



EXPEDITION DIARY Peru 2005

By Clare Fothergill

21 May

Hello all!

The final preparations for the Peru 2005 Biosphere Expedition have now been completed at the Biosphere HQ. Matthias and I have been busy packing all the equipment, which we will be using for our research in the rainforest including video cameras, digital cameras, global positioning systems, solar panels and the essential battery re-chargers.

In Tambopata the research station staff are eagerly awaiting the arrival of the first team members. The temperature is currently at 32°C with humidity up to 70%. As usual the forest is a hive of wildlife activity.

I am looking forward to meeting the first group in Puerto Maldonado on the 29th of May. Safe travels.

26 May

Our arrival at base camp was greeted by a majestic golden moon rising above the forest. This was followed by an orchestra of nocturnal creatures settling in for a concert of chirruping, shrills, squawking, squealing and yelps which lulled us to sleep after the long boat trip here. Quite an incredible welcome!

Although it is not a full blown friaje, the weather is relatively cool and it has been raining. Having said that temperatures were still in the mid 30s yesterday and the mosquitoes have been biting! Already spotted in and around the camp have been a rainbow boa, a cheeky tayra and hundreds of birds including blue headed macaws, trumpeter birds and mealy parrots.

Everyone is excited about the imminent arrival of the first group of team members so that the project can get into full swing.

31 May

The boat journey to base camp for the first Biosphere Expeditions team in Peru this year was blessed with glorious weather. Although a little hot for some people the sightings of capybara, several caiman, howler monkeys, yellow spotted side necked turtles, wood storks and scarlet macaws more than made up for the heat.

Settling in to camp life team members have been out and about in the forest for both day and night walks to familiarise themselves with the different species that are to be studied and identified. Robyn, Gemma, Rebecca and Eveline returned to camp last night in jubilant mood having been lucky enough to spot their first ocelot!! Other team members were pretty happy also, having seen a mixture of spider monkeys and tamarins earlier on in the day.

We are just experiencing a refreshing downpour of forest rain. Fingers are crossed, however, as we hope this isn't the start of a friaje. Three groups are currently out at the macaw colpas, but the boat has gone back to collect them as the birds are unlikely to feed in such weather.

Another entry will be sent in a few days when I hope to report warmer and drier weather.

2 June

The start of June has brought with it many successful sightings. The pilot surveys at the colpas have been completed and it has been decided that we will continue surveying two sites. Yesterday Ralph, Stefan and Emma were extremely satisfied with 15 red-and-green macaws feeding at colpa 1. Some good filming from Ralph meant that everyone was able to see the amazingly colourful feast and flush that followed. Monkeys have been spotted all over the place with very close encounters with spider monkeys and tamarins. Eveline even disregarded her fear of spiders to get close to one monkey in particular who seemed to be posing for photos!

Last night's caiman trip again was incredibly lucky with a very rare encounter with a tapir. The female seemed totally undisturbed by our presence and casually carried on feeding whilst we watched from the river. What an amazing feeling to watch a CITES appendix II listed endangered species at such close range.

5 June

Today everyone has had a well deserved break from data collection. A few games of volleyball and a trip to the waterfall in brilliant sunshine has made the day off extremely relaxing. The past two days of activity has seen a number of exciting mammal transects. Transect A is a long but rewarding hike through terra firma forest. Seven species of monkey have been seen on the transect including saddleback tamarins, spider monkeys, dusky titi monkeys, squirrel monkeys, brown capuchins, white-fronted capuchins and monk saki monkeys. In addition peccaries have been frequently smelt (an unbearable stench!) and two separate sightings have been made before the herds scattered away snorting and snuffling through the undergrowth. The whole experience leaves quite an impression on the senses.

Ralph and Stefan who have always been eager to try anything other than the ordinary have been helping to cut trails with their new found machete skills. They reported jaguar tracks on the far side of the river as well as on the Brazil nut trail.

The macaws have also been busy with feeding at both colpas 1 and 3 throughout the mornings. Colpa 1 appears to be dominated at the moment by red-and-green macaws despite the calls of chestnut fronted, red bellied and blue-and-yellow macaws being heard in the hours just after dawn. Whilst on colpa 3 blue headed parakeets and dusky headed parrots seem to have found their favourite feeding site.

