



EXPEDITION DIARY Peru 2006

By David Moore

18 May

Still a week or so to go before slot one arrive at our meeting point in Puerto Maldonado, Im sending out our first diary entry which will keep you abreast of all happenings in the 2006 expedition.

Im David, your expedition leader, and tomorrow Ill be flying out to Peru to meet up with Emma, our local biologist, to finalise preparations for the arrival of this years first Biosphere team.

Today has been spent with Matthias (aka Dr. Hammer) at the Biosphere office in Germany packing up some of the equipment were taking (solar panels, binoculars, spotting scopes, rangefinders etc.) and testing out the satellite phone which well be using for communications from the Amazon basin. Weve also installed some GPS tracking and mapping software on to the laptop to aid us in creating a more detailed map of our study site. Tomorrow morning Im off to Frankfurt airport and Lima. I look forward to meeting you all soon!

23 May

This next instalment of the Peru diary comes via the satellite link at our jungle base camp where we're finishing preparations for slot one's arrival on Sunday.

Along with the sorting out and testing of equipment, the last few days have been a good opportunity to get familiar with the trails around base and to get to know the staff and helpers we'll be working with over the next month.

As you'll soon be here to discover the sights and sounds of the rainforest yourselves, I won't detail the birds and animals we've come across in the last few days. Though the opossum we discovered hopping around the garden last night, this morning's Southern Amazonian red squirrel and a rare sighting of five coati (big tree-climbing racoons with a pointy snout and a huge bushy tail) are already on my list of favourites.

After unloading the boat under the sweltering heat on Sunday, yesterday was cold and rainy. Today it's warm and sunny, so be prepared for all weathers!

Most of us here at base are heading down to Puerto Maldonado tomorrow and I'll be staying at the Wasai lodge, so no doubt I'll meet most of the incoming team members there. We're planning to go out for dinner on Saturday night, so if you'd like to join us, let's meet in the lobby at 19:00. If you prefer to rest or prepare for next day's departure, no worries, we'll see you in the same place for our 07:00 departure on Sunday.

28 May

With the water a little higher than expected, we made good progress up the river on Sunday, with a plentiful supply of caimans and turtles on the riverbanks as well as a brief sighting of a couple of capybara (the world's largest rodent) as we approached the camp. We stopped off to buy some pumpkins on route and caught our first glimpse of a rainforest farm with it array of banana trees, papayas, star fruit and caconas.

Far from the relative bustle of Puerto Maldonado, everybody seems to be tuning in quickly to life in the jungle. Jane and Phil were this morning's parrot watch team and were up even before the howler monkeys, ready to leave for the 'colpa' at 4:45.

Yesterday was our introduction day about the project as a whole and the research activities in particular before launching in to the activities today. We split up in to a couple of groups for a kind of orientation walk, following the trails down from terra firma to the floodplain forest below.

Alan, a guest biologist here, showed us some of the familiar trees, palms and birds of the area and we came across coatis, a tayra, squirrel monkeys and the small saddleback tamarins who often hang out behind the lodge. Emma's group had their first close encounter with marauding peccaries and sensibly had their eye on a suitable escape route up the nearest tree as the animals circled round quite close. The last few years of research here have shown the monkey populations to be increasing (probably since the loggers have disappeared) and there was no shortage of sightings yesterday with a red howler monkey and brown capuchins to add to the list. Being able to identify these different species is obviously pretty useful when doing the mammal transect in the first light, though for the first few days we're glad for the help of Antonio and J-J, two of our local guides.

It's now approaching lunch time on our first full day of research activities. With the teams returning from the morning activities, the word from the clay lick is of dusky-headed parakeets and blue-headed and orange-cheeked parrots. Also the first sighting of deer, both red and grey brocket deer on the mammal transect. Some of us took a long hike down along transect C to take GPS coordinates which we'll eventually download on to the satellite image and create a map of the area. Oh, our first snake sighting too... a yellow-tailed cribo (not dangerous apparently, but it was a few feet long). Oh, and our first jaguar spoor too!

As you can imagine in such a biodiversity hotspot as this, there's loads to see and learn about.. Fortunately all the team members seem to be avidly keeping their own journals so they won't be relying on me to detail every unusual bird, beast or frog we see! (Though I'd like to make a special mention to last night's crested forest toad who was very obliging for the cameras and made it on to our 'Most impressive moment of the day' list.) This afternoon will see the first of the fishing activities and the tower observation - I'll let you know how we get on in the next diary entry!

2 June

Everybody has had a good chance to try their hand at the different activities and time is going by quickly (even though it doesn't always feel that way when sitting in the hide waiting for the parrots to come down and feed!).

The weather changed around noon on Wednesday with grey rain clouds and a drop in temperatures. While the Tower and GPS teams cancelled their afternoon sessions, the fish team decided to venture out and see what they could find.

