ATTACK OF THE KILLER WASP

A TERRIFYING DRAMA IN MINIATURE ENFOLDS BEFORE OUR EYES WHILE EXPLORING THE **AMAZON RAINFOREST** OF EASTERN ECUADOR

The Tarantula Hawk wasp overturns its half-paralized, living prey. The tarantula's huge fangs are clearly visible.

A gruesome but fascinating behavior to ensure the survival of the species

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The reproductive strategies of the Tarantula Hawk wasps are well known - these fast and aggressive hymenopterans attack and paralize large spiders, laying a single egg into the still-living host and guaranteeing their larvae a constant supply of fresh food. But the behavior we have recently witnessed in the lowland rainforest of the Ecuadorian Amazon is new to us. Heralded by a loud droning sound, a very large Tarantula Hawk (*Pepsinae*) buzzed us a few times before entering its nest (or larder?) inside a huge, dead tree - only to emerge a few seconds later, dragging a very much alive but half-paralized large tarantula out of it. The wasp showed no hesitation - the cohordinates of the site were clearly very well known to it. Dragging its still moving prey into the open, the large predatory wasp then calmly proceeded to methodically bite off the remaining legs of the spider (some were already missing, proving this was a work in progress which had been carried out for some time). The process went on for several minutes - we had to keep a reasonable distance as these wasps can deliver one of the most excruciatingly painful stings known to man. We can only guess the reason behind this interesting but rather horrifying behavior - reducing a large tarantula to its cephalothorax and abdomen by biting off its legs would make storage of the living host somewhat easier? It would then be quite reasonable imagining the nesting site of the wasp filled with many neatly piled, well stored, legless but still living tarantulas bodies - the mind boggles!

Ignoring our presence, the large (about 10cms / 3 1/2 inches long) Tarantula Hawk wasp proceeds to drag its spider prey in the open and starts to bite off its remaining legs, still being ineffectually waved in the air by the paralized tarantula. Working methodically, the wasp uses its strong, sawtooth-edged jaws to cut the spider's legs at their lowest joint. Careful observation reveals where other legs have been previously cut off and discarded.

Most of the tarantula's legs have been bitten/sawed off. We can only imagine what is now left of the still-living spider will be easier for the wasp to store away in its nest, where it will be fed upon by a single wasp larva until it will pupate.