

# FISHES of SAHUL

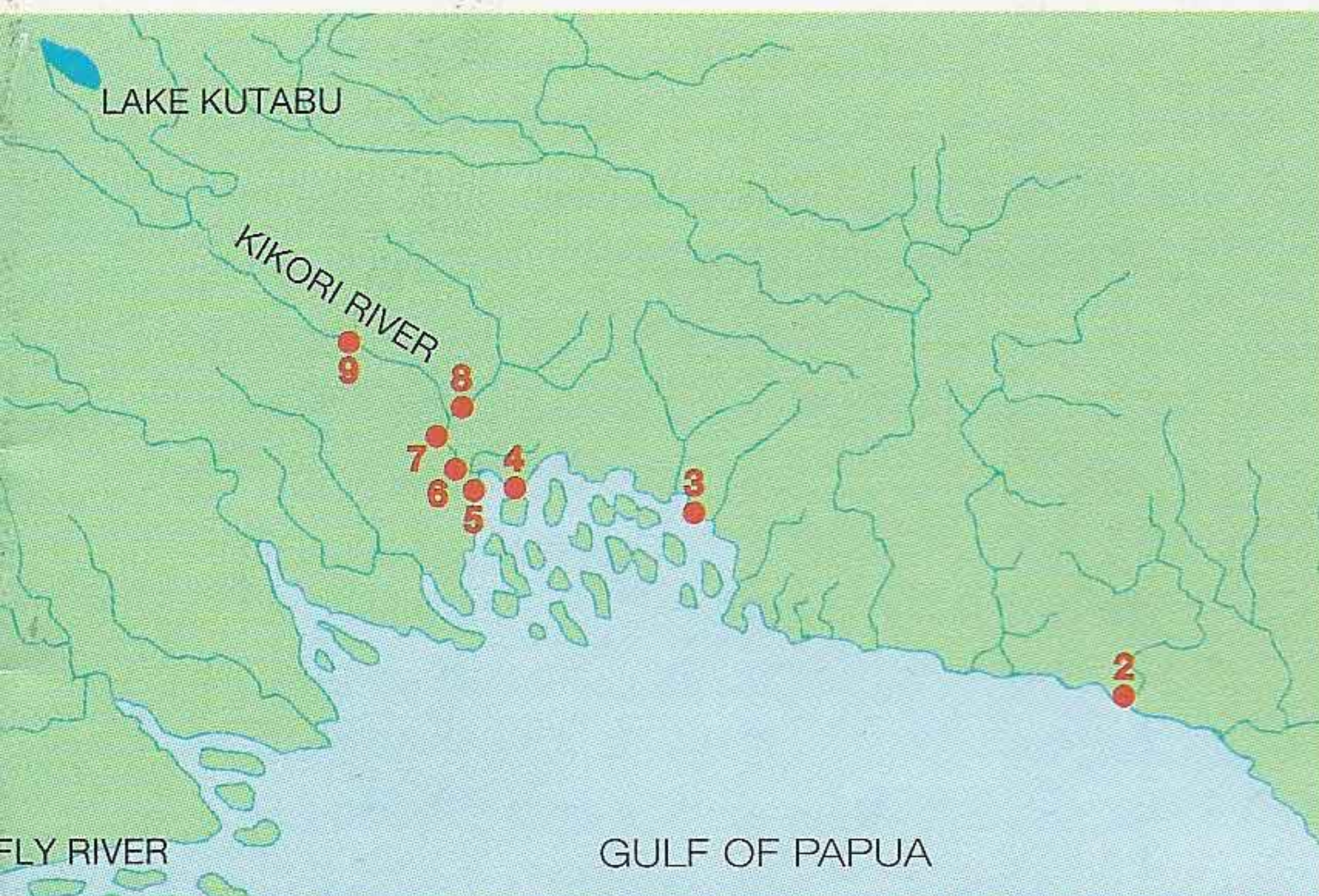
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*Hypseleotris guntheri*

photo Neil Armstrong



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## KIKORI KALEIDOSCOPE

Bruce Hansen

◀ Upper Kikori River P.N.G.

