



ANIMA MUNDI

Adventures in Wildlife Photography

Issue 2, Year 1 - 2nd Quarter, April 2011

In This Issue:

SECRET REALM OF THE DRAGON SNAKE Malaysia's Cameron Highlands

IN THE HALLS OF THE BISON KING Poland's Bialowieza National Park

ANEMONEFISH A portrait of the pesky and adorable Clownfish

AMAZING AMAZONIA A portfolio by Roberto Fabbri

ANIMA MUNDI

Adventures in Wildlife Photography

THE BEAUTY OF SIMPLICITY

Welcome to the second issue of *ANIMA MUNDI*! Since you are reading this, we have good reason to believe you liked the previous one. Well, we are convinced you will like this one too, and the many others to follow - there is a lot cooking in the pot, and we have been travelling the world far and wide to provide the magazine with more and more interesting content. There's so much beauty and adventure out there! However, we have realized that in our first editorial we were too busy waxing lyrically about the meaning of our title and its *raison d'être* to offer some actual insight about *ANIMA MUNDI*'s editorial structure, so we shall do that now.

Our online magazine basically offers three different types of articles, each introduced by its own separate heading. *ON THE TRAIL* are long, comprehensive, extensively illustrated wildlife trip reports - the emphasis is obviously on wildlife photography, as elsewhere in *ANIMA MUNDI*, but the text accompanying the images attempts to be both factual and evocative. The idea behind this kind of reporting is to make you really, really want to go there as you read, and the feature presents a full, down-to-earth coverage of the destination, enriched by a large selection of the photographic subjects one might realistically encounter. At the same time, there is also some emotional narrative - highly personal, no doubt - which should transmit the true feeling and atmosphere of the place to the reader. We are convinced this is a very important aspect of field reporting, which is however too often overlooked in the obsessive search for the bare facts. We avoid delving too deeply in the organizational aspect of the trips, as too many factors are involved and too many things are subject to abrupt change, but we do mention (and often recommend from first-hand experience) those wildlife guides, nature resorts or travel companies we have successfully travelled with, as these can really make or break a wildlife photography trip. This kind of information is essential to ensure success!

SPOTLIGHT articles focus instead on single species, groups or even behavioural aspects - these are probably a little bit more scientific in their approach and just a teeny-weeny bit less emotionally involved, attempting to offer some detailed and hopefully interesting information about the stunning creatures we focus on. You will probably find a lot of surprising new facts in these in-depth articles, and our unexpected wide-ranging choice of subjects will possibly tempt many readers to pick them up for the next photographic challenge. There will be a lot of diversity here but photographic appeal will be always paramount, dictating our choices. *PORTFOLIOS* will - as most portfolios do, in fact, so nothing new here - feature the work of a single guest wildlife photographer in his or her own words and, most importantly, images. As we have already done in our book *A Diver's Guide to the Art of Underwater Photography*, we shall feature both professionals and amateurs as long as quality is high and subjects are interesting and / or unusual. Publishing one's images is always difficult if fame has not been attained yet, and we are glad to offer this opportunity to anybody interested. By the way - *ANIMA MUNDI* is created on Apple iMac 24-inch computers and looks at its stunning best in Hi-Res on a big widescreen iMac monitor.

For the time being, these are basically the three clear-cut facets of *ANIMA MUNDI - Adventures in Wildlife Photography*. As the magazine grows, more could possibly follow - reviews of books and camera equipment for instance, or a wildlife / environment world news section. But, as in nature itself, simplicity is usually the best option. So we'll always try to keep our quarterly lean and essential, while at the same time offering exceptionally well illustrated, uncommonly long articles which allow uniquely in-depth coverage.

Have a good trip!
Andrea & Antonella Ferrari

www.animamundimag.com

TO TRAVEL IS TO LEARN.

When Giovanna Holbrook took on the challenge of leading two University of Florida science professors and a group of naturalists to the Galápagos Islands in 1971, she had no way of knowing the lasting impact that experience would have on her life and on the lives of those traveling with her. The group journeyed throughout the archipelago aboard a retired navy vessel, propelled by their spirit of adventure and thirst for knowledge. At that time, the Galápagos was just celebrating its twelfth year as a national park, conservation work at the Charles Darwin Research Station was still in its infancy, and tourism in the islands was virtually non-existent.

More than thirty years later, Holbrook Travel continues to serve the needs of teachers, students, academic institutions, and nature lovers. Although many changes have taken place over the years, Holbrook Travel has taken great care to remain true to its roots. As news of environmental concerns and world conflicts continue to fill the airwaves, it seems more important than ever to help people gain a better understanding and appreciation of the natural world and other cultures through firsthand experiences. In the words of Andrea Holbrook, president: “Our goal is to try to continue the great work my mother started.”

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HOLBROOK
TRAVEL

We appreciate your feedback - constructive criticism, useful suggestions and interesting contributions are most welcome.

Please drop us a line at nautilus@reefwonders.net

ANIMA MUNDI
Adventures in Wildlife
Photography
is a Free Quarterly
Online Magazine
www.animamundimag.com

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Robinson's Anglehead lizard *Gonocephalus robinsonii*, a distinctively white-lipped agamid endemic to the montane rainforests of the Cameron Highlands in West Malaysia.

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Dear Anima Mundi Reader,

NHBS are once again delighted to be advertising in this wonderful magazine by our friends at Anima Mundi...

All the books and kit here link to our website, so if we've piqued your interest there's lots more to discover at www.nhbs.com, on these and many other fascinating subjects and geozones.

Happy travels,

The NHBS team

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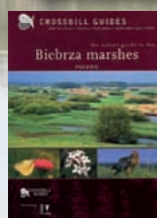
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Wildlife of Poland



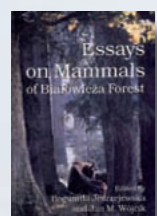
The Nature Guide to the Bialowieza Primeval Forest, Poland

Dirk Hilbers
The perfect guidebook for the nature enthusiast.
Pbk | 2005 | **£16.95**



The Nature Guide to the Biebrza Marshes, Poland

Dirk Hilbers et al
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Essays on Mammals of Bialowieza Forest

Edited by Bogumila Jedrzejewska and Jan M Wojcik
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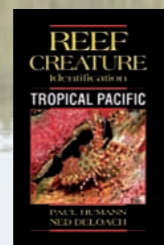
Lukasz Mazurek
Where to watch the birds and large mammals of the Biebrza Marshes.
Pbk | 2009 | **£49.50**

Reef Life



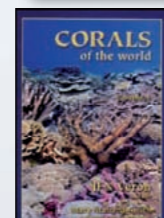
A Diver's Guide to Reef Life

Andrea Ferrari and Antonella Ferrari
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Reef Creature Identification: Tropical Pacific

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A Pocket Guide to Dragonflies of Peninsular Malaysia

AG Orr
Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore are home to more than 230 species of dragonfly.
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A Birdwatcher's Guide to Malaysia

John Bransbury
This classic bestselling site-guide covers over 40 major sites.
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A Field Guide to the Reptiles of South-East Asia

Indraneil Das
Extensive coverage of South-East Asia. Detailed and comprehensive.
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A Field Guide to the Mammals of South-East Asia

Charles M Francis
Covers all the mammals recorded from mainland South-East Asia.
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A Guide to the Pitcher Plants of Peninsular Malaysia

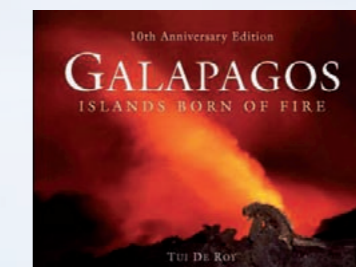
Charles Clarke
Covers the 10 spectacular native species and several natural hybrids that occur in the region.
Pbk | 2002 | **£9.99**



A Photographic Guide to Snakes and other Reptiles of Peninsular Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand

Meryl J Cox et al
Useful compact, pocket-sized guide with colour photographs.
Pbk | 2010 | **£7.99**

Stunning South America



Galapagos: Islands Born of Fire
Tui De Roy
Hbk | 2011 | **£20.95**



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EXTREME TREKKING IN THE CAMERON HIGHLANDS AND PULAU TIOMAN

SECRET REALM OF THE DRAGON SNAKE

Exploring West Malaysia's impenetrable montane rainforests
searching for beautiful, rare and occasionally dangerous fauna



■ A female Wagler's or Temple Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus wagleri*, a tropical arboreal venomous crotalid, rears up in a threat display on a trail of the Cameron Highlands, West Malaysia.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The four feet long, wrist-thick snake lies motionless, elegantly draped on a half-rotten, moss-covered tree stump, its heavy, muscular body wreathed in glorious gold, pale green and velvety black. A large adult Wagler's pit viper, probably a pregnant female: a strikingly beautiful species whose apparent, deceiving lethargy conceals the capability of inflicting highly venomous, lightning-fast bites. Drops of water glisten on its broadly banded back, every pearly bead a miniature rainbow in the sun's rays which scythe through the rainforest canopy, cutting through the all-pervading wisps of mist. Stunned, frozed in admiration, we silently watch its incredibly massive, broadly triangular head hesitantly uncoil and rise towards us, its small, grey-green beady eyes watching us intently, the long black forked tongue slowly darting forward, tasting the still, moisture-filled air. Mesmerized, I slowly draw my camera lens ever closer to its dragon-snake face, trying to find a precarious balance on the muddy, slippery, mossy slope. Squinting through the viewfinder of my Nikon I can clearly see its heat-sensing pits, located between its cold eyes and its backward-turned nostrils. I know it can sense my body warmth through these, its primeval mind scanning with utmost accuracy an infrared image of my body parts. The first third of its thick body compressed in a spring-powered figure-S, the diamond-shaped broad, deep head - covered in sharply ridged scales - is now focusing on my ever-so-slow approach, the forked tongue's flickering getting testier, faster, broader. I know the signs and I hug my camera closer, precariously hiding my face and exposed knuckles behind the heavy cardboard shield which rings the 105mm macro lens and which I have built for exactly this purpose - to protect my vulnerable fingers from its heat sensors. As I reach the invisible border separating me from the huge pit viper, imperceptibly inching closer and closer to get a sharper portrait, the snake suddenly lunges forward, heavily, its bright white mouth inner linings flashing briefly in the forest's damp perennial twilight, its long curved unsheathed fangs erected. Even knowing this was coming - a half-hearted, sluggish attempt at intimidating the intruder rather than a fully-fledged, violent, lightning-fast venomous defensive bite - my heart skips a beat as I almost lose my footing on the muddy, squishing ground, backing off with a half-gasp of enthusiastic awe. Contented with its genuinely impressive show of power and grace, the snake coils up slowly

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Left top, an adult Red Mountain racer or Bamboo Rat snake *Oreocryptophis porphyracea* sub. *laticincta*, a very colorful and active terrestrial colubrid restricted to the cool montane rainforests of Southeast Asia. Left bottom, a Twin Spotted or Himalayan Flying frog *Rhacophorus bipunctatus*, a small species found in the same habitat. Right, a bright red and very tiny mushroom photographed in the montane rainforest of the Cameron Highlands.



■ A Twin Spotted or Himalayan Flying frog *Rhacophorus bipunctatus*, a small and rather colorful species often encountered in the cool, water-soaked montane rainforests of Southeast Asia.



again, but its massive, threatening head is now fully alert, constantly turning to follow our clumsy movements as we surround it in a surreal, trance-like ballet. The dragon is awake. We know there will be no more bluffs from now on.

OF SNAKES, SLOPES AND SCONES

We have been trekking for hours on the slippery, muddy, heavily forested and very steep slopes of these peaks, the

perennially drenched and surprisingly cool untouched mountains on the Cameron Highlands, a popular holiday retreat of Peninsular Malaysia. Relatively close to crowded, highly developed Kuala Lumpur, this is a much-loved weekend destination for those city dwellers wishing to flee the oppressive heat of the surrounding lowlands, for Malaysians wishing to spend their holidays in an occasionally ridiculous pseudo-European and theme-park like hill station (replete with fake Tudor

A mysterious world of steep valleys and mist-cloaked forests

Steep, mist-cloaked and almost impenetrable: the pristine montane rainforest of the Cameron Highlands.

caulk-and-beams little straw-roofed hamlets everywhere) and an all-inclusive tour location where Western tourists are herded by bus to hurriedly swallow tea, scones and strawberry jam among carefully tended rose lawns. The absurd abundance of temperate-climate fruits and vegetables in the Cameron Highlands has given rise to an inordinate amount of farms and tourist attractions - we cannot forget the wonderfully inventive billboard inviting visitors to a greenhouse and its "Self-plucking Strawberries"...Now that would be interesting! The landscape is stunningly beautiful, with dramatic, ever-changing skies looming over tender green, rolling hills which are terraced with tea cultivations and intersped with deep stretches of thickly forested slopes and ravines. What most visitors do not know - and really do not care about - is that in fact the Cameron Highlands still feature exceptionally

large areas of connected, untouched, unspoilt wilderness, encompassing all habitats from dry lowland to montane rainforest to mossy elfin (or cloud) forest: a scenic environment which is all but inaccessible to most - except its native inhabitants - and which boasts an absolutely amazing biodiversity. Intrigued by the little information we could get from the Internet, we had an unexpected stroke of luck when we contacted our guide for the trip - young, literate and enthusiastic herpetologist Hans Kam, who - despite his surprisingly Germanic first name - is in fact an ethnic Chinese hailing from Kuala Lumpur and a veritable mine of tried-and-tested knowledge regarding the Camerons and their reptile populations. A frequent visitor and independent explorer of the largely untapped wilderness of the area, Hans has built over time an exceptionally useful network of relationships with

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A juvenile, yellow-phase specimen of the Oriental Whipsnake *Ahaetulla prasina*, a mildly-venomous, rear-fanged colubrid. Its large eyes with their keyhole-shaped pupil allow frontal, binocular view to better grasp fast-moving lizard prey in thickly forested habitats.



■ *Malaysian Dead Leaf mantis Deroplatys lobata, a praying mantis of Southeast Asia which is exquisitely camouflaged to look like a dead, dry leaf. Surely one of the natural world's most stunning examples of camouflage and mimicry, it is one of the many fascinating species found in the Cameron Highlands.*

local collectors and forest dwellers, which allow him to take his clients off the beaten track in search of the rare, spectacular species which are so abundant and yet so frustratingly elusive in this forbidding environment. Hans also authors and maintains the enthusiastically opinionated but nevertheless very informative website www.naturemalaysia.com which is an absolute must for those interested in exploring the area or simply wishing to know more about it and its fauna.

