



The previous 24 hours had been filled with incredible excitement. I had finally reached my long-sought destination, Lake Kamaka. It was just too good to be true. The lake was even more beautiful than I had imagined and a new species of rainbowfish was icing on the cake. Now, back at the home of missionaries Dave and Tammy Price on the edge of Lake Holmes, I was filled with a great sense of accomplishment. The journey to Irian Jaya was now at the halfway mark. If nothing else was achieved it would be a total success. As it turned out, there was ample excitement ahead during the remaining days!

The morning after returning from Lake Kamaka I was up before daybreak. Gary Freisen had invited me to accompany him, along with Tammy Price and her two children, on a flight to Fauwi Village on the edge of the

Top: A picturesque Dani village at Mamit in the Central Highlands.
Bottom: The "ski-jump" runway at Mamit.

Chasing Rainbows in Irian Jaya—Again!

DR. GERALD R. ALLEN

Department of Ichthyology, Western Australian Museum

Editor's note: The story of the first part of this expedition appeared in the April, 1992, issue of TFFH.

Mamberamo Plains. When we met Gary at the landing strip he briefed us on the day's itinerary. I was dismayed to discover that we were first scheduled to fly to a remote strip in the Central Highlands. Fishes are usually nonexistent in New Guinea's high mountains. Moreover, I did not relish the thought of the hazardous flying conditions the Highlands are famous for. Anyway, if I could persevere through the mountain flight there would be plenty of rainbowfish action down on the Plains afterwards.

Gary's *barang* (Indonesian for baggage or cargo) consisted of smelly bundles of smoked fish. These were introduced African tilapia caught by the villagers at Lake Holmes. We were finally airborne at 6:30 AM. The views of the expansive Mamberamo Plains were breathtaking, but I was apprehensive about the weather. The mountains ahead were shrouded in menacing dark clouds. Thirty minutes later my fear of mountain flying was once again reinforced.

Gary searched vainly below for a glimpse of our destination, the tiny village of Mamit. It was completely hidden by cloud. We circled the general vicinity for 10 minutes before abandoning the search. We then flew over two other strips, but the result was exactly the same. It was now urgent to land in order to conserve our dwindling fuel supply. About 30 minutes later Gary finally slipped under the clouds for a safe landing at Bokondini.

We took on additional fuel and waited for the clouds to dissipate. An hour later we were once again



Top: The Van Daalen River, on the Mamberamo Plains near Fauwi. **Bottom:** Van Heurn's rainbow from Fauwi.

in the air and headed back toward Mamit. This time we found it without any problem. But I couldn't believe that we were actually going to land there. Perched on the mountainside, it looked more like a ski-jump than an airstrip! Gary skillfully handled the landing. Obviously, he had done this many times be-

fore. We taxied to the end of the runway and were immediately engulfed by hundreds of villagers. Gary unloaded the strong-smelling fish *barang*. This was a relief, but its place was taken by a live pig in a gunnysack, and a chicken! I went for a brief stroll, snapping photos of the people, members of the Dani tribe. A few



Top: A male Van Heurn's rainbow showing aggressive coloration. **Center:** The beautiful variety of the barred rainbow, *Chilatherina fasciata*, found at Fauwi. **Bottom:** Village children haul the net at Obogwil.

still wore their traditional dress, but many of the men and boys had Western-style shorts. The takeoff was an unforgettable experience. We accelerated rapidly downhill to the end of the strip, which ended abruptly at the edge of a 1000-foot cliff. It was literally a case of sink or swim!

I was greatly relieved to see the Plains again. We followed the Van Daalen River, a tributary of the Mamberamo, for several minutes before landing at Fauwi. This village is situated at the meeting place between the Mamberamo Plains and foothills of the Central Range. Its main attractions were a 100-yard-wide river next to the village and several small tributary creeks. Gary gathered up a small crew of men and boys to help us catch fishes. We first trekked upstream through one of the small creeks. It was strewn with large, slippery boulders and a tangle of overhead vegetation that slowed our progress. We periodically stopped to scoop with the nets, but only a few juvenile rainbows were captured. Suddenly one of the men pointed to a concentration of adult rainbows in a deep pool just below a 3-foot waterfall. Even when viewed from above the surface, the large males glowed with brilliant color. It was a species I didn't immediately recognize. We surrounded the school with the net and hauled the precious cargo onto the bank. A closer examination revealed it was Van Heurn's rainbow, which I had previously seen in Dave Price's aquarium at Lake Holmes. However, these specimens displayed much more yellow on the back and belly. We selected sev-

eral of the best fish for transport back to Dave's house and released the remainder. This species is known only from the Mamberamo system.

