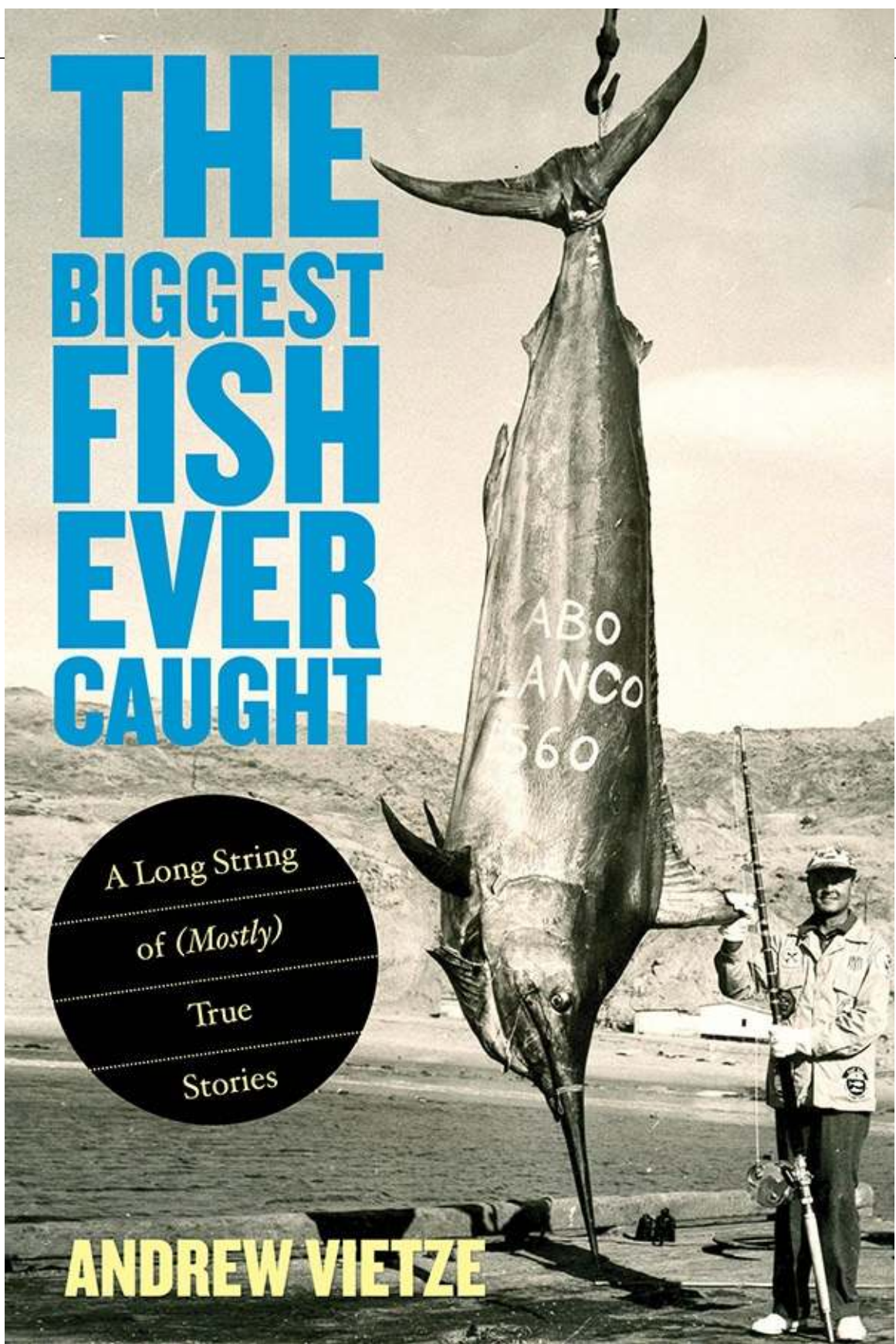


# THE BIGGEST FISH EVER CAUGHT

A Long String  
of (Mostly)

True  
Stories

ANDREW VIETZE



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# THE BIGGEST FISH EVER CAUGHT



**ANDREW VIETZE**



**LYONS PRESS**

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Every fisherman has a bit of the Ahab in him. As a park ranger stationed at a popular fishing pond in Maine's North Woods, I see eager anglers on a daily basis from October to November. They come from all over the world to explore the depths of the spruce-ringed, thirty-eight-acre basin out front—and the dozen others within walking distance—for its native population of brook trout. They seek me out for fishing licenses, for keys to the boats we have on remote ponds, to ask about the rules and regulations, and sometimes for advice on where they're biting and what flies are working.