photo by author



## KIKORI KALEIDOSCOPE

Bruce Hansen

Most of us ANGFA "Fish-heads" spend a considerable amount of our time surveying various waterways here there and everywhere in Australia but only get to dream about the streams and fishes of the NG part of ANGFA surveys. A chance meeting on the tennis court with an old acquaintance offered me a window of opportunity in the form of half-price air fares to PNG during the Master's Games in early October 1994. My friend Charles from Tracks Travel put the package together – a week in PNG for about 1000 dollars; what a bargain! Initially 12-14 members were keen to go, but by departure time there were only 4 (myself, Steve Baines, Eng Chuah and James Dobson) plus Eng's fishing mates Richard and Lido. A few phone calls and faxes and the odd meeting to decide on gear, health considerations (like Malaria prophylaxis) and other essentials got all the preparation out of the way. Even so I seemed to take about 50% more stuff than I needed – "just in case!". Prior to leaving, I had tried to drum up some World Wildlife Fund sponsorship towards our boat hire costs etc., but approval was not forthcoming.

Nature provided us with a few concerns when Rabaul's volcanoes decided to erupt before we left and elevate family misgivings another notch. At the airport we all took out travel insurance – "Just in case!", as well as the obligatory 25 Dollar Departure Tax and some last minute duty-free shopping (including a couple of bottles of OP Bundy – "Just in case!"). The flight to Port Moresby by Air Niugini was quick (3 hours) and comfortable but the 2 hour dawdle through luggage, Immigration, Customs etc. was not. However eventually settled in to the air-conditioned comfort of the nearby Gateway Hotel and dined on Satay Crocodile Steaks and Madang Prawns. Afterwards James and I were entertained by the delights of local TV which ranged from extremely bloodthirsty Polish movies (complete with subtitles), through Australian, Indonesian, Filipino and CNN channels to the entertaining local stations with their unique advertising offerings.

My diary for our first full day in PNG started at 5.30 a.m. with packing, a poolside breakfast featuring excellent local coffee, a quick return trip into town on the No.10 Bus to have a look around, a "shambles" at the Milne Bay Airlines terminal where we had to weigh our luggage and ourselves amidst utter confusion and finally board out Twin Otter over half an hour late. Then we were off – climbing steeply out of Moresby and along the coast of the Gulf of Papua to refuel at beautiful green Kerema before finally disembarking at our destination, Kikori. There were many memorable vignettes along the way – the large tattooed lady holding the axe at the airport; the little Papuan girl clutching Richard's arm in terror during takeoff; the seemingly "adolescent" pilots; the cargo packed loosely in the plane wherever it would fit, the "Esky" between the pilots for refreshments; the wheelbarrow that came out at Kerema for the scraps; the 50 year-old Marsden Matting we landed on at Kikori; the small tin shed at Kikori airstrip that masqueraded as a terminal building – all part of the rich tapestry of a trip to PNG. After stowing our gear into our rooms at Delta Lodge which sits literally a few paces off the runway, and demolishing a stack of the special Kikori-style sandwiches (thick slices of everything – bread, processed meat, raw onion etc) that we were to have for lunch for the next 5 days, we were taken on a walking tour of the village and environs by our local guides David and Joshua. Aquarium plant "Bufs" would have been as impressed as we were to see thousands of *Cryptocoryne ciliata* in serried rows on most of the estuarine midgy banks. After a couple of hours of the searing sunlight and a chance meeting with Father Fournier (Father "Fornicate" to the locals) Eng, Richard and Lido opted for a rest while we went off to examine a small jungle stream on the other side of the airstrip.

A shallow spring-fed stream meandered along the floor of a small ravine with the walls



