



Butterfly peacock bass

a new Florida tradition

By Paul Shafland

Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission staff approved introduction of the nonnative (exotic) butterfly peacock bass (*Cichla ocellaris*) in 1984. This represented a once-in-a-lifetime break with fisheries management traditions that remain in force to this day – the question of “can any exotic be a good exotic (free-roaming, nonnative species)?” In a quirk of fate, this tradition-breaking decision was initiated by the agency’s non-native fish assessment program,

which exists largely to assess, eradicate and/or minimize the detrimental effects of illegally released exotic fishes. This program’s origins date back to the 1960s, and it was the first program of its kind dedicated completely to conducting long-term science-based assessments of exotic fishes.

Studies completed in the late 1970s and early 1980s documented some illegally-introduced exotic fishes had become extremely abundant,



It was a historic moment when, in August of 1984, Paul Shafland released the first butterfly peacock bass in Black Creek Canal (C-1; Miami-Dade County).

especially spotted tilapia and other cichlids in the coastal metropolitan Miami-to-West Palm Beach canal systems, and there were too few native predators present to keep these undesirable exotics under control. Because no practical management alternative existed to increase native predators, these important findings became the basis for proposing the legal introduction of an exotic predator.

Before introducing the butterfly peacock, research indicated this species would not harm native fishes nor would it consistently live outside coastal Southeast Florida since winter water temperatures elsewhere typically get colder than the 60°F that kills this fish. Although the boundaries of this area fluctuate depending on winter temperatures, the prediction that butterfly peacocks would be restricted to this general area has been validated since their introduction nearly 25 years ago.

Tradition-breaking actions require more scrutiny than previously proven management strategies, so the Commission's staff proceeded slowly. Only after years of research and analysis, was introduction of the butterfly peacock approved.

And to this day, the butterfly peacock is the only legally-introduced exotic fish with self-perpetuating populations in Florida. While FWC staff broke with tradition, it is important to note this was done only after extensive studies concluded the introduction of the butterfly peacock would benefit the natural resources by helping reduce undesirable exotics, as well as providing fishing opportunities to the many thousands of anglers who would enjoy catching this world-renowned game fish.

After being introduced in 1984, the butterfly peacock thrived, and in 1989, a daily bag limit was set, and the fishery officially opened to the public. The bag limit remains two fish per day, only one of which may be 17 inches or longer. State record catches for butterfly peacocks were broken repeatedly between 1990 and 1993, starting with a 5.36-pound catch by Mark Soucy and ending when Jerry Gomez landed the current 9.08-pound state record. Somewhat surprisingly, this record has held for 15 years, even though butterfly peacocks weighing more than 10 pounds have been documented, including one that weighed nearly 12 pounds.

How to catch a butterfly peacock

One of the most amazing attributes of the butterfly peacock is that it can be caught readily by novice anglers using live shiners, swimming below a bobber, while pursuing more and larger ones can challenge even the most experienced freshwater anglers. A wide variety of bait, spinning and fly-casting equipment, ranging from a simple soda-pop can, 50 feet of monofilament and a hook, to the most-expensive light tackle currently marketed for largemouth bass fishing professionals, can be used to catch this colorful and exciting gamefish.

Introduction of the butterfly peacock has helped reduce the number of exotic fishes while having no known detrimental effects on native fishes. At the same time, it has generated millions of hours of fishing pleasure for thousands of anglers.





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Basic butterfly peacock bass fishing techniques are similar to those used for the native largemouth bass, but since peacocks rarely eat anything but fish and chase down their food almost exclusively during daylight hours, avoid using non-fish-imitating baits worked slowly or fishing at night. Top-water lures with or without props, fish-imitating crankbaits and flies fished on light tackle (6- to 8-pound test) are all good choices since peacocks tend to be an open-water fighter.

Butterfly peacock bass congregate in shade and around structure provided by bridges, culverts, fallen trees, canal bends, intersections and dead ends. More large fish (those more than 4 pounds) are caught between February and May than any other time of year. Every peacock angler has his secrets as to where and when to fish, including those who have seven to 10 hot spots reachable from shore. These hot spots can be checked easily on the way home from work or in just a few fun-filled hours close to home on a day off.

Where can you catch a peacock?

All major coastal canal systems in Miami-Dade, Broward and southern Palm Beach counties have supported fishable populations of butterfly peacock bass for the past several years. Typically, the Miami-Dade and southern Broward County canals east of Krome Avenue consistently produce the most, since these populations are less affected by colder winter water temperatures than those farther north and west.

Some of the most popular butterfly peacock canals are Tamiami (C-4), Cutler Drain (C-100) and Aerojet (C-111) canals in Miami-Dade County. In Broward, check out Pompano (C-14), Middle (C-13) and South (C-11) New River canals. And if the string of mild winters since 2000 continues, Lake Osborne, Lake Ida and the associated E-4 Canal system in southern Palm Beach County will continue to provide some excellent butterfly peacock catches.

New traditions

Overall, introduction of the butterfly peacock 24 years ago has been extremely successful in that it has helped reduce the abundance of some exotic fishes while having no known detrimental effects on native fishes. At the same time, it has generated millions of hours of fishing pleasure for thousands of urban anglers who spend nearly \$10 million annually just to catch this fish. Thousands of feature articles in magazines and features on TV have focused on this fishery, helping to renew interest in inner-city fishing opportunities that encourage young people to learn conservation ethics and partake in healthy outdoor recreational activities.

This is an incredible success story, especially given that many professional biologists and ecologists have long dismissed these canal fish communities as being “biological cesspools of introduced life.” Nonetheless, often because of the lack of comprehensive pre-introduction research and assessments by fisheries professionals, the history of exotic species is replete with bad experiences. For this reason, it is not only unwise, it is illegal for anyone to transfer or release any exotic species in Florida, including the butterfly peacock.

For more information on South Florida’s butterfly peacock bass, visit the FWC’s Web site at floridafisheries.com/Fishes/non-native.html#peacock, and floridafisheries.com/pdf/index.html#peacock. For up-to-the-minute fishing reports, contact your local bait and tackle shop specializing in fresh water. Also, experienced guides are available for anglers who want to learn quickly how and where to catch this fish. **FW**

Phil Chapman, a former FWC biologist, holds a good-sized butterfly peacock.