Then they head out, and I marvel at their passion and drive. They're on the water, seated in a canoe, when the rain is coming down in torrents. They're out there when the first snows of the season begin to fall softly down. They're out there when the whitecaps are blowing right over the rails into their boats. They're out there when nothing is rising, and the only things biting are thick clouds of maddening blackflies.

Nothing can stop a fisherman. The only other species that can rival their determination might be New England gardeners. Or golfers. Or adolescent video gamers. Or those blackflies. Single-minded. Focused. So in love with what they do.

It's a beautiful thing.

My dirty little secret: I'm no angler. Which isn't to say I'm not very good. I simply don't fish. Like Theodore Roosevelt, I never acquired a taste for it, always finding it a little slow. I prefer to hike and climb and paddle. People are often shocked that the ranger at Daicey Pond, surrounded by some of the finest fishing in the northeast, doesn't wet a line now and again. (And a Registered Maine Guide at that.) Some of my fellow rangers, posted mountainside or at gatehouses, want to bump me off and take my spot simply on principal.

But I have a real admiration for fishermen because they will not be deterred. If they set aside a day for fishing, they will fish, come what may, Always with the idea that on a lucky day one of them will strike it big, hauling in a monster. Perhaps it'll be big enough for the angler to contact the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) and have it considered for a record.

Based in Dania Beach, Florida, IGFA does the fishing world's bookkeeping, tracking the largest fish caught anywhere on the globe with a rod and reel. Founded by a group of deepwater fishermen in 1939, the organization was originally formed to help set ethical standards for ocean angling. Up to that point, there were no

universals, and fishing clubs, countries, and individual anglers all operated on their own moral codes. This led to many disputes and record confusion, and certainly didn't help global fish populations.

In the early thirties, famed angler Michael Lerner met with British fisherman Clive Firth and discussed the idea of an international association to codify fishing standards and establish saltwater fishing records. Being a scientist, Lerner wanted to keep gamefish populations healthy as much as he wanted to keep some of the records he'd set, and IGFA's mission always included a message of conservation. The pair met with the American Museum of Natural Science, which was involved initially, and the institution's Dr. William Gregory became the first president of the nascent organization in 1939. Another well-known fisherman by the name of Ernest Hemingway lent his support and was an early officer.

Freshwater records at the time—those records held by fishing legends like Townsend Miller, George Perry, and Cal Johnson—were kept by *Field & Stream* magazine. The association absorbed those in 1978.

To meet IGFA's standards a potential record breaker must:

- Be caught on a standard mono-, multi-, or lead-filament line with a standard rod and a reel that has no power aids.
- Fishing chairs and gaffs are allowed but again, no added power.
- Fishermen must fight the fish alone but can be helped by a gaffer and/or a friend who grabs the leader when it touches the end of the rod or is within reach of the boat.

That's it. There are many specifications and permutations—line class, hook size, line types, etc.—but that's the gist of it: a single fisherman fighting a single fish, with a little assistance in the landing acceptable when the fish is boatside.

To qualify for a record, IGFA requires a certain amount of documentation: clear photographs of the fish and the fisherman; certified weight; line and tippet samples and name of boat, captain, weighmaster, and witnesses. The application must be notarized. For obvious reasons the process is rigorous. Some conservationists argue that it's too rigorous, that it doesn't allow anglers to catch and release a fish for fear of missing out on a record. I address this debate in the Afterword at the end of the book.

Fishermen vie for records in a multitude of line classes but the stories in this book deal with all-tackle world records (except for Stacey Parkerson's Pacific blue marlin which is remarkable because it was caught on a fly. A fly!).

As the title says, these are the biggest fish ever caught.





