parrots in peru

Peru's Tambopata region in the Amazon basin is the only area in the world where parrots and macaws gather in their hundreds to eat clay from riverbank mud cliffs. Biosphere Expeditions are working on a unique project to protect them.

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Pictures: SARAH BARRELL, FREDDY WIDMER & BIOSPHERE EXPEDITIONS

It's 5am and the amber fringes of dawn are just visible above the jungle canopy. Howler monkeys have woken us with their morning call – more an eerie encroaching rumble than a recognisable primate howl.

My room mate, Gail, stumbles out from under her mosquito net, staring sleepily at me through the half-light. As her eyes focus on our environs – a dense-fronded wall of green surrounding our little wooden base camp and stretching onwards for hundreds of kilometres, she suddenly springs to life.

'We're in the middle of the bloody Amazon,' she yelps with a shout of idiot glee. I couldn't have put it more succinctly if I had tried.

If not strictly in the geographical centre of the Amazon, we are indeed in the thick of it: located in south-eastern Peru, 50 kilometres from the Bolivian border and 150 from Brazil's, our research centre amounts to a tiny spec in an immense green wilderness.

To get to this spot, arriving the night before, we had travelled by plane, Land Rover and boat. The last leg involved seven hours by 'peke-peke' (outboard-motor boat) from Puerto Maldonado, the river port capital of Madre de Dios, Peru's 'jungle' ▶

Scanning the rooftops of Asisi on the trail of St Francis.

province. Access to this area, other than by boat, is impossible. Three hours up river, you pass the last permanent human settlement; after that, it's just you, the rainforest and an awe-inspiring parade of the planet's most endangered species.

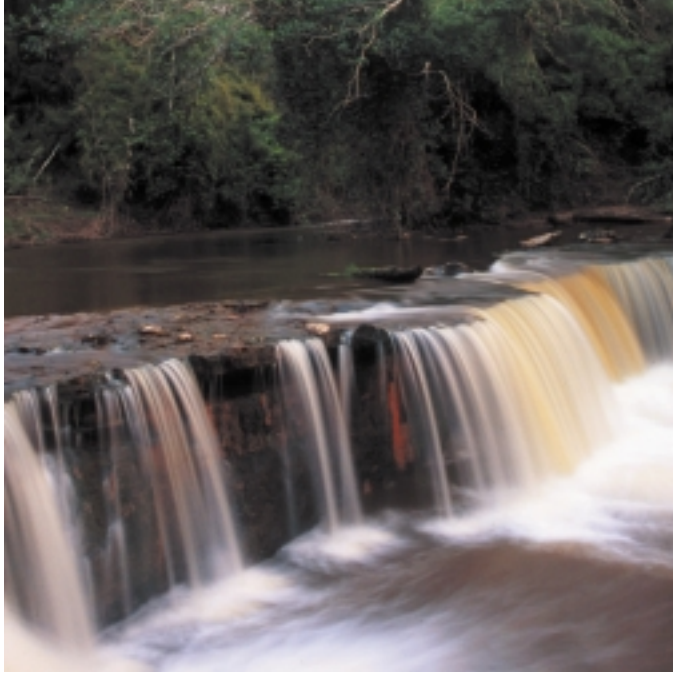
Primarily, we have travelled here to study the parrots. Peru's Tambopata region is the only area in the world where Parrots and Macaws eat clay from riverbank mud cliffs, known as colpas or clay licks. There is no conclusive answer as to why the birds do this but prevailing scientific opinion suggests that clay particles help neutralise toxins ingested with their diet of unripened fruits and nuts.

For Parrots and Macaws, colpa gatherings are a social event. In twos and threes, they group in the treetops, chattering, playing and hanging upside down on vines, until a big enough group has amassed and feeding begins

Whatever the reason, it is integral to their survival and the act of feeding itself, often comprising hundreds of birds at a time, is one of the Amazon's most spectacular displays.

As with many areas in the Amazon basin, increasing economic development is putting a strain on the natural resources of Peru's rainforest. Logging, farming and tourism are a growing threat to its wildlife, particularly in this area along Las Piedras River just east of Manu, Peru's premier national park. Unlike Manu and the neighbouring Tambopata River nature reserve, the adjacent Las Piedras river system is not yet protected. But like the Tambopata, Las Piedras represents a body of water running through one of the largest tracts of pristine rainforest on the planet. It's an area considered to be one of the world's hotspots in terms of biodiversity – the heart of the Amazon.

