You're quite sure it was a toadfish you saw?" Nixon Griffis, the 62-year-old chairman of the New York Zoological Society's Exploration and Scientific Collection Committee, asked as we walked past the two white Beluga whales pressing themselves against the glass walls of the New York Aquarium. Their melodious sounds were being broadcast to us through a hydrophone. "Nothing is uglier or nastier than a toadfish," said Griffis, "but I've never heard of one more than 12 inches long."

"But I saw it," I insisted. "It was at least three feet long and had a mouth that looked big enough to swallow a basketball. Two fishermen hauled it out of a brackish creek right on the coast of Suriname and bludgeoned it to death with a rock. They eat those things down there, consider them a delicacy. They're called lumpoe, and they told me they sometimes catch them this big. I spread my arms as far apart as they would reach.

"If that's true, they'd make a fantastic exhibit," Griffis agreed while passing in front of a display of brightly colored marine tropical fish swimming amid stalks of bleached white coral. "People get awfully tired of seeing the same pretty fish year in and year out. We need something ugly and different to boost attendance, and your toadfish sounds like quite a monster. Well, we're going to Bolivia next year to collect frogs from Lake Titicaca. Don't see why we couldn't stop in Suriname for a few days."

Thirteen months later Griffis and I arrived in Paramaribo, the capital of Suriname, formerly Dutch Guiana, on an authorized expedition to collect one of the toadfish I'd described. With the help of the Ministry of Fisheries, Griffis started looking for a guide who could help us catch the biggest specimen. Everyone said, "You get Boudji [pronounced boot-GEE], he catch big lumpoe... Boudji can catch anything."

We found Boudji mending his net down at the fisheries dock. He wasn't a very impressive figure, a squat, brown-skinned Hindustani barely five feet tall. "Ever since I was a little boy," he boasted, "I fish dis river. We catch beeg lumpoe." And he spread his arms as far apart as they would reach. "They good to eat, you cook with peppers, tomatoes and onions, very nice. You pay me $50 a day, buy all de gas and food, and I catch. No problem."

No problem? We were into our fourth night of fishing, and while we'd seen some weird creatures, we still hadn't caught a giant toadfish. On the third set that night, when almost half of the 300-yard-long gill net had been hauled into Boudji's dugout canoe, an eerie, penetrating, almost strangling sound came up from the depths of the vast muddy Suriname River, which flows north out of the Guiana Highlands into the Atlantic.

I switched on my flashlight and shined it on a small brown devilfish-looking fish that was writhing to and fro in the mesh, flashing its milky-white belly and whipping its long set of whiskers back and forth. "Whaaar... whaaraar... whaaar," emanated from the joints of the long dangerous-looking sawtooth pectoral fins that sprang out from its sides. With great force, this creature of the mud snapped its fins shut and then expanded them again.

"Good God, look at those tiny eyes," cried Griffis. "That's one of the strangest fish we've seen yet. Too bad it isn't bigger, but let's try to get it back alive anyway. What do you suppose it is?"

"Some kind of catfish. I'd imagine," I said, grabbing the writhing mucus-coated thing and trying to unravel the net cords from its serrated spines. "Almost everything we've seen in this river has been some kind of catfish." It was almost impossible to free it from the net, because with each sinuous twist the fish became even more entangled, and my gloves were making the job even more cumbersome."

"Mister, you be careful," warned Boudji. "Dat trumpet fish, he hurt you bad!"

I was growing impatient—if this creature stayed out of water too long, it would die. Had this been my own net, I would have cut away the webbing to free the fish. But the patched and re-patched gill net was Boudji's most valued possession. He told us proudly that he'd had it for 15 years, and in Suriname, where many people barely subsist, a gill net can mean survival.

The trumpet fish was screeching even louder. Finally I yanked off my gloves and worked the fins free, and just as I started to drop my catch into the Styrofoam specimen box, the saw-toothed spines on its fins slammed closed like a guillotine, pinning my fingers against its bony side. Blood spurted, and the fish's searing poisons shot through my hand. And the fish kept writhing, cutting deeper into my flesh.

I yelled with pain as Boudji struggled to pry the creature off me. When at last it was free and whipping its snake's body around the specimen box, Boudji turned to me and said angrily, "I tell you she hurt—now maybe you believe?"

