

Photography Expedition to Peruvian Amazon, March-April 2014

I left St. Paul's School in June 2013 to take a gap year before going to Durham University to study Biology. Last month I returned from a two-and-a-half month trip to Peru which was partly funded by the Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust. Through the grant I was able to fund the majority of my flights, so I am hugely grateful for it.

I flew to Cusco, via Madrid and Lima, on 19 February for the first part of my trip, 10 days around Cusco seeing ruins such as Ollantaytambo and Machu Picchu. It was incredible to be there, and it was definitely worth doing, but I was always looking forward more to the next part of, and main reason for, my visit to Peru.

On 28 February I took the short flight from Cusco to Puerto Maldonado, in the South-East of the country. Stepping out of the plane was a shock; the cool temperatures of Cusco had been replaced by those nearing 30°C with up to 90% humidity. From there it was an hour's taxi ride followed by a 5-hour boat journey before I reached my final destination: Centro de Investigación y Capacitación Río Los Amigos (CICRA). It is a biological research station run by the Amazon Conservation Association and, since its opening in 2001, has hosted over 200 research projects. I wasn't there to carry out research, but to photograph both the station and the wildlife surrounding it. I'm also a very keen birder so couldn't wait to see how many I could see there.

On my first morning I was up at 5.30 to give myself half an hour to look around the buildings before breakfast. The station is situated on the upper bank of the Madre de Dios River, therefore giving a fantastic view of the river and forest beyond. The sun was just coming up, illuminating the forest in a wonderful golden light, and I was able to take some lovely photos of Capped and Cocoi Herons roosting in the tops of the trees. Before breakfast I also managed to notch up 5 species of Parrot! Breakfast consisted of steamed rice and a fried egg, something that was to become extremely familiar over the next two months, where barely any meals didn't contain rice as a main ingredient! After this I headed out onto the trails for the first time.



Rainforest canopy

Walking into a rainforest is something unlike anything I've ever experienced. Screaming Pihas, a drab grey bird with one of the most often heard songs in the rainforest, sing at a mating site, a troop of Black-faced Spider Monkeys crash through the canopy and a flock of Antbirds can be heard calling as they follow one of the many army ant swarms across the forest floor. For the most part, the only sign of the larger animals that inhabit these rainforests, such as Jaguars and Pumas, is their tracks imprinted in the mud. In the mature forest especially, the understory is very open and easy to wander around in. This is because so little light penetrates the canopy and midstory that not many plants can grow down there. The trees also have very few leaves except for right at the tops, accentuating the sense of their height.



Lowland Amazon

One aim I had before I arrived was to come back with some nice images of some of the colourful birds there, but soon after my first outing on the trails I realised this would be far more difficult than I had anticipated. Photographing anything in the canopy was impossible as it was so high up and always strongly backlit. Some species of birds, such as the antbirds, were lower down in the forest, but here I was presented with a different challenge: light, or rather the lack of it! It was certainly a very different environment to photograph in compared to what I'm used to, but made me think much more creatively about my images which was a good discipline.



Black-fronted Nunbird



Spot-breasted Woodpecker

One of the facilities that I particularly enjoyed was the station's canopy tower, built originally for monitoring radio-collared Jaguars by WWF. It stretches up 60m into the sky, and involves climbing a 130-rung metal ladder (strapped to a harness of course!). Despite the effort to get up, it was completely worth it, with a panoramic view over the forest. Getting up there before it was light on my third morning I could hear the haunting sound of a troop of Red Howler Monkeys in the distance. I was very fortunate to see these just before I returned to London. On my first trip up it I was treated to wonderful views of 2 White-throated Toucans dueting to each other perched on top of one of the tallest trees for miles. Another regular sighting was the Macaws flying past the tower to roost in the palm swamps. They would often pass below the height of the top, giving a different view of them.



View from canopy tower



Blue-and-Yellow Macaws

Another easier way for me to photograph some of the birds was on one of their oxbow lakes, one shaped like a horseshoe. Here I could take a small canoe out onto the water. For the most part the wildlife was fairly unconcerned about my presence there and so I managed to photograph 2 species of Kingfisher, more Toucans, a Fasciated Tiger-Heron and Hoatzins, reptilian-like birds which would allow a very close approach before clumsily and noisily flying across the water.