## BLACK PIRANHA

RUSSELL JENSEN, FISHERMAN

**“El grande! El grande!”** The guide was screaming, pointing at the fish twisting and wriggling at the end of Russell Jensen’s line. A native of the Wai Wai tribe, the Amazon boatman was ecstatic, almost ready to break into a dance. Fisherman and guide stood beside the Rio Jatapu, a dark, winding waterway deep in the Amazon rain forest. Lined with lush green, the waterway twists and wends its way between trundling hills and low-lying sandbars on its way to meet the larger Rio Uatuma, as if trying to lose itself in the dense jungle. In the canopy of trees beside the river, anacondas and jaguars were settling in to sleep away the new day.

A retired contractor who spent most of his career working as a general foreman for New York University, Russell Jensen traveled four thousand miles from the Bronx to hear his guide utter just these words—“the Big One.” He’d come in search of black piranha, fabled man-eaters that attack aggressively, stripping everything they find down to the bone.





Russell Jensen has made a science out of landing big fish, breaking more than twenty world records. To catch the biggest black piranha ever taken, the Bronx resident traveled all the way to the deep, dark Amazon, pulling this toothy, eight-pound–four-ounce piranha out of the Rio Jatapu in 2009.

COURTESY OF THE IGFA

Of the many species of these misunderstood monsters, the black piranha (*Serrasalmus rhombeus*)—sometimes called the red-eyed piranha—is among the largest. The previous world record for the fish was seven pounds six ounces, and Russell Jensen meant to break it. And there is no place better in the world to find the black piranha than at the northern edge of the world’s largest watershed—the great Amazon Basin.

Jensen and his guide had started their day at 6:30 a.m.—this was the New Yorker’s last day of fishing before he had to leave for the long journey north—walking down to the Jatapu to fish for bait. Once they had buckets full, they’d push on in search of a world-beater. The Big One.

“El grande! El grande!”

The guide was, as Jensen puts it, “freaking out.” He knew these waters, knew that you should never swim between 6 and 10 a.m. when the piranhas were feeding, knew that the grey fighters live in both churning whitewater and deeper slow currents, and he was pointing at the fish shimmying on the hook, barely able to contain himself with excitement.

Jensen, not so much. An experienced angler, the New Yorker also knew his fish—specifically, what a trophy looks like. At his home in the Bronx, he has a room full of them, caught on excursions just like this one—to Alaska in search of king salmon, to Mexico on the trail of yellowfin tuna, and to Costa Rica to fish for tarpon. He’s had a remarkable success rate.

Jensen had been to the Amazon five years earlier, fishing for jau, the largest of the two hundred species of catfish, with the same outfitter, Acute Angling of New Jersey. He spent six days on that trip before he landed a 109-pound whopper that broke the world record.

Only a few other fishermen across the globe could claim to be more successful than Russell Jensen. Bearing a resemblance to Ernest Borgnine, he’s earned himself more than twenty world records. He’d wrestled lingcod from Alaska and hauled Orinoco peacock bass from Brazil. He’d taken a good-size black piranha already on this six-day excursion, a seven-pounder, but he wanted a bigger one. “I knew there were piranhas over eight pounds in these waters,” he says. “This fish wasn’t big enough to hold the record a long time.”

**And this wasn't what a world beater looked like.**

**But there was his guide jumping up and down at the river's edge, shouting "El grande," "El grande mandi" and carrying on, gesturing with astonishment at the leviathan from the deep. On the hook was a fish that looked to Jensen like baitfish *bait*. A tiny thing, it couldn't have been more than a pound or two.**

**"I said, 'it's so cute,'" Jensen recalls. His guide, fully aware of the size this species usually reaches, insisted Jensen measure and weigh the little fellow. He did, and the rest was, well, stuff for the history books. Though it clocked out at a weighty two pounds four ounces, the pescadito was indeed "grande," the largest mandi catfish ever to be landed.**

**Russell Jensen had broken another world record. This time, without even trying.**



**This wasn't the way it normally happened for Russell Jensen. Each of the records that he'd beaten previously had been the result of painstaking planning, research, and practice—along with a certain amount of confidence. He liked to tell people, "I'm going to catch a world-record catfish or piranha" long before he ever dropped a line for one.**

**His inspiration came from an unlikely source. "I watched Tiger Woods," he says "and he said practice, practice, practice." So practice he did. He'd spend hours aiming lines into his sister's swimming pool in nearby Connecticut. Cast, reel, cast, repeat. "I wanted to be the best." He still practices at least ten hours every week. "Now, I can drop my lure within six inches of where I want to be at thirty feet."**

