

# Last Horizons: Hunting, Fishing & Shooting On Five Continents

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Peter Hathaway Capstick first earned a name as an outdoor writer in the pages of such magazines as *Guns & Ammo*, *Petersen's Hunting*, *The American Hunter*, and *Outdoor Life*. In this, the first of a two-volume collection of his hunting, fishing, and shooting tales, you'll find twenty-four examples of his keen eye and steady hand with rifle, shotgun, bow, and typewriter.

The critically acclaimed successor to Hemingway and Robert Ruark repeatedly put himself in harm's way and writes about close scrapes with his trademark wit and dash. He tells what it's like to be in the path of an express train with Horns--the Cape buffalo; describes the heart-stopping sensation of sharing the immediate bush with several sickle-clawed lions that most certainly were prone to argue; and recounts his adventures bow-fishing for exotic species in the piranha-filled rivers of Brazil. Capstick's experiences, painfully gained (and almost lost) with the most dangerous of game, are the yardsticks against which most modern exotic and hunting adventures are gauged. The finely rendered drawings by Dino Paravano do justice to the text.

#### Last Horizons

##### HARPOONING FRESHWATER SHARKSSAGA--SEPTEMBER 1969AUTHOR'S

INTRODUCTIONIn the mid-sixties, Nicaragua was, well, just Nicaragua, a remote Central American banana republic that everybody had heard of but nobody could quite place. My old passports show that I visited the San Juan River area twenty-two times in about five years, and my memories today just meld into one great adventure of giant tarpon on the fly rod, snook by the shoals, and iguana-shooting for the pot. There were no telephones, no worries, and no guerrilla wars on that border with northern Costa Rica. Although the tarpon fishing was so fabulous that it was not unusual to jump at least a hundred-odd silver kings in a day's fishing, it became like a diet of pure caviar: delicious and rare, but almost tiresome in the end, as you knew that just about every time you cast a long, saddle-hackled offering, something with a mouth like a bailing bucket would try to eat it. If the first one missed, another would grab it. It was at this point that I got involved with the sharks, often completely ignoring the fly-fishing in favor of the long iron.In those days, when Nicaragua simply lay in the sun, improving its tan, and growing plantains, the locals considered the idea of harpooning sharks some weird form of northern madness. Perhaps that made it even more interesting. Anyway, we did it, and it developed into an activity of sufficient insanity to attract ABC Television's "The American Sportsman," featuring Jack Nicklaus. To observe that the exercise didn't work out would be rather like concluding that the Titanic didn't make it to full expectations.I doubt you could get to the San Juan today at all, but back then we had to hire the Nicaraguan Air Force to fly us in to the head of the river where we took dugoutsdownstream. On one of these jaunts, the lieutenant piloting me to San Carlos overshot the rough runway at deep dusk and tore off both wings of the single-engined Cessna between two palm trees. Soaked with aviation gas, we both crawled from the wreckage without too much personal damage. That the plane did not burn is why you are now reading this.Incidentally, it seems that the conclusions I reached twenty years ago, based as they were on the best ichthyological data available concerning the migratory habits of bull sharks, may have been erroneous. It would seem that *Carcharhinus leucas* does trade back and forth between fresh and salt water. I am still convinced, however, that although this may well be the case with some individual sharks,