The aim of this six-week expedition is to gather data – clay lick behaviour, mammal and bird population densities and effects of human traffic on wildlife. The published results are then presented to decision-makers in Peru (the government, park authorities and the like) to provide them with valuable information on how to manage this natural eco-tourism resource – one



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which is increasingly becoming essential to the regional economy.

All very well and worthy but as some of our team has never so much as spotted a macaw outside of a zoo cage, we approach the first morning with some trepidation. One advantage of going on a Biosphere expedition is that its members do not have to have any scientific experience or qualifications. This sound idea enables Joe Public to work together with local scientists and volunteer their manpower. More or less all the money paid for the trip contributes toward sustaining the project.

In this case, our scientists are British ex-pat Emma Hume and her Peruvian partner Juan Julio Durand. Emma and Juan Julio, together with Biosphere expedition leader Helen Boulden and field operations director Dr Matthias Hammer, prepare our team for fieldwork, teaching us the basic skills and methods required for research. They have a formidable task ahead of them.

Our first lesson involves listening to local animal noises on tape and learning to identify them. We settle down at a long wooden table in the camp 'dining room' which, like the dorm and shower blocks, amounts to little more than an enormous raised wooden platform with a pitched, palm-thatched roof. Unlike the other living areas, the dining room has no walls whatsoever (the bedrooms are also gloriously open to the elements on one side). As Monday morning meetings go, this sets an al fresco precedent.

Along with Parrots and Macaws, numerous mammals also feed at the colpas and part of our job will involve identifying and monitoring species such as the Black Spider Monkey, Red Howler Monkey, Red-and-grey Brocket Deer, Collared Peccary (a type of wild pig) and Tapir. But as the taped jungle soundtrack consequently reveals, with monkeys sounding like delicate tropical birds and birds doing a damn fine impression of huge howling mammals, this was going to be even trickier than we thought.

Out in the field, it also became clear that some of us might be better predisposed to this than others. 'Over here,' hisses 27 year-old Australian vet, Michelle Ward, who within minutes has spotted a group of tamarin, making it clear that she has her bush eyes well focused, while 69 year-old British bird enthusiast, Kathleen Harrison, also has her binoculars expertly trained on the tall canopy.

Most of us gaze up at giant 400 year-old Kapok trees (known as the Mother of the Jungle), trip over the hip-high hurdles of their buttress roots and do a bad job of avoiding chain-gang trails of leaf-cutter ants, carrying the human-equivalent of a grand piano on their backs.

Our nine-strong team, although sharing a common-interest in conservation, are a disparate bunch. William Warburton, 25, from London, resigned from his job in new media and came to the jungle to find some inspiration for a career change. 'I really wanted to do something a bit different and this seemed, well, a pretty good start,' he explains. 'My preparation for this trip consisted re-watching Jungle Book and spending an afternoon in the hothouse at Kew Gardens.' ▶

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Linda and Stephen Abraham from Surrey, a well-travelled couple in their 50s, are quite the reverse. They arrive with more GPS gadgets, Gautex quick-dry kit and detailed field guides than the lot of us put together. 'I've just finished a six-year, part-time environmental conservation degree,' says soon-to-quit accountant, Linda. 'What better way to start a new phase of my life than this!'

But even the best prepared among us were pretty clueless when it came to our first practical lesson: learning to handle a machete. Ironically for a conservation group, one of our key tasks was to finish cutting research 'transects', the narrow jungle paths traditionally used to carry out RAPS (rapid assessment programmes identifying fauna and gathering population densities). The method, pioneered by Brazilian scientist Carlos Peres, says that each transect should be cut 4-5 kilometres through the jungle and must be Roman road straight, the idea being that you can see the animals before they see you.

Easier said than done. Aside from insects, the creatures of the jungle are an elusive bunch, and unlike along the river bank, where on the way up we had spotted several breeds of monkey, Macaw, Black-and-white Caiman, as well as a family of over-sized, guinea pig-like Capybara, within the rainforest you need the eyes of a Harpy Eagle to spot as much as a squirrel. This is no photo-safari.

'If you want to 'do' Peru by zipping through the jungle, onto Cusco and then Machu Picchu, this is not for you,' explains Dr Hammer. 'Animals don't "perform" to command and this is a project where you are actively involved in gathering hard data in an unstudied area. It takes time and patience.' And he was right. By day six, my 'tick box' quota is pretty poor. Others, however, are doing spectacularly.