MISTY MOUNTAINS AND RUGGED RAINFORESTS

We had been repeatedly alerted in advance by Hans about the occasionally steep and very wet conditions prevailing when trekking off the beaten track in the Cameron Highlands, but we were nevertheless surprised and occasionally impeded by the extreme ruggedness of the terrain, which is to be visited at night and during the rainy season for the best chances of success – not an easy endeavour when carrying 15 kgs of camera equipment on one’s back. As we all know snakes, lizards and insects are more plentiful and easier to encounter during the monsoon season, but in the Cameron Highlands this means dealing on a daily basis with truly torrential downpours, low temperatures (we measured 12°C at

night with temperatures in their 30s during the day), faintly marked or non-existent forest trails transformed into sticky, glutinous traps of ankle-deep mud, the onslaught of leeches and a general state of physical misery which is compounded by the lack of heating in the local hotels. Add to this the fact that the average night trek may last from four to six hours, taking place on 80° slopes with only roots or twigs for handholds, through thick thorny shrubbery or by wading up stony streambeds, often having to deal with fallen tree trunks, slippery footholds and running, ice-cold water up to one’s mid-calf and you’ll soon realize - as we did - that this is neither easy nor comfortable. In fact, much to our dismay and humiliation, on a few memorable occasions we had to give up our planned itinerary when halfway through and opt for something more manageable. Footwear and clothes molding - if not downright rotting - overnight, the occasional messy leech bite and all-too-frequent falls head-over-heels in mud, over buttress roots and down steep slopes or forest floor ravines were - however embarrassing - a small price to be gladly paid for the amazing encounters we had: thanks to Hans’ unique proficiency in the field we were able to find and photograph a number of species we had only dreamed of until then, and which are all but invisible to anyone visiting the forest by himself.



Spectacular, prehistoric-looking three-meter tall Giant ferns are a visual, unmistakable landmark of the upper reaches of the Cameron Highlands.

■ The Mountain Horned lizard *Acanthosaurus armata* - a small, colorful and very spiky agamid - is restricted to the cool, water-soaked montane rainforest habitats of Southeast Asia.



A vibrant green and red Cameron Highlands Pit Viper (Trimeresurus nebularis) is coiled on a mossy log in a lush rainforest. The snake's body is primarily bright green with a blueish-green pattern on its back and a red underside. It is surrounded by dense green foliage, including large leaves and ferns, creating a natural and vibrant habitat.

The Cameron Highlands Pit Viper *Trimeresurus nebularis* is an arboreal, highly venomous crotalid. This recently described, endemic species is found in very cool mountain rainforest environments and its distribution is exclusively restricted to the Cameron Highlands of West Malaysia.



Antonella busies herself shooting a beautiful specimen of the Cameron Highlands Pit Viper *Trimeresurus nebularis*, a recently described, endemic, arboreal and highly venomous crotalid. These mostly nocturnal snakes can be quite active at surprisingly low ambient temperatures - as low as 12°C.





ANIMA MUNDI
ON **YouTube**

CLICK ON THE IMAGE AND WATCH A SHORT VIDEO ON SOME OF THE CAMERON HIGHLANDS' MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL HIGHLIGHTS

Cameron Highlands



The scenic panoramas of the Cameron Highlands are often blessed with dramatic, swirling cloudscapes - a great bonus for photographers and videographers.



■ A Malaysian Jungle Nymph or Green Nymph Walking Stick *Heteropteryx dilatata*, one of the world's largest and heaviest insects. Large specimens such as this may reach a length of 20 centimeters and a weight of over 65 grams.

Tender green tea plantations against a bright blue sky - a typical panorama of the Cameron Highlands of Peninsular Malaysia. Even if such man-made habitats are often rich in interesting reptile, amphibian and insect species, access to most tea plantations - which are privately owned - is normally severely restricted.





The finely structured leaves of Giant ferns - endlessly repeating an almost abstract pattern - offer interesting textures and details to the nature photographer.



Left, the softly rolling landscape of tea plantations. Right, a striking adult of the Oriental Whipsnake *Ahaetulla prasina*, a mildly-venomous, rear-fanged colubrid, with its chequered skin showing between the bright green scales in a typically colorful threat display.





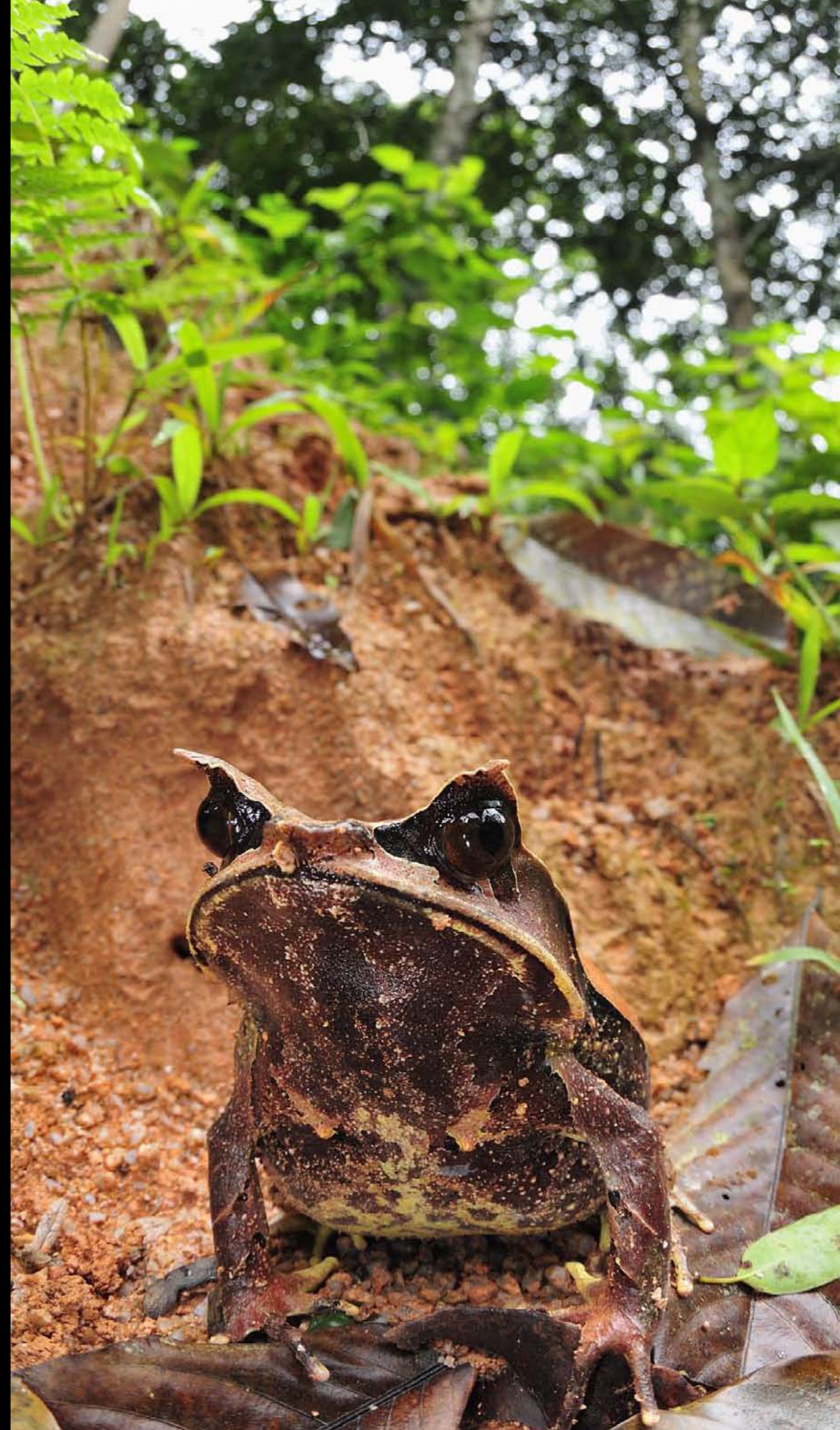
The Malaysian Orchid Mantis
Hymenopus coronatus
is a small praying mantis which mimics to perfection *Phalaenopsis orchid* flowers (pictured above and commonly found in its natural habitat) to trick its insect prey.



Dramatic landscapes of swirling clouds cloaking virgin rainforests

At their highest elevations the Cameron Highlands often offer unrivalled scenic views, with steep forest-covered mountainsides shrouded in swirling, dramatic clouds.

From left to right, a Malaysian Dead Leaf mantis *Deroplatys desiccata*, a praying mantis of Southeast Asia which looks exactly like a dead, dry leaf; a Malayan Water monitor *Varanus salvator*, a large, imposing and very agile semiaquatic monitor lizard extensively found throughout Southeast Asia; and finally a Malaysian Horned frog or Long-nosed frog *Megophrys nasuta*, perfectly camouflaged among dead leaves and forest litter.





Kuhl's Flying gecko █
Ptychozoon kuhlii, showing the extensive webbing which enables this species to glide for some distance if threatened. Its cryptic livery mimics to near-perfection the tree bark on which this gecko is found.

A large, beautifully patterned adult Wagler's Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus wagleri* lies in ambush, draped on a small branch by a forest waterfall.



■ A pair of displaying males of the Larut Rice Frogs *Microhyla annectans*, observed at night at a temperature of 12°C in the Cameron Highlands. Despite the cold, several couples of this exceptionally tiny amphibian were observed actively mating and breeding in a roadside rain puddle.



■ A Larut Rice Frog sitting on Antonella's thumb shows the exceedingly tiny size of this species. Microhylids enjoy a circumtropical distribution, being the most common group of frogs in Madagascar and Papua New Guinea.

■ Bell's Anglehead lizard
Gonocephalus belli, a large
and very colorful agamid inhabiting
the undisturbed rainforests
of Thailand, Malaysia and Borneo.



■ A juvenile specimen of the Red Mountain racer or Bamboo Rat snake *Oreocryptophis porphyracea* sub. *laticincta* clearly shows its distinctive red and orange banded livery, which will turn uniformly candy-red once it will reach adulthood. This colorful and active colubrid species is restricted to the cool montane habitats of Southeast Asia.





Clockwise from top left: Siamese Pit viper *Trimeresurus wiroti*, a colorful and highly venomous semi-arboreal or terrestrial crotalid found in lowland and submontane rainforests of Thailand and West Malaysia. Top right, Green Crested lizard *Bronchocela cristatella*, a common inhabitant of primary and secondary rainforests in Southeast Asia. Bottom right, Common or Dusky Mock viper *Psammodynastes pulverulentus*, a terrestrial, nocturnal, rear-fanged, mildly venomous snake found throughout Southeast Asia. Bottom left, Common Malayan racer *Elaphe flavolineatus*, a large, fast and aggressive terrestrial or semi-arboreal colubrid found in the lowland forests of West Malaysia, Borneo and Indonesia. All photos were taken in the Cameron Highlands.





■ Pied Mossy Frog *Theloderma asperum*, a small and rarely observed species found in montane rainforests throughout Southeast Asia. When seen from above (above) this slow-moving species mimics with surprising accuracy an unpalatable bird dropping to avoid predation.





Left, a Giant Leaf insect *Phyllium giganteum*, a large nocturnal Phasmid of Southeast Asia which mimics with stunning accuracy a set of leaves. This fascinating species is one of the natural world's most striking examples of mimicry and camouflage. Right, a Twin Spotted or Himalayan Flying frog *Rhacophorus bipunctatus*, a small species typically found in the cool montane rainforests of Southeast Asia.





A Malaysian Orchid ■
Mantis *Hymenopus coronatus*, a small praying mantis which mimics the *Phalaenopsis* orchid flowers found in its forest habitat. The Cameron Highlands offer very good chances of finding these graceful, rarely-spotted insects in the wild, especially during the rainy season.

■ A Malayan Crested lizard *Gonocephalus grandis*, an imposing and spectacularly colorful agamid found in undisturbed rainforest habitats throughout Southeast Asia. This beautiful male allowed a close approach when found in a very cold drizzle.





Giant Leaf insect Phyllium giganteum, a large nocturnal Phasmid of Southeast Asia which looks exactly like a set of leaves. Notice how perfectly even the leaves' veining is reproduced! A large female such as the one pictured can be over 10 cms long.



■ *Giant Forest or Green-Eyed gecko Gekko smithi, a large and pugnacious gecko restricted to pristine, undisturbed forest habitats of Southeast Asia. Bites from this beautiful but shy and uncommon species can be quite painful.*

Stunning mountain views of pristine, impenetrable cloud forests

The stunning cloud or elfin forest view from the top of Gunung Brinchang, one of the highest elevations of the Cameron Highlands. Sadly, habitat alteration and human encroachment can already be clearly seen in the distance.



■ Giant Rhino beetle *Chalcosoma caucasus*, one of the world's largest beetles and proportionally one of the world's strongest animals. Large males such as this one can make truly spectacular camera subjects.

A beautiful Wagler's or Temple Pit Viper *Tropidolaemus wagleri*, an arboreal crotalid which is still relatively common in the Camerons. This massive individual was found basking in the sun by a forest road with the dark, rain-laden clouds of a stormy sky in the background adding a dramatic, welcome touch to the scene.



Basking in the sun under the ominous clouds of an approaching storm

■ *Oriental Whipsnake Ahaetulla prasina*, a mildly-venomous, rear-fanged colubrid. This juvenile specimen - still in its yellow phase - was found by an overgrown forest trail in Pulau Tioman.



SHADES OF KONG!

Fully satisfied - and rather humbled - by two very energetic weeks spent exploring the verdant but almost impenetrable Cameron Highlands, we then drove all the way down to the east coast of mainland Malaysia to board a ferry to our next destination, the celebrated Pulau Tioman - an idyllic and steeply mountainous island in the South China Sea which boasts an impressive herpetofauna with a very high incidence of endemisms. Almost deserted during the monsoon by the budget tourists and backpackers which crowd it during the dry season (and which represent the main source of income for its meagre resident population besides fishing), Tioman welcomes visitors landing on its shores with its tall, craggy, heavily forested and rather forbidding profile, reminding one of the movie classic *King Kong's* fabled Skull Island. Sparsely populated along the coastline (an almost uninterrupted sequence of cheap tourist bungalows and seafood restaurants rings it along its sandy beaches, but luckily the

mountainous inside is still heavily forested, almost impenetrable and totally undeveloped), the island is crossed by a single, twisting and very steep tarmac road. It also offers several forest walking trails of varying difficulty - ideal hunting grounds for our nightly explorations in search of interesting herpetofauna. Besides featuring a high number of rare or endemic species (including an incredible and only recently described turquoise blue pit viper, which sadly we did not find despite all our efforts), the island is populated by an ungodly number of huge Water and Savannah monitors - these impressive, two-meter long lizards are literally everywhere (but usually not easily approached). The island climate of sea-mount Tioman is obviously very different from that encountered in the higher altitudes of the Cameron Highlands, and while the amount of rain we faced during our permanence there was equally staggering, the average temperatures were much higher, as was the number of mosquitoes: despite being

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CLICK ON THE IMAGE AND WATCH A SHORT VIDEO ON SOME OF PULAU TIOMAN' MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL HIGHLIGHTS





Crab-eating or Long-tailed macaque *Macaca fascicularis* are very common on Pulau Tioman, where they are represented by an endemic insular subspecies. When encountered in large troops these monkeys can occasionally be bothersome and aggressive - especially if they are used to being fed by tourists.





A tropical idyll of forest streams and palm tree landscapes

An idyllic forest river forms a cascade of quiet pools fringed with palms in Pulau Tioman. Despite being rather small and mountainous, the island abounds with such enchanting views.



■ *The Many-lined Sun skink Mabuya multifasciata is another insular endemic subspecies exclusively found in Pulau Tioman. Skinks and geckoes are exceedingly common on the island's forest floor.*

occasionally rather steep, the forest trails are much more easily negotiated than the non-existent ones of the Camerons, and our daily and nightly treks on the island were both very pleasant and fruitful, even if the unique feeling of remoteness we had experienced in the cooler Highlands was somewhat missing. Make no mistake, however - seriously exploring the island can be similarly exhausting, as forests are very thick, slopes are occasionally steep and slippery, several half-forgotten trails are overgrown and in disuse and the high degree of humidity can prove truly stifling to the unaccustomed.

