

A Tale from the Bush

Amazon Amazement!

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This night would be special, I could feel it in my bones. Something deep inside me knew it would be fruitful. After staying in the Amazon for a while, it's funny how all your senses become more acute, including your intuition...

I HAD AWOKEN that morning, curled on a soft mattress on the precariously suspended bamboo floor of our hut, to a wonderful chorus of *Oropendola* bird song. Together with a soft breeze and the early rays of dawn streaming on my face, their calls naturally refreshed me, bringing an inner smile to my being before I had even opened my eyes. The mosquito net suspended above me was there only to keep the vampire bats off my skin as I had slept, for the sides of the wooden hut were entirely open. I lay there for while, just soaking it all in. It was wonderful. I stretched, got dressed, and then went to join my colleagues and some of our bleary-eyed students for breakfast. Checking my muddy wellies for scorpions and spiders at the doorway, before sliding my feet in, I realized that I had been so tired that I had slept through what must have been a particularly heavy rainstorm in the night.

My passion is frogs, and has been for as long as I can remember. From an early age I was content to spend my time in and around my local ponds and ditches, with a just a bucket full of mixed aquatic creatures as my spoils for the day. In my childhood I pawed over magical images of my favorite animals, which funnily enough I remember being mainly South American. Over the past 13 years I had been lucky enough to have traveled to many special places in both South and Central America in search of some of the rarest amphibians on the planet. I knew many species well, by sight and by call, and I enjoyed nothing better than passing on my knowledge and enthusing others about my subject.



Nyctimantis rugiceps, a highly elusive Amazonian tree frog of which very little is known.

I was here in the Amazonian rainforest in Ecuador at the foot of the mighty Sumaco Volcano to teach a group of 2nd year Zoology students from Manchester University the practicalities of tropical fieldwork. This was how I would spend today, with the only excitement being provided by the arrival of some much awaited fresh rations and the capture of a large coral snake in the river we would later be crossing.

How happy I was, combining everything I loved. Not just the teaching or being surrounded by wildlife, but contributing to a real conservation project that actually meant something. The field course formed an integral part of an important initiative that I felt very privileged to be a part of. Together with colleagues from Manchester and Glasgow Universities and Kew Gardens, I had been given an unprecedented opportunity by the local Payamino Community to conduct ecological studies in an area so far untouched by oil company exploitation.

After a hearty but uninspiring meal of rice, beans and tuna, it was time to tear a small group away from the student banter of the tressle tables. While we had been eating, darkness had fallen and outside it sounded as though someone had just turned up the volume on an un-tuned radio, as the insects of the night began their loud cacophony. Time to gather our things, long-sleeved shirts, caps and torches, oh, and my blue neckerchief for luck. After such a downpour the previous night, maybe tonight would be a good night for frogging?

Stepping down the river bank to the waiting canoe, I once again felt excited to enter a realm I have grown to know well. A world of darkness, where sometimes all you can focus on is the narrow light of your torch beam. A suffocating environment that can drain you to your limits, and then seem to take more, and place in which night searches can seem to last forever, leaving you with nothing more than wet clothes!

That night the air was clean and humid, not heavy and dank. The sky was clear and the stars and moon bright. We climbed aboard the long, wooden, hand-made craft that was used to reach our riverside base camp, and crossed the river to the opposite bank in silence.

Leaving the open moonlit riverbank, we quietly took to a narrow trail leading into the forest. The bamboo thicket was dense and dry. One by one we filed along the twisting path. We were only a couple of minutes into the trail at most, but familiar frog calls sounded loud ahead. As I raised my head after ducking under a low branch, I saw a frog. I was third in line, but somehow the others had missed it. As I looked further, my heart started to pound. This was no ordinary frog, my mind was telling me, but what was it? Years of collecting in my youth would serve me well, and my frog catching reactions did not let me down. In my hand was something new, something I had never ever seen before. Beside myself with excitement, and fearing I might lose it, I dared but sneak a glimpse. It was beautiful. My smile said it all. Wow, I just couldn't believe it. I was holding a *Nyctimantis rugiceps*, a species that most frog biologists only ever get to dream of.

Remarkably, the skin on the top of this unusual frog's head is actually fused to its indented skull. Also, unlike other treefrogs, the frog breeds in bamboo columns and tree holes far from the ground. The tadpoles are raised by the female, who lays unfertilised eggs for them to feed on. Although considered to have a wide distribution in the area, the large colourful tree frog I had in front of me was so rare that it has only been found by a handful of people since being discovered in 1882. Not even our native guides, who had spent all their lives in the area, had ever seen this amazing but elusive frog before.