Next we tried the big 80-foot seine in the river. This was fishing at its easiest. While I supervised from the top of a huge boulder the village children pulled the net. We obtained an excellent catch of barred rainbows



Striped grunter, *Hephaestus obtusifrons*, from Obogwi.

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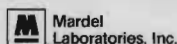


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ally envied Dave's ability to keep all these rare species that have yet to see the light of day in the aquarium hobby. The extra time at Dave's place also enabled me to further explore the lake and its tributaries. One afternoon I succeeded in capturing a 10-inch specimen of Idenburg's catfish

Left: A rare catfish, *Neosilurus idenburgi*, collected by the author in Lake Holmes.

(*Chilatherina fasciata*), a fish that is widespread in northern New Guinea. The Fauwi variety is nicely marked, with large blue-black blotches on the lower sides.

There were still several hours of daylight remaining. I quickly packed the fishes while Gary did his usual preflight checks. Thirty minutes later we received the usual tumultuous reception upon landing at Obogwi Village. Several children led us to a nearby creek and helped us drag the seine. The drab silver rainbow (*Chilatherina crassispinosa*) was the only rainbow caught. However, we captured several handsome striped grunters (*Hephaestus obtusifrons*), a species not previously photographed alive. It is characterized by vivid black stripes on a white background.

I spent the next few days at Lake Holmes. This was an excellent opportunity to take advantage of Dave's aquaria for fish photography. It was necessary to set up an additional 50-gallon tank to house all our recent acquisitions. I spent hours in front of the tanks with camera in hand. I re-



Top: Serui is the hub of Yapen Island. **Bottom:** Loading the charter vessel at the Serui waterfront.

(*Neosilurus idenburgi*). I then happily worked late into the evening photographing this rare find.

A glorious 5-day visit to Yapen Island (sometimes spelled *Japen*) was the culmination of my journey to Irian Jaya. It is a long (approximately 100 by 10 miles), mountainous island, situated only 15 miles off the mainland directly west of the Mamberamo Delta. Dave and his family have been working with the Ambai people of Warironi Village for the past five years. I was fascinated with Dave's tales of frustration during the early part of his missionary assignment. He arrived at the vil-



Dave Price enjoys a swim on the way to Warironi village.



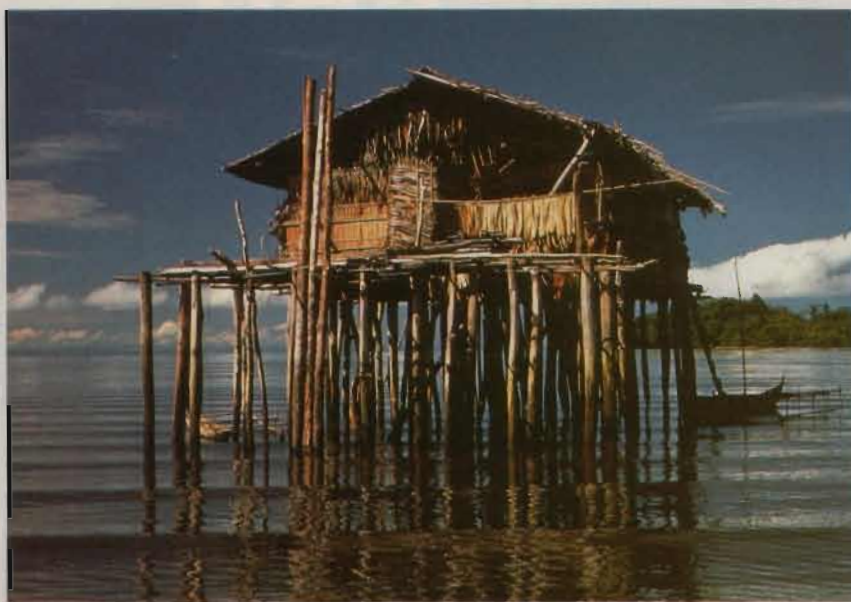
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Top: A stilt home in the bay at Warironi Village. **Bottom:** Scenic coastline at Warironi Village.

