

IN-DEPTH READS

Field guide to the Fishes of the Amazon, Orinoco and Guianas

Edited by Peter van der Sleen and James S Albert (Princeton field guides).

If I'd been a tree, knowing that I was getting chopped down to make the paper for this book, I'd have died happy. It's a seminal and important work. In years to come, this will be the first choice for field researchers, as well as aspiring ichthyologists. The authors have a fine pedigree, with Peter van der Sleen working as a post-doctoral fellow, while James Albert is a professor of biology. It has been assembled with contributions from more than 50 leading Amazonian ichthyologists — flicking through the list, you spot names like Kullander, Lopez-Fernandez, Lujan, Reis and de Sousa, among many, many more. Sleen and Albert have very much asked the experts.

After a brief introduction giving some background on things like the composition of Amazonian fish fauna, habitat types and ecology, the book gets right into the thick of it with taxonomic keys that will allow you to identify almost any fish from the Amazon, Orinoco and Guianas to a genus level.

How much this book appeals to you will reflect your level of fish geekery. If you're a beginner, chances are a lot of it will be lost on you. This is not lighthearted writing about setting up tanks or maintaining filters. It's deep. There are even a few pages dedicated to 'how to use this book'.

If you're the geekiest of fish geeks (a badge of honour, I've always thought), the chances are you'll want to absorb the book from cover to cover. It's moreish. A couple of pages at a time are never enough. This is the fishy equivalent of a Jaffa Cake.

Identification keys are easy enough to use and, even if you've managed to avoid them so far, they're so intuitive you'll get the hang of this one in seconds. It does require a degree of competence to understand some of the terms — ideally you should be familiar with words like 'laterosensory canal', 'protrusible jaw' and 'odontodes' if you want to use it properly. You don't need

to know these intimately, though, as the comprehensive glossary will tidy up any terms you're new to.

On the ground, if you happen to be in the Amazon, and you've just fished out a species the likes of which you've never seen before, you can grab this book and follow the first key through a series of descriptions (with illustrations), that apply to the fish you have in your nets. Eventually you'll reach a logical outcome based on your descriptions, and be redirected to a specific page. This will take you to the family of the fish in question.

Once there you'll be given another taxonomic key. Pick out the relevant features of your fish according to the key until you're directed to a page with the subfamily. Another key will identify genus, and then you can read its particulars.

Aquarists who buy fish from the likes of Pier, Wharf, Wildwoods, Silksworth or Aqualife Leyland, where the ranges are so esoteric that it can sometimes be a guess to establish exactly what kind of catfish or characin you're looking at, will love this book. You can go through things like tooth shapes and presence or absence of neuromasts until you whittle down — to genus level at least — what you're buying.

This book is a cornucopia of information and you'll find yourself losing time reading it.



For example, I opened the book at a random page and I landed on the family overview for *Loricariidae*. There is information on diversity (924 recognised species, making *Loricariidae* the fifth most species-rich vertebrate family on the planet), as well as prehistory (they're hypothesised to have originated 85 million years ago) and evolutionary facts (the

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tripartite jaw apparatus was an important player in ecomorphological diversity).

At a genus level you get a clear line drawing of a typically representative fish, a map showing known distribution, and information covering notable traits, numbers of species (and names in some cases), and further details about habitat, distribution, and biology.

If you're passionate about fish, it's an awakening experience. As editor of a fishkeeping magazine, with a lifelong immersion in the hobby and industry, I thought I was pretty hot on knowing most genera out there. Flicking through this, I've found names I never even knew existed.

Verdict

This could easily be my favourite fish book to date. If you work with fish imports, plan on visiting South America on a fish-finding expedition, or studying ichthyology, you need this book, just like a painter needs a brush. If you seek out the rarest of species on sale, or have a thing for seeking out unidentified bycatch from wild imports, you also need this book. I can guarantee you'll learn something.

● **Price:** Suggested retail price for the softback edition is £37.95. At time of writing, Amazon has copies at £24.66.

● **More info:** press.princeton.edu