A TREASURE TROVE OF RARE SPECIES

It should be obvious by now this was a highly specialized trip, which focused almost entirely on reptiles and insects, with a very special emphasis on macrophotography and rainforest exploration - certainly not everybody's cup of tea, even if the results of such endeavours can be both stunning and unique. Trips like this require a degree



Top left, Keeled Rat snake *Ptyas carinatus*, a large and aggressive colubrid of SE Asia's lowland forests. Above, Reticulate python *Python reticulatus*, the world's longest constrictor and a powerful predator. Left, Banded Coral snake *Calliophis intestinalis* sub. *lineata*, a deadly venomous elapid showing bright aposematic coloration. Note the raised and upturned tip of the tail, showing bright orange ventrals in a typical threat display.

of physical fitness, the willingness to accept and tolerate the occasional difficulty or failure, a tolerance for bad weather, perennially damp conditions and physical discomfort, and last but not least a strong motivation. For us it has been a spectacular experience and we greatly enjoyed every minute of it - we got what we were looking for, and even more than we expected, thanks to our guide's field experience, enthusiasm and total dedication to make the trip a successful one. Despite the perennially damp conditions, our camera equipment - both our Nikon D300s and all our Nikon strobes - performed faultlessly, and our Apple laptop did not miss a beat. The final count of "firsts" or simply exceptional sightings - between the Cameron Highlands and Pulau Tioman - has been stunning for us, numbering - among others - spectacular specimens

of the endemic Camerons pit viper, Wirot's or Siamese pit viper, Oriental Whip snake, Mock viper, Wagler's or Temple viper, White-bellied Rat snake, Common Malayan racer, Red Mountain racer, Dog-faced Water snake, Banded Coral snake and Reticulate python among snakes, Malayan Crested lizard, Green Crested lizard, Mountain Horned lizard, Robinson's Anglehead lizard and Bell's Anglehead lizard among agamids, Twin-spotted Flying frog, Malayan Horned frog and Pied Mossy frog among amphibians plus Giant Rhino beetle, Giant Leaf insect, Giant Stick (or Forest Nymph) insect and the otherworldly Dead Leaf Mantis and Orchid Mantis to name only a few of the insects. We only missed finding a King Cobra, which is apparently plentiful in Tioman - it's going to be a good excuse to go back soon!



A small brook runs among scattered boulders in the lowland and sub-montane dipterocarp and palm rainforest: a typical snake habitat in Pulau Tioman.

Boulder-strewn brooks quietly murmuring in the forest's perennial twilight



A beautiful Reticulate python *Python reticulatus* lies elegantly draped on a treefork in the hot, stifling rainforest of Pulau Tioman. This powerful constrictor of Southeast Asia's forests is still relatively common and may occasionally prove dangerous to humans given the large size - up to a length of 8 meters - it can attain. Its spectacularly-marked livery provides surprisingly efficient camouflage in the sun-dappled forest environment.

■ A Dog-faced Water snake *Cerberus rynchops* hunts for frogs, tadpoles and fish, lying half-submerged in a fast-running, clear mountain stream in Pulau Tioman.



A graceful portrait of supreme reptilian elegance

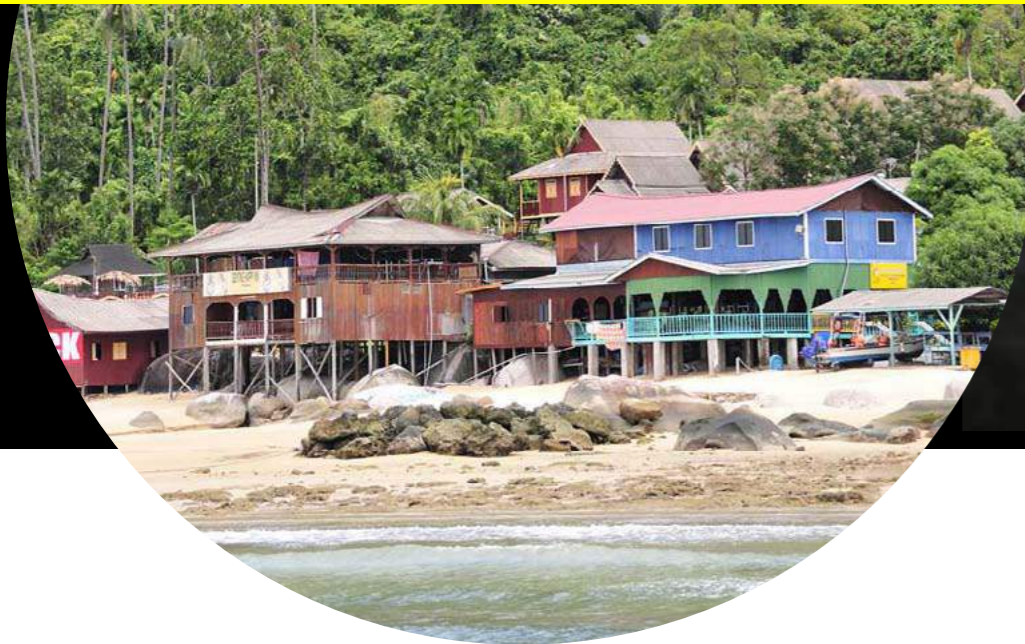
■ A portrait in reptilian elegance, a Malayan Water monitor *Varanus salvator* basks on a granite boulder by a forest stream in Pulau Tioman. Notice its deeply-forked tongue tip testing the air in the presence of an intruder - despite their size these monitors are very wary and very fast, and are not easily approached.



USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

SOME SIMPLE, COMMON SENSE, FIELD-TESTED ADVICE AND INFORMATION TO MAKE THE BEST OUT OF YOUR TRIP AND TO AVOID HASSLES, WORRIES AND PROBLEMS

At-a-glance travel guide



COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: **MALAYSIA**

ROUTE: Your flight will land at KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport), one of the world's most beautiful and modern airports. From there it's a day-long tortuous car drive to the Cameron Highlands, where you'll probably stay in Brinchang or Tanah Rata. If you want to visit Tioman first, you'll have to drive instead all the way down to the peninsular eastern coast to the harbour town of Mersing, spend the night there and catch the ferry to the island the following morning. It's a long and very tiring drive - we recommend going to the Camerons first.

MEANS OF TRANSPORT: Visitors can rent a car in Kuala Lumpur and drive themselves around but we do not recommend this at all - save yourself the trouble and have the trip organized by a local guide who is thoroughly conversant with the routes and the best wildlife viewing spots. Once in the Highlands there will

be some daily driving to get from your hotel to the jungle trails starting points, and then lots of hard walking in steep, slippery, inhospitable terrain. In Tioman it is walking and nothing else - to the point of exhaustion if doing things seriously.

CURRENCY: It's advisable to change one's own currency in the local one (Ringgit Malaysia or RM) upon arrival in KL to save loss of valuable time looking for local bank branches later on.

ACCOMODATION: Pick your choice from beautiful, top-class hotels to very cheap little hostels for locals. We suggest to stay in upper or middle-level accomodation as coming back from a physically demanding jungle trek one is often exhausted, cold and soaking wet, so a reasonable degree of comfort is very appreciated. Keep in mind that hotels in the

Camerons - despite the prevailing cool and wet climate - do not offer room heating. In Tioman the same applies - one can choose from the luxurious **Tioman Berjaya Resort** to a zillion cheap and rather dingy beachfront huts. We choose the former - the dampness and the heat were enough without having to deal with the mosquitoes and the rats, plus we want our expensive camera equipment to be safe when we are not there.

FOOD: Absolutely wonderful - there's an enormous, mouth-watering variety to choose from as Malaysians love eating out. We recommend being adventurous and trying a few of the roadside ethnic Chinese eateries which abound in Brinchang - they certainly look intimidating and not too clean (don't look at the kitchen!), but we always had spectacular food and were never sick. Being helped by your tour guide is a must here - language problems and

Stunning landscapes, great wildlife and wonderful food



choosing exotic dishes in the small restaurants for locals can be pretty daunting. Plus you'll pay a lot more if you're on your own.

LANGUAGE: Malay and English everywhere, but outside of the big towns - when dealing with country folk or the aboriginal Orang Asli - problems might occur if you don't speak Chinese or a local dialect. Having an experienced bilingual local guide with you is strongly advised, especially when venturing beyond the normal tourist circuit - as you'll be doing.

WORRIES: Mosquitoes and other rainforest pests can carry diseases or provoke severe allergic reactions, so it's always better to use repellants. Leeches are omnipresent, messy and in the thousands, but luckily harmless. Forest hiking can be seriously dangerous, so watch your feet as it's all too easy to sprain an ankle or worse. Any small wounds or scratches suffered in the forest must immediately be disinfected and kept under strict observation to avoid serious consequences. With luck, one will be dealing with potentially lethal venomous

snakes, so a degree of caution is highly recommended at all times. These are pristine, untouched highland rainforests where very dangerous animals are still found - so never, repeat never, go hiking on your own.

HEALTH: There's always the possibility of catching malaria or dengue or something else but equally unpleasant, and one has to be fatalistic with such things when going to the forest in the tropics. Food is reasonably safe if just cooked and sizzling hot - particularly in Chinese restaurants - but avoid drinking tap water and fresh uncooked vegetables. The lack of heating in the hotels of the Camerons can be uncomfortable (the five-star ones have fireplaces), and people unused to damp conditions can certainly catch a bad cold there. Tioman is very hot and humid and mosquitoes are prevalent on the island during the wet season, especially inside the forest.

CLIMATE: Strictly tropical - both montane (as in the Camerons, very warm during the day but with cold nights) and lowland (as in Tioman, which is very warm

24 hours a day). During the wet season - which is the best time to find reptiles and insects - torrential downpours can be expected on a daily basis, often lasting several hours and causing dangerous floods.

BESIDES: Besides fascinating wildlife and stunning natural landscapes, the area - as most of Malaysia in general - has very little to offer regarding art or culture. Towns of the Cameron Highlands - such as Brinchang or Tanah Rata - are little more than artificial tourist traps replete with hundreds of restaurants, coffee-shops and various eateries surrounded by slightly grotesque, embarrassing recreations of Tudor England which are however much loved by the local tourists. If your interest lies in strawberry farms or vegetable street markets then you'll be having the time of your life, but do not expect to see much or anything at all in the way of art, culture or even traditional ways of life. Tioman is even worse, as it lives off seasonal tourists and it hibernates the wet season away when nobody comes. Nothing there, not even traditional village life or local folklore - in fact it's a rather closed, not too friendly community. ●



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BIALOWIEZA NATIONAL PARK

IN THE HALLS OF THE BISON KING

Hiking deep in the heart
of Poland's primeval forest in search
of the fabled European Bison



Rotting undisturbed for decades on the forest floor, ancient and gigantic tree trunks are slowly colonized by fungi and mosses, slowly blending with the landscape and returning to the great matrix of the forest. This is Nature at work - almost impossible to see elsewhere in today's highly industrialized Europe.



■ A massive Zubr or European Bison *Bison bonasus* - also known by its German name of Wisent, this is the last of the great European ungulates of antiquity. Large bulls such as this one may be two meters tall and weigh one ton - an imposing and humbling sight.



TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

There are ghosts in the forest. There are ghosts, and banshees, and spirits, and goblins. They hide and rest and sleep during the day, when the great halls and cloisters of the forest are silent and empty, and one walks in the sun. But with dusk and twilight, they come. They come with the thick white fog, which rolls like a wave from the darkness of the treeline, creeping on the meadows and flooding the forest clearings like a milky tide. They come with the full moon, shining bright up in the sapphire ice-cold blue sky, hiding behind the waving, pointed tips of the spruces and birches. They scurry in the undergrowth, running on all fours, dark and irsute, grunting harshly. They bellow with prehistoric echoes from behind the curtain of trees, a sound Jurassic which smells of ages gone past, of melancholy and fury. They hobble across the trail, low and fast, with a creepy undulating motion – pausing only for the briefest of pauses to turn, flashing their yellow chest, to look at you and then disappear among the ferns and nettles once more. They swim in the forest ponds, water rippling in silver waves under the moon, playfully diving and quickly disappearing under the surface. Some say they know better, and call them wild boars foraging for mushrooms and acorns, and Red deer in rut challenging their rivals, pine martens

on the prowl and beavers building their dams – but the doubt stays with us, as Bialowieza's celebrated forest is a place of mystery, of brief glimpses, of eerie sounds, of half-forgotten memories and primordial suggestions. Located at Poland's northeastern frontier, bordering with Belarus, this is Europe's last standing primeval forest – a vast sanctuary of gigantic oaks, linden and ash, an impenetrable fortress of thick alder, maple and hornbeam, a rampart of spruce, birch and Scottish pine which despite having been ravaged by man on several occasions still retains its unique, ageless appeal. Walking among its immense trees, dwarfed by the green giants soaring up in the sky, dodging gigantic tree trunks which have been rotting for decades in the ankle-deep moss, one feels what the Roman legionnaires must have felt when they first crossed the Alps and entered what was then wild, forbidding, untouched continental Europe. The air is fresh and clean, and yet heavy with cool moisture: the forest acts like an immense sponge – its floor is more often than not a mushy, soaked, saturated bog. The smell of cool temperate forests, that unmistakably woody, aromatic smell of pine needles, peaty soil and wet mushrooms pervades every corner of the sanctuary. The sun's rays slant here


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■ Bialowieża's forest landscapes can often be extraordinarily beautiful, especially in autumn. Natural woodland regeneration is allowed and strictly monitored in several sites inside the National Park.



Ancient trees proudly rising like temple pillars towards the sun




A common or grass frog 
Rana temporaria sits unperturbed by its pond in the middle of the forest. Bialowieza's moist forest undergrowth habitat is home to a great number of amphibians.

and there, like through a cathedral's stained glass window, painting golden patches on the open, leaf-littered ground among the trees. And there is silence everywhere – a silence borne of aeons long past, that deep, dizzying silence which only wild untouched natural places can generate, and which the soft buzz of bees and the occasional chirping of a hidden bird can only make even more intimidating. And then of course, above all and all-important, there is the great dark god of the forest, the ancient lord of Bialowieza. Enormous and nimble, powerful and silent, dangerous and shy like all sylvan deities of antiquity, its horned enormous head one readily imagines standing on the sweaty, grimy shoulders of a prehistoric shaman, the European bison inhabits the deepest recesses of the primeval forest like a great spirit, silently appearing now and then - a monstrous dark shadow – revealing itself in brief stunning glimpses among the pale, naked tree trunks. We stalk it for hours and days, moving like ghosts among the thick branches, obsessively checking footprints and droppings, ambushing it at dawn and dusk, now and then crawling on our bellies, communicating in gestures, and when we finally approach it closely, hearts thumping in our chests from excitement and trepidation, the huge bull watches us gravely and intently – its enormous

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■ One of the most typical sights of Białowieża's extraordinary environment - a seasonal bog pond in marshy, spongy ground. Alder, spruce, ash and hornbeam thrive in this habitat.