Robyn, Gemma, Eveline and Antonio are all sleeping out at the mammal colpa tonight hoping to see some animal action. Maybe the jaguar will be sociable tonight - who knows!

7 June

The days seem to be flying by for the first BE Peru team members. We have been incredibly lucky to have Stanley and Connie on this first slot who have been so diligently inputting all of our data into the computer.

Aside from the numerous oropendulas Gemma has sighted on mammal transect B, she seems to have a strange affinity with ticks. Whilst few have been found on anyone else, Gemma has had no fewer than 16 ticks taken off her!! Ralph has tried to comfort her by demonstrating the Germans' natural talent for dancing with his skills in "Disco Fox".

Feeding on the macaw colpas is continuing daily although not quite as consistently as we hoped. Species seen however have increased to include cobalt winged parakeets, yellow crowned parrots and blue headed parrots as well as those seen previously.

So far the mammal colpa itself has not been particularly active and our attempts at catching the jaguar on the camera trap have not been successful.

Only two days left of data collection for the current Biosphere team.

Enthusiasm, however, has not declined for any of the activities in spite of a good collection of insect bites and some aching limbs.

10 June

The last two days in the jungle were again rewarding for the team members. A record number of parrots, parakeets and macaws were seen from the viewing tower close to camp. Seven orange cheeked parrots perched in the surrounding trees allowing us an amazing view of their incredible plumage. In addition a pair of golden collared toucanettes have also been seen regularly at the tower. Feeding at both colpas 1 and 2 has been continuing with everyone having had a chance to see feeding. An amazing amount of monkeys have been spotted on all activities, many of whom seem to be intrigued by our presence.

Connie had her second encounter with peccaries on the mammal transect and I believe has overcome her initial fear of them! Eveline and Rebecca had a close encounter with a tarantula. Nothing, however, (even her arachnophobia) seems to sway Eveline from her mission to photograph everything she can! No jaguars spotted this time though.

A truly fantastic 12 days has passed with the first Biosphere team this season. A big thank you to all of the team who have been incredibly enthusiastic throughout. A large amount of data have been collected and we hope to continue in this vein for the next two slots. Many thanks to all.

We are now looking forward to the arrival of the next team members. Let's hope we are as lucky in our species spotting in the next two weeks.

13 June

The second group of Biosphere team members all arrived safely despite some delays in flights. Our journey up to base camp was again blessed with some superb sightings of birds including an ornate hawk eagle, the third largest bird in the rainforest, white and dwarf caiman and a number of capybara. We also experienced a full-on downpour of torrential rain, and our ponchos were well used by the time we reached camp. The cooler weather certainly made it a little easier to unload the boat although humidity was still up in the 90s!!

After their first night in camp the team members are currently out on an introductory walk into the forest. With over 20 different bird species sighted on the boat journey yesterday alone, let's hope today brings more successful sightings.

More in a couple of days or so (laptop & satellite uplink permitting).

15 June

All three macaw and parrot colpas have been extremely busy over the last two days. Colpa 2 has once again become active and Sarah and myself saw over 40 red-and-green macaws in the trees directly above the colpa today. For two hours the birds preened, played and fought amongst themselves whilst gradually coming closer to the colpa. A number of flushes enabled us to see the magnificent colours of their plumage, bright reds and blue against the white sky. Unfortunately the presence of a laughing falcon and eventually a downpour of rain stopped them from actually feeding. On colpa, 1 however, Wendy and Emma had great success with over 40 minutes of feeding from another 13 red-and-green macaws. The longest we have seen consistent feeding for since Biosphere arrived this year. Colpa 3 was also visited by dusky headed parakeets and blue headed parrots.

A tamandua was seen yesterday on the way back from the colpas, and came within metres of the team members before ascending a nearby tree and proceeded to fall asleep totally unaware of the excitement it was creating!

Rob and Antonio were lucky enough to spot some of the herd of peccaries that were so blatantly in the vicinity (due to their smell) before they disappeared off into the forest in a flurry of snorts and grunts.

