

THE JUNGLE HOOK

Duncan Hall embarks on a thrilling adventure in Thailand, dodging elephants, bears and snakes in pursuit of the elusive blue mahseer

I LAY SUSPENDED BETWEEN TWO trees, peering through mosquito mesh and listening to the cacophony of frogs and less identifiable jungle sounds. Everywhere was dark: not just dark, but the pitch-black of dense jungle, far from human habitation.

The hammock in which I lay was compact, resembling a shallow, rectangular sarcophagus, but fortunately zipped to prevent insects and snakes from finding me at home. I hoped the shape of my sleeping container was not an omen of a sinister jungle encounter about to unfold. I was in Khao Sok, southern Thailand.

Beside a flooded river valley, transformed into a lake supplying hydroelectric power, Khao Sok is home to extraordinary wildlife, including tiger, leopard, panther, Indian bison, deer, bears and numerous, not necessarily friendly, snakes. However, the King of the Jungle is the Asiatic elephant. >

Where the jungle was too thick, deep wading was the only way forward.



DUNCAN HALL
has fly-fished for 50 years, casting in more than 20 countries from Albania to Zambia.

During my latter years as a GP I've been able to work flexibly, allowing me to travel for a month every winter, normally to Asia or South America but always combining travelling and fishing. My wife, who doesn't have this luxury, or the desire to fish, travels with me for a spell and then returns to her hospital work in the UK, leaving me free for a fly-fishing challenge.

For this trip, I had spent time studying fly-fishing options in Asia, considering India, where I'd spent two months back-packing in the past, then beautiful Bhutan with its stunning mountain scenery and rivers, but where entry rules are prohibitive.

Myanmar sounded interesting but there was only a single reference to fly-fishing – Mynamarflyfishing.com run by Vincent Jalabert. It has a few clear rivers holding blue mahseer, but many are heavily poached and netted, and still worse is the fear of landmines laid indiscriminately to "control" border tribes. But there I went, settling for a few hours on Myanmar's beautiful Lake Inle, which although unsuccessful was still a wonderful experience. I watched local fishermen propel wooden boats, skulling with one leg while casting nets and standing precariously on the other.

After three weeks' travel in Myanmar and central Thailand, my wife flew home and I headed south to fly-fish for blue mahseer at Khao Sok. I had found it on an internet search, and it sounded ideal. A new fish species, challenging fly-fishing and camping in the jungle – perfect!

The expedition was organised by Meik, a Thai-living Dane, who proved a reliable leader with plenty of fishing knowledge and completely at home in the jungle. Attracted by his website, I

"We took the boat as far as we could ... and then hiked upstream"

signed up for a six-day trip, three days of which involved overnight camping in the jungle. I didn't appreciate at the time that this was to be a solo trip arranged only for me. The overnight camping required additional manpower and organisation. We were accompanied by three impressive Thais, who acted as porters, foragers, guides and forest security guards, warding off unwelcome, potentially dangerous creatures.

As a preliminary to the camping trip, I spent the first day with Meik and a guide called James Bond. All the guides had nicknames. But this Bond didn't carry a Walther PPK – he had a Glock 45. Other guides were armed with handguns, or 5.56 semi-automatics, machetes or catapults. Apparently, the gun was last fired two years ago – a warning shot is always given to scare an animal away.

We took the boat as far as we could up one of a number of jungle rivers in the area, and then hiked upstream in search of blue mahseer. We followed riverbanks, often wading in chest-high water and at other times walking on jungle paths that were surprisingly wide. This was not due to humans but jungle animals, notably elephants and Indian bison. We passed very close to the crashing sound of elephants as we followed one trail. Elephants, I was informed, are the most dangerous animal. It was critical to show them they were boss if there was an encounter by shrinking down or running away.

Mahseer are related to chub and the blue variety actually looks golden without a hint of blue. They live in the fast flows and deep pools of the rivers, and are eaten by groups, or "romps", of otters that move downstream feeding efficiently, leaving a legacy of blood, scales and footprints. As a result, mahseer are conditioned to be easily spooked by any disturbance. Wading into a pool terminates the fishing. Similarly, a fish released into a pool. Caught fish need to be carried downstream if there >

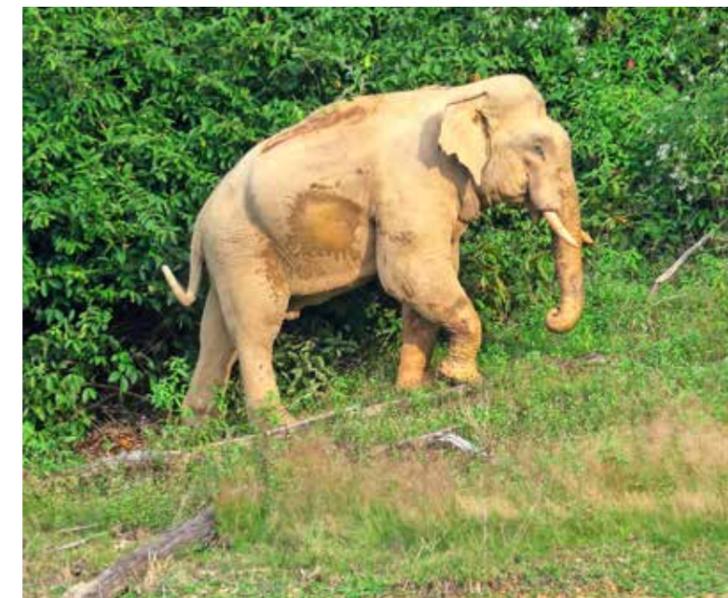
Pouring water from a bamboo kettle. Gun handy.



Thai guide James Bond heads upriver.



One of the small boats used to transport expedition gear.