**But it doesn't matter if you can hit a target if you don't know where the fish will be. Jensen believes practice is no good without research. You have to think like a fish. Understand the fish. Know what the fish wants and when it wants it. Anticipate its moves.**

**Jensen hung around those who know such things. When he wasn't overseeing new construction or maintaining old construction at NYU, the fisherman visited the school's biology department. "I got to know the professors of ichthyology," he says. He'd pick their brains about fish habits and habitats, listening intently as they explained the finer points of fish biology.**

**Studying was key. Not only did he make the acquaintance of people who might help him, he also spent many hours in the library and in front of the computer screen. Whatever fish he was hunting, he'd spend countless hours reading about.**

**"If I wanted to go after catfish, for example, I'd find out which is bigger—male or female. It's the female. When does she lay her eggs? First week in February. Then I [make plans to] go the last week of January because she'll be ravenous, eating**

everything to be ready to sit on the eggs.”

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Russell Jensen discovered his fishing skills almost by accident. “My father gave me a fishing pole when I was nine and told me to go catch a fish,” he recalls. So he did. The Bronx boy went to a pond at the local cemetery, sunk his line, and drew it out with a carp attached. He hurried home, excited to cook the small fish for dinner. His father asked him where he caught it, and when he heard it came from a graveyard pool, he told his son to throw it out. Jensen was crestfallen.

But the boy was hooked. Though his father was no fisherman, he had a friend who was. This friend had a son about Jensen’s age, and he invited young Russell along on saltwater fishing trips out of Montauk, New York. It was all new and exciting to the kid from the Bronx, but he was as green as the sea.

“I remember standing with my rod bent at the railing and saying to the mate, ‘My line is stuck,’ he recalls. “And the mate says, ‘No, you’ve caught a fifteen- or sixteen-pound codfish.’ I probably weighed all of eighty pounds myself.”

Jensen seemed a natural, and he was soon outfishing his father’s friend. “He was second to me. I caught the biggest fish. He only took me one or two times . . .” Landing the day’s best catch became a habit. “I was nine years old. The next time out, I won two pools.” The adults were either embarrassed or annoyed by the kid, and they stopped inviting him. “No one would take me.”

Jensen fished where and when he could after that, but he didn’t get serious again until he went into the Army. Stationed at the 101st Airborne’s base at Fort Campbell in Kentucky, he found some fishing buddies among his fellow paratroopers. They’d venture out on leave to Kentucky Lake, the largest man-made reservoir in the eastern United States, and spend weekends dropping lines for bass, perch, bluegills, and catfish.



**Black piranha grow quite slowly. In captivity, they might live as long as twenty years. To reach record size, a fish would have to be quite old indeed.**

**One of his captains arranged a trip to Alaska, and the Last Frontier is where Russel Jensen first started thinking about world records. “I was supposed to fish with three other fishermen on a forty-five-foot boat for halibut and king salmon,” he says. “But the three others were coming in a different plane, and they weren’t able to fly.” Jensen had the boat all to himself. “I fished all week with the captain and the first mate.”**

**On one particular morning, Jensen’s life would change. The New Yorker had caught his limit by 8:30 a.m., and they couldn’t go back until 2:30, so the captain said he’d show Jensen his favorite spot, a sandbar near Elephant Cove with breathtaking visibility at low tide. “It was eight feet deep, and you could see right to the bottom. You can look at the fish and decide which one you want.” The angler got excited. “I had the International Game Fish Association (IGFA) book with me—if I could catch a lingcod over twenty-three pounds, I would have a world record.”**

Some of the fish certainly looked like contenders, swimming tantalizingly below. “The captain said, ‘where’s your fly rod?’ I told him I didn’t bring it.” He couldn’t fish without one and bring home the record. Jensen swore then and there he’d be back there next year, and he asked the captain to keep the place a secret. “Don’t take anyone else there,” the fisherman said to the captain. “And he didn’t.”

Back in the Bronx, Jensen made his plans for the following year, and he decided he ought to know a little more about fly fishing. He signed up for classes at the Joan Wulff School of Fly Fishing in upstate New York, and he wasn’t shy about telling Joan Wulff what he was about. “She asked everyone why they were there, and I told her I was there to break world records.”