A photograph of a European Bison (Zubr) in a forest. The bison is partially visible, with its head and chest framed among the trees. The forest is dense with tall, thin trees and many bare branches in the foreground, creating a complex texture. The lighting is soft, suggesting a forest interior.

head and chest framed among the trees, its wild eyes flickering in the darkness of its brow, an image of heart-shaking power and raw wilderness emerging from the ancient legends of Central Europe. A shiver runs down our backs – as we, in mute amazement, kneel in admiration and respect in front of the Zubr, the wild European Bison, the last great survivor of a glorious past, the true King of Bialowieza. Then a brief snort, a muted thumping of hooves, and in a dark flash the savage spirit of the forest vanishes once more.

A COMPLEX TEXTURE OF INTERLACED ENVIRONMENTS

As National Parks go, Bialowieza is somewhat an enigma, as the protected area encompasses an enormous variety of different environments and habitats, ranging from populated and cultivated areas to relatively new forests, and from marshes and riverbanks to the core area or Strict Reserve. This might prove a little confusing at first, since most animal sightings actually take place outside the core area and occasionally on clearings and meadows close to human settlements, while the Strict Reserve – which is cut by the two branches of the Narewka river - offers the most spectacular views of a pristine European forest one can imagine, with trees which can be 700 years old and

■ A typical European Bison encounter in the forest - despite their enormous size and weight, these ungulates can move nimbly and silently among the thick trees of Bialowieza. Approaching them closely requires caution, stealth, patience and good camouflage.

■ A splendid Bison bonasus bull in its prime - which, thanks to our guide Lukasz's tireless tracking, we were lucky enough to sight at twilight in a forest clearing. It took us a long, slow crawl on our bellies in the wet grass to approach him this close - a uniquely rewarding opportunity even if by then the very low light levels forced us to raise our camera settings to 1600 ISO, something we would never do in normal circumstances.



50 meters tall. To further confuse first-time visitors, the so-called Bialowieza forest complex covers a cross-border area of almost 1600 square kilometers, of which about 45% is in Poland and 55% lies instead in Belarus, with the result that this latter part is virtually off-limits for visitors. In fact, while walking there it is not uncommon to be stopped by border patrols and have one's documents carefully checked. Accommodation and great, comforting food are readily available in a variety of options and in a number of small hamlets and villages, from lovely intimate hotels to quaint and very comfortable private homes traditionally built in wood, but another perplexing aspect of the current state of things is that wildlife photographers and nature lovers visiting the area during September and October - as we have done - have to share sighting sites and forest trails with large numbers of mushroom pickers (collecting wild mushrooms, freely permitted inside National Parks, is a much-loved pastime in Poland) and, more worryingly, with big-game hunters coming from all over Europe. It can be extremely disconcerting and occasionally bothersome having to share the breakfast table with a group of bragging shooters carrying high-powered, scope-equipped rifles and not-so casually laying down a freshly stripped set of Red deer antlers from last night's kill...quite possibly the same

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■ A freezing, wind-swept new day dawns on the meadows bordering the forest - such sites usually offer the best chances to sight Red deer in rut and small Bison herds.

■ *Birches in autumn foliage and cobweb-draped long grasses stand transfixed in the icy grip of a freezing new dawn - in a few minutes fog will give way to the sun's rays.*

animal which was the majestic subject of your latest photo (thankfully, they're not allowed to shoot Bison – only Red deer, wild boar and Roe deer). In fact, the clash between time-honored local traditions such as hunting (including poaching) and more enlightened ones such as wildlife viewing and photography is quite apparent everywhere – what we naively took at first sight as wildlife viewing towers, standing on every forest clearing, are in fact shooting hides for hunters, and surprisingly, it is the hunting community plus the Polish casual weekend tourists which seem to represent the bulk of the

visitors to the Park, rather than wildlife photographers and nature lovers from the rest of Europe – although birdwatchers in springtime are a notable exception. Most of the wild or semi-wild area outside of the Strict Reserve (in which hunting is obviously not allowed) is also subject to a strict forest management, as trees are regularly felled for commercial timber – another surprising aspect one would not expect in a National Park. Despite these minor and rather curious – at least to us – details, Bialowieza National Park appears in any case to be a splendidly managed, very well

organized and carefully protected nature reserve – a shining example of wilderness preservation to the rest of the world. Easily reached from all of corners of Europe – it is located only a few hours' drive from Warsaw's Chopin International Airport – it certainly represents one of the Old Continent's most interesting destinations for wildlife photographers and nature lovers – it's safe, accessible, easily explored and stunningly beautiful. Its environment features a very complex and rather interesting geological and botanical history – it's basically a marshy mosaic of several

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■ A fully mature Red deer *Cervus elaphus* stag - a seven or eight pointer judging by its splendid set of antlers - rests by a forest clearing in the late afternoon's warm light. Autumn is rut time for this species - antlers will be shed soon to be grown back next year.



different kinds of forests, including spruce and Scottish pine woods, temperate, deciduous oak, linden and hornbeam mixed forest, alder bog forest and spruce bog forest, with birch woods, open meadows and riverbank reed beds thrown in for good measure - but the details can be too complex (or boring) for the non-botanist layman: for an in-depth, exhaustive description of the different environments found in the area and their history we suggest reading *The Nature Guide to the Bialowieza primeval forest – Poland*, published by **Crossbill Guides**.

SECRETIVE DWELLERS OF THE ANCIENT FOREST

Given its consolidated (and most of the times rather troubled) interaction with man and his intruding activities, the fauna of Bialowieza is predictably wary and very difficult to see - European wildlife, alas, has little to share with its tropical counterparts regarding numbers, population density or confidence, and those hoping for easy, close views of the large mammals - European bison, Red deer, Roe deer, wild boar...not to mention wolf and lynx - are in for a huge disappointment (even if, as ever, there are the lucky exceptions!). Sightings, when they occur, can also be frustratingly brief – often lasting only a few seconds – or from a great distance, so taking good shots of the large mammals can be

exceedingly difficult (don't let yourself be fooled - most images of the Bialowieza mammals available today have been in fact taken in the so-called Bison Reserve, an admittedly very nice zoo where several animals are kept in large, somewhat natural-looking fenced enclosures. Some photos taken there look wonderful, but it's not the same thing as getting them in the wild, obviously). At least 44 mammal species are represented in the National Park grounds – a number without equals in Europe. Most are moderately- to small-sized (foxes, beavers, hares, minks, badgers, raccoon dogs, pine martens, mice, voles), extremely rare and wary (wolf, lynx) or present in very small numbers (less than 30 Elk live in the Park), but European bison – now strictly protected and an icon of modern Poland - have made a successful comeback after being completely wiped out in the wild at the end of World War One: the current population of 300 now residing in Bialowieza descends from the 12 specimens which had survived in captivity, with the first captive-bred individuals having been released in the wild in 1956. Red deer and wild boar have also been successful and are present in large numbers. Seeing these - not to mention being able to photograph them with some measure of success - requires an enormous amount of patience and dedication, a good degree of luck and above all the skills of

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■ A stunning European Bison *Bison bonasus* bull - it always comes as a surprise discovering that an animal of such enormous size and weight can easily jump across a 3 meter wide stream or over a 2 meter obstacle from a standing position. Normally shy and peaceful, bulls can become dangerous during rut, while females will promptly charge humans if separated from their calves. Bison can live up to 27 years in the wild.



■ A scenic bog landscape in the heart of the forest. Such quiet, peaceful corners offer wonderful photo opportunities to visitors, particularly in spring and autumn when colors are at their most vibrant.

a seriously motivated, experienced wildlife guide. We have been exceptionally lucky in this respect having secured the services of Lukasz Mazurek, the founder and owner of WildPoland.com and author of the highly recommended and exhaustive *WildPoland Bialowieza* and *Biebrza Site Guides* - an enthusiastic, highly motivated, exceptionally informative young man who, besides being a very pleasant companion, was able to successfully track down our wary subjects - thanks in no small measure to his relentless obstination in making us happy. Make no mistake, the animals are there - but it takes a lot of experience in the field to find them in the right place and at the right time, so the contribution of a local experienced guide is absolutely essential if one does not want to rely on luck alone or be sorely disappointed, and we can safely recommend Lukasz and his small but highly professional company for a custom-designed trip.

THERE IS A RIGHT TIME AND A RIGHT PLACE FOR EVERYTHING

Different periods of the year predictably present different opportunities - many interesting bird species and mixed bison herds are easier to see in spring and summer (but then the forest foliage is thick and uniformly green), autumn is remarkably good for colors, mushrooms, lone

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Flamed by the nearing of autumn, maple and hornbeam leaves drift on the surface of a forest puddle. Soon they'll be part again of the never-ending cycle of death and regeneration so evident everywhere in Bialowieza.

Approaching bison in the thickly forested habitat they live in usually means slowly and silently negotiating soft, uneven, mossy ground and a tangle of twigs and branches to be able to get a good field of view. It's not easy - but highly rewarding, even if the shot is flawed or not as good as hoped.





■ A rare sight - a bachelor bull grazing at sunset in a forest clearing. The small photo at right gives a good idea of how close one can get - with a good dose of caution - to such a magnificent animal.



bison bulls and rutting Red deer, winter offers spectacular snowy landscapes and allows good views of bison feeding at specially appointed haystacks (at minus 30°C) - but do not be mistaken, time (at least a full week) and stamina are always required to have some reasonable chances of success. There's a lot of walking to be expected (from 8 to 15 kilometers a day, and that can be quite long for photographers carrying 12 kilograms of equipment on their back, as we do), but luckily the forest floor is very open and flat - not like in the tropics! - and the trails are immaculately maintained, so this can actually be very pleasant; light levels inside the forest itself, however, are very low and often problematic even during the day, and that may complicate matters as most sightings of large mammals can be hoped for just before sunrise (from 5am to 6 am) or in the late afternoon (from 5pm to 6pm), at least in autumn. Using a normal tripod for wildlife photography here is out of the question, as most encounters are too short to allow setting up one, so the only other option is raising the ISO values and keeping one's hands steady - you'll need those, as a

400mm lens is the absolute minimum required. The other solution - adopted by several dedicated and hard-working professionals - requires setting up a one-person hide by one of the trail crossroads and sit there all day long with a hot coffee thermos, a long lens and a tripod-mounted camera, from dawn to dusk, hoping for some fine specimen to show up. They usually do, sooner or later - but that is not our idea of enjoying ourselves or enjoying the forest. Bird life is exceptionally abundant in spring (Bialowieza is a woodpecker's paradise with all but one of European species represented, including the rare Three-toed woodpecker, and it hosts eight out of ten Central European owl species, including the diminutive Pygmy Owl) but once again seeing is one thing - European birdwatchers flock in large groups to Bialowieza every year! - and taking good pictures is another, as the dark, sun-dappled forest environment usually frustrates the fast focusing which bird photography requires. There are no dangerous animals in Bialowieza, and those potentially so (bison, wild boar, wolves) keep well clear of humans, so walking is safe at all times - but mosquitoes can be very

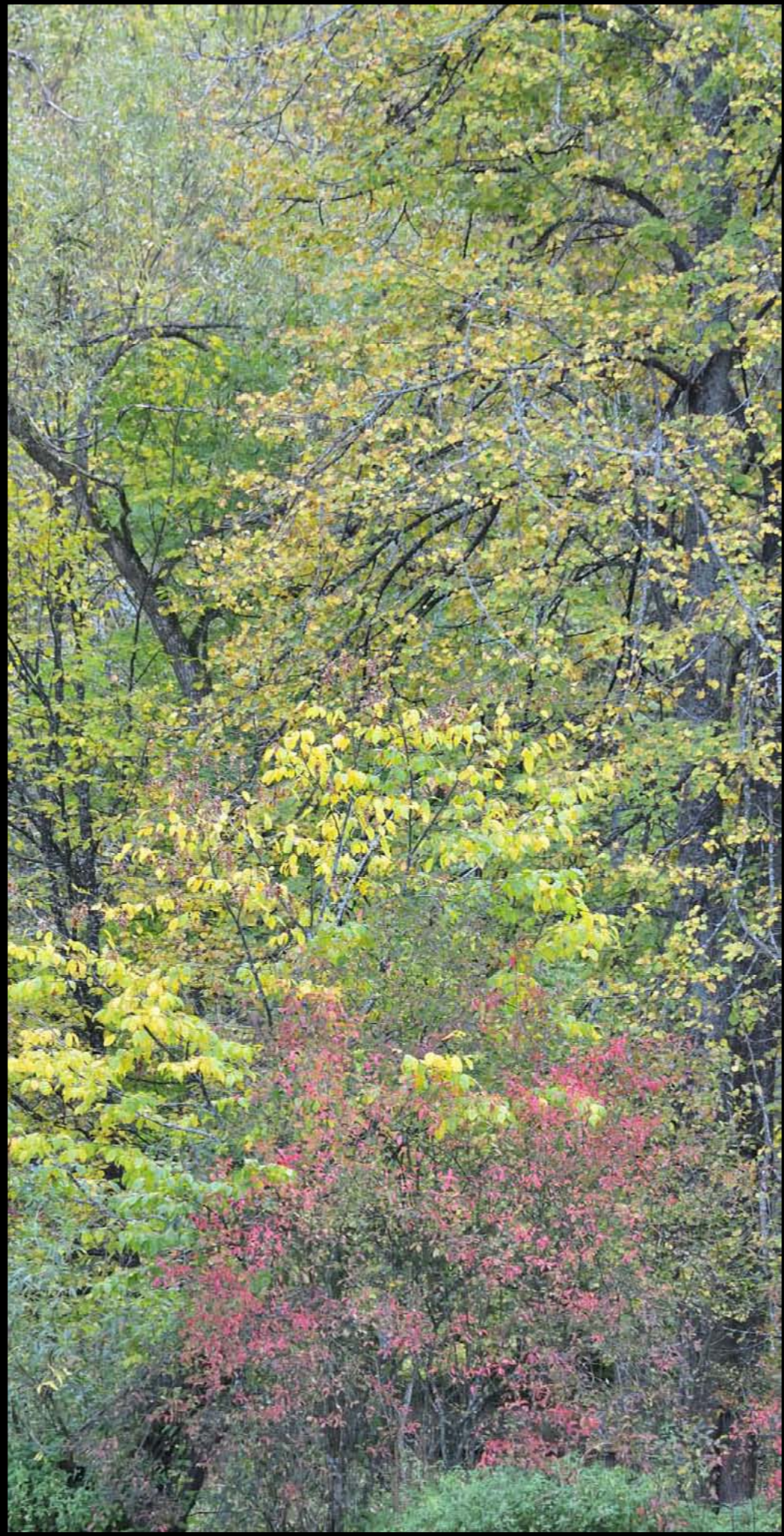
■ Bright green duckweed, colorful dead leaves and a clear blue autumn sky reflected in a quiet forest bog - a few simple elements which conspire in creating images of great appeal and natural beauty.



■ A flaming sunrise heralds the coming of a new day on Bialowieza's ancient forests - many-hued, colorful dawns and sunsets at these latitudes often rival those usually admired at the tropics.

numerous and bothersome in warm weather, and ticks are very common in the tall grasses. These latter blood-sucking parasites are not dangerous *per se*, but they can occasionally transmit Lyme's disease - which can be very serious if not treated in time - and so it is very advisable to wear long sleeves and trousers, tucking them into socks, and check well every part of the body in the evening. If the relative (or rather, the apparent) scarcity of large animals can be very frustrating to the uninitiated, the methodical, careful observation of the forest floor is instead exceptionally rewarding (in September and October the woods are literally alive with thousands of exquisitely camouflaged Grass frogs *Rana temporaria* and millions of colorful, strangely-shaped fungi of all sorts and sizes), so carrying a macro

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More colors from the autumnal palette - from left, maple, oak and hornbeam leaves; hornbeam and spindle tree foliage; and the unmistakably glassy, bright red berries of guelder rose.

