

In the Ten Thousand Islands corner of Florida, the writer was surprised to catch this chunky peacock in a lake familiar for large-mouths, Mayan cichlid and snook.

**Hidden  
Gems** 10,000 ISLANDS

## Golden Gate Peacocks

The popular transplanted gamefish have made permanent inroads into the canal systems of Collier County.

By Chris Duerksen

**I**t was early March 2020, and I was exploring a pond close to my home near Everglades City. I was casting the shoreline with a baby bass fluke when a jolting strike almost yanked my rod into the drink. I thought it was a big snook, but it turned out to be a 4-pound peacock bass, my first ever.

The story of how peacock bass made their way from South America to these canals is a fascinating one. It starts with a tale of the world's largest subdivision developed back in the 1960s, one that extended from the northern reaches of unincorporated Collier County east into the Big Cypress Swamp then south into what is now known Port Of The Islands, some 20 miles as the crow flies.

With thousands of lots, it was intended to house upwards of 400,000 people when completed, spread out over 112,000 acres on 1.25 acre lots bordered by 183 miles of canals. By 1974, with the area only 10 percent developed, Collier County woke up to the fact that real problems were on the horizon dealing with all those lots on septic and wells, limestone roads, and no plans for parks or schools. Ultimately the development went belly up in 1978. Today, three-fourths of the massive subdivision remains unoccupied, and the state and federal government are buying up lots in an effort to restore the land to its natural state and improve the flow of freshwater into the Everglades.

But the story gets even more interesting in the 1980s. By then the freshwater residential canals in the Miami area were being overrun by Mayan cichlids, oscars,

and tilapia—all South American invaders. Florida state biologists were casting about for methods to tackle this problem, finally deciding to import butterfly peacock bass, another South American exotic that loves to feast on the smaller interlopers. The first peacocks were introduced in 1984 into the Black Creek Canal system in southeastern Miami-Dade County. They have thrived and expanded in the warm environs of southern Florida, becoming a popular sportfish that most agree are pound-for-pound better fighters than largemouth bass.

I wanted to learn more about these fish. On a bright, sunny afternoon in mid-April, my fishing buddy Bob Wayne and I met up with Capt. Mark Rose at the Golden Gate Community Center ramp. Because peacocks like warmth there is no need to be up at the crack of dawn or fish for them at night as is often the case with largemouth.

Soon we were putt-putting down the main canal, observing the slow-motor zone restrictions. The canals in Golden Gate Estates were dredged out of limestone to a depth of 5 to 6 feet and range from 50 to 75 feet wide. The shorelines descend steeply from adjacent residential



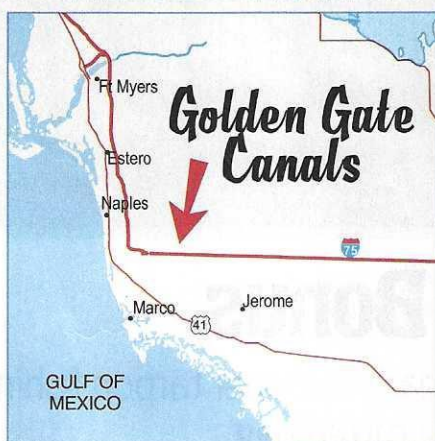
lots to the water with a shallow rock ledge extending a few feet out. Here and there trees have fallen into the water offering structure that our guide said was to the peacock's liking. We turned off into one of the narrower residential canals, put the trolling motor down, and started working the ledges and downed trees, me pitching my lures and Bob imperiously casting his fly rod. The captain rigged up a couple of bait outfits—a live shiner suspended about two feet below a big neon yellow slip bobber on a super-sharp Eagle Claw Trokar hook with no sinker, tied directly onto 30-pound-test braided line.

It didn't take long before the captain was pointing out some sizeable peacocks lollygagging in the sun against the shoreline on the shallow ledge. But 15 minutes later neither Bob nor I had so much as a strike. The devoted fly fisherman Mr. Wayne gave in first when our guide spied another pair of big peacocks. The good captain executed a perfect pendulum cast that landed right next to the larger of the two and quickly handed the rod to Bob. The bass instantly attacked the minnow. After a ruckus, Bob brought a muscular 4-pounder to the net. It wasn't long before Bob had another, then another under Mark's tutelage.

I stubbornly refused to switch to live bait for another 15 minutes, but after watching Mr. Wayne catch several more big bass I meekly flew the white flag. From then on I had a blast sight fishing for the scrappy fish. When the peacocks got more finicky and the action slowed, Mark switched us to a drop sinker rig that featured a minnow on a short dropper hook above a small torpedo sinker. When it hit the water near a bass, the sinker pinned the bait close to the spawning fish which became increasingly perturbed and finally attacked the bait.

A couple of hours and over a dozen fish later, Captain Mark suggested we try nearby Lake Sapphire. I moved forward to lift the trolling motor then realized it was already up. It was then I discovered that for the last 15 minutes our boat was creeping slowly down the canal under power by Mark's super quiet Mercury 250 Pro four-stroke.

As we motored casually to Sapphire, we asked Mark to fill us in on the best months to fish for peacocks around Naples. He told us he starts guiding in November, and the bite can be good through the winter months if the water temperature doesn't fall below 72 degrees. Fish are deep-



Live shiner under a float is irresistible to peacock bass. Above: Bob Wayne (L) with Capt. Mark Rose and another fish caught sight-fishing the canal bank.



er then and are suckers for live shiners or jigging lures fished slowly near the bottom. He recommends lures with lots of flash like a SteelShad or an orange/yellow Mister Twister grub rigged on a Beetle Spin. He likes March through April best for sight fishing when the bass move into the shallows to spawn. Summer can be a blast using topwater lures as peacocks are very active in the hot weather.

In a few minutes we were cruising into an h-shaped lake Mark explained contains juvenile tarpon and largemouth bass, but again we would target the belligerent pea-

## Hidden Gems DISCOVERY

### COLLIER COUNTY PEACOCK BASS

**WHAT YOU'LL FIND:** Captain Mark Rose guides in Florida in the Gold Gate Estates canals and Lake Okeechobee November through April. He gets his alluring shiners at Serenity Bait Company on Davis Blvd. in Naples or Miller's Bait and Tackle in La Belle. He is a member of BassOnline.com Pro Team and can be reached at 888-629-2277.

ocks along the shallows. We managed another dozen scrappy peacocks, all released, before the sun lowered in the sky.

On the leisurely trip back to the ramp, I scoped out a map of the area with its miles of canals in the center of Golden Gate Estates that we hadn't even touched.

And to get my fishing fever really elevated I could see miles more of canals in the surrounding areas to the north and east that Mark said can only be fished by launching at informal put-ins, often off gravel roads. Guess what I'm plotting next? **FS**