He said the same thing to his boss, the president of NYU, at the yearly staff picnic. “I told him I was going up to Alaska to shatter the world record—a lingcod on a fly rod.” It wouldn’t be easy. “The record was twenty-four pounds, so to *shatter* it I’d have to catch a fish over thirty pounds on a fly-fishing line.” He spent a lot of time casting into his sister’s pool.

All of the research, the painstaking preparation, the hours of practice paid off. “I caught a thirty-six-pounder,” he says. And upon feeling the rush of reeling in a world beater, Jensen decided he needed another—“I wanted to be the best, to have the most world records”—and he decided to get serious about it. “If you make up your mind in this great country we live in, you can do anything,” he says.

He reeled in another and another and another: a jundia catfish pushing 26 pounds; a silver croaker weighing in at a hefty 11 pounds, 4 ounces; and the biggest big one, a piraiba catfish weighing 295 pounds 9 ounces, capable of sinking a ship. The trophy room at his house filled quickly, and he rose up the ranks of record holders. By 2008 he was the third-best fisherman in the world. To be Number 1—the Tiger Woods of sportfishing—he’d need more records. Which led him far south once again, to the tropical rainforest of the Amazon.



It was a place Russell Jensen always wanted to go. “The jungle, the jaguar, the anaconda . . .” he trails off. As a boy he had daydreamed about adventures in the Amazon—and finally he was there. He traveled twenty miles downriver with his Wai Wai guide, moving slowly, searching for piranha, fishing all the while. The black piranha can grow to be a football-size fish, and has a powerful jaw set with a circle of serrated white teeth. They’re among the world’s most aggressive animal species known to terrorize aquariums in captivity, and they’ll often go after creatures much larger than themselves. Piranha have attacked people on many occasions. In 2011, for example, piranhas chewed up a Bolivian teen when he jumped out of his canoe, causing

so much damage he bled to death.

Russell Jensen knew much better than to leap from his boat. As excited as he was about going after these vicious predators, he was just as intrigued by the wild countries they inhabited. “I took a picture of the fer-de-lance, one of the most venomous snakes in the Amazon,” he says. “They call it a four-step—if it bites you, you have four steps. After that he spotted an eighteen-foot anaconda, then a twenty-two-foot anaconda and the fabled big cat. “I saw a jaguar on the branch of a tree—it was about fifty feet from me.” The fishing and fauna were spectacular, but so were the other sights: the river itself, the jungle, the indigenous culture. “I have pictures of hieroglyphs on rocks over four thousand years old.”

On his very last day, Jensen made the catch. He had his custom Grant rod, crafted to his specifications, loaded with Power Pro eighty-pound line. At the end was a rugged Gamakatsu Octopus circular hook. “With this rig, I can catch over nine hundred pounds,” says the fisherman. “And what do I catch? An eight-pound–seven-ounce piranha.”

But it was just the fish he was after.

El grande.



## BLACK MARLIN

### ALFRED GLASSELL, FISHERMAN

**A**nd this is how the other half does it. The 1 percent. Alfred Glassell was interested in fishing. Alfred Glassell had resources: the kind of play money that comes from having a father who was among the vanguard of American oil men, the kind of wealth that allowed him to amass the largest collection of African gold in the world. Alfred Glassell decided to use his riches to commission a team of Yale marine biologists to find him the world's greatest fishing hole.

**And they found it.**

**Alfred Glassell traveled to the spot discovered by his scientists, set up an exclusive world-famous fishing club, and reeled in the biggest bony fish ever caught with rod and reel, a 1,560-pound black marlin.**

**Today, the fish is in the Smithsonian.**





Texas oil man Alfred Glassell decided he wanted to find the world's finest fishing hole, so he hired a team of biologists to sail the seas, studying ocean currents and fish populations. He discovered the fertile fisheries of Cabo Blanco, on the coast of Peru, and set up a famous fishing club with a group of affluent anglers, attracting the likes of Ernest Hemingway, Jimmy Stewart, and Doris Day. That's where he caught this 1,560-pound black marlin in 1953. The massive billfish remains the biggest bony fish ever caught and resides today in the Smithsonian.