■ Backlit by the early morning sun, dry tall grasses sway in the breeze on a forest clearing. Such habitats offer excellent opportunities to sight raptors and other birds and small mammals.



or wide-macro set up is obviously recommended to all. And then of course there are the spectacular landscapes of Bialowieza - open meadows and luminous forest clearings, tree trunk shapes and bark textures, solemn forest panoramas, peaceful beaver ponds, the black still pools of peat bogs - which truly have few or no rivals at all in the rest of Europe. Colors in autumn can be absolutely stunning and a photographer's dream - the cool blue-green of spruces, the golden leaves and silver-white trunks of birches, the flaming red and oranges of Norway maples, the bright yellow of hornbeam, the fluorescent vermilion and fuchsia of fruiting Spindle trees all blend harmoniously in a glorious and uniquely European tapestry. There are moments - especially at dawn - when the delicate, exquisite beauty of the surrounding landscape, still cloaked in mist, is truly overwhelming. It is then that the secret, mysterious essence of Bialowieza is finally revealed to those humble enough to watch and learn. Silently standing in the early morning's frost, the pilgrim hushes in awe, transfixed by nature's epiphany, as from the fog shrouding the meadows an electric vibration of cold hues rises, evoked by the first, streaming rays of the rising sun: that shimmering, shivering, magical curtain which shelters now and forever, like in an ancient Slavic fable, the mystery of the Halls of the Bison King.

■ The Common toad *Bufo bufo* is often encountered during the day if the weather has been wet - given the opportunity, this robust and well-camouflaged amphibian will not hesitate to prey on large insects, reptiles, frogs and even small mammals.



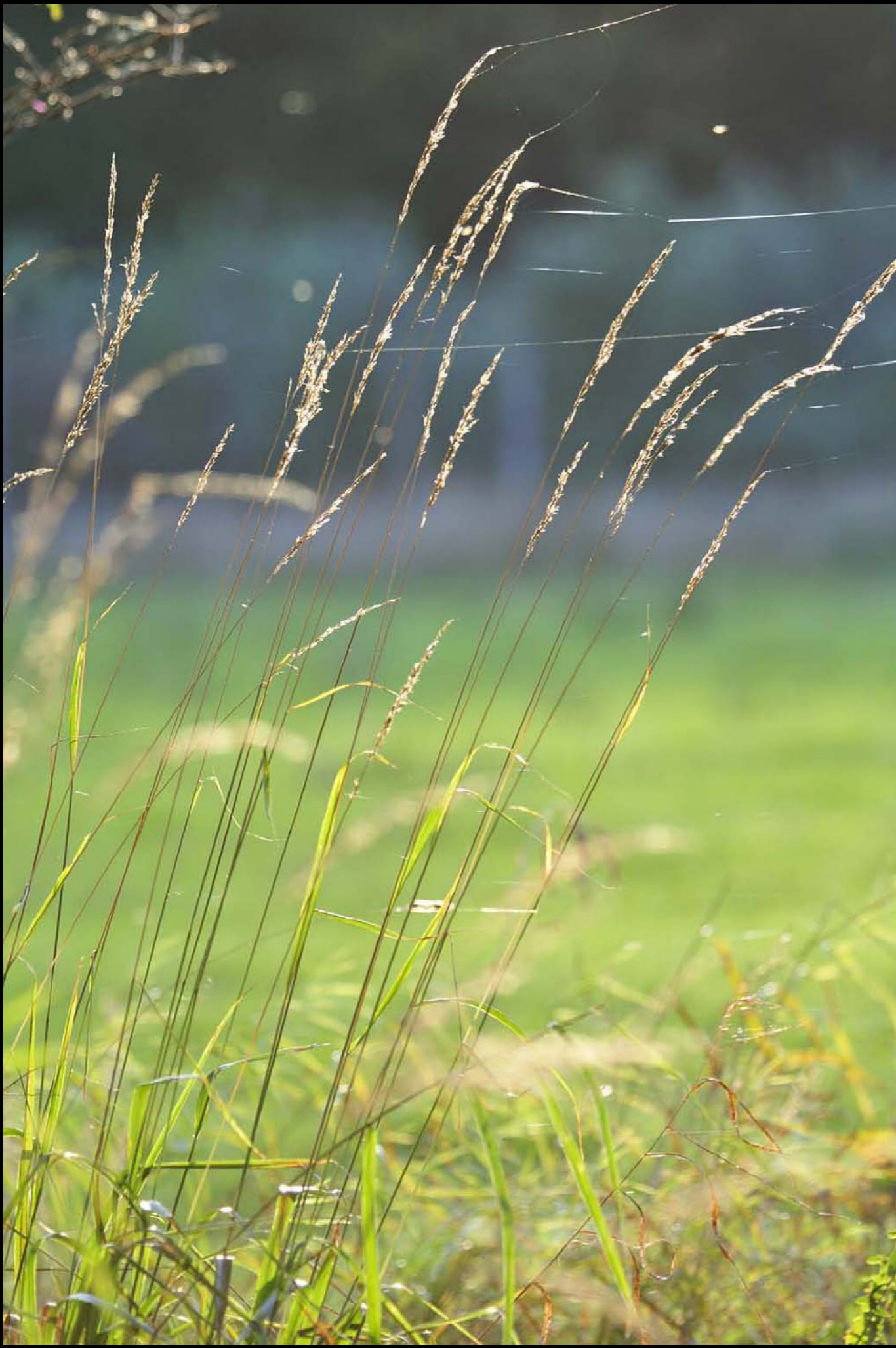
■ Guided excursions inside the Strict Reserve offer stunning photographic opportunities to visitors, even if actual animal sightings can be rare. The trails run between scenic alder bog forests and imposing oak, linden and hornbeam mixed woods, where some trees can be 50 meters tall - that is rainforest size, unheard of elsewhere in Europe today.





More details from the universe of Bialowieża's forest - a mushroom colony, the heavily fissured bark of an ancient tree, a clump of ferns in the undergrowth.





More impressions from Bialowieza: grasses waving in the golden afternoon sun (far left), a Spotted Flycatcher *Muscicapa striata* perching on the wooden fence of a country cottage, an unidentified species of field mouse surprised in the forest (below).





■ During September and October - if the weather has been favorable - Bialowieza is trasformed in a magical kingdom of mushrooms, with an overwhelming number and variety of fungi growing literally everywhere.



■ Feared by all and persecuted by many, wary and endangered, the European wolf *Canis lupus lupus* lives in small packs and is very rarely sighted in the forests of Bialowieza. Antonella's hand beside the footprint freshly left by a large wolf gives a good idea of the size of the specimen - this Alpha male might very well weigh more than 70 kgs. Tracks left by this highly sociable and mysterious predator are very often observed along the trails which criss-cross the forest.



Autumn lighting and foliage in Bialowieza offer truly superb opportunities for landscape photographers - here the long meadow grasses, immersed in a cool golden glow, acquire an almost theatrical quality.



Looking like a dead leaf but ready to jump away at a moment's notice

■ A common or grass frog *Rana temporaria* on the forest floor. At these latitudes this species can still be quite active at very low temperatures - nearing 0°C - and at a remarkable distance from streams and ponds.





More examples of the stunning variety and quantity of mushroom species found in Bialowieza during September and October. The bright livery of the Toadstool or Fly Agaric *Amanita muscaria* (right) advertises its hallucinogenic and potentially deadly properties.





Wild boars *Sus scrofa* are possibly some of the most easily observed large animals in the Bialowieza forest. Wary, intelligent and alert, often foraging in groups, these relatives of the domestic pig will occasionally charge intruders - with very scary and potentially dangerous consequences, as their tubular snout conceals a pair of curved, razor-sharp tusks, particularly developed in males.

■ The fiery autumn foliage of Norway maple is instantly recognized - single Acer platanoides trees stand out at a great distance.



■ The sun sets in a fiery display - eastern European skies have a special quality to them which is rather unique in our experience, often offering spectacular cloud formations which are seldom observed further west.



CLICK ON THE IMAGES AND WATCH THREE SHORT VIDEOS ON SOME OF BIALOWIEZA'S MOST SPECTACULAR NATURAL HIGHLIGHTS

Bialowieza NP



Mushroom Heaven



Bison





Colors - from the technicolored foliage of the autumn forest to the leaves of a fern burnished by the frost, to the soft hues of a rainbow gloriously rising above the forest after a rain squall.





■ The sun's rays, filtering and scything from the tree canopy above, often increase one's sensation of entering a cathedral or a temple - ancient forests such as this one have a distinctly mystical quality.



A variety of species, colors and habitats. Top left, a juvenile Common toad *Bufo bufo*; bottom left, a few brightly colored Norway maple leaves stand out on the forest floor; right, the stunning change brought to a football-field sized stretch of forest by a family of beavers - which first dammed a small brook and then flooded it, transforming it into a veritable lake.





■ The forest canopy stretches above. Trees in Bialowieza can reach a very old age and a very remarkable height: oak trees *Quercus robur* (40 meters), linden *Tilia cordata* (40 meters) and Ash *Fraxinus excelsior* (40 meters) are some of the tallest species. The record however belongs to the Norway spruce *Picea abies* which can reach a height of 57 meters.



■ The European or Eurasian lynx *Lynx lynx* is - together with the wolf - the top predator of the Białowieża forest. Nicknamed "the Silver Ghost of the Forest" for its wariness, this stealthy, cunning feline is very rarely observed and even less often photographed in the wild. No more than 200 individuals of this very secretive species are present in Poland at the moment, even if its areal stretches from western Europe to Siberia.



The cold stare of the silver ghost of the forest



■ The warm, golden light of a late autumn afternoon lends a distinctly magical quality to this simple forest landscape - those rounded willow bushes, tall spruces and sharply defined birch trees might very well serve as a Pre-raphaelite set to Mozart's Magic Flute.

■ An old, massive bison bull strides fearlessly and purposefully towards us - a good reminder of man's puniness when facing Nature. Saved by man at literally the last minute by a man-induced extinction, this spectacular species now stands as a symbol - still endangered, yes, but hopefully recovering - of what can and must be done to preserve our natural heritage.



A living symbol of Europe's endangered natural heritage

USEFUL TIPS FOR YOUR EXPEDITION

SOME SIMPLE, COMMON SENSE, FIELD-TESTED ADVICE AND INFORMATION TO MAKE THE BEST OUT OF YOUR TRIP AND TO AVOID HASSLES, WORRIES AND PROBLEMS

At-a-glance travel guide



COUNTRY OF DESTINATION: **POLAND**

ROUTE: Your plane will land at Chopin Warsaw International Airport, a thoroughly modern and well organized facility. From there it's a comfortable five-hour car drive due north-east on good, well-maintained roads to your destination, Bialowieza National Park, close to the border with Belarus.

MEANS OF TRANSPORT: You might rent a car in **Warsaw** and drive yourself but we do not advise you to - save yourself the trouble and have the trip organized by a guide who is familiar with the routes and the best wildlife viewing spots. Once in the Park you will have to drive for short distances and then walk - a lot - on very easy, perfectly maintained forest trails. Many visitors also rent bicycles, which are available at every lodge - an excellent and

enjoyable choice but not an easy or comfortable one for equipment-laden wildlife photographers.

CURRENCY: It's advisable to change one's own currency in the local one (Polish Zloty) upon arrival in Warsaw to save loss of valuable time looking for small local bank branches later on.

ACCOMODATION: Pick your choice from beautiful, top-class hotels to simple, family-style cottages. There's a bit for everybody, so it really depends on your preferences. We elected to stay in small, cozy family-run wooden cottages to have a real taste of local life and traditional cuisine and did not regret it. Even basic, unexpensive accomodation is usually very clean and well heated.

FOOD: Fantastic! Heavy and abundant stuff due to the climate - plenty of smoked and cured pork, venison, herring, cabbage, pickles and preserved fruit. Surprisingly, little or no beef is consumed locally. Beware - this isn't an ideal destination for strict vegetarians! Don't miss *pirogi* (stuffed dumplings), the local *bortsch* (the celebrated eastern european red beet and sour cream soup) and Polish *kompot*, a brew of dried fruit and hot water which is both warming and refreshing - and which goes surprisingly well with the hearty food of the area.

LANGUAGE: Polish - obviously - and some German and Russian. Very little or no English at all is spoken in eastern Poland - one more reason to have a guide you can communicate with along.

A treasure trove of European history, art and culture



WORRIES: None. Locals are very decent, private, reasonably friendly country folk. Crime is almost non-existent. Food and drink are absolutely safe. Trails are easy to follow and well marked, there are no seriously dangerous animals (well, don't disturb Bison or Wild boar!) and it is rare not to meet other hikers in the forest anyway. Mosquitoes can be real pests in season however, and ticks are a serious liability, so bring some good repellent as there's none available locally.

HEALTH: No worries worth mentioning except the risk of catching Lyme's diseases if bitten by a carrier tick. If the bite mark shows a white circle have it inspected by your doctor as soon as possible - Lyme's disease is easily cured but can have very serious consequences if left untreated.

CLIMATE: Continental European - reasonably warm summers, cool mid-seasons, freezing winters with lots of snow. Can be very cold at dawn and dusk - dress in layers. Good, well worn-in hiking boots and rubber wellingtons are a must as there's a lot of marshy, boggy terrain in the woods. Forest photography is not easy due to prevalent low light conditions and lots of obstacles (branches, twigs, leaves) between you and your subject.

BESIDES: Besides the wildlife, Poland offers all the extraordinary attractions of one of the great cradles of European culture. Local hamlets in the north-eastern area provide interesting photo opportunities with their colorful wooden houses, and in Tykocin, nearby Bialowieza, one should not miss visiting the baroque Synagogue Beit ha-

Kneset ha-Godol, built in 1642. It will offer the opportunity for some sombre reflections about some of the Country's darkest moments in history as the Jewish population of Tykocin - numbering 2.000 - was slaughtered *en masse* by the Nazis on 25-26 August 1941. Then of course there's the rebuilt center of old **Warsaw** - razed to the ground during the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1944 and subsequently rebuilt brick upon brick with spectacular results - which one should not miss visiting before flying back home at the end of the trip. Poland offers many other exceptionally beautiful, not-to-be missed destinations - such as the historically and artistically significant **Krakow**, a jewel of a city - which however lie beyond the scope of this guide. For art, architecture and music lovers it is a destination of a lifetime. ●

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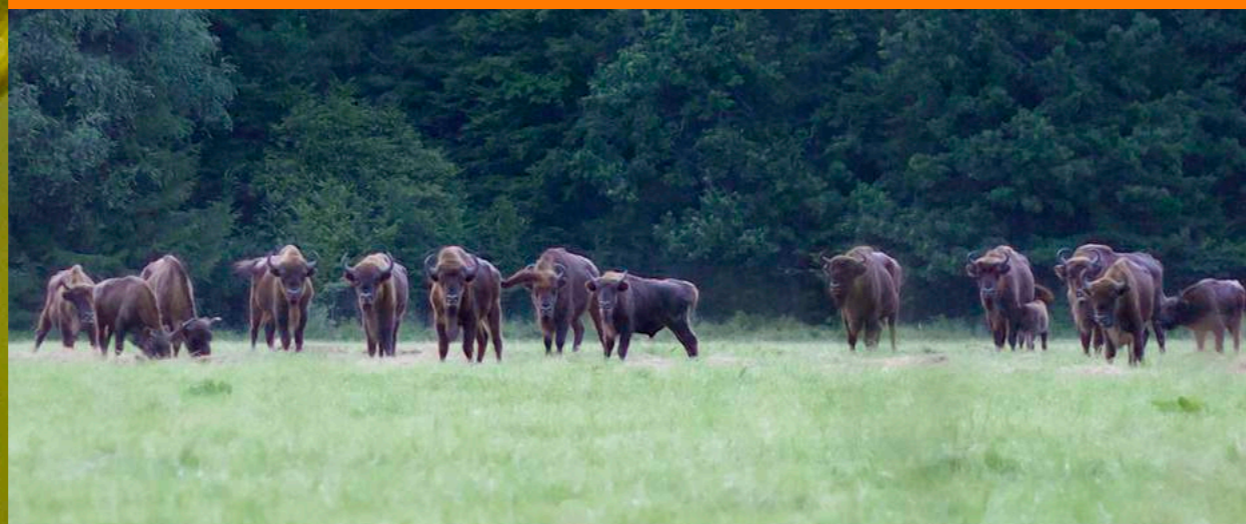
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A Spine-cheek Anemonefish *Premnas biaculeatus* snuggling among the tentacles of a Lightbulb sea anemone *Entacmaea quadricolor*, its exclusive host. Females of this species - as the one pictured - are much larger and less brightly colored than the males.