The collecting, photographing and eventually cataloguing of fish is a new project this year which will hopefully result in a booklet detailing the species found in this area, similar to one we have on amphibians from a previous year. We're advancing pretty well so far (cat fish, killi fish, knife fish and numerous others with only their Latin names). Phil seems to be the main fish identifier man while Ralf has the right equipment and know-how for the photography. Fortunately our fears that the rain may be signalling the start of a friaje (cold snap) proved unfounded, and by evening time it had improved enough to go on our planned night-walk, a good chance to spot animals by torchlight (such as the rice rats, wolf spider and a vine snake).

Yesterday activities were able to continue as normal. Things have been fairly quiet on the clay licks, and though the parrots were down feeding this morning, the macaws got no closer than small groups in the trees overhead. Voters are making their way down the river for the Peruvian general election on Sunday - perhaps their noisy peke peke boats passing on the river are disturbing the birds and preventing them from coming down.

Our GPS attempts at mapping the rainforest have been proving quite successful, so we've been able to see the exact position of the jungle trails on the satellite map for the first time. Emma, JJ and the local guides have been quite surprised to see that some of the trails run so close. Anyhow, as a result we've been able to plan for a new mammal and bird transect, so a few of the team members set to work early this morning with their machetes. Meanwhile the early start paid off for Frank and Sibille in this morning's transect team as they saw our first ocelot of the year while setting off from base!

Last night we decided to do a night-ride along the river in search of caiman. Most of the animals tend to duck under water or slide off the sandbanks as we approach, so we mainly contended ourselves with riding along the river by moonlight. Just as we were about to turn back, however, we came across one very obliging dwarf caiman who allowed the boat to pull right up beside him to give us all a good view of his speckled scales and nice set of gnashers. (I think Sibille gave the loudest squeal when he made a split-second dive in to the water, but the whole boat definitely rocked for a moment).

5 June

The most exceptional event of the last few days must be this morning's jaguar sighting from the mammal colpa. Although we are not conducting any of the research activities from this spot this year, we decided to do a sleep over on both Saturday and Sunday nights with the team members taking it in turns to stay awake and watch for animals. While Saturday's team came back fairly unimpressed, last night's team saw a jaguar at 03:15 this morning - not bad for what is only their second week in the jungle! I think this is only the second time we've encountered this animal during a Biosphere Expeditions slot.

Saturday afternoon offered another exceptional sighting in the form of a Harpy Eagle, the world's biggest eagle. It's an endangered species in Peru and needs a territory of about 1000 sq km to ensure a sufficient supply of monkeys and sloths as prey. I wasn't there to observe this surprise visitor either, but Phil tells me it was sufficiently exciting to elicit funky dance moves from Emma on top of the observation tower. Along with last Friday's ocelot sighting, more than our fair share of good luck!

It's not all about rare and exotic sightings, however. Our observation work at the two bird clay licks continues every day, sometimes without a parrot or a macaw in sight. Colpa one was very quiet this morning, though we had a red squirrel and nine blue-headed parrots feeding from colpa no.2. The red-and-green macaws also started to gather in the trees overhead but preferred to rest their heads under their wings and sleep rather than come down and feed. Although we called off our official watch when the rain increased, Emma and Alan have just returned from the river and report three of them down feeding on the lick.

Yesterday being our 'day off', we walked over to the tree top platform in the morning, harnessed ourselves in and were hoisted 27 metres up to get a great view over the top of the canopy. In the afternoon some of us took the boat down to the waterfall a few hundred metres downstream while others took off on a bird-spotting walk through the jungle. Bird ID skills must be improving as they were even able to recognise the yellow-rumped cacique, a small bird who specialises in imitating the calls of other birds. Perhaps Antonio helped them, I'm not sure...

Despite the odd shower, the weather has been favouring us and we're about to leave for our afternoon activities. The fishing teams have been a bit quiet the last couple of days even coming back empty handed from a line-fishing attempt last Friday. This evening's plan is for a night-fish at the waterfall, so let's hope this will mark a change in their fortunes...

8 June

The mixed weather meant we played around with the timings of our activities, though all in all we managed to continue pretty much as planned. The early morning transects had to be called off because of rain, but with it clearing up later we were even able to walk transect B on the other side of the river and get a good GPS reading. The new tracks especially can get slippery in the rain (Val seems to have perfected the best way to slide) and yesterday's team discovered you have to watch out for the wasps. But there are plenty of rewards too, such as the black and white hawk eagle and our first anteater sighting.

Another night walk proved interesting too: one team spotted an olingo (furry monkey-like racoon), while the other saw night monkeys, the only wide-eyed nocturnal monkey.

Yesterday we were able to observe macaws feeding, not on the main colpa but on a new clay face just to the right of it (perhaps they are moving feeding places?). I'm about to go over with Phil and Jane to relieve this morning's observation team, so we're hoping for some last-day action.