Everyone has experienced the spontaneity of the rainforest today when a torrential downpour drenched the entire team at various different locations this morning. The sun is out once more with temperatures back up to a mild 28 degrees Centigrade and 95% humidity!

18 June

Peccaries, peccaries everywhere! Whilst we had to search hard on the last slot to have a glimpse of peccaries, it now seems that they are tripping over themselves to be on route almost every day. A large herd with over eight young, have been sighted on the mammal colpa trail twice and others on and around the route known as transect A.

An initial attempt at netting some of the local bats was unsuccessful last night; probably due to the bright moonlight. Melissa, who works with bats in her day to day job is eager to identify some new species. We have decided to try again later on in the week in a darker area!

Melissa and I were lucky enough to have a close encounter with a pair of red howler monkeys who were as intrigued by us as we were with them. In the evening sunlight we had an amazing view of their red fur and they were totally undisturbed by our presence. In fact it was the first time I have walked away from an animal before it has moved on. On our return back to camp JJ enticed a red brocket deer within metres of us by a series of gentle whistles before it strolled off into the jungle. Truly a magical moment.

This morning was a success at colpa 1 with approximately 13 red-and-green macaws feeding. It was Rob's first time to see them feeding and he was particularly thrilled to tell us that on the way back to camp he had been urinated on by a dusky titi monkey!!

We were all excited (particularly Emma) by the arrival of an Amazonian milk frog a couple of nights ago, who according to the species guide is not local to these parts. It jumped onto one of the walk ways and proceeded to devour a huge moth.

The jungle always seems to be bringing new species that even the guides who have been working here for years have not seen before. It really starts to give you a taste of how biodiverse the forest is.

22 June

The summer solstice brought with it the first real friaje that Biosphere has experienced this season. Temperatures have fallen to 18 degrees but with humidity still around 80% it feels a lot cooler and sleeping bags and fleeces have been brought out in force. It definitely feels strange being in the rainforest trying to keep warm!

Saturday was a great success at the macaw colpas. Over 68 red-and-green macaws were flying around colpa 1 and perching in the adjacent trees with more than 32 feeding at any one time. At colpa 2 a further 25 were seen with feeding for over an hour and a half. There is a definite increase in numbers generally at the colpas.

Sunday was a day off for the team members and volleyball was again a close and competitive match. The Peruvians seem to have a natural talent for the game, even Gladys and Gisela our wonderful cooks, are total experts. Not much chance of spotting any wildlife whilst we are playing, however, due to the loud cheers and laughing from both teams!!

The onset of rain and the friaje on Monday meant that our activities were more focused on vegetation surveys and trail marking. Animal and bird activity is usually greatly reduced when the weather is wet and cold. However, whilst the rain was pouring down we managed to see so many smaller but intensely colourful birds from the station. Paradise and turquoise tanagers, blue crowned and black tailed trogons, black faced dacnis and russet backed oropendolas were all seen just outside of the dining area. We were even visited by saddle backed tamarins and dusky titi monkeys, presumably trying to find somewhere a bit drier to sit.

Whilst clearing a new trail with our expert machete skills, Eveline came across a huge beetle larvae which she hoped was the edible type JJ had told her about! White in colour, approx 6 cm long, and squirming about in her hand she was getting ready to indulge herself when JJ told her it was the wrong type - this one wasn't tasty enough!!!

Only two days of data collection left to go for the second slot of Biosphere team members. Hopefully the weather will warm up although Rob and Pere seem a lot happier now that they are back to "normal temperature"!

25 June

The second Biosphere team returned to the hub hub of Puerto Maldonado on Friday. The boat trip down the Rio Piedras was a little chilly to say the least. However, the mini friaje does seem to be moving on and we are hoping for some warmer weather for the next team.

Despite the cold weather, data collection was still possible in the last few days of the expedition. Steve, ever optimistic predicted he would see yellow-and-blue macaws on his last shift at the colpa! Unfortunately for him this did not happen but Anya and Melissa did manage to see over 85 blue headed parrots feeding, which was a real treat.