ADORABLE CLOWNS OF THE SEA

ANEMONE FISH

Everybody loves the cute and colorful clownfish, a tropical symbiont which finds safety among the deadly venomous tentacles of its host

A vibrant underwater scene in the Maldives. Two large, purple, bulbous anemones with thick, wrinkled bodies and numerous yellowish-tan tentacles are attached to a rocky reef. A Black-footed Anemonefish (Amphiprion nigripes) is seen sheltering in the space between the two anemones. The fish has a bright orange body with a white stripe and a black band. The water is clear and blue, with sunlight filtering through from the surface, creating a shimmering effect. The reef is covered in various colorful corals and algae.

A Black-footed Anemonefish *Amphiprion nigripes* shelters between two large anemones in the Maldives. Notice the shallow, sunlit, current-swept environment which is typical of this genus and its symbiotic hosts.

W

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

we all know and love clownfish. Also commonly known as anemonefish - a name which suits them rather more aptly - these small and colorful reef denizens belong to the very important and large family of the *Pomacentridae*, numbering a grand total of more than 300 species and which they share with other very common, shallow-water fish such as damselfishes. Counting more than ten different species in Indo-Pacific waters, clownfish are widely regarded as easily approachable if a little pesky camera subjects and adorable (but presumably rather unwilling) aquarium guests. In fact, they're so pretty it's easy loving them to death (or to near extinction) as it almost happened several years ago when the commercial success of the Disney/Pixar animated movie *Finding Nemo* prompted hundreds of thousands of kids worldwide to beg for one - with the dire result that as many were cyanide- or net-fished out of the sea only to end up down toilet drains when the little brats and their unknowing parents found out that caring for them was not really as easy as expected.

In nature they're well known for being symbionts - living in relative harmony together with another completely different marine organism, both of them getting mutual benefits from the relationship. In this case, the other organism is quite unique - the deadly venomous sea anemone, a beautiful


and often gaudily colorful living carpet of toxic tentacles rising from a velvety, fleshy foot, closely related both to corals and to jellyfish. Every single sticky tentacle of this soft-bodied creature is quite capable of injecting a deadly dose of toxins in the body of the unfortunate organism touching it (that is how anemones get their food by the way) through a number of microscopic "needles" shooting on contact. Any creature living in the cuddly embrace of such a terrifying host would be quite safe from hungry predators - so how do clownfish avoid getting paralyzed and eaten by the anemone? It seems they just trick it in believing they're part of itself - gradually and daily wriggling among its tentacles with great care since they're very young, they absorb its "surface identity" in the layer of mucus which covers their bodies: after some time, the toxic tentacles of the anemone do not react anymore to the touch of the clownfish, since they do not recognize it as a potential prey item. Strip a clownfish of its protective layer of mucus however, and the little cunning fellow will be instantaneously paralyzed and eaten by the anemone like any other fish. No wonder the little pugnacious clownfish will rise up to an approaching diver's face, nibbling ferociously at noses, ears and probing fingers, bravely defending their turf at the slightest suggestion of encroachment! And yes - as funny as

continued on page 94 >



*Safely snuggling
in the deadly embrace
of its velvety host*

With its sharply banded black, white and bright orange livery, the Western Clown Anemonefish *Amphiprion ocellaris* is perhaps the epitome of this group of colorful, active fish. Hundreds of thousands of individuals belonging to this species are captured annually for the aquarium trade, often meeting a very uncertain future.

A Western Clown 
Anemonefish *Amphiprion*
ocellaris wriggling among the
tentacles of its venomous host -
its rounded facial features
screaming cuteness
and cuddliness to most
first-time viewers.



it may sound, being nibbled by an angry clownfish defending its "investment" can occasionally be startling - it doesn't hurt, but it's definitely felt, even through gloved hands. On the other hand, we understand how clownfish profit by their lifelong association with anemones, but it's not really always clear what sort of advantage the anemone itself gets from its little hosts. It is true that they will strenuously defend it from intruders, but that would seem more a defense of their own territory than of the anemone itself, and anyway such a noxious creature is perfectly capable of defending itself (one can see hundreds of anemones on a reef without a single clownfish in them, and yet they're all perfectly healthy). And clownfish are not the only ones to take advantage of the anemones' toxicity, as the frequent presence of porcelain crabs and several species of shrimp on their mantle can readily attest.

SHOOTING THE CLOWN

The technicolored show offered by a family of little clownfish comically wriggling inside a colorful anemone is just too typical of a reef scene to be ignored. They're commonly encountered in shallow, well-lit areas of the reef, often on coral rubble stretches which are subject to strong currents - in the spots offering their almost completely static anemone hosts the best feeding opportunities. As for clownfish themselves being good camera subjects, that's open to debate. They certainly look great but we find them quite obnoxious and generally hysterical, since they never stop swimming to and fro for a second, and trying to get a good snapshot of one is not the simplest of toils. In fact, one (very good and field tested) theory suggests to pre-focus where you'd like them most to be on their anemone's mantle - and then click when they enter it by pure chance. Sooner or later it must happen! ●

Tiny pugnacious lords of their own little turf in the reef world






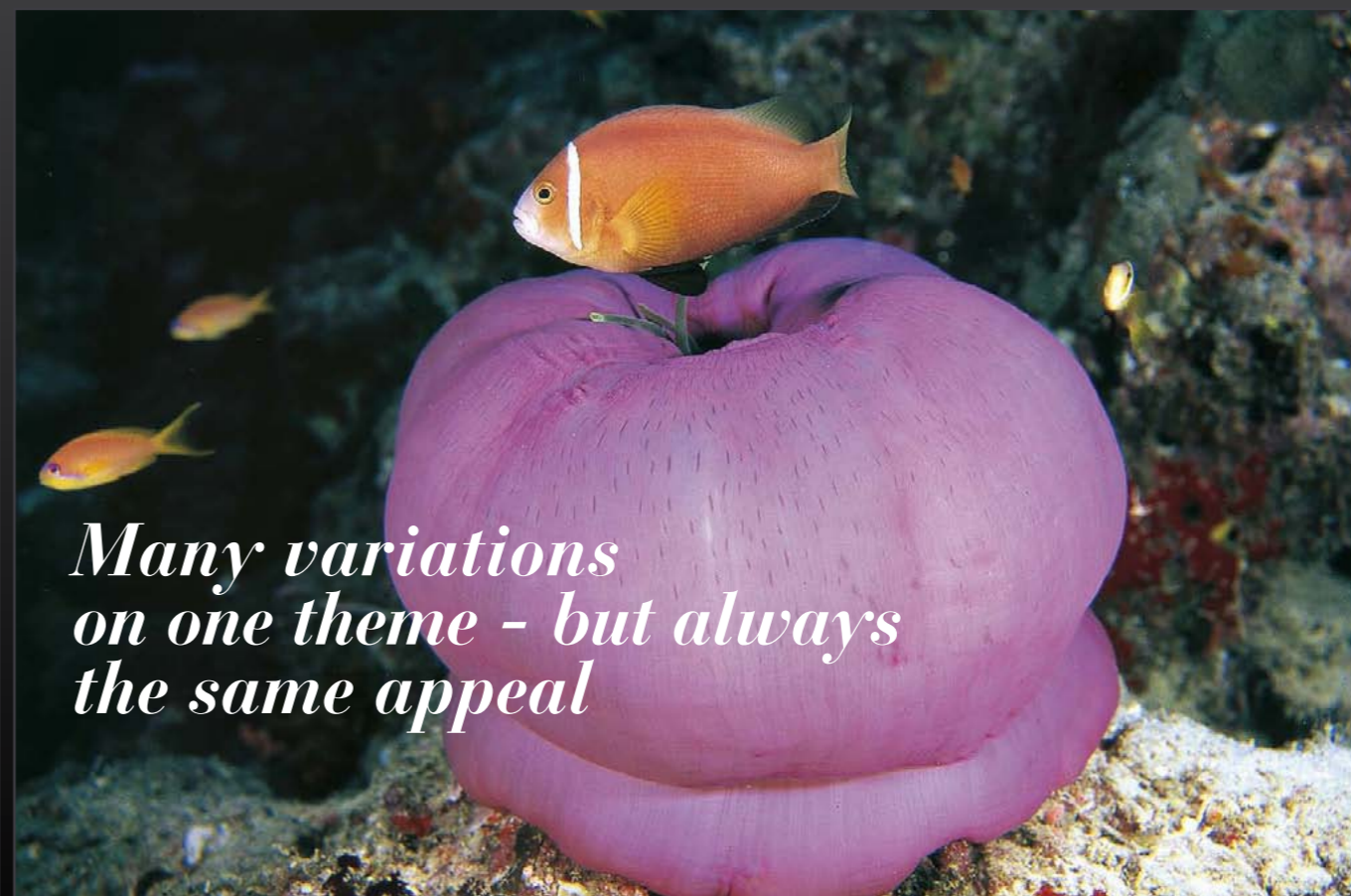
— The Bridled Anemonefish *Amphiprion frenatus* (far left) and the rather more delicately nuanced Pink Anemonefish *Amphiprion perideraion* (left) are commonly found on most Central and Western Indo-Pacific coral reefs. Notice the fleshy texture and chromatic variations shown by their anemone host.



— A small male Spine-cheek Anemonefish *Premnas biaculeatus* emerges from the psychedelic maze of the lightbulb-shaped tentacles of its exclusive host, the anemone *Entacmaea quadricolor*. No matter how small, all Anemonefish will always strenuously defend their territory and their host.

A large colony of yellow-tailed Amphiprion melanopus anemones covers a rocky reef in Raja Ampat, West Papua. The anemones are densely packed, with many showing a yellowish-brown color. Several clownfish are visible swimming among the anemones. The background shows the deep blue water of the reef.

A gigantic colony of what appears to be a local yellow-tailed variety of *Amphiprion melanopus* covers an area of several square meters in shallow water. Raja Ampat, West Papua.



Clockwise: top left, male Spine-cheek Anemonefish *Premnas biaculeatus*, Central Indo-Pacific; left, Western Anemonefish *Amphiprion ocellaris*, Central Indo-Pacific; bottom, Black-footed Anemonefish *Amphiprion nigripes*, Indian Ocean, with its retracted anemone; bottom left, Panda Anemonefish *Amphiprion polymnus*, Central Indo-Pacific, the only species of this genus commonly observed on silty habitats, well away from coral reefs.

Many variations on one theme - but always the same appeal



A very large colony of Two-banded Anemonefish *Amphiprion bicinctus*. This is the only species of clownfish found in the Red Sea, where it can often be seen in colonies of several hundred individuals sheltering on "living carpets" made of closely-set sea anemones.

ANIMA MUNDI
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CLICK ON THE IMAGE AND WATCH A SHORT VIDEO ON THE LIFE AND HABITS OF CLOWNFISH IN THEIR CORAL REEF HABITAT

The Adorable Anemonefish





These Clark's Anemonefish *Amphiprion clarkii*, photographed in the Sulu Sea off the coast of Borneo, look somewhat less endearing than the average clownfish - is it the toothy scowl or the convict stripes? The cuteness factor inherent in all anemonefish belies in fact their severely pugnacious nature.

These stripes tell a message - don't trespass or you'll get it from us!



Reef life at its vibrant, dazzling, technicolored best - with the ubiquitous clownfish and their swaying sea anemone hosts playing an indispensable part in the picture, both visually and ecologically.

Raja Ampat...

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Amazing Amazonia

One man's love story with the Amazon Basin and its elusive apex predator, the endangered Jaguar, has resulted in a collection of truly stunning images. *Anima Mundi's* first Guest Wildlife Photographer shares them with us



Roberto Fabbri: A Wildlife Photographer in his own words

Born in Rome, Italy, and a photographer for the last 45 years, I had an unusual start in the underwater world. It happened in the early 60's during my first discovery of scuba diving. U/W photography in those years was really challenging, equipment was "invented" day by day, Rolleiflex and Hasselblad were the only camera manufacturers offering U/W housings. In 1968, in the waters of the Red Sea, on a reef off Port Sudan, I had the luck to photograph a Manta ray giving birth and even today, after so many years, my images are the only evidence of such an event in the wild. My work was published in magazines all over the world. In 1969 I won the Silver Star at the prestigious International Underwater Photography Contest, the Premio Maurizio Sarra in Italy; David Doubilet, the American grand master of U/W photography and *National Geographic Magazine* photographer, won the Gold.

I have been living for last 14 years in Belize, a small country in Central America; I was immediately attracted by the wonders and beauty of its wilderness, its forest, its wildlife and the underwater

world of its barrier reef, the second longest in the world. In 2002 I made the transaction to digital, facing all the problems and challenges of this new photographic era. During the last few years, I have organized many expeditions to the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, in Peru, a vaste area of rainforest, home to many National Parks: Parque Nacional del Manu, Reserva Nacional Tambopata, Parque Nacional Bahuja-Sonene. Traveling in these areas is always problematic considering the equipment a photographer normally carries, now adding laptops, hard drives, portable electric generators, etc. But the hardships are always worth it: the chances to encounter wildlife are good, the rewards for the wildlife photographer are extremely satisfying. In 2009 I traveled to the Pantanal in the state of Mato Grosso in Brazil; I spent several weeks at the Jaguar Research Center, a small tent lodge owned by the renowned zoologist Dr. Charles Munn, a pioneer in eco-tourism. My goals for the future: to travel more in the remote areas of South America, especially Brazil, Peru and Bolivia. There is so much wildlife to see. ●



During the time I spent at Lago Huitoto in the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, an oxbow lake formed by the flood of the Rio Madre de Dios, I always encountered abundant wildlife. These three baby Black Caimans, *Caiman niger*, were part of a large group sunbathing on a log on the beach side. I got very close and they did not pay much attention to me; in fact this particular one, to show his total indifference, yawned in my face! Rainforest of Lago Huitoto, Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.