and base festooned with an array of exotic (to us) foliage plants such as Torch Lillies, Calatheas and Philodendrons like some open air shadehouse. Aquatic plants were equally spectacular – a carpet of emerse *C. versteegii* covered several horizontal areas with some extending underwater. We had to walk carefully to avoid damaging them, while numerous taller specimens of *C. ciliata* stood like sentinels here and there. Most logs in the stream were covered in the slender aquatic fern *Microsorium brassii* or its broader relative *M. pteropus*. However the “piece de resistance” was a beauty we have tentatively identified as *Hydrostemma* (?Barclaya) *motleyi*. This fully submerse plant has rounded leaves up to 15cm across with hairy stems and a woody rhizome which can send out runners. The largest specimen we saw had 30 leaves and covered an area of about 45cm across and high, and was growing beautifully in gloomy light. The two immature flowers we saw had hirsute stems that expanded at the water surface and the enclosed buds were pink in colour. The overall effect was of an underwater geranium – magnificent! The stream had slow flow over a lateritic substrate with a pH of 6.4 and TDS 30. The few small fish seen were small FW mudskippers and a small grey fish that resembled a *Gambusia* or perhaps *Oryzias*. When Eng saw our “prizes” he was ecstatic – this was the mysterious plant of his boyhood in Malaysia that he had searched for in vain ever since.

Sunday morning (2.10.94) we breakfasted early and selected our gear for the day and by 7.30 David and Joshua had us heading upriver in our roomy outboard-powered fibreglass banaboat. The trip was a constantly changing kaleidoscope of river traffic, islands, debris, villages, vegetation and wildlife – especially birds including cormorants, Brahminy Kites, Crested Hawks, kingfishers, bitterns, swallows and the spectacular huge Blyth’s Hornbills with their highly audible wingbeats. A large sandbar in the Kikori River directed us into the Sirebi River and eventually to Joshua’s village where we struck our first major difficulty. Apparently the last fishing party in the Sirebi had zoomed in, caught their Bass *Lutjanus goldiei* and zoomed out without paying their respects (and probably more importantly their “compensation”) so we were subjected to a vociferous tribal discussion on our acceptability by some 30 machette-carrying irate villagers who understood our English while we were unable to follow their deliberations in Motu. Eventually we agreed to pay them 100K to look and fish but declined their valuation of 10K per photograph. We also were provided with an “observer” for our trip through their country.

Our angling efforts were totally unsuccessful; the excuses/reasons offered sounded familiar “you should have been here last week when the water was clearer” etc. However we saw some spectacular scenery with densely jungled cliffs dropping precipitously to the river’s edge and a unique dome-shaped waterfall which had a bat cave beside its head and glorious habitats everywhere with the ever-present rainforest and its trunks, tendrils and treetops. Fish were only seen in the smaller tributaries and catching specimens for identification purposes was quite difficult. One fast-flowing stream in limestone country had schools of *Melanotaenia goldiei* (up to 10cm) flashing through the pools while in the rapids we saw a goby with dark spots along the sides (? *Awaous crassilabris* or *A. melanocephalus*). The only other sightings were Barramundi *Lates calcarifer* and Sooty Grunter *Hephaestus fuliginosus*. As well as seeing the beauty of the area we learned how to rob river turtle nests for eggs (didn’t we Steve) and how to spot a Hornbill nesting tree. All too soon we had to return our observer Daniel to the village and were relieved of our 100K plus a few gallons of fuel just to put things back into perspective.

After a whole day in the sun the slow trip back downriver was somewhat of a trial for our sunscreens, especially the regular enforced stoppages to clean the sparkplugs ...



### ... Kikori kaleidoscope

caused by faulty fuel. Since Kikori is a “dry” village our duty-free Bundaberg rum was the reviver at our “happy hour” before dinner. Not surprisingly James and I were the only ones not asleep by 9.00. I must admit I was happy to turn in and read for a while in air-conditioned comfort to the background music of barking geckoes as they scurried across the ceiling on their suction-cupped toes. Incidentally we were required to lock our accommodation from the inside each night. Despite the fact that all windows were strongly weldmeshed, the building was floodlit and two guards patrolled each night – all in the name of the great god Security, a very major consideration in this neck of the woods.

Monday (3.10.94) saw us heading downriver, this time towards the Aird Hills, the highest ground around. Our guide John, was one of the elders and his village nestling at the foothills was a picture of tropicality and home to some 800 people. It was a treat to see so many smiling faces as crowds of happy kids followed us around, especially anticipating and enjoying the moment when Richard stepped backwards onto some fresh dog manure and his subsequent efforts to clean his shoes. The highlight was a climb to the T.V. tower on top of the hills for spectacular views for 360 degrees of the surrounding topography and a chance to see close-up the birds, butterflies, snakes and vegetation of this tropical paradise. Even my limited botanical skills could distinguish the Tibouchinas, Calatheas, Philodendrons, Torch Lillies and Ginger Lillies.