lage with his young family, very much an outsider without any knowledge of the spoken language. Living conditions were extremely crude by Western standards, and malarial infection was rife. He was close to quitting on several occasions. Slowly but steadily, he and Tammy learned

the Ambai language and during the process were accepted into the community. It was obvious during our short visit that Dave's friendship is highly valued by the villagers.

We flew to Yapen in a twin-engine Aztec. This journey required only 50 minutes. Serui, a

former Dutch settlement and hub of the island's economy and government, was our arrival point. We spent most of the morning shopping for supplies. Later we walked down to the waterfront and bargained for a charter boat to take us to Warironi. We finally settled on a price of 75,000 rupiah. That might sound like a lot, but is actually about \$40. Not bad, considering that the journey takes 2 to 3 hours and the charter must also cover the return trip. It was a beautiful sunny day and I relished the idea of the leisurely journey along the coast, which from the air had looked absolutely spectacular.

The cruise to Warironi certainly met every expectation. The sea was flat calm and we could often view sparkling corals and reef fishes in the waters below. Our route followed a broad passage between the main island and numerous large and small coconut-fringed islands paralleling the coast. As we motored along I resolved to return someday to leisurely explore these splendid coral reefs and sheltered bays. After nearly two hours of steady steaming I could no longer stand the sight of crystal-clear water and tantalizing coral. I begged Dave to stop the boat so we could enjoy a 30-minute swim with mask and snorkel. This took very little persuasion. It proved to be a wise decision. Within minutes of plunging over the side I discovered a beautiful aquamarine damselfish that I immediately recognized as a new species. We collected several specimens at a nearby reef on the journey back to Serui several days later. I recently named it

EXPLORATION

Chrysiptera pricei in Dave's honor!

As we rounded the last bend I could scarcely believe the magnificent sight in front of us. Jungle-clad mountains formed a stunning backdrop across a tranquil bay. Incredibly picturesque thatched huts on stilts dotted the shoreline. Dave explained that the community is actually composed of two parts: the stilt village now in front of us, and a second village about one mile inland along the river. Dave was situated in the interior. The total population of Warironi is about 1000.

It took us an hour to unload the supplies and carry them to his

house. Thankfully, we were assisted by many friendly villagers. Everyone we met along the jungle path greeted us with a big smile and the exclamation "*Mahikai!*" Dave said this was the Ambai word for "hello," but also meant "thank you" and "good-bye." After arriving at our small three-room cottage our first task



Dave filters drinking water from the rain barrels.



The Refafeif River on Yapen Island.

was to filter a quantity of drinking water from the rain barrels. Afterwards, we walked a short distance to the river and had a refreshing bath. That evening we dined like kings (well, not exactly) on corned beef gravy and rice as we made plans for the coming days.

My prime objective was to collect and photograph the

Yapen rainbowfish (*Melanotaenia japonensis*). Only two specimens had ever been collected. These were obtained by Dr. Boeseman, former curator at the Leiden Museum in Holland, back in 1955. I discovered the still-undescribed specimens during a study visit at Leiden in 1977. It was clearly a new species, which I subsequently described with Norrie Cross. The original specimens were both females without any remaining trace of color pattern.

The next morning we filled a 20-gallon aquarium that Dave kept in storage. I also gathered gravel and stones from the nearby river. This tank would enable us to photograph any captured speci-



mens while still displaying their natural colors. As soon as the tank was set up we packed the collecting gear and were soon on our way. We were joined by Dave's next door neighbor, Isak Kaiba. We followed the Refafeif River upstream for about one mile. The streambed was about 60-70 feet in width, with a gravel-and-boulder bottom. The water was very clear and mainly shallow, with occasional pools up to 4-5 feet deep. We mostly fished in the deeper areas, which I first scouted with mask and snorkel. The water felt refreshingly cool after the walk from the village.

