



MEET THE SCIENTIST

# Andrew Gray

Curator of herpetology at Manchester Museum

A working life that began in the circus lead to helping save critically endangered frogs in Central America and naming a new species after his granddaughter.

It may seem a strange career journey to have left school aged 15 with a certificate in motor mechanics and eventually end up running a vivarium with an internationally important collection of Costa Rican frogs, but that is the one undertaken by Andrew Gray.

Dig deeper and the story becomes stranger still, as that 15-year-old left his Blackpool home to join a circus. This first job was a hint of things to come though: "I was looking after the animals," says Gray.

Indeed, animals had always been his passion and, as a small boy, he would go collecting with his "trustworthy yellow bucket" in nearby Ashton Gardens in St. Annes: "I used to go out looking for frogs, newts, tadpoles, you name it. My mum used to check my pockets before she'd let me in – I had insects in my pockets and all sorts!" he says.

After the circus came a 10-year stint as a retail area manager for a clothing company, but it was a



Gray introduces Sylvia's tree frog (below) to students at La Selva, Costa Rica.

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trip to Central America and a month spent living with indigenous people within the rainforests that was to change his life. "I came back and I saw things differently," says Gray. "I wanted to make a bit of a difference."

So, he took a 50 per cent cut in salary, said goodbye to the company car and accepted a job as a technician at Manchester Museum.

When Tristram Besterman (the museum director at the time) won one of the first lottery funding awards, he gave Gray a blank sheet of paper and asked him to redesign the vivarium, which had begun life in 1963 as a teaching aid for the University of Manchester's zoology course.

Gray grasped the opportunity and began to build the collection around what became his speciality: Central

American neotropical frogs. Now, 25 years later, this school leaver has created an internationally significant conservation collection of critically endangered frogs and developed the trust of the Costa Rican authorities sufficiently to grant him one of the very few collector's permits. He has also helped design and deliver University of Manchester field trips to the region and conservation training to indigenous people.

Teaching is of equal importance to Gray and the vivarium engages with all age groups, from three-year-olds to postgraduate students. "I've got a real passion for teaching underprivileged kids and those with special needs," he says. The pandemic has brought its challenges and like many of us, the vivarium has taken to Zoom: "Even with lockdown, it allows us to engage with the public."

A high point for Gray is the discovery of a new species of frog, which he has named after his first granddaughter. "You get to name these things and it is a privilege that most zoologists dream of," says Gray. "It is such a beautiful frog as well." The frog is called *Cruziohyla sylviae* – Sylvia's tree frog. **Andrew Griffiths**

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Manchester Museum Vivarium [museum.manchester.ac.uk/collection/vivarium](http://museum.manchester.ac.uk/collection/vivarium)