COURTESY OF THE IGFA

Alfred Glassell Jr.'s entire life was one for the books. He was born into a Louisiana oil family in 1913, just as the automobile was taking over the nation, and came up through the schools of Shreveport. At Louisiana State, he blossomed. He was student body president, won entrance to Kappa Alpha, was a member of thirteen honor societies, and was a commander in the ROTC.

Upon graduation, the young scion migrated to Texas and worked in the family business. This was during the boom times for oil, and Glassell's company opened vast fields in Texas, Louisiana, and the Gulf of Mexico. All that was needed was a way to ship the black gold to the hungry markets of the northeast. So Glassell set up the Transcontinental Gas Pipe Line Corporation, later known as Transco, which ran the first transmission line from Texas to New York. The oil flowed one way; the money flowed the other.

When war broke out in the forties, the Texan enlisted, becoming a major in the Army. His service took him to both North Africa and Europe, and he was honorably discharged.

Glassell picked up his fishing pole upon his return. He had a lifelong interest in the outdoors, no doubt fostered by his father, who was a conservationist and one of the founders of Ducks Unlimited. Alfred Glassell the younger had a particular fondness for the underwater world, perhaps begun at the tender age of three, when he landed a four-pound bass.

Growing up, Alfred Jr. fished the lakes and bayous of his home state and searched the Gulf Coast for larger trophies, but he didn't realize his love for big fish until he went on a trip to the Bahamas with a friend. There was a big run of tuna on at the time and Glassell and his buddy decided to try and land an albacore. In a 2008 interview with journalist C. J. Schexnayder for kleph.com, Glassell describes the experience: "One afternoon, for the lack of anything else to do, we went out. We hooked one of those big tuna and I told myself right then 'this is for me.'"

The experience thrilled him. "It's the most exciting thing in the world. You go from complete relaxation to the maximum speed of a human body in the space of a single second. There is nothing in the world as exciting. . . . It's like a freight train coming

out of the water and jumping into the air and throwing its body around with these beautiful leaps then throwing its bill around and diving back into the water and creating this huge geyser of spray.”

Glassell wanted more, and he began to take trips to Bimini to fish. He and several friends started a de facto club, and they'd get together annually to search the waters off the island for bigger and better fish. They fished with a famous writer named Ernest Hemingway. Glassell didn't know it then, but he'd cross paths with the larger-than-life scribe in a meaningful way in a few years.

While on these trips to the Bahamas' westernmost isle, Glassell encountered Michael Lerner, a well-known fisherman (and IGFA founder) who had a lab onboard his boat, the *Bahama Mama*. Lerner realized the more that he knew about fish, the better he would be at catching them. (And he was very good: *Life* magazine once wrote that Lerner caught more big ones than anyone alive.) This seemed to make a strong impression on Glassell. “I'd give 'em my fish so he could put the scientific to 'em,” he told Schexnayder.

Lerner, one of the world's great anglers, worked with biologists to study fish populations—today there's a research station named for him in his beloved Bimini—and Glassell decided he'd lend his vast resources to the cause. In the late 1940s, he commissioned a Yale-Miami study of the relationship between sea currents and sea life. He funded the research vessel *Argosy*, a 110-foot steel ketch, which took teams of scientists from Yale and Miami all around the globe in a search for life. One year, the ship traveled more than twenty-four thousand miles. “We kept constant studies going on over the oceans of the world,” Glassell told Schexnayder, “and we were particularly interested in concentrations of plankton. When you found an abundance of plankton you would find the fish, and we found a spot off the west coast of South America with a huge concentration.”

It was a find that would change his life.



The place was called Cabo Blanco, and it sat four degrees south of the equator on the westernmost point of South America, at the great curve of the continent, the elbow of Peru that juts out into the Pacific. This is where the two prevailing currents of the world's largest ocean met in a swirling mass of life. As the *Miami News* put it: “Just off Cabo Blanco, the Humboldt and Equatorial Currents join, creating a ichthyological traffic jam—an unprecedented abundance and variety of fish, large and small, like nothing found anywhere else in the world.”