We have managed to cover quite a large distance with the vegetation surveys, which are designed to identify the distribution of palms and buttressed trees which parrots and macaws feed on. Steve developed a skill for identifying the different plant species amazingly quickly and Sarah really seemed to enjoy bashing about in the undergrowth with her machete.

The last night walk did not reveal the ever illusive ocelot that everyone was hoping for much to Wendy's delight, who due to her enthusiasm for long transect walks had to sit it out to rest her sprained ankle. Rob, Pere and JJ only managed to see a few arboreal rats on the new Actimel trail which everyone has worked so hard on to clear.

Hopefully when our scent has worn off the trail we will see a few more animals. We may even find Pere's glasses which he dropped when fighting off a swarm of wasps. He then temporarily lost his wellies in the swamp and fell up to his thigh in mud!

A big thank you for the huge amount of energy and effort that was made by everyone involved on this slot both in work and play. I don't think that the coconut bar knew what hit it when Rob Ritchie, the world's biggest trogan fan, strutted his stuff on the dance floor!! Thanks to everyone for all the data that have been collected.

28 June

The final group of Biosphere team members for this year are already well into the research programme. The journey up river was blessed with great weather and a record number of capybara sightings. We stopped on four occasions and saw over seven in one location. Lynn with her keen eyes spotted a coati even before Antonio did! Hoatzins were also out in force and a number of wood storks and jabiru storks were also prancing about on the sand banks.

Although the initial night walks did not bring out the mammals in force, the local ocelot was spotted firstly by Deanna and then by Antonio on two consecutive evenings.

The first morning shifts at the colpas were quiet for feeding on 2 and 3 although large numbers of birds were seen in the surrounding trees. Colpa 1, however, provided a fantastic introduction to Charlie and Claire, to red-and-green macaw feeding. For over an hour the birds were there with a maximum of 18 on the clay at a time. A couple of big flushes revealed that over 40 birds were in the surrounding trees. An additional treat was that three scarlet macaws came down to the clay lick, two of which fed. This is the first time we have recorded scarlet macaws feeding this year.

The team members are now getting to grips with filling in the data sheets and will be going to test out their skills on a mammal walk this afternoon.

Let's hope their initial luck at spotting animals will continue!

29 June

It is not often that getting up at 4.50am feels like a privilege. Today, however, was one of those occasions. A beautiful clear starlit morning was a good omen for both colpas 1 and 2. The first shift brought with it blue headed parrots, mealy parrots and yellow crowned parrots in force. At one point over 100 birds were feeding at colpa 1 including two red-and-green macaws mixed in with the parrots. It was an amazing sight to see so many birds feeding at one time all vying for position on a small piece of clay cliff. It was a frenzy of chirrups and shrieks when they finally flushed and the sky was filled with the blues, greens, reds and yellows of thousands of feathers. Jany and I were totally elated by the sight and had big smiles on our faces. Lyn and Antonio also had an equally impressive shift at colpa 2 but were also stampered by capybara whilst sitting in the hide! Colt and Deanna followed with yet another fantastic shift with over 70 red-and-green macaws in the trees and 30 feeding for over half an hour.

The two transects again were exciting with peccaries, spider monkeys, red howler monkeys and tamarins being recorded. Three separate groups of spider monkeys and tamarins were seen on transect B, the most recorded yet on the other side of the river.

Antonio and Bill truly early birds (up at 4.40am) reaped the benefit when they spotted an ocelot sitting behind the dining area. Presuming that it is the same one we have seen around camp on many occasions now, we feel we are really getting to know him!!

1 July

Yesterday was quite special for a couple of reasons. Firstly Judy and Peter came back from transect B having seen the first brown throated three toed sloth this season. I think they were more excited when they realized just how rare a sighting it was. However, it didn't top their evening floating downstream in the canoe looking for caiman under a moonlit sky.

Charlie and Bill had a close encounter with red howler monkeys where some good facial expressions were exchanged. "Like two grumpy old men" said Charlie - I am sure he meant the monkeys!