Baby Black Caiman,
Caiman niger,
with a nasty fly on the head
sucking its blood,
Amazon Basin of Madre
de Dios, Cocha Cusiyacu,
Peru, South America.
Cocha is the Spanish
and local name for oxbow
lakes, those temporary
natural basins formed by
the flood of the great rivers
in the Amazon basin.



Chestnut-eared Aracari,

Pteroglossus castanotis, outside his nest. Toucans, parrots and macaws don't build conventional nest as other birds do using leaves, straw or sticks, but they nest in natural cavities they find in trees, where females lay their eggs. It is believed they use the same nest over and over. This picture was taken using a Nikon D2Xs with a Sigma 300-800 mm, a total focal length of 1200 mm due to the crop factor of the DX format; the lens was mounted on a carbon fiber tripod, and because of a silly mistake by the photographer a few minutes later it fell in the murky waters of the Rio Manu, an affluent of the Rio Madre de Dios! Our very brave female cook grabbed the tripod by one leg just before it sunk in the river, and the combined weight pulled her into the river, but with bravery she held to her catch! There was no hope of repairing the lens, but at least I still enjoy the tripod. Rain forest of Parque Nacional del Manu, Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.



The Amazon Basin of Peru

The Amazon basin of the Madre de Dios has been my destination for four expeditions, from 2004 to 2007.

This vast area of tropical and rain forest is home to two major National Parks and to the Tambopata-Candamo Reserve Zone:

- Parque Nacional del Manu (Manu National Park) is just immense with 3,785,000 acres of pristine habitat, ranging from the grassy puna highlands on the Cordillera Oriental at 14,000 feet, to the wet tropical forest of the Amazon lowlands. In terms of biodiversity Manu has the highest numbers of plants and animal species in the whole world.
- Parque Nacional Bahuaja-Sonene with 1,365,000 acres.
- Tambopata-Candamo Reserve Zone with 3,650,000 acres.

These three large areas of wilderness, in terms of biodiversity, have the highest number of plants and animals in the world; over 1,000 species of birds, 20,000 species of plants, 1,200 species of butterflies; this is wildlife heaven, one of the best eco-tourism destination in the world. I visited the Parks more than once, but time has always been the problem - one will always need to spend long months, if not actually years, in order to appreciate what the nature of the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios has to offer. The only way to move around is by boat; rivers are the only highways. One can easily travel for miles and miles in total wilderness, with little contacts with humans, and we all know where there is water there is life. Wildlife is abundant on the riverbanks, offering frequent encounters with families of capybaras, white and black caimans, large flocks of macaws, birds in large quantities, monkeys, giant otters, tapirs and even with the elusive jaguar.

Osprey, *Pandion haliaetus*, flying over the waters of Lake Summerset, Lakeland, Valrico, Florida.



Black-collared Hawk, *Busarellus nigricollis*, caught just a fraction of a second before catching a fish in the Rio Pixaim, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.





Jabiru stork,
Jabiru mycteria,
 flying over the waters
 of Rio Pizaim,
 Pantanal Wildlife
 Center, Pantanal,
 Mato Grosso, Brazil,
 South America.



Andean Cock-of-the-rock,
Rupicola peruviana, male, female is rusty orange with
 small crest and brownish wings and tail. This is the
 national bird of Peru, found in middle and low levels of
 cloud forest vegetation, especially near rocky streams.
 Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.



Immature Harpy Eagle, *Harpia harpyja*, the largest bird of prey of the Americas. This one was about six months old and couldn't fly yet, waiting for its mother to bring food. Rain forest of the Amazon Basin of Rio Colorado, Madre de Dios, Peru, South America.

Harpy Eagle

In early 2006, a friend from Peru, Alex Torres - a birdwatching tour guide - contacted me because he knew of a nest of an Harpy Eagle. These enormous birds of prey, the largest in the Americas, always build their nest on very tall and isolated trees with absolutely no climbing vines, to protect their eggs and chicks from predators. On this occasion the nest was on a private property close to the gold town of Colorado, on the Rio Madre de Dios; the only activity in this little town has always been gold mining, generation after generation.

A flimsy metal scaffolding acting as an observation tower was installed just 100 feet (30 meters) from the nest tree: it was 110 feet tall, a really scary and unpleasant daily climb. For a full week I spent every day - from dawn to sunset - precariously perched on a small wooden platform installed at the top, and apart from the chick of the harpy eagle it was not the best time of my life! I never had the chance to see or photograph the mother, only the baby; she came three times bringing food, and we missed her on every occasion.



A couple of Hyacinth Macaws, *Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*, a common encounter in the Pantanal. Pantanal Wildlife Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



Keel-billed Toucan, *Ramphastos sulfuratus*, the national bird of Belize, caught inside (outside) his nest carrying a fruit in his beak for his chicks. Toucans, parrots and macaws don't build conventional nest such as those of other birds but they nest in natural cavities they find in trees, where they lay the eggs. It is believed they use the same nest over and over. Belize, Central America.



Giant Otter, *Pteronura brasiliensis*, eating the fresh catch of the day, a heavily armored catfish called *cascudo*. Giant Otters are categorized by the IUCN Red List as an endangered species. Oxbow lake of Sao Pedrinho, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

Spectacled Caiman, *Caiman crocodilus*, with his catch of the day in the mouth, a *cascudo*. Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas State Park, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.





**Southern
Tamandua,**
*Tamandua
tetradactyla*, upside
down, feasting on a
large termite nest on a
tree in the rain forest
of the Amazon Basin,
Rio Las Piedras,
Madre de Dios, Peru,
South America.

Red Howler Monkey,
Alouatta seniculus,
female, carrying
on her back her newborn
baby in the trees
of the rain forest
of the Manu National
Park, Amazon Basin of
Madre de Dios, Peru,
South America.





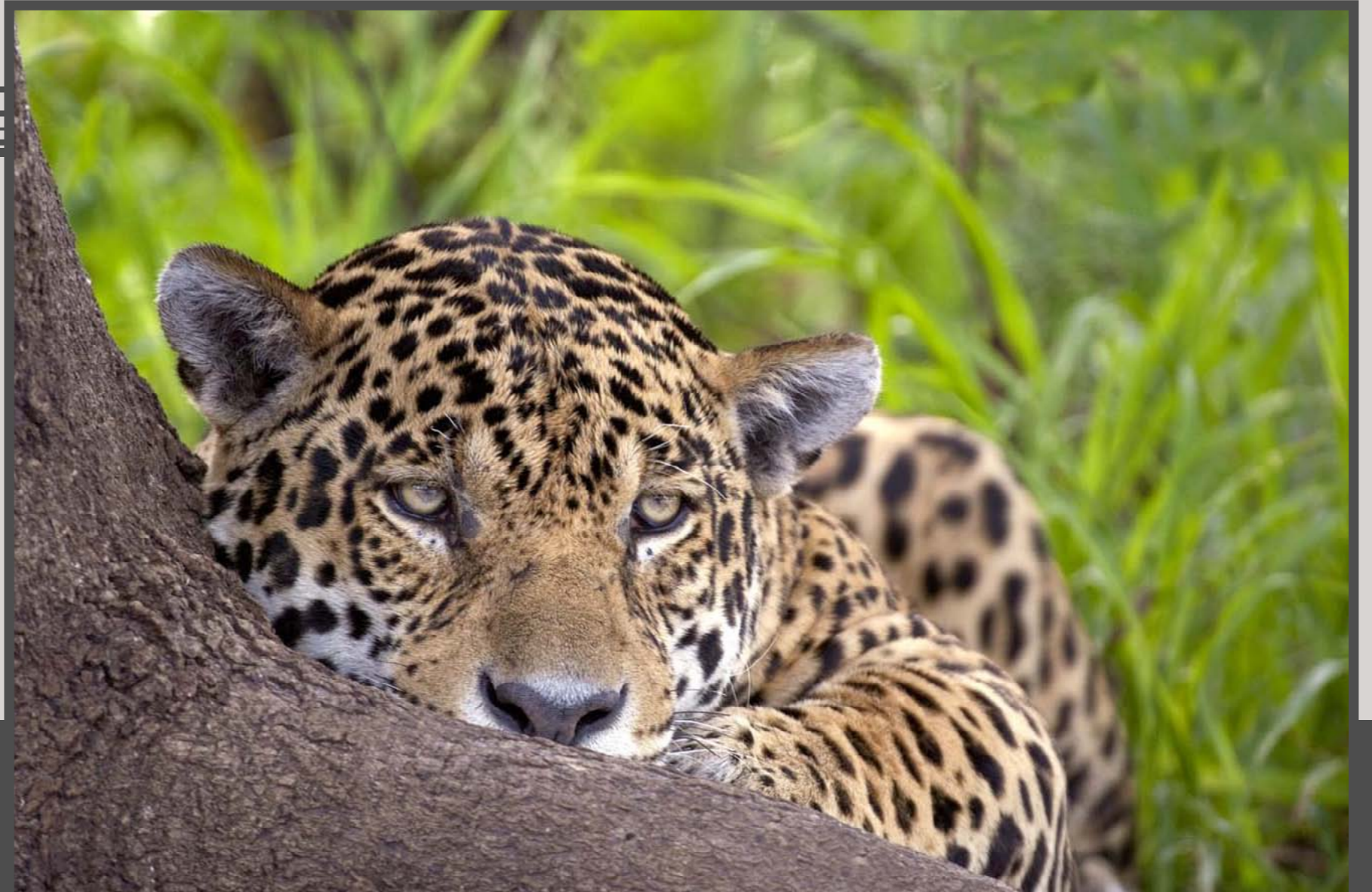
Roseate Spoonbill,

Ajaja ajaja, in flight,
carrying nest
building material.
Alafia Banks,
Tampa Bay,
Florida.

Red and Green Macaws, *Ara chloroptera*,
at early morning clay lick, getting their daily dose
of mineral dietary supplement. Rainforest of Rio
las Piedras, Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios,
Peru, South America.



A very large male Jaguar,
Panthera onca, resting on the banks of
 Corixo Negro, an oxbow lake. Encontro
 das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State
 Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal,
 Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



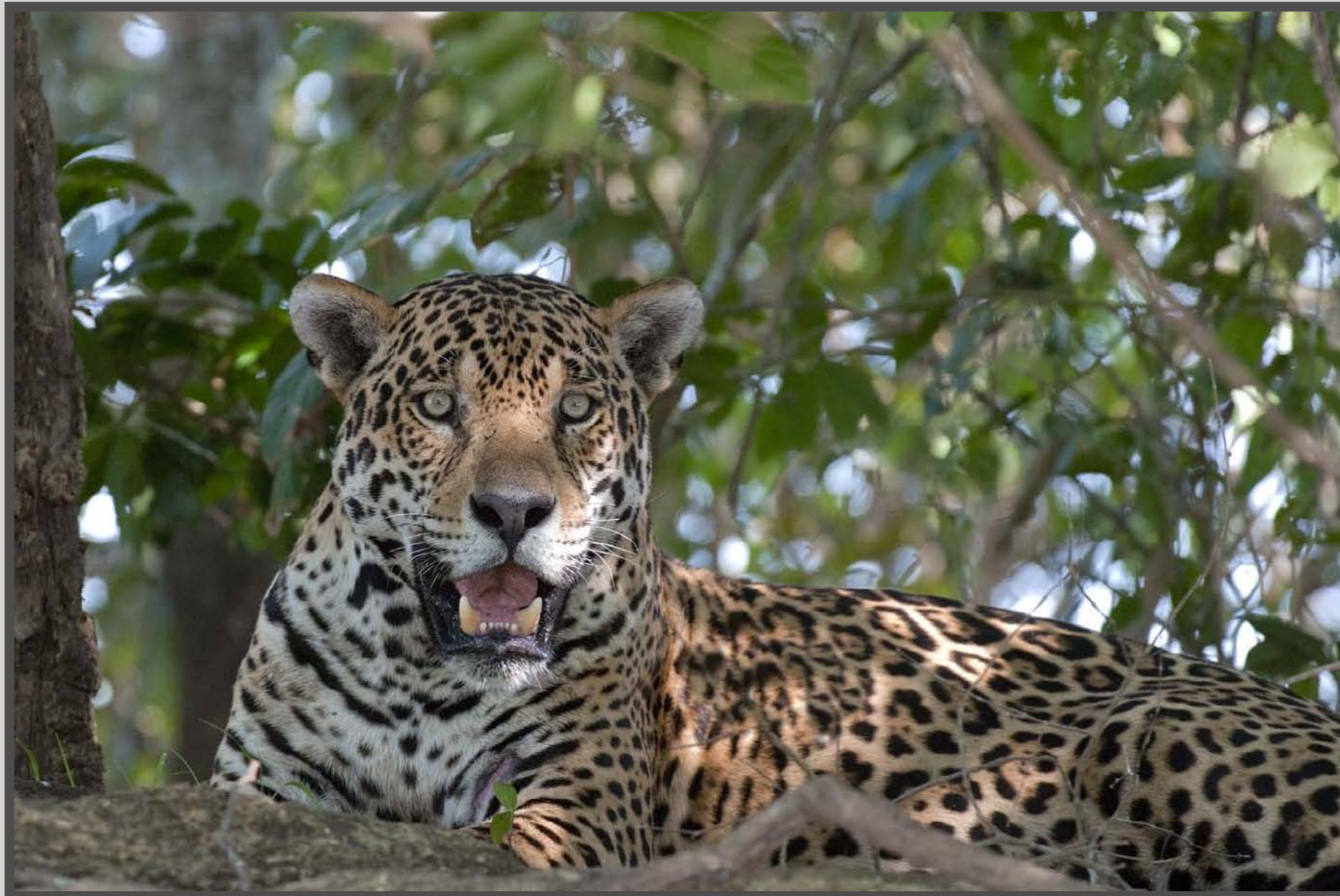
Brazil and the Jaguars of the Pantanal

My quest for jaguars started when I saw the first one in my property in Belize, in 1999. I was slowly driving on our access road when I first saw her, a small young female less than 100 feet away. I stopped the car, stepped out and slowly started walking toward her. She did not move, she was staring at me; as I reached a bit closer, she turned around and walked slowly in the bush. No camera! I saw this cat many times over the years, even with her cub and more jaguars, all inside my property, but never when I was carrying a camera. We are sited just a few miles from

the Cockscomb Basin Wildlife Sanctuary, the Belize Jaguar preserve, a National Park of 140,000 acres, created in 1981 by the celebrated zoologist and jaguar expert from the W.C.S. Alan Rabinowitz. Spotting jaguars in the wild and not being able to take images of them frustrated me to the extreme; I ventured in the Cockscomb Basin many times, but results have been always disappointing: a lot of footprints, but no cats. In 2009 I was contacted by Dr. Charles Munn, a well known zoologist and eco-tourism promoter, to visit his Jaguar Research

Center, located inside the 270,000 acres Meeting of the Waters State Park (Encontro das Aguas). This is in the Pantanal, in central-western Brazil, an area the size of the UK which features some of the finest wildlife viewing in South America. Dr. Munn was aware of my previous four expeditions to the Amazon Basin of Madre de Dios, Peru, and he knew of my obsession for jaguars; he wrote to me "...just come to JRC, I can guarantee you will encounter as many jaguars as you want!". I was a bit skeptical, but he was right: in 15 days I counted 35 of

them, of which 11 unique sights. I saw jaguars performing all kind of actions: swimming in rivers, mating, lazily resting on the river banks, hunting for capybaras and caimans, and even a mother with a two months cub. It was just amazing! The size of these well-fed cats is quite impressive: in Central America, where food is scarce, a mature male jaguar can barely reach the weight of about 150 pounds, but in the Pantanal - where food is abundant - a male can easily exceed 300 pounds, the weight of an African female lion.