"I believe," I said.

"Are you all right?" Griffis asked with concern.

I cursed my stupidity, nodded and then sat miserably in the dugout sucking fingers that burned with pain, in too much agony to slap the mosquitoes that hummed in my ears. Boudji and his teenage son, Franz, continued hauling in the net, snapping off the venomous spines of the brilliant gold catfish caught in the meshing and tossing the fish into baskets. In the morning Boudji would sell them in the Paramaribo marketplace.

While father and son brought in the nets, Griffis' flashlight illuminated the catfish, making them gleam like the treasures of the Pharaohs. "Fool's gold," he muttered. "It's a damn shame."

When we'd first started fishing the
wide, deep and muddy rivers that drain out of the jungles into the Atlantic, we were enthralled by those gold catfish. "What a fantastic display they'll make at the aquarium." Griffis declared. "People love the color of gold. I can just see them in a black-walled tank, with a dim yellow light to bring out their color. They'll be fantastic." Not only were the fish a bright yellowish gold, but when the males were hauled in, fighting in the nets, they often spat out marble-sized greenish eggs and spiny tiny babies. Like many species of saltwater catfish, the males incubate the eggs and protect the fry by holding them in their mouths.

With great enthusiasm Griffis and I had worked through the night, changing the water in which the gold cats were held, selecting the specimens that were free of net burns. But to our disappointment, by morning they'd faded to what we learned was their natural, nondescript gray color. We felt like Cinderella after her golden coach had turned back into a pumpkin. Not even the sight of a roseate spoonbill rising in morning flight was much help in allaying our disappointment and exhaustion.

By now almost nothing surprised us about these strange Suriname fishes. This is the land of piranhas, electric eels and freshwater stingrays. Here in muddy waters that virtually no light penetrates, fish have evolved armored bodies, wickedly sharp teeth and venomous spines. To escape their attackers, they can change color or make raucous noises.

And the diversity of South... continued

By daylight, the two collectors scouted for toadfish amid the sharks, snappers and catfish on display in Paramaribo market.
Toadfish
continued

American catfish was staggering. In
North American rivers and lakes, there
are something like 28 species of cats, but
10 or 12 of them look virtually identical
to anyone but a taxonomist and even the
rest are more or less alike. In Suriname
there are hundreds of species, some with
heavily plated armored bodies that make
them look more like armadillos than fish,
some with soft white-and-black tiger-
striped bodies, and some with the ela-
gated bodies of eels. Still others have
evolved strange, flat heads and long
whiskers that bend back along their sides.
All of them have a nasty arsenal of spines.

In our four days on the rivers, we'd
massed a considerable collection of such
unusual creatures, but none of them was
a giant toadfish. Boudji had caught plen-
ty of small ones; they were impressive in
their grotesque way but not big enough
to merit a special display at the New York
Aquarium. And now we were fast run-
ning out of time.

As Boudji and Franz hauled in the last
section of net, I heard Boudji cry happily,
"Aaaaah, here's beeg lumpoe!" Instantly
I forgot the burning in my fingers and
hurried forward to help pull the Surin-
name toadfish (Batracoididae surinami-
enses) into the canoe. It landed with a
flop and began thrashing about, making
menacing grunts.

Its gigantic, bone-crushing jaws sprang
apart, displaying a whitish mouth that
seemed to extend all the way down its
narrow tadpole-like body. The jaws
slammed shut and sprang open again.
Quickly I closed my gloved hands around
its soft, floppy body, taking great care to
avoid the tiny poisonous spines on its
gill coverings. Before it could turn and
bite, I catapulted it into the specimen
box. It smelled ghastly.

The lumpoe backed into the corner of
the container and sat there lumpishly,
with its mean little eyes glowering up at
me. As its bulldog jaws opened and
closed, the fleshy brown pendants that
hung down from its broad flabby chin
swayed like seaweed.

"Dis one beeg enough?" Franz de-
manded. He was getting tired of fishing
night after night with us and being away
from his friends.

"No, afraid not," I replied. "We need
one at least three feet long. This one
couldn't be larger than 14 inches."

Franz shook his head in disgust. "You
fish here all year maybe not catch one
dat beeg!" he said.