many are permanent residents of Lake Nicaragua and of the San Juan River. Perhaps time and further research on the species, certainly the biggest killer near South African river mouths, will shed more light on the unusual habits of these sharks. Jose's mahogany knuckles tightened and showed white as the long anchor line came taut. In a practiced motion, the fishing-safari guide deftly dropped a loop over the bow post and the heavy dugout swung to a halt. We were anchored in "the pool," as the natives know it, where Nicaragua's San Juan River byways merge to form a dread outpost for the voracious freshwater shark. In the vicinity, at the moment, about thirty big, slate-colored dorsal fins cut the surface. Upstream from us, beyond a shallow stretch, the water became deep again and was flecked with a patchwork of bright jungle sunshine that filtered through the treetops overhanging the bank. Antenna-tailed parrots and colorful dragonflies darted about overhead like spectators to the coming encounter. The heavy air was oppressive and ominous. As we watched, every few minutes a big shark or two would splash across the shallow water and slide into the deep-water hunting grounds upstream. Nicaragua is one of the strangest geological areas on earth. It has two major lakes (both densely populated by killer sharks) and a string of twenty-three volcanoes that run down the western side of the country, many of which are still active. In 1835, one of these, Coseguina, blew its top with a roar heard in Bogota, Colombia, 1,100 miles away. Pieces of the cone landed as far as 150 miles out to sea. The capital city of Managua was itself leveled by an earthquake in 1931, with a terrible loss of life. But the history of life and death in the area seemed much more remote, at that moment, than the possibility of a personal disaster. Watching Jose study the menacing fins, one sensed that he knew the ferocity of the beasts beneath the surface of the chocolate-colored water better than an ordinary fisherman. Needless to say, I was pleased to have him along. At last, turning his attention to the twelve feet of hardwood lying along the gunwale, he asked, "Listo, Patrón?" ("Are you ready?") I glanced at the heavy harpoon, the hand-forged point glinting from its fresh honing. The silky, white nylon sash cord was securely wired to the ring welded below the steel barbs. It ran along the shaft to the slipknot six feet up the green wood, and trailed off to a neat coil in the dugout's bow. The rig was ready. "Listo," I said, wondering if this was quite as good an idea as it had seemed an hour ago. Jose mumbled something in Spanish about his spiritual future, crossed himself, and swung the bloody sack over the side into the murky water ... My first exposure to Nicaragua's dread freshwater sharks came over a very dry martini. I was lunching with Alfredo Bequillard, Jr., the owner of Tarpon Camp, a famous hot spot on the San Juan River, Lake Nicaragua's only connection with the men at sea. I had been sent to Nicaragua by Winchester Adventures, Inc., a subsidiary of the well-known arms manufacturers, to check out the fantastic tarpon fishing on the San Juan. Winchester represents a string of top-notch outfits like Alfredo's around the world, each personally inspected by their staffers before receiving their seal of approval. Al told me that only three weeks before, a young boy had taken a dive into the river at San Carlos, a small village located at the mouth of the river where it flows from Lake Nicaragua to the Caribbean, some 130 miles away. The boy surfaced and immediately was dragged shrieking beneath the surface by a large shark. No part of the boy was ever found, Al told me. One day in 1944, three persons were attacked by a single shark near Granada, a good-sized city on the shores of the lake. Two were killed and one badly mauled. My own guide, Jose, told me that his uncle had been killed by a river shark in 1960, just below the location of the present camp. He had fallen overboard and what was recovered of the shredded torso

indicated that more than one man-eater was on the prowl that afternoon. When I arrived on the river, a few days later, I was told of eight other definite shark attacks that had had fatal consequences. I spoke with one old man who had been grabbed by the foot in very shallow water by a four-footer. Two toes were missing and infection had set in. He had pried the shark loose with his hands. Nicaraguans who live along the river say that at least one person each year is taken by the sharks, sometimes four or five. In the village of Castillo, about halfway between giant Lake Nicaragua and the sea, there was one very big shark that hung out at the base of a set of small rapids. This monster had terrorized fishermen for a three-month period, ramming light dugouts and seizing paddles in his huge jaws. He would attack anything that entered his territory. The river people knew it was always the same shark from his extreme size and the definite yellow cast of his hide. Finally harpooned and shot, he was over twelve feet in length. No one has ever been able to completely unravel the riddle of the freshwater shark. Probably the most logical theory as to how a saltwater animal came to survive and prosper in fresh water is that Lake Nicaragua was once a large saltwater bay. During one of the cataclysmic upheavals of the earth common to this region, a land bridge was raised, cutting off the bay from the sea, forming the lake. In it were, of course, all the species of fish normally found in the saltwater Central American zone. As the ages passed, the water became less and less salty through dilution by heavy rainfall, and most of the ocean species died. However, the cub shark, also known as the ground or bull shark, did adapt and exists today as the freshwater variant called the Lake Nicaragua shark (*Carcharhinus nicaraguensis*). The U.S. Navy "Shark Danger" ratings list the Lake Nicaragua shark on a par with the feared tiger shark, giving a rating of 2+. There are many other species in the lake and the San Juan River that are common to both fresh and salt water, namely the snook, tarpon and sawfish. These species are, however, anadromous, meaning that, like the shad and salmon, they will run into fresh water as a matter of normal course. The Lake Nicaragua shark is considered to be the only true freshwater shark, but the habit of other species of shark to enter fresh water is not as rare an occurrence as it might at first seem. There is an Indian variety, the Ganges shark, that kills an average of twenty bathers a year in that holy river. In 1959, during a two-month period, thirty-five persons were mauled or killed in the Devi River by this shark. Sharks have been reported up rivers in such far-flung places as Thailand, Malaya, New Zealand, South Africa, Mozambique, Peru, Guatemala, Australia, Japan, and Fiji. A British military ambulance driver was one of twenty-seven people both mauled and killed in the Karun River of Iran during an eight-year period in the 1940s. A seven-hundred pounder was even found on the beach of Marlboro, New York, fifty miles up the Hudson River, after what was probably a collision with a steamboat in 1926. Eight years later, New York City police flashed a shark alert along the Hudson as far north as Poughkeepsie. A shark had been sighted off the West 42nd Street pier, six blocks from Times Square. These cases, however, are clearly of sharks that have come from the sea into fresh water and then returned to the sea. The Lake Nicaragua shark is born, lives, and dies completely in fresh water, quite unlike all other species. Natives of the river claim that there are, in fact, two varieties of killers haunting their waters, the reddish-bellied tintorero and the white-bellied visitante, which they believe does run in from the sea. I think this theory is false. Many of the sharks I have harpooned over several trips to the San Juan would roll upon feeling the steel, clearly showing their snow-white bellies. But, after a long fight against the line, they had pink or red bellies upon being dispatched. It seems to me that the exertion of the fight would break the small blood