I think that Alan, Mark and Lyn took first prize yesterday though when they virtually stepped on a 3 metre long red tailed boa constrictor that was as thick as Mark's thigh!! Eveline, this one would have kept you going for years!! Caught both on a stills camera and video camera meant that everyone could look and exclaim "Oh my word" (or similar such phrases). Alan with his expertise in snake handling picked up the beast and told us he could hardly hold it because it was so heavy! I was amazed to see that it was so colourful with big splashes of red and black on its scaly skin. It certainly beat my 8 cm flat headed snake which I found yesterday!!

What will tomorrow bring?!

4 July

Claire, Judy and Antonio had an usual sighting of an ornate hawk eagle attacking a group of dusky titi monkeys on Friday. Apparently the noise was intense and understandably the monkeys were pretty freaked out! The monkeys managed to protect themselves, however, and the bird left empty clawed.

According to "A Neotropical Companion" by John Kricher the reputation that white lipped peccaries have for aggression is "considerably exaggerated". I think that Peter, Charlie and Garza might have something to say about this: On Saturday they came face to face with at least 80 beasts who in smaller groups proceeded to surround the trio and then began to charge! Luckily Garza had his machete handy and fended off the attackers who were obviously extremely protective over a number of piglets. Luckily both men and animals came away unscathed if not a little more wary of each other!

A relaxing day and a well deserved break from data collection followed on Sunday for most of us. Lynn managed to catch a sting ray whilst fishing which gave her a little fright as "a huge thing with two massive eyes" came flapping ashore! As usual volleyball was competitive and the players could be heard from as far away as the tower!!

Only four days left of data collection but fortunately everyone is eager to get as much completed as possible before the end of this year's Biosphere expedition. The colpas are still active with over 60 macaws split between 1 and 2 this morning. Vegetation surveys are now well under way and the dream team of Emma, Deanna and Jany are aiming to get all of transect A completed by Friday. I really can't believe how quickly time has passed whilst here in the forest. I think I had better order some bananas in for when I get home so that I can practice for my new book "100 and 1 ways to cook a banana"!

9 July

Yesterday marked the end of this year's Biosphere expedition in Peru. The last few days of activity were still packed full with exciting tales of bizarre and wonderful sightings in the forest.

The mammal colpa finally rewarded our patience when Deanna watched a red brocket deer stroll around the hide whilst she was on watch in the middle of the night. Antonio and Bill also managed to see the elusive armadillo that we have been hoping to see for weeks. On their return journey back to camp Colt who had not managed to stay awake all night (very sensible) spotted both spider monkeys and peccaries. The latter were a little more friendly than those encountered earlier on in the expedition.

On her final shift at colpa 1 Judy finally saw the magnificent feeding of red-and-green macaws. Up to 27 were on the colpa and the birds for over 50 minutes. Three scarlet macaws even arrived to top the experience off. She said it was well worth waiting for, especially when over 40 birds flushed into the sky scared by the presence of a king vulture overhead. For some reason vultures seem to be following her around this last week rather too closely on one occasion. One yellow headed vulture swooped down into the forest missing Emma's head by a claw and landed in a tree close to Judy who was a little surprised to say the least.

Although these last couple of days in the forest have been sunny, the arrival of another friaje has meant that nights have been really chilly. A motley combination of clothing has been worn by everyone trying to keep warm - there is something particularly fetching about socks and flip flops!!

The journey back to town was slow due to the low water levels in the river and we had to push the boat on several occasions to avoid being marooned on the sand banks. The last morning sunrise however, was incredibly beautiful with the mist rising slowly above the river as the sun's rays started to break through the trees. A fantastic farewell gift from the jungle.

So, as everyone prepares to leave Puerto Maldonado I would like to say a massive thank you to all the team members who have participated in the expedition this year. It has been such a pleasure to work with people who seem to have an unending supply of enthusiasm for working in the forest be it at 4.30 am or in the pouring rain. We have collected massive amounts of data, which without your dedication would not have been possible. The expedition report should be available within six months so that you can see exactly what your hard work has contributed towards.

I hope that everyone has some fantastic memories of what has been a great expedition (I certainly have) and I look forward to seeing the photos!

Take care

Clare Fothergill
Expedition leader