

The frogman cometh

Never work with animals or children, they say. But for frog expert Andrew Gray these are the things that make life in a university museum so special. Felicity Heywood talks to him about his work

Andrew Gray is in love with his life — a life that centres on skin-breathing, web-footed creatures. Gray is a herpetologist. The uninitiated would be forgiven for deducing that he investigates skin blisters and rashes, but he is in fact one of the UK's leading specialists on frogs.

He has been obsessed with amphibians ever since he can remember. But it was only six years ago when he was first rewarded with a salary, beating off stiff competition to land a job at the Manchester Museum. 'If I was asked at ten what I wanted to do when I grew up, it would be exactly what I'm doing now,' Gray says. From a very early age, his interest in animals overshadowed the more usual boyhood pursuits: 'I didn't want to know about football, I would have rather have been down a ditch collecting newts.' So that is what he did. He also had a tank in his bedroom that housed frogs and reptiles, including a snake. 'I wasn't interested in them as pets. I'd sit

for ages, studying them, watching their every move,' he recalls.

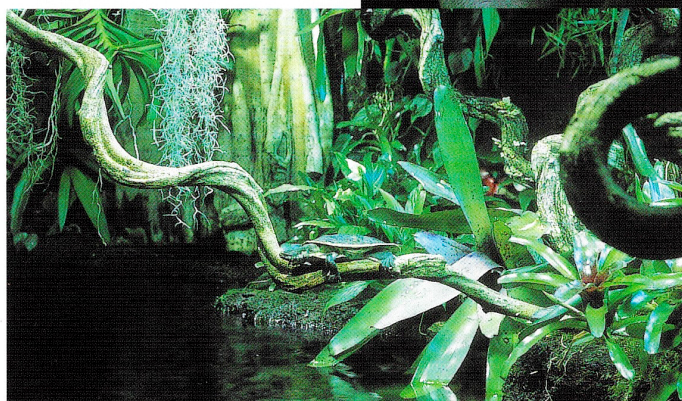
Gray's boundless enthusiasm for all things scaly has seen him go from bedroom tank observer to the curator of herpetology and vivarium manager at Manchester. Gray's specialism is neotropical frogs from South and Central America, where he makes regular study trips. The museum holds the largest collection of these frogs in the UK, including what Gray says is probably the most significant collection of extremely rare leaf frogs (phyllomedusines).

Gray is currently devising new breeding programmes for endangered amphibians such as the stunning Splendid Leaf Frog from Costa Rica. He is also engaged in a collaboration with the Ulster University, studying the leaf frog's secretions, which has helped a further understanding of the ecology of the species.

He has had to learn to be a good fundraiser as well. Funds from the project with the university have enabled him to employ an assistant — particularly helpful back at base when Gray is risking life and limb in Latin America.

One close shave came three years ago in Ecuador when Gray and a colleague arrived in the country just after its opposition leader had been assassinated. Travelling to a remote area of the Amazon, they were advised to carry a gun and tear gas canister for protection. Gray saw someone shot, and under any other circumstance he would have re-

Frogman and boy — Gray's love affair with amphibians began early on



Above: The pursuit of some of the world's rarest frogs has taken Gray to the remoter corners of Latin America, including places along the Amazon. Top right: the Splendid Leaf Frog is the subject of Gray's latest research



treated. 'But this was a one-off chance that I had only dreamed of,' he says. They were there to collect information on one of the rarest species of frog in the world, the Fringed Leaf Frog. Permission to do this was only gained after delicate negotiations with the Ecuadorian officials, so there was no question of him returning to the UK empty handed.

Amazonian adventures are a far cry from his early career when, at 21-years-old, he was a manager at the high street fashion chain Chelsea Girl and Concept Man. 'I loved dealing with the public and organising the displays,' he recalls.

During the ten years he spent working in retail he used his spare time to forge links with zoos around the world. These efforts paid off when he was invited to spend a month accompanying a herpetologist from the Dallas zoo down the Amazon. This was his first real taste of what was to come. Back home, he did outreach work at local schools and continued to carry out his own research. Among his discoveries were new findings about the sight mechanisms of tadpoles, which were featured in the BBC Wildlife magazine.

The job at the Manchester Museum was a dream come true for Gray, even though it meant losing his company car and taking a pay cut. With the backing of the museum, he is currently studying for an MPhil in animal biology. He also finds time to lecture at the university.

Last year, he was asked to design and

oversee the building of a new vivarium to house the museum's amphibians. Gray admits it was a big learning curve, but he clearly relishes such challenges. Having already produced a temporary exhibition for the museum on the World of Frogs, he was full of ideas for the graphics and the interactives for the new gallery. The centrepiece is a reconstructed Amazonian rainforest exhibit.

Gray is a strong believer in conservation through education. 'This is something close to my heart. As a boy there was very little literature on this subject,' he says. He is developing a programme that is designed to complement the national curriculum and which prioritises conservation issues. One of Gray's projects is a joint initiative by the vivarium and the museum's education department called This Fragile Earth, where children can have hands-on experience to help them understand the animals.

Gray's interests outside work include cooking, swimming, walking and salsa dancing, which he developed a taste for in Latin America. But there is no question where his first love lies. 'At home I'm always on the phone to colleagues and reading the books on frogs that fill my shelves. Yes, it is my love and my life.'

► [Link:www.museum.man.ac.uk](http://www.museum.man.ac.uk)
Keeping Amphibians, a beginners guide by Andrew Gray, is published by Collins