Freshwater habitats were limited to small but permanent tumbling creeks consisting of occasional rocky pools joined by waterfalls and only contained small shrimps. John said small fish did come out at night – possibly gudgeons by his description. In the lower reaches we saw a few small freshwater Mudskippers *Periophthalmus novaeguineae* flicking into the pools from their vantage points on the rocks, while the entrance creek had banks lined with mangroves and *Cryptocoryne ciliata*. The villagers are mainly self-sufficient with their gardens (vegetables, taro, cassava), groves of palms (sago, cocoanut, betel) and other fruit trees (bananas, breadfruit, soursop) showing the fruits of their labours. Their biggest problem was education and preparation for the future in a rapidly modernising New Guinea. As usual we fished wherever we found a likely spot and the only reward was a fork-tailed catfish (probably *Arius leptaspis*). On our return to Kikori we braved the experience of shopping at the store, the only one for hundreds of kilometers, which has a colourful history. It was apparently established by pioneering adventurer/explorer Jack Hides whose nephew Gordon Hides has been keeping and breeding PNG rainbowfish since well before ANGFA came into being.

By that evening the conviviality of our pre-dinner “happy hour” ritual was well established and we were joined by Ernie (the manager) who provided some history, politics and “expat.” insight. Dinner each evening also provided alternative conversation with the gradually changing guest list during the week which included various nationalities (local, Chinese, Filipino) and occupations (botanist, teacher, businessman, refrigeration mechanic etc). The food was boarding-house (European) quality but usually tasty and copious. Even James Dobson’s legendary prodigious appetite was appeased.

Unfortunately the coffee was instant and atrocious in a country where the local product can be superb. But then New Guinea is the “Land of the Unexpected!”

Tuesday (4.10.94) was a later start. The plan was to hitch a ride up to the Chevron Camp at Kopi to see if Charles could arrange some transport further up the road to allow us to survey several small freshwater jungle streams crossed by the road before they emptied into the Kikori River. The ride up was very crowded, extremely hot and very ...