This confluence—and the rich habitat it created—was exactly the fishing hole that Alfred Glassell was looking for. Reports of giant schools and huge tuna started

filtering back to the oil man. A friend with a tuna fishing boat offered to take the eager angler south, and the pair visited Cabo Blanco at the dawn of the 1950s. Glassell was smitten. "Oh boy," he told Schexnayder, "it was the Mecca, the Heaven, the Valhalla of all fishing." Cabo Blanco was a tiny, remote outpost at what seemed the end of the earth. Staring at the sea from atop brown cliffs and dotted with white beaches, the village was very difficult to get to, requiring a nine-hour flight from Miami and then an arduous overland trek from the airport in Talara. None of that mattered to Glassell. Upon returning to the United States, he told his friend Ki Farrington, another wealthy fisherman who'd made a name for himself in the tropics about the almost mythical charms of the White Cape, and they set about recruiting other interested parties for another big fish club. They had no trouble finding game fishermen and soon had a group of ten ready to invest in a clubhouse there. It was May of 1951.

And the Cabo Blanco Fishing Club was born.

The club was as exclusive as they come. Membership was limited to twenty and said to be in the ten-thousand-dollar range. Legend has it that Farrington was hounded by aspiring anglers, once turning down an offer of fifty thousand dollars to join. The ranks were mostly Americans—the likes of Firestone heir Roger Firestone, Buffalo Sabres owner Northrup Knox, Los Angeles tax attorney Joseph Peeler, ballistic baron John M. Olin, and Indianapolis Speedway magnate Anton Hulman—but included nabobs like Peruvian banker Enrique Pardo Heeren as well. The fishermen rarely visited at the same time. Glassell himself made it a point to spend at least ten days at Cabo Blanco every year, usually in August. Members were allowed to have guests, and visitors would pay twenty-five dollars per person for room and board and one hundred dollars more to use one of the club's three boats, one forty-foot and two thirty-eight-foot vessels. Like Glassell's own *Miss Texas*, with its open back, fighting chair, and cabin, these were down-east-style craft imported from Nova Scotia.

The clubhouse was a simple, whitewashed structure, sitting atop a three-hundred-foot cliff overlooking the sea. With ten rooms, its own bar, pool, and cooking and cleaning staff, it was quite comfortable without being extravagant. These men were here to fish.

Fish they did. The billfish were so plentiful on "Black Marlin Boulevard," as the waters offshore were nicknamed, that members could simply cast in their direction and be fairly assured they'd take one home. They took so many they lined the driveway down to the dock—where a big crane sat at the ready to hoist fish—with marlin tails by the dozen. And they sent scores back to Miami to be mounted by renowned taxidermist Al Pflueger.



Modern methods for catching marlin include using multiple rods with outriggers to troll through likely water. The equipment and methods available to modern fishermen far outstrip what was available sixty years ago, making Glassell's accomplishment all the more impressive.

**Alfred Glassell, though, took the first big one. On April 4, 1952, he landed what would become a world first—a bony fish over 1,000 pounds taken on rod and reel (Glassell vied for that honor with Western writer Zane Grey, who caught a Giant Tahitian striped marlin that weighed a cool 1,040 pounds in 1931. That fish, however, was considered too shark-eaten to count.) The Texan's massive billfish leaped from the briny up onto the clubhouse wall, and it would be the first of many "granders" at Cabo Blanco.**

**The record wouldn't last long. The waters were so rife with marlin here that a new record would be broken before the ink could dry on the previous one. Thousand-pounders became commonplace. "After the club was running people were catching them pretty often," Glassell told Schexnayder. "A total of thirty-two granders were caught there."**



**None would be bigger than this one. The catch came on a sunny early August day in 1953. Glassell was fishing about eight miles out, a five-pound mackerel on the end of his hook, when he felt a sharp jab on his line. His rod was a bamboo seven-footer, his reel a Fin-Nor, and his line thirty-pound linen. He set the hook, and found himself involved in a tug of war with a fish the size of a Model T. The battle was pitched, and it was exhausting. The fish leaped over and over in desperation, trying to make it escape.**

**Black marlin are tenacious fighters, and some mariners consider them the fastest fish in the sea, hitting speeds of more than seventy miles an hour. They've been seen**



to stun their prey with a swipe of their long bills, which can reach upwards of four feet in length, and use it like a rapier to pierce other fish. Their fearsome swords inspired fear in early fishermen, and they've been known to spear human vessels—or simply launch themselves on deck and wreak havoc (like one that terrorized an Australian fishing boat in October of 2012).