"Well, it looks like your giant toadfish
may have turned out to be just another
fish story," said Griffis.

Maybe he was right, maybe the giant
toadfish I had seen the year before was a
fluke, or maybe that gigantic ugly head
on that little tapered body made the fish
look so terrible that it grew and grew in
my imagination until it had become a
monster by the time I returned to the
U.S. and told Griffis about it.

"Not to worry," Boudji said reassur-
ingly when he saw my disappointment.
He snatched the starter cord on his de-
crepit 40-horsepower motor. "We catch.
It take two, maybe three more days, but
we catch." The motor sputtered, ran a
short while and then cut off again.

Griffis puffed a cigarette, the orange
tip glowing brightly in the darkness.
"Boudji, this has to be our last night,"
he said. "Tomorrow we have to start
packing the fish to go back to New York.
We don't have two or three more days."

Boudji scratched his bald head
thoughtfully and said, "My cousin tell me
dat he see beeg lumpoe at de old sugar
plantation. Very far down de river, but
we go tonight."

When we finally got the motor run-
ning, we sped down the main river chan-
nel, round the broad bends that led to
the sea. We passed a 300-foot freighter
at anchor in the deep channel, its lights
ablaze. Soon the clatter of Paramaribo's
docks and wharves and houses had dis-
appeared behind us and were replaced
by mangrove bushes that grew thick
along the muddy shoreline.

At last we spotted the ruins of an aban-
doned sugar plantation. It was three
o'clock in the morning, and the rubble of
the broken concrete sluice gates and vine-
covered crumbling buildings were silhou-
etted by the moonlight at the river's edge.

Worm-eaten piling rose ghost-like from
the sluggish, dark river. The cabins of two
sunken cruisers emerged from the thickly
silted waters. The whole place had a feel-
ing of decay, of jungle rot. "This looks
like a good habitat for a giant toadfish," I
remarked to Griffis. "It's the only fish I
know of that thrives on man's turning of
the ocean into a garbage dump."

Indeed, the toadfish tolerates low-
oxygen and silted conditions. And almost
no other fish can survive out of water as
long as it can. An angler, having put out
bait intended for other species, often will
bring up a toadfish, see this creature of
hell hanging from his line and simply cut
the line and leave the fish on the dock to
die. Along the coast of the southeastern
U.S., I often see small toadfish stranded
out of water, still alive hours after being
cought, still ready to clamp their jaws on
anything that comes within range. I al-
ways kick them back into the water, be-
lieving that anything that mean and ugly
has character and a right to live.
Boudji cut the motor off a long way before we got to the plantation’s dilapidated boathouse so we wouldn’t scare the fish away. “O.K.,” he said in a low voice, slipping overboard into waist-deep water. “Now push.”

Franz went in, too, and I started to follow, but Boudji shook his head. “No, no, Mr. Jack, you stay in the boat. Much sharper shell, glass, cut your feet.”

Something was dark and ominous about this part of the river, something I hadn’t felt before. I was just as glad to remain in the canoe. The empty shadows of the ruins stood cold and unfriendly. As Boudji and Franz pushed and pulled the dugout along, the river bottom periodically gave way beneath their feet. Once Franz had to be pulled out of the ooze.

My mind flashed back to the stories we’d heard of the voracious bull sharks that prowled the rivers at night. And then there was the lau-lau, the colossal catfish reputed to snatch little children from the riverbank. Two days ago I would have thought that story fiction; now it seemed all too possible.

That morning Griffis and I had walked through the bustling Central Marketplace in Paramaribo to see if anyone had brought in a big toadfish. We moved with the crowd, past racks of drying sharks and shrimp, smelling the pungent odor of smoked mangrove snapper and mullet blended with overripe fruit and vegetables. Just then, through the crowds came a flatbed truck, its horn blaring for everyone to make way, sagging on its axles, straining under a tremendous weight. It carried a single monstrous catfish that easily measured 12 feet and weighed more than 1,000 pounds. The beast was alive—its gills were still slowly opening and closing. Now as we moved along the fluid muck of the Suriname River, I half expected to see the Loch Ness monster come slithering out.

Suddenly there was a whirring sound in the shallows, and I automatically switched on my flashlight, catching the gleam of dozens of raised green eyes as little fish scurried across the top of the water. They looked like scaly brown frogs.