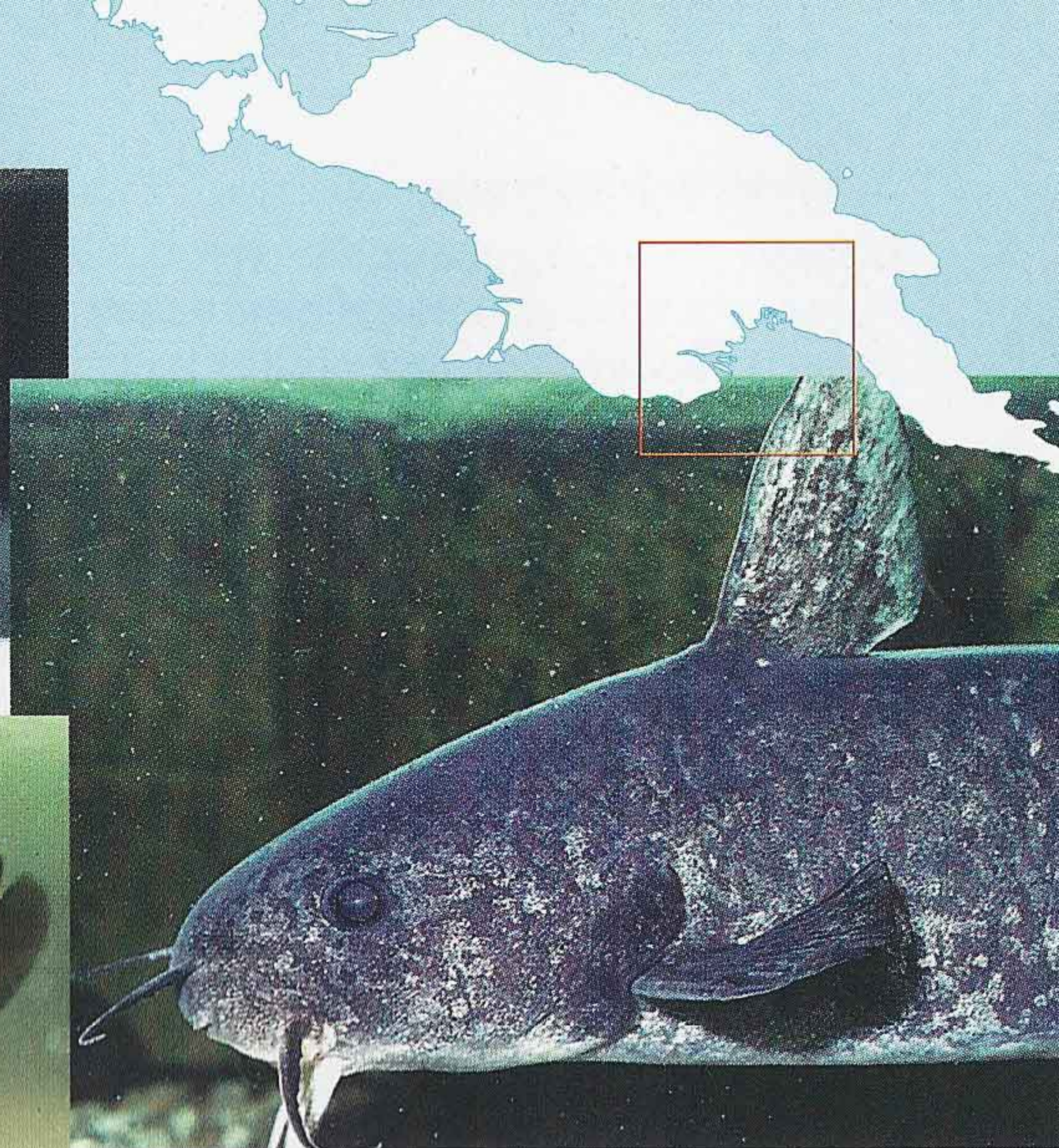




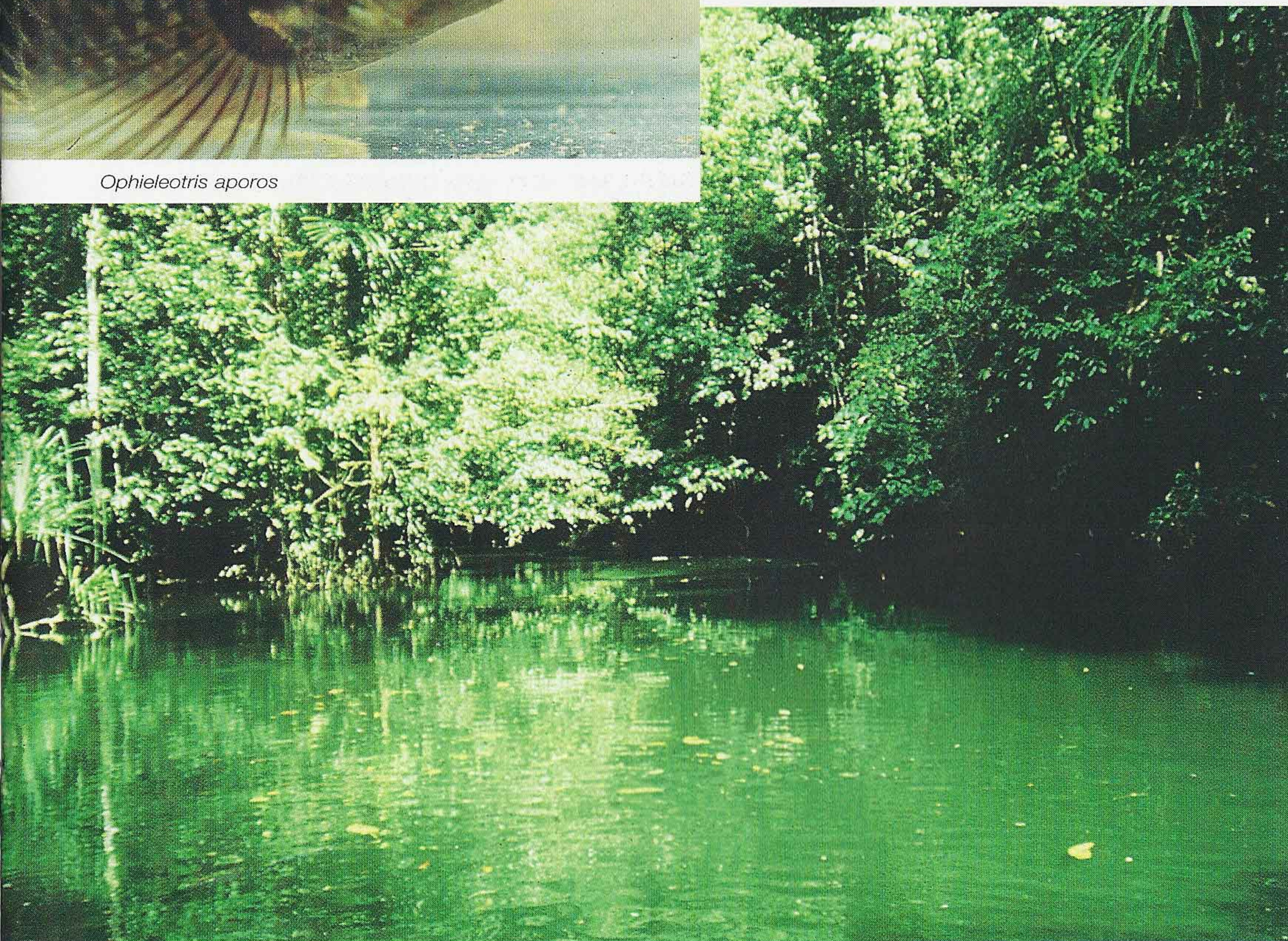
*Pseudomugil paludicola*



*Ophieleotris aporos*



*Arius leptaspis* (?)



Overhanging trees on the lower Kikori River

photos by author



### ... Kikori kaleidoscope

bumpy – in short a major discomfort. Charles showed us around then declined road transport on the grounds of poor roads, worse bridges and deteriorating security status with villages further upstream. To soften the blow he arranged a local fisherman and boat to allow us a look at the Kikori system above the Sirebi entrance and afterwards drove us back to Kikori in greater comfort (and at greater speed) than our trip out.

Half our party (Steve, James, David and I) went ashore to search for small fishes while the rest fished from the boat (once again unsuccessfully). It was hot and steamy with mud sometimes to mid-thigh and the light too dark for photography in most places. Between the traps and a scoop-net we caught 5 species to bag and photograph later. The stream had clear water flowing slowly over a soft substrate with minimal aquatic vegetation but some cover in the form of roots, branches and under-cut banks. Small schools of two different rainbowfishes cruised mid-water with occasional blue-eyes near the surface, the others hovered close to cover. Other highlights for me were the extensive patches of emergent aquatic fern *Microsorium pteropus* growing on the leaf litter; splashes of crimson in the trees from Black-capped Lories and a harsh call and a flash of blue that David assured me was a Bird of Paradise (possibly the Magnificent Riflebird by my book). That evening the resourceful David, accompanied by his shadow Joshua, arrived with a borrowed utility to take us spotlighting up the road past Kopi. There was only room for two for safety reasons and James and I weren't too sure who got the lucky end of the short straw situation when David enquired en route about our fishing prowess in case we ran into trouble. The darkness and the element of potential danger certainly increased the excitement value of the experience and although no crocodiles, cassowaries or wild pigs came our way, we did manage to bring back some rainbowfish for photography and a splendid specimen of Snakehead Gudgeon *Ophielotris aporos*. When we finally "hit the sack" near midnight the adrenaline was still running.