A very large male Jaguar,
Panthera onca, resting on the banks of Corixo Negro, an oxbow lake, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



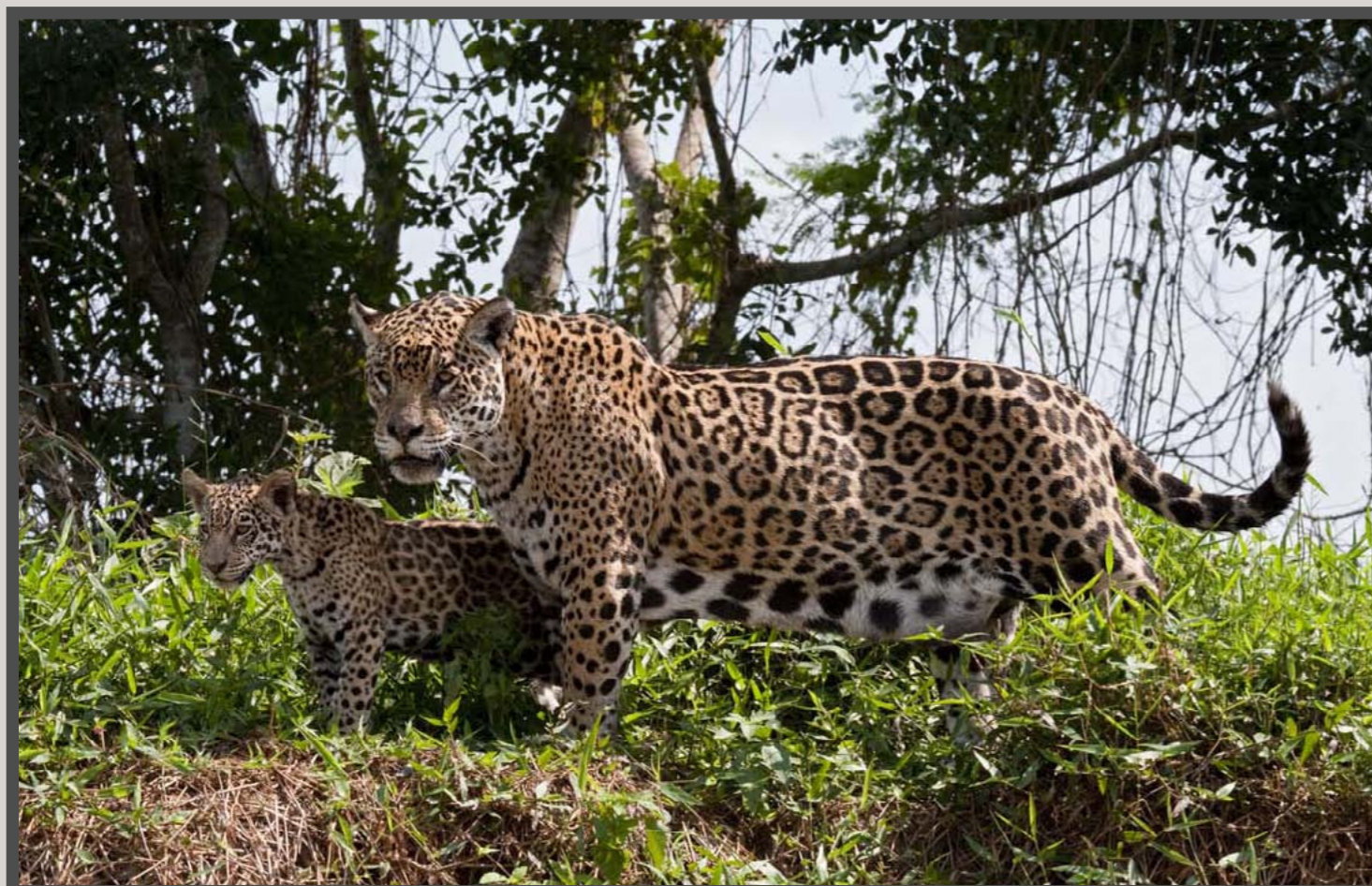
A large and mature female Jaguar,
Panthera onca, with her young cub, probably less than two months old, hunting for caimans on the banks of Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

A young male Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, probably no more than two years old, his mother behind him, resting on the banks of the Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.



A very large male Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, resting on the banks of Corixo Negro, an oxbow lake, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

A large and mature female Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, hunting along the banks of Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

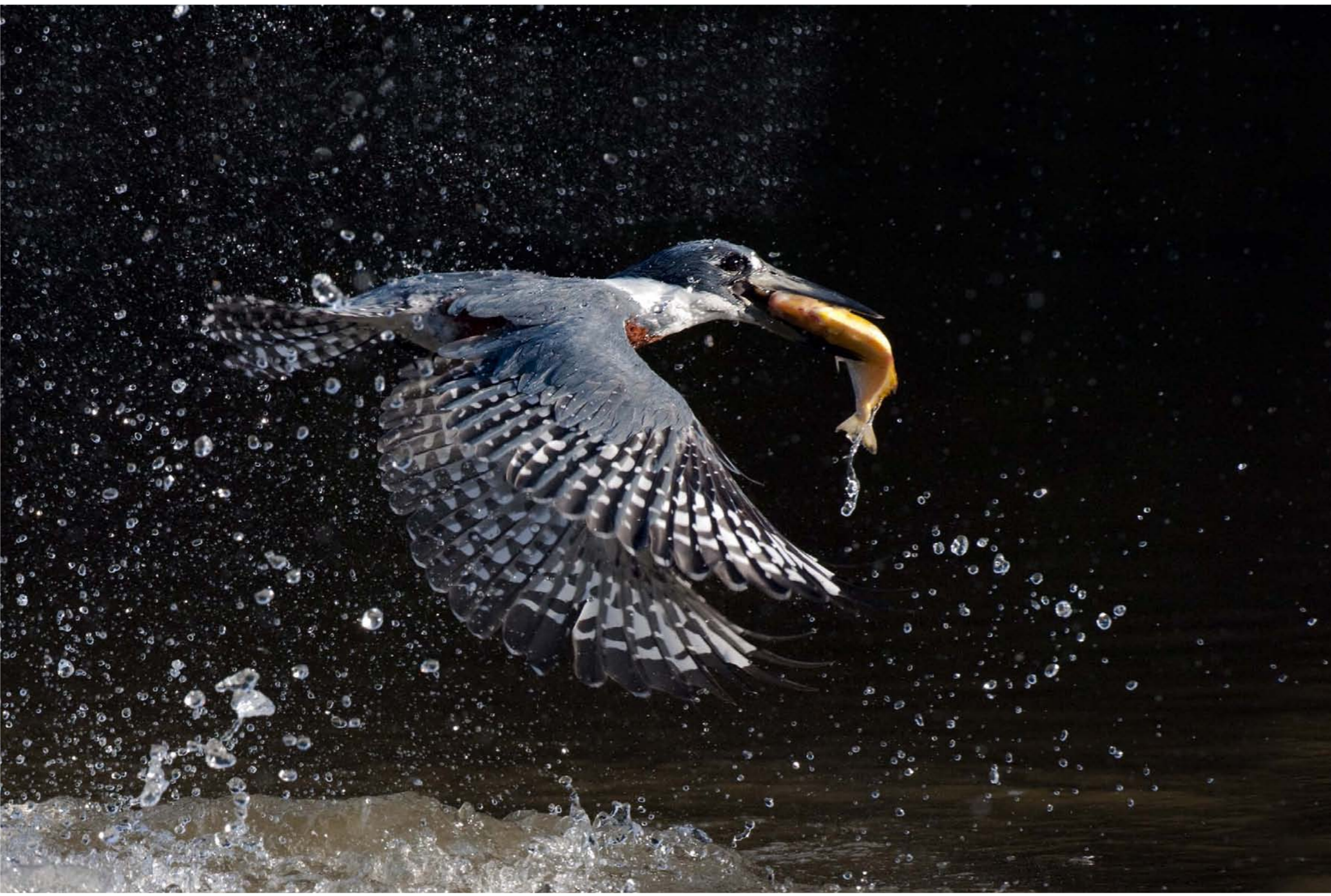


A large and mature female Jaguar, *Panthera onca*, with her young cub, probably less than two months old, notice she is pregnant again, on the banks of Rio Tres Irmaos, Encontro das Aguas (Meeting of the Waters) State Park, Jaguar Research Center, Pantanal, Mato Grosso, Brazil, South America.

**A very large
male Jaguar,**

Panthera onca,
resting on the sand
banks of Rio Tres
Irmãos, Encontro
das Águas (Meeting
of the Waters) State
Park, Jaguar
Research Center,
Pantanal, Mato
Grosso, Brazil,
South America.



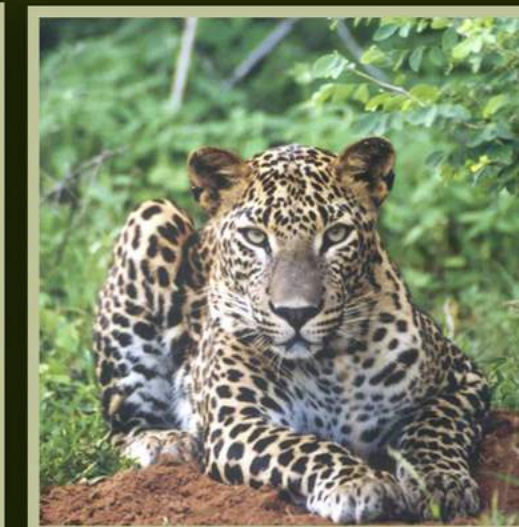


Ringed Kingfisher,
Ceryle torquata, with the fresh catch
of the day, Rio Pixaim, Pantanal
Wildlife Center, Pantanal, Mato
Grosso, Brazil, South America.

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The Parting Shot



Replete with Giant anteaters, Spectacled caimans, jaguars, ocelots, pumas, Orinoco crocodiles, hordes of capybaras, enormous anacondas, gaudily colored macaws and literally millions of beautiful birds, the Llanos of Venezuela surely must represent - together with Brazil's Pantanal - one of the few remaining strongholds of South American wildlife. Local fauna is actively protected (and periodically harvested, as it happens with caimans or capybaras) within the borders of several of the Country's immense Hatos, endlessly sprawling private cattle ran-

ches whose enlightened owners have chosen conservation rather than eradication. While working on our book *In The Kingdom of the Jaguar*, entirely devoted to the National Parks of Venezuela, we were lucky enough to visit several times one of the world's best nature resorts, the famed Hato Pinero, owned and managed for generations by the Branger family. We took many, many wonderful shots there, encountering an impressive number of species uncommon elsewhere. And yet we feel a special affection for this simple, utterly normal image, for it really

and almost physically evokes - for us at least - the unique mood and atmosphere of the Llanos of Venezuela. The shallow seasonal lagoons bathed in the soft, warm late afternoon light, the flat landscape where dry forest and savannah intermingle, the noisy flocks of waterbirds - stately jabirus, snow-white egrets, striped tiger herons, the candy-red ibises locally known as Coro-coro - ambling and squawking by the hundreds in the mudflats...the true essence of the understated, dusty, sun-parched Llanos and their beautiful wildlife. ●

IN ANIMA MUNDI 'S NEXT ISSUE No.3, Third Quarter, July 2011

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Exploring Costa Rica's Selva Verde Nature Reserve in search of hummingbirds and poison frogs



THE TWILIGHT ZONE

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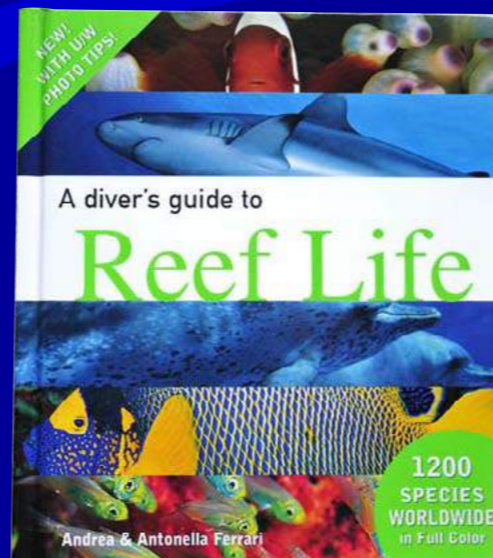


A Diver's Guide to Reef Life

1200 TROPICAL MARINE SPECIES WORLDWIDE in Full Color featuring 1300 spectacular color photos with full details on distribution, habitat, size, life habits and underwater photography tips

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A Diver's Guide to the Art of Underwater Photography

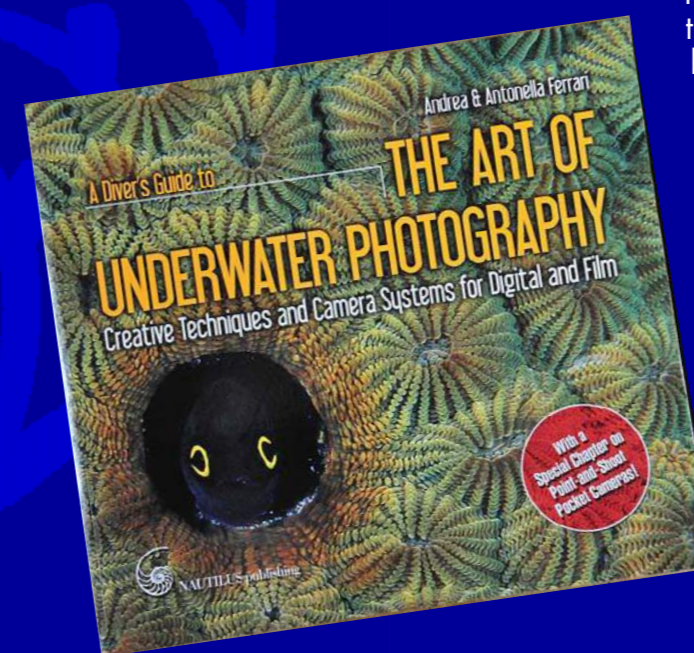
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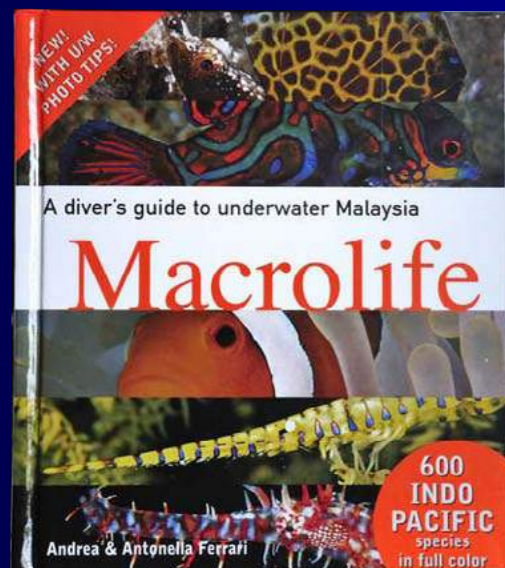
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