

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS A PIRAPATINGA?
by Daniel J. Logan, Corvallis, Oregon

I recently submitted an article for publication in AMERICAN CURRENTS listing all of the fish species collected in Benton County, Oregon (AC, Summer 94). One of the species listed was the Pirapatinga (*Piaractus brachypomus*). Within a few days, I received a letter from editor Bruce Gebhardt asking, in short, "What in the world is a Pirapatinga?" Bruce suggested that a short article introducing the Pirapatinga would be beneficial for AC readers.

The Pirapatinga, also known as the Red-bellied Pacu, is a near relative of piranhas. Both are in the family Characidae and the subfamily Serrasalminae. Pirapatinga are native to the Amazon Basin of South America. They are omnivorous, though they rely heavily on vegetation in their diet (Goulding 1980). Pirapatinga are rhomboidal, highly compressed, deep-bodied fish. In general, they are shaped somewhat like Bluegills, though with a relatively smaller head and a relatively shorter caudal peduncle. Adult Pirapatinga have a dark blue dorsal and lateral surface and a pale dusty-white ventral surface. Pirapatinga can be large, with extreme sizes of 20 kg (44 lbs.) and standard lengths of 850 mm (33.5"). The Benton County fish was 295 mm (11.6") standard length. Pirapatinga are popular aquarium fish and are common in pet stores. The assumed source of the Benton County specimen is a release of an unwanted aquarium fish.

Recently-caught pacus in Oregon have generated considerable local coverage by the news media, which frequently refer to them as piranha. The specimen from Benton was hooked on August 3, 1992 by B. Howell, angling with a worm as bait. In addition to the Benton County collection, there have been five other pacus of three species collected in Oregon in the past six years: three Pirapatinga; one Caranha (*P. mesopotamicus*); and one Tambaqui (*Colossoma macropomum*), also known as Blackfin Pacu.

The Oregon pacu collections are not unique in the United States. Courtney et al. (1984) list pacus as nonestablished exotic fishes; they list pacu collections from Arizona, California, Florida, Missouri, Ohio, and Georgia. The authors placed all pacus in the genus *Colossoma*, using *C. bidens* for the Pirapatinga and *C. nigripinnis* for the Tambaqui. In this article, I followed the nomenclature of Robins et al. 1991a and Robins et al. 1991b.

The release of tropical aquarium fishes is usually not considered a risk in Oregon's temperate climate. All Oregon collections of pacus have been between July 4 and September 29

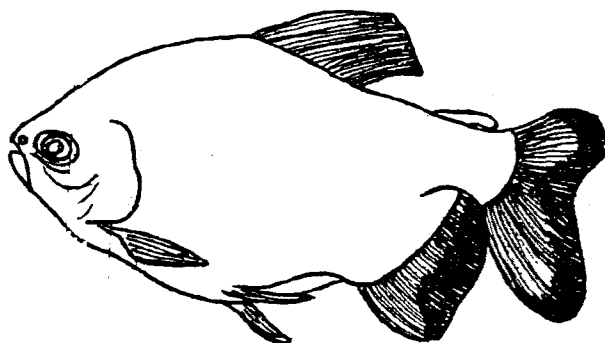


Fig.1. Line drawing, left lateral view, of Pirapatinga (*Piaractus brachypomus*) from photograph of museum specimen (OS 11491), 201 mm standard length. Drawn by author.

--three of the four warmest months for most waters in Oregon. Preliminary thermal tolerance results indicate that is unlikely that Pirapatingas would survive typical wintertime water temperatures of Oregon (Logan et al., in review).

References

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Collections of Pacu in Oregon

Piaractus brachypomus - Pirapatinga (Red-Bellied Pacu)

- *201 mm SL, Willamette River, Multnomah County, hook and line, 4 July 1988.
- *295 mm SL, Long Tom River, Benton County, hook and line, 3 August 1991.
- *Columbia River, Multnomah County, gill net, 29 September 1990.
- *Unnamed pond, Marion County, hook and line, summer 1991.

Piaractus mesopotamicus - Caranha (Pacu)

- *238 mm SL, Herbert's Pond, Douglas County, hook and line, 21 July 1989.

Colossoma macropomum - Tambaqui (Blackfin Pacu)

- *408 mm SL, Snake River, Malheur County, hook and line, 19 July 1991.

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