Failing action on the clay lick, there's always tonight's planned bash to celebrate Ralf's 40th birthday. We're hoping the cacona juice will provide a suitable mixer for the Pisco (Peruvian tippie). Happy Birthday Ralf! Looking forward to meeting the new team members, ready for Sunday's journey upstream.

14 June

Slot two kicked off to an interesting start with torrential (well, pretty heavy) rain throughout Saturday night. Several layers of clothing and raincoats were needed for the trip upriver as well as steady legs for descending the muddy bank to the boat. We stopped again at Don Carlos' farm to pick up yuka and by early afternoon the rain had eased off.

Despite some of the lowest temperatures so far (around 19°), the monkeys (spider, night, capuchins and tamarins) put in some appearances on Monday, and yesterday the activities kicked off for real. A great morning on the clay lick - 42 blue-headed parrots on colpa I and a close-up view of a large capybara ("definitely bigger than a small hippo" Ralf tells us) with her two infants on the beach in front. Then over 30 red-and-green macaws on colpa II with groups of twelve or thirteen feeding for nearly an hour. Even a solitary macaw came down for the second shift along with a blue-headed parrot. 13:30 is no time for a parrot to be feeding on clay, so we're not sure what he was up to. Perhaps he did it for a dare?

Meanwhile the transect groups spotted our first sloth (typically hanging upside down) as well as monk saki monkeys and a razor-billed curassow.

After a full day out in the field and early starts today we turned down Alan's night-walk option last night. Venturing out alone, he was barely gone for 10 minutes before reappearing rather pleased with himself having seen an ocelot and a paka. I daresay we'll make it out tonight.

With temperatures now back up in the high 20s and our first sustained sunshine today, we're busy charging up our batteries and computer so that the data-enterers can make progress and I can hopefully send this while the satellites are in range!

18 June

Being a small group we've been hard at work and this first week has flown by. We're glad of a rest day today. Nicole is making the most of it, canoeing out on the river with Antonio while the rest of us are relaxing at the lodge having just survived the platform hoist.

Things have been as unpredictable as ever on the clay licks. The macaws didn't feed till really late on Thursday, skipped Friday and then came out early yesterday. We're also seeing more and more parrots (mostly blue-headed) on the macaw colpa, especially early in the morning. From tomorrow we're going to start observing early there as well. The endangered Amazonian parotlets were spotted feeding on the clay late on Wednesday afternoon.

Klaus has been enjoying the challenge of the new rougher transect C. It was on this transect that Nicole and Laura had a great encounter with over 70 squirrel monkeys and then a mother peccary with her babies crossing the path about three metres in front of them.

We've been alternating our regular tower observations and macaw transects with a couple of renewed attempts at fishing. We came back very proud of ourselves after trying the net in a few of the streams leading in to the Las Piedras river, convinced of discovering at least four or five new species. Unfortunately our selection failed to impress, most of them already identified. Least appealing was the small eel-like canerou, although these were only the less noxious dead-flesh-eating kind.

With such clear sunny weather (despite misty mornings hampering parrot colpa efforts) we've finished off the remaining GPS tracking, with readings of transects A and B. The batteries are hooked up to the solar panels, hopefully giving us enough power to progress with the data entry that is gradually building up.

Despite the power of positive thinking the jaguar did not return to the mammal colpa last night (at least not while we were still awake), though we've in fact found jaguar scat in a couple of places over the last week. But the torch light did show up the rear end of a paca disappearing behind a log and that's almost as good!

1 July

I should really have written this last diary entry about a week ago during one of my mammoth layovers on the return from Peru, but I thought I would wait to hear how everybody is getting on after leaving the jungle and settling back in to their relevant civilisations!

Hopefully by now Ralph will have had a chance to sift through his thousands of photos - surely there must be at least one or two good ones? I'm about to look on your website to check for any incriminating material. I hope Laura enjoyed Machu Picchu and that Nicole hit the jackpot in Vegas (if your poker is as good as your scrabble, you should be in the penthouse suite by now.)

Daryl must now be back from the Galapagos Islands while Jane, slot 1's very own Shakira, will be preparing for her next adventure in the Altai. Hope you've now mastered the Spanish pluperfect and that you're brushing up your Russian for next month.

This last diary entry is to say thankyou to everybody involved in this year's project. We were small teams and I think we worked very well together to collect this important data for Alan and Emma - hopefully the rotas were arranged so that you didn't have to slog along transect C too many times! We were lucky to have such a great team driving, guiding and cooking for us, and even the computer settled down and did a good job by slot 2, so we were able to input the considerable amount of data. Then of course, all in all the unpredictable parrots and macaws performed pretty well, as did the *ferocious* peccaries, Frank and Sybille's jaguar and the ocelot. I never did quite see the latter, but that gives me a good excuse to return another year!

I'll be going on-line soon to www.imagestation.com/album/?id=2107450775 to make some small offerings from my photo collection (including day 1 frog and dhe dwarf cayman). Best wishes to everybody, all the best for the future and hope to see you for another adventure somewhere sometime soon!