After you: an elephant emerges from the jungle.

is to be any hope of hooking another. There is an explanation. A distressed fish releases a chemical warning signal known as *schreckstoff*, or “startle shock substance”, which is smelt by the other fish.

Mahseer are omnivorous and eat anything from flies, tadpoles and small frogs to fruit or seeds that drop from the canopy of the trees. The method is predominantly sight-fishing. But I struggled to locate them and was grateful to Meik, who has sharp eyes. Although I’d brought several rods and lines, Meik’s Sage One six-weight and floating single-handed spey line was a dream to cast. It was finished with 16lb Guideline tippet.

Fine presentation is essential. Good turnover of a 20-yard cast will deliver the fly with a small but gentle plop to induce a predatory take. I have fly-fished for pacu, a nut-eating fish of the Amazonian region, which required a similar technique, creating a plop to mimic nuts falling from trees but not a splash that would scare fish. I used fluorescent foam flies, similar to Chernobyl Ants, to represent bamboo seeds and insects; and black nymphs to imitate tadpoles, although they failed to induce the mahseer’s interest. The casting was challenging because the jungle vegetation forms a continuous canopy over the river, interspersed by small open pools often obstructed by collapsed bamboo trailing in the water. Creative casting improved my access and it was helpful that I can cast off either shoulder.

Crawling through one section of undergrowth I was acquainted with red tropical fire ants, which, though not dangerous, were a nasty intrusion as they dropped from the bamboo down my shirt. The itching was intense but subsided after a few hours.

I caught fish every day, as many as 15 on day one, but many were small. The bigger 4lb fish are less numerous and wiser. Mahseer up to 11lb can be caught in the rivers and 17lb in the lake. These larger fish behave differently when hooked. I caught two between 4lb and 6lb, the largest of which ripped line off my reel as it swam at remarkable speed through rocky pools and under a fallen tree. I managed with hasty wading to remain in contact,

“Wading into a pool terminates the fishing. Similarly, a fish released into a pool”



Top: Where Duncan listened to the sounds of the night.
Bottom: Breakfast underway: bread, rice, fruit, coffee.

only for the fish to return rapidly down the small river at equal velocity. Luckily, it was well hooked.

I was as interested by the jungle, camping and wildlife as the fishing. Over six days we encountered numerous exotic animals, including elephant, wild boar, deer, otter, monkey, fish eagle and large hornbill.

My most memorable encounter was with a king cobra. They grow to 18ft and are highly venomous, but they are the “good guys” as they hunt other snakes. The one we met was perhaps 8ft with its body raised from the stony riverbank so that its head and hooded neck were several feet off the ground. It was less than 6ft away when I shouted at Meik to stop as he had failed to see it. We stepped back rapidly and the cobra also took evasive action, retreating to a hollow in the sandy bank. We watched each other intently before moving onwards.

There are many other snakes, including the reticulated python, which grows to 33ft, and the Malaysian pit viper, whose lethal necrotoxic venom makes it the most dangerous Thai snake. Rather than sliding away, it lies camouflaged,



Blue mahseer: golden, not blue.



Leeches dined on Duncan.



Stepping away from a king cobra.

usually under dry leaves, and can be stepped on.

The camping trip was particularly special. While I was fishing with Meik, the three Thais portered up the hammocks, food and cooking equipment. They were incredibly skilled in the jungle. At least one had been born there.

We slept in hammocks with a fly sheet suspended overhead in case of rain. To my consternation, for some reason mine was sited away from the others. The fire was frequently lit to discourage animals, particularly when we fished in areas where elephants were nearby. Everything was cooked on the fire and the guides modelled a table, cups, water boiler and pancake-maker out of bamboo. The water boiler was a section of bamboo propped at 80 degrees vertically to the fire. A ladle made from a smaller bamboo section with a long handle extricated the water. I kept my cup as a memento and wrote this article drinking wine from it several days later back in civilisation.

On the first night, hanging in my hammock, I could see the guides wearing headtorches and creeping around the undergrowth, and heard an >



A turbo-charged mahseer, hard to control in a narrow jungle river.

“The following evening I was enlightened: they’d been shooting frogs with catapults for dinner”

occasional pinging sound. I felt comforted that they were frightening any marauding wildlife likely to feast on me during the night. It was only the following evening that I was enlightened: they had been skilfully shooting frogs with their catapults for dinner. I have eaten frog’s legs in France, but these really were a treat.

On the third day, we forded the river many times. My wading boots proved hopeless, falling apart on the way into the jungle. I spent some time drilling holes through the soles with my Swiss Army knife and tying individual knots with a boot lace. This sufficed for the first day, after which I improvised with hiking shoes. They were still woefully inadequate for the jungle and useless for wading.

To add insult to injury, I lost my Tubigrips, designed for ankle compression but which Meik had ingeniously advised I use over my trousers and socks to prevent leeches climbing my legs. At

night, they had been suspended from the ground to prevent scorpions from taking refuge in my shoes, socks and bags, but on the last day they were nowhere to be seen. I think the culprit was a bear. Despite my hiking gaiters, numerous leeches ascended as far as my back where they fed on my blood but were otherwise harmless and were removed by DEET rather than a cigarette. They do liberate an anticoagulate and the bleeding sites continued to ooze blood for some time.

I left the jungle with fine memories, a range of healing insect bites and a reminder that good kit and, notably, footwear are essential for this trip. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY: DUNCAN HALL

Factfile

BOOKING Thai Fishing offers jungle and saltwater fishing trips with fly and lure. **Tel:** +66 (0) 8 15972631. **Web:** thai-fishing.com

WHAT TO PACK Loose, light clothing, including nylon underwear and high-quality wading boots. Also, a hat, polaroids, sun block, bug repellent, and light waterproofs.