Bob Hussey, a 40-something aviation worker from Luton, seems to be a divining rod for all creatures great and even greater: dusky Titi Monkey, Armadillo and Jaguar spotted in one walk alone. We dub this the 'Bob Factor' and decide that bits of him need to be carved off and shared between each field group as a talisman. Bob mumbles something about 'Heart of Darkness' and is from then on not seen after dark without his head torch and a very big stick.

This hide-and-seek factor, however, makes it all the more thrilling when you do spot something. After a night spent in a treetop hide one kilometre from base camp, ears twitching with every crack of branch, eyes trained to every moving leaf through night-vision binoculars, I still hadn't seen a thing. During the afternoon shift later that day, however, kept awake only by dint of the mosquito bites sustained overnight, I suddenly spy the orange coat of a Howler Monkey hanging upside down in a tree, no more than 10 feet away. I scan the surrounding foliage, quickly discerning an entire family dangling from vines, feeding and grooming each other with a sublime natural theatre that begged an Attenborough voice-over.

While the first, early morning shift at the mammal colpa had been successful, shifts at the mosquito-netted hide opposite the macaw colpa were less so. A previous expedition to the Piedras in 1996, led by Dutch scientist Jessica Groenendijk, had recorded 21 boats on the river over a one-month period. Despite the Debt for Nature Swap, an initiative set up between the USA and Peru, the Peruvian park authority, Ivena, has this year recently declared the Piedras a logging free-for-all: no licence required. In three hours alone, we count eight 'balsa' boats with attached rafts of mahogany and cedar. Thousands of dollars-worth of wood chugged noisily downstream, keeping the flocks of Red-and-green Macaw, Blue-headed Parrot and spectacular Scarlet Macaws from coming down to the banks to feed.

But when they do finally come down, the spectacle is worth the wait. During my third morning shift, 25 Scarlet Macaws fly overhead and rather than making for their preferred perch,

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MORE INFO

Biosphere Expeditions (01502 583085 www.biosphere-expeditions.org) organise three annual trips to Las Piedras, Peru. Leaving late May, the expedition takes place in three two-week slots, running back to back. Cost £1,150 per person, per two-week slot, with two thirds of that contribution going directly back into the project. Price includes all transport, meals, accommodation, guides and specified equipment. Not included are international and domestic flights to the pick-up point in Puerto Maldonado or insurance.

Other expeditions:

Monitoring steppe wolf populations and bird migration, Black Sea

Cheetah population ecology, Namibia

Grey Wolf tracking, Polish Carpathian mountains

high in the Iron trees and Aguaje palm, they swoop straight into the vines midway down the canopy. For Parrots and Macaws, colpa gatherings appear as much a social event as anything else. In twos and threes, they group in the treetops, chattering, playing and hanging upside down, until a big enough group has amassed (25 or more) and feeding begins.

After several days without a visit to the colpa, the birds are determined. Their chattering and squawking is deafening and within minutes they swoop down in one spectacular rainbow cloud. ‘This is what I came for,’ says Kathleen, with a face like someone who has seen the second coming. ‘This is what I came all this way for. I can go home happy now.’ We watch Scarlet Macaws and Mealy Parrots, frantically identifying species, counting and monitoring their behaviour, quietly praying that another boat doesn’t come past.

This year has been designated International Year of Eco-tourism by the UN; one of the main areas of debate being whether eco-tourism is anything more than the same old self-serving animal dressed in a new ‘green’ coat. Faced with several key conservation issues being played out on the riverbank in front of us, it couldn’t be clearer how essential, credible and sustainable eco-tourism projects actually are.

By the middle of our second week, we are seasoned expeditioners. We now have more insect bites than clear skin; our dinner conversation revolves around comparing potential cases of bot fly and leishmaniasis. None of us have looked happier. Our mammal tallies are looking increasingly impressive and Emma reports that between us, we have spotted at least two species never before recorded at Las Piedras. In short, we’d begun to feel part of something that had previously seemed a bit out of reach for your average armchair conservationist.

And suddenly, the jungle seemed less elusive. We now knew that the pungent smell of the garlic tree would greet us after the rain, that the rumble of the Howler Monkey always arrives before dawn and that the wolf-whistle cry of the Screaming Piha, though a nondescript little bird, is the enduring sound of the Amazon. We also knew now, first hand, that with projects like these, it is possible that the enduring sound of the Amazon is a little less likely to be lost. ●