vessels under the skin, and the blood could be seen through the white skin. Also, if some did run in from the sea, why did they only run up the San Juan? There are many rivers along Central America's east coast, yet only the San Juan and Lake Nicaragua hold these killers. Alfredo's camp turned out to be an absolute paradise for tarpon. The run of these silver kings (many well over one hundred pounds) between January and June is simply fantastic. But after three days of even this great fishing, I still couldn't get the sharks off my mind. We had caught two on handlines off the camp's dock, and I was amazed to see them clear the water in high, twisting leaps. We had also witnessed their speed and ferocious power as they attacked hooked tarpon we were fighting. They would slash in, either alone or in packs, surrounding the big tarpon. A sudden charge, and they would rip thirty-pound chunks of flesh from the fear-mad tarpon. We would cut the line, but it was always too late as they would glide away in a cloud of spreading blood. It made me sick to see these great gamesters butchered like that. Then Jose asked whether I was willing to try the pool. Maybe the heat was getting to me, but I said yes. Jose hoisted the anchor and we went off to the village of Castillo to barter some .22-caliber cartridges for three of the big harpoon heads. We cut a twelve-foot sapling and shaped the thick end of it to fit the skirtlike base of the steel, much the way a hoe head fits its shaft. On the way back to the pool, we stopped and bought the entrails of a cow that had been slaughtered that morning. Jose put the reeking mess into a burlap sack and tied a short length of rope around the neck. I broke out the long nylon handline and two hundred feet of sash cord, checked the .357 Magnum at my belt and we were in business ... .

A cloud of red blossomed from the bag Jose had swung over the side, and the blood surged downstream into the pool. Thirty seconds went by. Then we saw it. It started with a small V on the dark surface, rising slowly until a foot and a half of the fin gleamed like wet lead above the long, tapered shape. It cut the water like a tiny sailboat tacking as the huge shark cast its ten-foot length back and forth like a pointer trying to locate a running quail. Other dorsals appeared as the bag of bloody cattle entrails seeped its invitation into the current. I slipped the leather glove over my left hand and raised the harpoon as the shark moved out of the pool and headed directly for us, the long upper lobe of the tail waving above the shallow water. It glided closer to the dugout, the half-open mouth agleam with snagged teeth, its cat's eyes reflecting dully as it paused in a patch of sunshine ten feet away. A gentle thrust of the big tail brought it nearer. At five feet, I threw with every ounce of strength I had, hearing the thug as the steel tore through gristle and muscle. For a fraction of a second, nothing happened. Then it charged. It hit the side of the dugout while I was still off balance from the thrust. The long harpoon shaft, jutting from the top of its head, flashed by my face as I felt myself teetering over the enraged shark. My stomach flipped as I felt myself start to fall over the side. The shark, harpoon-head jutting from its skull, lay four feet away, watching me, wounded but waiting like a striking bushmaster. Jose's hand flashed out and grabbed my belt, jerking me backward into the bottom of the dugout. We almost swamped the light craft, but somehow we didn't go over. I felt as if I'd been quite literally snatched from the jaws of fate. The shark reacted by turning and tearing off downstream, the harpoon line melting from the coil of rope in the bow. I grabbed the nylon with my gloved hand and tried to slow down its escape. I might as well have tried to snub a falling safe. There was simply no holding it. The balsa-wood float tied to the end of the line whipped off the bow, and skittered across the surface like a terrified, giant waterbug. Jose hoisted the anchor and we followed, catching up with the

float a half-mile away in quiet, deep water. I plucked the float from the water and felt the throbbing power at the end of the line again. Slowly, I worked it in, only to have it take off again, the line ripping through my fingers. Finally, after almost an hour, we worked it close enough to put four .357-caliber tranquilizers through the Y-shaped brain. That quieted it down quite a bit. I slipped the big gaff into the killer's gill slits and we tried to haul it aboard. It was useless. It must have weighed over four hundred pounds. I wasn't so hot to share the accommodations, anyway. It took another hour to haul it upstream against the current to our camp, but we were anxious for a look... This anthology of Capstick's articles range from 1969 into the 1980s and were selected from such popular general hunting and shooting magazines as *Guns & Ammo*, *American Hunter*, and *Petersen's Hunting*. Capstick lives in Africa; his first love is Africa; his forte is in his knowledge of and writings about Africa, rather than "on five continents." His fishing expertise is reflected only in a couple of articles among the total 24. Each selection in the book is prefaced by an informative introduction by Capstick, which adds immensely to the articles. Outdoor sports and adventure collections where the author's *Death in the Long Grass* (1978) and *Death in the Dark Continent* (1983) are popular will want to consider this.

- Eugene J. Millich, formerly with Univ. of Wisconsin Lib., La Crosse

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