

Unremarkable in appearance, except for its oversized mouth and prominent teeth, the piranha varies in color from species to species. Most have olive green or blue-black backs with dark to silvery-gray sides and bellies.

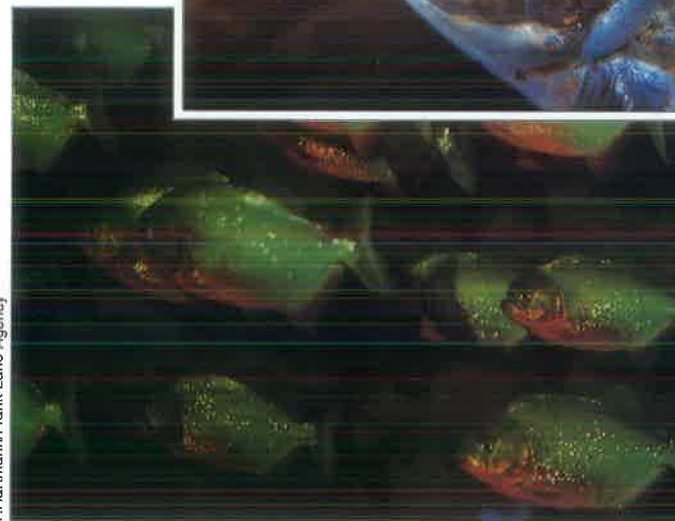


P. Morris/Ardea

HABITS

Piranhas live in enormous packs, or *shoals*. They spend most of their time hunting for food. Rivers are their primary habitats, although as a result of massive flooding, they may occasionally find their way into lakes. But it is thought that they are unable to breed outside of rivers.

Piranhas have voracious appetites and they seek river locations that have plentiful fish supplies. They are found in any river of their range that has an abundance of fish.



F. Hartmann/Frank Lane Agency

FOOD & HUNTING

The piranha hunts using speed and surprise. Piranhas attack typically by swimming directly into a school of prey fish. The attacked fish scatter in every direction and the piranhas quickly overpower any isolated fish. Smaller fish are swallowed whole. Larger prey have chunks ripped out of them, which the piranha swallows instantly, so that it can immediately take another bite.

Piranhas possess an advanced sense of smell, which helps them to locate

prey. The presence of blood in the water will send piranhas into a frenzy. They are also capable, like sharks, of sensing any unusual vibrations in the water around them. Any commotion in the water will immediately attract a large shoal of piranhas.

Piranhas are opportunistic feeders, and they will eat anything. When the water is muddy enough to obscure prey fish, or when food is scarce, piranhas will even attack an animal that enters the water to drink.

M. Freeman/Natural Science Photos



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PIRANHA & MAN

Throughout South America, stories of piranha attacks on men are numerous. And, while it is probable that some of them are true, there are few verifiable accounts. In any case, man is certainly not a preferred quarry, as legend sometimes sets forth. The piranha is not selective when it is hungry—it simply

eats whatever food it finds.

A dangerous circumstance has arisen from man's use of piranhas as aquarium fish. At one time, they were very popular as "pets." However, when people discovered that the pet piranhas were as dangerous as their wild counterparts, they began dumping them in ponds,

lakes and reservoirs across the United States.

In many places in which this happened, the water temperature was too low for them to survive. In other places, however, the conditions were ideal. It is not known yet if piranhas can breed in bodies of water outside their natural habitat.

Top: Profile of a piranha, easily identified by its protruding lower jaw.

Left: Piranhas hunt in huge shoals. Although each fish measures about 8 inches, by attacking together a shoal can quickly devour its prey.

Far left: Dead specimen of red-bellied piranha showing its sharp teeth.

Left: The remains of a common catfish pulled from the Amazon after it had been attacked by a shoal of red-bellied piranhas for just 30 seconds.

DID YOU KNOW?

- The teeth of the piranha are so sharp that they can slice through bone.
- Piranhas can consume animals the size of pigs within minutes. One account tells of piranhas attacking and completely eating the world's largest rodent, a capybara, weighing more than 110 pounds.
- It is believed that piranhas tend to attack fish that are more than four times as long as they are. Fish that are less than three times as long are less likely to be attacked.