the limits. Siamese Giant Carp are very wary and shy fish, and require a specialist form of angling.

It is quite possible for even knowledgeable fishermen to spend weeks fishing for one without a bite. If you really want to catch a Siamese Giant Carp, an experienced fishing guide is probably a good idea.

A Common Carp of over ten pounds is a superb catch in Thailand, and most taken are under five pounds in weight. However, big-Carp fishermen need not worry, because Siamese Giant Carp of over one hundred pounds are occasionally caught in Thai fishing parks. Fish of over fifty pounds are not rare, although still considered a magnificent achievement. Twelve to twenty-five pounds is the more regular size in most fishing parks containing *Catlocarpio Siamensis*, and forty to ninety pounds is the stamp in the best fisheries. The largest ever recorded Siamese Giant Carp in Thailand was caught in the wild in a net many years ago, and weighed in at an incredible six hundred and sixty pounds.

Big Head Carp of nearly one hundred pounds have also been recorded, but anything over ten pounds is a good fish for the sport angler in Thailand, and a twenty pound specimen is a great fish.

Baits, Tackle and Methods

A strong Carp rod is adequate for both Common and Big Head Carp. Obviously, very strong tackle indeed is required for Siamese Giant Carp, and is probably best provided by your fishing guide. Your Striped Catfish tackle, lines and hooks will do the job for the other two species. Baits can be fished on coil feeders, ledger rigs, or free lined. Float fishing is not a popular method for Carp.

All of these Carp species can be taken on dough, bread baits, potatoes, cheese and worms, although worms will attract other species. There is a tremendous amount of secrecy involved in Carp baits, and there always seems to be a jealously guarded “magic bait” of the moment, which changes from month to month, and which serious Carp fishermen are always reluctant to divulge. The Big Head Carp is fond of molluscs, and is also caught on chunks of fish meat. It has also been taken on lures, but this is not a recommended method. The favourite bait for the newcomer to Carp fishing in Thailand will probably be bread paste or flakes mixed with sweet additives. Common Carp can sometimes be taken on floating crust on the surface at the margins, especially during the hours of darkness.

Habitat

Slow moving rivers, lakes, ponds, canals, flood plains and fishing parks.

Cookery

Common Carp have been farmed and eaten in Thailand for centuries. Despite this, as far as visiting *farang* anglers go, any caught by readers should be released to fight another day. Big Head Carp and especially Siamese Giant Carp are rare creatures and should only be regarded as sport fish and returned to the water.

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CARP FISHING REVISITED

Back in the Seventies, when I was a schoolboy in my mid-teens, Carp fishing was definitely the form of angling that us youngsters aspired to. In those long gone days, the break times that we spent sharing a pack of Player's No. 6 fags at the top of the playing field and the school dinner table conversations of most of us pubescent and pre-pubescent lads consisted of discussing the latest Slade or David Bowie single, the Yamaha FS1E mopeds we would soon have, the next bunk off school, Wanda Banks' breasts and Carp fishing.

Although none of us had ever come any closer to handling a double-figure Carp than we had to Wanda's knockers (she was by far and away the prettiest and definitely the best-endowed girl in school), it didn't stop us from fantasising. Of course, the sad truth was that both ten-pound-plus Carp and the lovely young girl's jugs were well out of us spotty teenagers' leagues.

In the golden summer days of the fishing season, weekends were spent at the local park named Lake Meadows, where we would cast out the latest "special" bait on ledger gear on hopelessly inadequate tackle and watch the older top-

lads—who were in their late teens and early twenties—with reverent awe. Every so often, one of the young hooligans' Heron buzzers would sound, and a scraggy looking Herbert in army greens and Doctor Marten boots would emerge from the sanctuary of his broolly tent (where Wanda Banks was very often to be found) and strike the hook that was attached to one of his matching Carp rods and Mitchell 300 reels into one of the many large Carp that inhabited the suburban lake.

A large crowd would then form as the young fishing God played the impossibly huge fish, and an awed silence followed when a fifteen- or even twenty-pound breathtakingly beautiful Common, Mirror or Leather Carp was netted by an equally slovenly mate. The stupendous fish would then be gently weighed, photographed and returned to the depths.

Us lesser mortals would then trudge quietly and thoughtfully back to our Shakespeare and Winfield flop sticks and Black Prince reels and dream of the day when we too would be blessed enough to catch a "double".

Some of us younger boys did occasionally manage a "Snotty" (Bream) which we sneered at and pretended to be disgusted with, although the captor was always secretly delighted. Ian Lindridge once had the tremendous good fortune to catch a three-pound Tench, which we all regarded with lofty disdain in the manner of true Carp fishermen, although in our private thoughts we were all unspeakably jealous.