Glassell found himself in quite a melee. “He didn’t fight any harder than other fish, it was just stronger and longer,” he told Schexnayder. Fish and fisherman dueled for almost two and a half hours. By this point, Glassell had already captured four grander himself, so he had a sense of what he was getting into.

His crew carefully kept the boat out of the way of the fish while the Texan wrestled the rod. Eventually the noble beast wore itself out with all its jumping, and Glassell was finally able to get the upper hand. When they finally got it onboard, he and his companions were astonished by the sheer enormity of the thing. “We had him in the boat,” Glassell remembered, “and his girth was way bigger than anything that had ever been reported. I said, ‘back to the dock, boys.’”

The giant black marlin was actually a her, and she was indeed a specimen—1,560 pounds, fourteen feet seven inches—taking the world record not only for the species but for all bony fish. It topped the previous champion—a marlin caught by Zane Grey’s captain Laurie Mitchell—by a cool quarter ton. And it remains the biggest vertebrate fish—as opposed to cartilaginous shark—ever caught by a rod-and-reel angler. A longtime patron of both the arts and conservation, Glassell donated his trophy to the Smithsonian, where it can be found today.

The catch made Glassell something of a celebrity, the real live incarnation of Hemingway’s Santiago. Magazines profiled him. “The Oilman and the Sea,” read one headline. Hollywood looked him up when director John Sturges was making the 1956 film of Hemingway’s *Old Man and the Sea*. *Sports Illustrated* put him on its cover in March of 1956.

Alfred Glassell, who already moved in socially prominent circles, soon found himself hobnobbing with the most famous of the famous. Hemingway himself made a guest appearance at the Cabo Blanco Fishing Club when the Spencer Tracy movie of his book was being shot. The manly writer spent almost six months there, and he impressed the world-record holder: “He was a damned good fisherman. He got up early and stayed out late and would work at it all day long.”

Hemingway confirms this in one of the few writings he did of his time at Cabo Blanco: “We fished 32 days, from early morning until it was too rough to photograph and the seas ran like onrushing hills with snow blowing off the tops.”

Papa’s efforts resulted in a host of big fish, the most notable of which was a 910

pound marlin. He celebrated the way he celebrated most things—with a drink.

“Hemingway did a lot of drinking. He was a big drinker,” Glassell recalled. “That’s one of the reasons we were glad to get him to go down to the club. His bar bill kept us operating for a year.”

Baseball great—and avid fisherman—Ted Williams was another visitor in December of 1954. He caught a 1,235-pound black marlin that vaulted him onto the club’s wall of fame. Other famed figures to venture to Cabo Blanco included New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller, Jimmy Stewart, John Wayne, Paul Newman, Humphrey Bogart, Doris Day, and Marilyn Monroe. The reputation of Alfred Glassell’s little guild of game fishermen spread worldwide.



But tides change. The Cabo Blanco Fishing Club enjoyed fifteen good years before new currents—both oceanic and political—brought an end to an era. Glassell described the sad situation to C. J. Schexnayder. “They had a revolution in Peru and we weren’t allowed to even go there anymore. The people in charge decided they were going to make it a playground for their top political players so they could use the boats and use the club. They didn’t really take care of the boats and eventually the boats all sank. So now the *Miss Texas* is out there somewhere at the bottom of the ocean.”

Not only did the rule of Juan Velasco Alvarado dampen the ability of Americans to travel to Peru, but the fishing itself started to wane. Some biologists suspected that overfishing of anchovies—a black marlin staple—had something to do with it. Others assumed that the fish simply rode away on the undertow that brought them there in the first place.

Alfred Glassell would have had to stop fishing in 1986 anyway. Open-heart surgery put an end to his big-game hunts, and he turned his attention to his other great love: art. He’d always been heavily involved with the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, but now he had even more time to devote to it. Today, the Glassell School of Art is named in his honor.

The maritime legacy of this Oilman of the Sea will always be remembered. His contributions to undersea research were recognized in 1971 when he was presented with the International Oceanographic Foundation Marine Science Award. Thirty years later, IGFA inducted him into its Hall of Fame.

And fifty years on, no angler has ever reeled in anything bigger.



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