Wednesday (5.10.94) was once again an early start under a clear sky. This time with 2 boats so the fishermen could fish exclusively and the "fish watchers" could likewise "do their own thing". Our new boatman Ken cheerfully advised us he was just recovering from a bout of Malaria while we motored down-river to our first stop, the village of Veiru, to explain our presence. We then proceeded up Veiru Creek to find some smaller streams and hopefully small fish. The habitat was unique – intricately water-carved limestone banks covered in ferns and Philodendrons with overhanging trees shading the lot. The water was clear and tasted fresh but was moving strongly under tidal influence and in places disappeared at some speed into caverns and tunnels through the rock. Overhead we were aware of numerous birds and through the undergrowth we caught glimpses of Blyth's Hornbill, Collared Imperial Pigeons, Shining Flycatchers and even a Scrubfowl scratching around. At one stage we saw a large Tree Python coiled above our heads and Joshua tried to grab it by the tail. Boy! Did that snake get stirred up! I for one was not particularly keen to experience 3 metres of irate snake thrashing around in a 4 metre boat with 5 people trying not to fall overboard into potentially crocodile-infested water – fortunately it didn't come to that. Submerge aquatic vegetation was limited to *Cryptocoryne ciliata* and a type of Vesicularia-like moss while *Microsorium brassii* and *M. pteropus* covered many of the logs and rocks that were regularly inundated together with an attractive branching/running fishtail type of fern. Fish in general were few and far between but enough were seen to make things interesting e.g. *Pseudomugil inconspicuus* on the surface; large dark gudgeons sitting near cover (? *Oxyeleotris melanosoma*); schools of ambassids with yellowish fins



(? *Ambassis vachelli*); Archerfish, probably *Toxotes chatareus* and garfish with long snouts (? *Zenarchopterus novaeguineae*).

On our way back upriver to Kikori we saw large areas of brown slick on the surface which is apparently relished by mullet and the villagers use the appearance of this ?algal bloom as an indicator to peg out their nets. It was nice to be back early for once and put my sunburned hands and legs in the shade to cool down for a while before photographing the fish and plants we had collected prior to returning them. The large Snakehead Gudgeon wasn't quite so lucky as he was claimed by one of the villagers for a snack. Our specimens from the upper Kikori tributaries included *Melanotaenia splendida rubrostriata*, the Red-lined Rainbowfish; a very attractive blue-eye with yellow fins, *Pseudomugil paludicola*; the pretty gudgeon *Hypseleotris guntheri* or Rainbow Prigi; a glass perchlet, probably *Ambassis agrammus* and another rainbowfish resembling *M. affinis* (Pagwi). I realise these identifications may not be accurate and certainly don't seem to fit in with recorded distributions but the number of collections are limited in the records and I feel future surveys will be necessary to clarify the situation.

That evening and the next morning seemed to disappear in a blur of packing and last minute changes in schedule before suddenly we were back on the airstrip side-stepping freight and on our way back to Moresby via Baimaru and Kerema. The Gateway seemed almost lavish after Kikori and extremely comfortable. That afternoon we went by taxi to the University of PNG (about 20K) and returned by bus (fare only 40t) - a difference of only 500%; no wonder the cabbie wanted to wait for us no matter how long we took! On the way back to our hotel we stopped at the Gordon Market for a wander around and experienced a little culture shock. The fruit and vegetables were great but we weren't quite prepared for bits and pieces of butchered cassowary lying alongside scorched and gutted bandicoots, wallabies and cuscusses. The fish on offer were a sorry lot too - especially those from freshwater with hardly a native fish in sight, mainly carp, Tilapia and Gourami. And everywhere there were flies in droves.

Next day after an anti-climactic flight back to Brisbane on an almost empty plane all we had to show from our Kikori "kaleidoscope" were souvenirs, sunburn and memories of the "Land of the Unexpected".

## KIKORI

- Approximately 400km west of Port Moresby.
- Situated on the Kikori River above the Kikori Delta which empties into the Gulf of Papua.
- Annual rainfall about 600cm, mainly between May and October.
- 1912 government and church influence began.
- Former capital of Gulf Province (moved to Kerema, 1960).
- Villagers cannibals and headhunters until 100 years ago.
- Centre of the largest expanse of mangrove forests in PNG.
- About 128 species of fish recorded from the area. Commercial catch Barramundi, Threadfin, Salmon, Jewfish, Catfish, Mullet and Sharks.
- Oilfield at Lake Kutubu developed as a co-operative joint venture with the pipeline running overland from the lake and entering the bed of the river below Kopi to run out to the platform in the Gulf of Papua since 1992.

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