The years passed by and jobs, cars, girlfriends and finally wives ousted the desire to catch a double-figure Carp from our young hearts. Only the very few die-hards, as well as those too nerdy to pull birds, progressed onto serious Carp fishing. Most of us never managed to get anywhere nearer to those

coveted, awe-inspiring fish than watching the honoured top-lads catch them, and although the more mundane diversions of life finally took over, there is no doubt that the failure to catch one of those magnificent double-figure Carp left a blank space in many an Essex boy's heart—including myself.

The ledger rig that I was using, and the downward pointing rod that I had set up on two rests—as well as the old washing-up liquid bottle top that I had utilized as a bobbin—had me contemplating those past halcyon days. I was sitting by a fishing lake in Thailand on a scorching hot tropical day. The water was surrounded by coconut palms and little wooden shelters with thatched roofs, and it was situated just outside Trat, a small town fairly close to the Cambodian border. One of the banks of the lake was actually a cliff, and it towered over the fishery majestically.

Where were those tough, rebellious young Carp fishermen that we had admired so much now? Were those beautiful fish still swimming in the depths of the park lake? And how were Wanda Banks' bazookas holding up to the test of time?

Having been told that there were a few Carp in the fishery, and looking at my tight line disappearing into the murky water whilst waiting for my bobbin to rise as a fish took the bread and banana mix I had prepared, I couldn't help feeling a pang of nostalgia for those youthful days gone by.

A couple of hours passed by with no action, and then suddenly, just as I was contemplating jacking it in and returning to my cheap guest house, the bobbin rose and the spool on my reel began to revolve slowly. Anticipating an agreeable battle with a Striped Catfish, I climbed to my feet and struck the fish hard. It felt like a good one, and it made several deep and powerful runs as it attempted to snag my line in a lily bed

fifty yards from where I was sitting. But I was no stranger to decent fish now and I put on just the right amount of pressure and soon gained the upper hand. I gently pumped my quarry to the surface and reached for the landing net. Imagine my surprise when a beautiful Common Carp appeared from the muddy water. Very, very carefully, I netted it.

I took the hook from the fish's rubbery lip and called over to the Thai angler fishing next to me to ask him if he would be good enough to take a photograph for me. Much to my surprise, I realised that my hands were shaking and there was a lump in my throat.

I had, by now, caught far bigger fish of other species in Thailand but this one was special. I weighed the Carp in the net and breathed a sigh of nostalgic delight. Ten pounds, two ounces. Yes, it was a "double"—and a cracker for Thailand. By no means the biggest Carp in the world, but after more than thirty years it was a schoolboy's dream come true.

I gazed on the fully scaled Common Carp. The sun reflected off its plump, golden body and the tiny barbels on either side of its mouth twitched as it opened and closed a mouth big enough to take a ping-pong ball.

All the memories of those adolescent days came flooding back in an instant. The day that Mad Mickey Mullins caught his record-breaking twenty-five-pound Mirror Carp. Curled up Marmite sarnies and tepid coffee from a flask. All-night sessions under a tattered fishing umbrella spent talking with boyhood friends about the life that stretched alarmingly before us. And Wanda Banks' tits, of course.

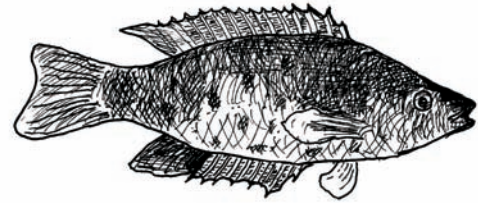
I picked up the superb Carp, gave it a kiss and lovingly slid it back into its watery home. It may have been three decades

late in coming, but I had finally joined the elite at last.



CLIMBING PERCH

Pla Mor



Anabas Testudineus

The Climbing Perch is a small, common freshwater fish that although not generally targeted, the freshwater fisherman in Thailand will very often come across. It is a very hardy fish and can be found in poorly oxygenated ponds, as well as stagnant and weed-choked waters. The colouring of this species is very variable depending on where they are taken from, and fish are either pale orange in colour through to dark greenish-brown, with occasional blotches. Climbing Perch possess an air-breathing organ that allows them to survive for up to several weeks out of the water. They burrow into the mud during droughts, and can even travel across land on their pectoral fins. *Pla Mor* have even been reported to climb trees—hence their name—but it is generally accepted nowadays that the dead Climbing Perch found in branches were left there by fish-eating birds. It is possible for a Climbing Perch to grow to nearly two pounds in weight, but most caught will be under half a pound.