The first fish seen was a rainbow, but was clearly not *M. japonensis*. It was a very bluish species of *Chilatherina*, somewhat resembling the barred rainbow (*C. fasciata*). I am still investigating the status of this fish, which may prove to be yet another new species.

I decided to use the large net in a broad, open stretch. After two hours of seining with Isak a total of 14 species were captured—an excellent day's work. Highlights of the catch included an unusual freshwater scorpionfish (*Tetraroge barbata*), several colorful gobies, the rainbow prigi (*Hypseleotris guntheri*), and a gudgeon that I failed to recognize. The latter fish turned out to be a significant

Top: Isak Kaiba (foreground) and the author seining in the Refafeif River.
Center: The mysterious blue rainbow (*Chilatherina* sp.) from Yapen Island.
Bottom: An unusual freshwater scorpionfish, *Tetraroge barbata*, from Yapen.

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discovery. It was Hoedt's gudgeon (*Ophieleotris hoedti*) a species previously thought to be invalid and simply a variation of the snakehead gudgeon (*O. aporos*).

The following morning Dave recruited four village men, including Isak, to help us. It was another sunny day, perfect for exploring farther up the river. We took a shortcut across a cocoa plantation and via a shady tunnel through a bamboo forest. Just before reaching the river we ran into another dreaded wasp nest, but luckily everyone escaped their stings. One scenic vista after another unfolded as we followed



Village helpers spread the seine in the Refafeif River.



A young male rainbow prigi, *Hypseleotris guntheri*, a type of gudgeon.

the winding river upstream. This stream was truly one of the most beautiful I have yet encountered. As we walked along the bank I was continually entertained by shoals of small fishes, clearly visible in the crystal-clear conditions. The river is heavily populated with the spotted flagtail (*Kuhlia marginata*), the strange *Chilatherina* rainbow, the thread-fin goby (*Sicyopterus longifilis*), and the brilliant neon goby (*Stiphodon semoni*).

I donned mask and snorkel for a cooling dip. Shoals of *Chilatherina* and *Kuhlia* surrounded me, actually nibbling on the hairs of my arms and legs. I

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swam into a fast-flowing section of rapids. It was extremely difficult to maintain position, but I tenaciously grasped a large boulder. Suddenly a 6-inch goby darted in front of my face. It was my first ever sighting of a loach goby (*Rhyacichthys aspro*). I desperately tried to net it, but was repeatedly frustrated by the raging current. Eventually one of the men speared one for me. Luckily, it was only wounded. It survived for another day, allowing me to take aquarium photographs. This goby is the ultimate fast-water fish. Its wedge-shaped head facilitates upstream swimming, and it has a large pelvic fin disc that is used for clinging onto rocks. I observed numerous individuals that appeared to be grazing on algae-covered rocks.

We eventually penetrated about 5 miles upstream. At this point the river had narrowed considerably and was tightly hemmed in by luxurious rainforest. Our progress was halted by a steep-sided, 15-foot-deep emerald pool. It is hard to describe the tranquil beauty of this place in words. My senses were bombarded by the gurgling brook, smell of lush foliage, incessant buzzing of cicadas, and the periodic cries of parrots, cockatoos, and pigeons.

On the return trek we had not ventured far when we came across a small overflow channel. We

Top: A speckled goby, *Redigobius bikolanus*, one of several gobies found in the Refafeif River. **Center:** The author preserves specimens of the blue *Chilatherina*. **Bottom:** Aerial view of Warironi Village.

followed this for a short distance until one of the men shouted and pointed excitedly to a small boulder-strewn pool. Dave explained that he was shouting "Red fish, red fish!" At last we had struck the Yapen rainbow! Our four helpers surrounded the pool with the net and eventually captured four fine specimens. The two-hour walk back to Dave's house with our precious cargo seemed to take forever. I was constantly slipping and sliding in my expensive Reeboks. These were no match for the villagers' ATBs (all-terrain boots, i.e., bare feet).