Hoatzin

I was also very keen to photograph the primates having never really been able to spend any time with them before in my life. Luckily 4 species, Emperor Tamarins with their characteristic huge white moustaches, Saddle-back Tamarins, Dusky Titis and Brown Capuchins, were seen regularly around the station buildings so I had lots of opportunities. It was also much lighter around the cleared area near the buildings, making photography significantly less challenging. On several days I'd see monkeys while having lunch so have to dash back to my room to get my camera! Towards the end of my trip I was delighted to see a troop of Red Howler Monkeys no more than 60m from me. They had been one of the main things I wanted to see before I came and with a week to go I was starting to get worried. One of the researchers at the station had told me about where he'd seen them regularly so I headed out the next morning and sure enough, there they were! My favourite monkeys were the Spider Monkeys though, with their incredible ability to swing through the trees using their prehensile tail as an extra limb.



Spider Monkey



Emperor Tamarin

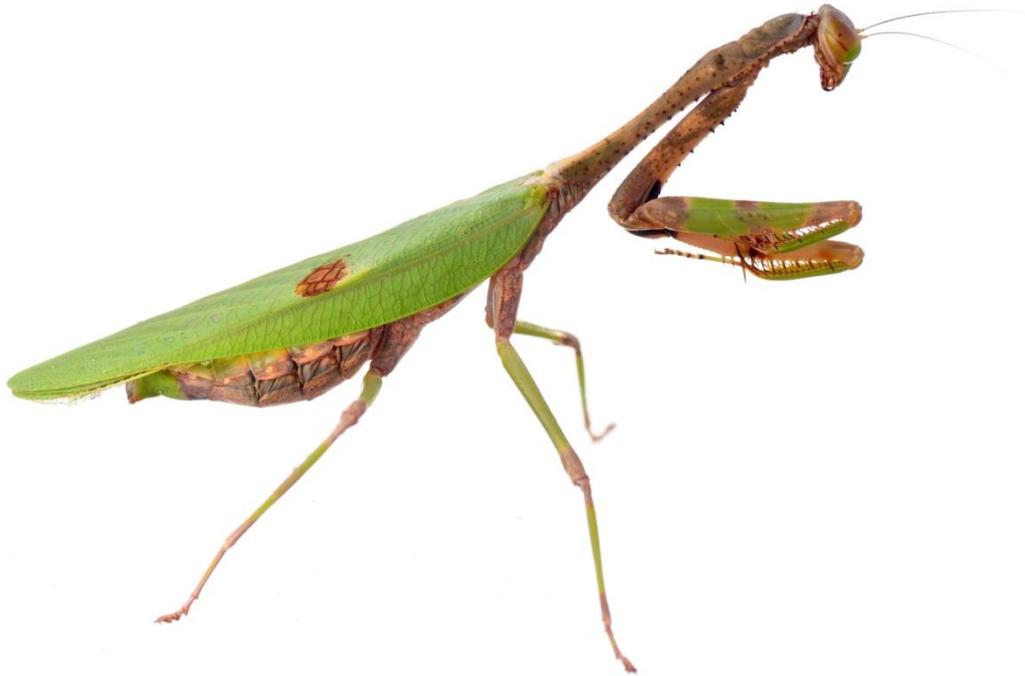


Red Howler Monkey

In addition to photographing wildlife in a conventional manner, I also spent time photographing smaller animals and insects against a white background, in the “Meet Your Neighbours” Style. This removes all context from the image, forcing the viewer to focus on the individual. The resulting images are therefore very useful for ID guides.



White-lined Monkey Frog



Mantis species

I hope this has given you an insight into my time spent in Peru. I loved every minute of it; over the two months I saw 380 species of bird, as well as 8 primate species, a wild pig, anteater, several species of squirrel, and hundreds of reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. Unfortunately this incredible habitat is severely threatened. Every minute an area the size of 3 football pitches is cleared for uses such as cattle ranching and agriculture. In Peru, illegal mining is a huge problem, resulting in deforestation and the pollution and contamination of soil and rivers. The increase in the extraction of timber, bush-meat and other natural resources is another contributing factor, as is climate change, which has led to severe droughts and storms occurring more frequently. In order to preserve the most biologically diverse place on Earth these threats must be tackled. I am extremely grateful for the grant which has allowed me to visit this amazing place, and I just hope that my pictures may be of some help to the research station and the Amazon Conservation Association.

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