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Baits, Tackle and Methods

Where the presence of *Pla Mor* is known, worm baits—fished either singly or in bunches—are probably the best bet. Fish the worms on a simple float rig either on, or just above, the bottom. Light ledger rigs can also be successful. Four to six pound breaking strain line, and a hook size of ten or twelve should do the job.

Habitat

Canals, lakes, ponds and swamps. The Climbing Perch is not generally stocked in fishing parks but one does occasionally appear.

Cookery

Before 1965 and the introduction of the Nile Tilapia, the *Pla Mor* was possibly the most popular food fish in Thailand. It makes for good eating and can be cooked in a variety of ways, although due to the small size of the fish, it is normally served whole.

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FISH FROM A MUDDY PUDDLE

Not so many years ago, there used to be a muddy, overgrown pond that you could just see from the road behind a couple of tumbledown wooden houses halfway between Soi Diana and Pattaya's famous Tuesday/Friday market. Although it was really little more than a tiny swamp, I had given it a second glance—as I do all waters—but I thought that it was much too shallow and stagnant to contain any fish life. It was

choked with a particularly smelly kind of green algae, and the overhanging shrubbery dipped drooping, twiggy branches into the inhospitable green water.

Early one Friday morning, I was walking to the market and I was surprised to see what looked like a fisherman crouched over a rod by the side of the uninviting pool. Of course, I couldn't walk past that! So I turned in at the dusty yard in front of the beaten-up houses for a closer inspection.

The angler turned out to be a very old Thai lady. Her brown face was lined with a thousand wrinkles and the hair under her battered straw hat was snow white. She wore a tattered but very clean cotton garment wrapped around her thin, bent body and her broad stubby-toed little feet were bare. Despite the old lady's ancient appearance, when she looked up and grinned at me she had a smile and teeth that a twenty year old would have been proud of.

“Have you caught anything?” I asked her, wondering rather uncharitably if the old girl was a trifle barmy or if there really was a species of fish hardy enough to survive in such a desolate-looking little backwater.

The old lady put her rod down. It wasn't so much a rod at all, but a length of whippy-looking bamboo cane about two feet long. Her small, square float was cut from an old discarded flip-flop. She reached forward and pulled a small keep net from the green soupy water. Inside the net there were four beautiful Climbing Perch all around the half-pound mark. I had not seen many *Pla Mor* before and she let me feast my eyes on the fish, which despite the state of the water, all looked in superb condition. In appearance they were somewhere between a Tilapia and an English Perch, although very much darker in colour.

I was extremely impressed with the old lady's angling prowess and told her so in no uncertain terms.

"Would you like to fish with me?" she asked in a barely audible voice, and she reached behind her into the undergrowth where she withdrew another tiny bamboo rod that was already set up with a hook and line.

We sat there for the rest of the morning until the bites dried up. For bait we used very small earthworms, similar to brandlings, on a hook that looked like a size fourteen. I was delighted to have caught two of the fat little beauties. The line was tied directly to the cane rod tip, and when the makeshift float went under the idea was to strike and jerk the wriggling Climbing Perch out on to the bank in one fluid movement. If you were too heavy handed, the hook pulled out. I lost four more fish in just that manner. I was a fraction of a second too slow, and their frantic struggles loosened the hook-hold and my spiky prizes flopped excruciatingly back into the shallow pond. The old lady put me to shame and deposited four more gasping *Pla Mor* onto the bank.

After we had packed up, my companion slipped her catch into a cane basket. I gave her my brace, of course, and she said goodbye. Her bare feet padded off up the stony track. I looked at my watch, decided against the market and opted for a cold beer in celebration of an interesting morning's fishing instead.

I went to the pond on two more occasions, and struggled hard not to become entangled in the overhanging greenery with the shortest rod I owned, a telescopic six footer. I managed to put a light quill float in exactly the same spot where we had fished before. I used the same type of earthworms that the old lady

had given me, which I dug from a piece of wasteland by the side of the Third Road.

I never had another bite.

I packed it in on the second day when a couple of tough-looking Thai teenagers who were working on the nearby building site passed me by late in the morning.

"Stupid *farang*," said the biggest and most muscular of the young builders as they passed me by, obviously not realising that I could speak their language. "There are no fish in that shitty little puddle." They both walked off laughing. Embarrassed, I broke down my unwieldy tackle and buggered off home.

I walked past that tiny pond many times before they filled it in and built a big hotel on it, but I never saw the old lady again.