That evening I joined Dave on a frog-hunting expedition. He is



Close up of the rare loach goby, *Rhyacichthys aspro*.

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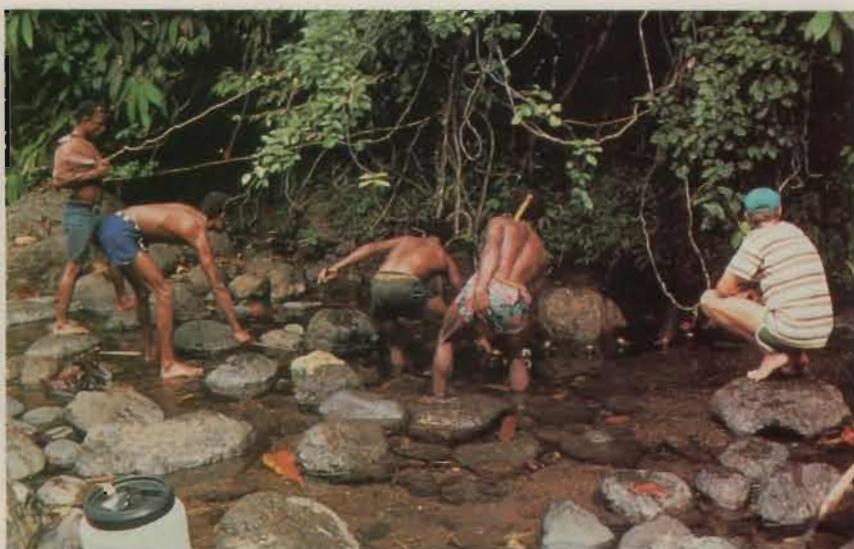


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constantly on the lookout for different species to photograph. As we made our way through the damp, dark jungle, I was comforted by Dave's familiarity with the area. But this confidence was temporarily shaken when a bull suddenly crashed across the path in front of us. Apparently the startled animal had broken its tether.

We failed to find anything special in the frog department. But as Dave checked the shoreline of a small pond with his powerful light I noticed what I thought was a large gudgeon. I directed Dave's attention to it, passing him a dipnet at the same time. He succeeded in scooping the fish on the first attempt. We were extremely surprised to discover a huge (5-inch) male Yapen rainbow. It was far more colorful than the specimens caught earlier.

The next day we had hoped to visit a coral reef across the bay. We were forced to cancel this plan, however, due to heavy rains during the night. It continued to pour for most of the day. The river rose very rapidly, preventing us from working there as well. I spent the day writing my field notes and photographing fishes in the aquarium. It was very relaxing to have a quiet day for a change.

I was sorry to see the end of our visit on Yapen, but I was filled with wonderful memories of the past five days. Dave hopes to

Top: Operation Yapen rainbow in action. The author's party captured four fish at this site. **Center:** A large male Yapen rainbow, *Melanotaenia japonensis*. **Bottom:** Close up of the Yapen rainbow.

spend another 4 to 5 years working with the Ambai people. I am already dreaming of joining him again. As we flew back towards the Irian Jaya mainland I noticed river after river similar to the one we had just explored. Who knows what undiscovered treasures they might contain? As far as I'm concerned, there is no more exciting place on this planet than Irian Jaya. I feel privileged to have played a small part in the biological exploration of this wild land. But there is still so much more to do! 🐟



This damselfish was named *Chrysiptera pricei* in Dave's honor.

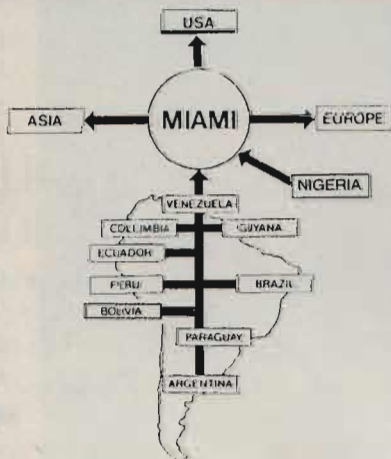
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