“Anableps,” said Griffis. “They’re air breathers. You see them all over South America. We’ve already got some in the aquarium.”

“Turn off light!” Boudji hissed. “You scare fish.” Then he whispered, “O.K., be very quiet, make no bump or noise.”

Quietly we helped him feed out the net. Steadily Boudji dragged one end of it toward the ruin of the boat shed while Franz continued pulling the canoe ahead until a wall of webbing stretched out and encircled the wreckage of the cruisers and the dock. For a long while we sat silently in the dugout, listening to Boudji and Franz talking softly in taki-taki, the local dialect. The moonlight’s reflection gleamed golden on the river, and Boudji crouched down and reached under the debris with his bare hand. Only his head was sticking up.

You couldn’t find a more dangerous way to hunt toadfish than Boudji’s method. No other fishermen in Suriname would take the chance. He’d grope around in the mud until he’d feel the fleshy head of a fish, and then he’d snatch his hand away before those steel-trap jaws could clamp down on him, and then draw the fish into the net. He almost never got bitten while using his hand for bait because toadfish are among the most sluggish fish in the ocean.

Something splashed in the net. Boudji and Franz had scared out a good-sized snook, and it was gilled at the corkline. Already we could see by the moonlight that several floats had been pulled down slightly by other fish driven

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Finally, Boudji set his net around a submerged junkyard and went into the opaque water to flush out a toadfish.
from the shelter of the fallen dock.

Suddenly we heard a blood-curdling shriek, and the water seemed to explode as Boudji jumped upward. Madly he flailed the water into foam, cursing in taki-taki, trying to shake something off.

"Something's grabbed Boudji," Griffith cried and stood up in the unstable dugout. His beam caught Boudji desperately thrashing about, wrestling with something. Without thinking, I found myself leaping overboard, landing in the soft mud and struggling toward our guide.

Light illuminated a large bite mark on his back. It ringed his shoulder blade and looked as though a shark with tiny teeth had grabbed him. Boudji's brown skin was punctured by a hundred tiny holes that oozed red.

Franz hurried over to get a pole for himself and followed his father back toward the fallen boat shed. With a vengeance they beat the surface, churning the peaceful river into foam, jabbing and stabbing into the debris to frighten the monster toadfish from its nest. Once under. There was an explosive splash, and the corks bobbed upward. Then they were abruptly pulled down again and came to rest just below the surface. No way could we tell by looking whether the fish had been snared or had bitten a hole through the net and escaped into the protective mud of the river.

Boudji hurriedly got back aboard, hastily grabbed an end of the net and started pulling it into the canoe. "Do you think we caught it?" I asked as I joined Boudji in his labor, all the while trying to ignore my sore hand. "There are some sunk corks up ahead."

"Don't know," Boudji grunted. "Maybe yes, maybe she got out. We see."

Despite our effort, the net came in with maddening slowness. Almost a third of it was aboard, and still there was no sign of a giant toadfish. A comical-looking 10-inch placostoma catfish with pigment eyes and armor-gray leopard skin came up uttering a long series of protesting grunts. Then another trumpet cat writhed in the net; without hesitation, Boudji snapped off its thorny pectoral fins with a pair of pliers and tossed them overboard. As he strained to recover the net, he flinched now and then with pain from the lumpooe bite.

Our tension mounted as the section of net with the sunken corks drew nearer. When it was only six feet away, the webbing began vibrating violently. Was it caused by the big lumpooe or some other unexpected monster of the morass? Suddenly menacing grunts began reverberating from down below.

Boudji and Franz slid overboard, dived down and bunched the leadline and webbing around the creature. And then, with one mighty heave, we hauled the toadfish into the dugout. It landed with a dull flop, and for a moment the moonlight gleamed on its slimy, scaleless skin. Then a prolonged bellow of pure rage shook the night. First came one long roar, then another, and for the first time in my life I stood rooted with fear, unable to move. The lumpooe opened its cavernous jaws, waiting for anything that might pass between them and bellowing all the while like an enraged jungle cat. No fish should make a noise like that!

"It's incredible," said Griffith, his voice filled with admiration and disbelief. At the same time he was backing up with me, giving the toadfish plenty of

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