

WorldWideWonders



ECUADOR'S CUYABENO WILDLIFE RESERVE

FLOODED FOREST

A little-known but relatively accessible and periodically inundated rainforest is one of northern South America's best kept secrets



Amazon Tree boa *Corallus hortulanus*

The iconic and always-ready-to-bite Amazon Tree boa *Corallus hortulanus* is one of the species which can be most commonly observed and photographed at Cuyabeno. On the previous page, Monk saki monkey *Pithecia monachus*, a typical inhabitant of the flooded rainforest or varzea in the Wildlife Reserve.



Rufescent tiger heron *Tigrisoma lineatum*

A striking and conspicuous species commonly observed among the foliage and branches overhanging the slow-moving brooks and rivers of Cuyabeno.

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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve or Reserva de Producción Faunística Cuyabeno is the second largest reserve of the 45 national parks and protected areas in Ecuador, covering an area of 603,380 ha (1,490,000 acres) with an elevation sloping from east to west from about 300 meters to slightly under 200 m above sea level. It is located in the Putumayo Canton in the Sucumbíos Province and in the Aguarico Canton in the Orellana Province and it was decreed on 26 July 1979. The Cuyabeno Wildlife Reserve is an important nature reserve in Amazonia with rather unusual ecological characteristics as the area encompasses a poorly drained plain with a network of periodically inundated forests, lakes and creeks. Such conditions are rare close to the Andes, where the drainage in the foothills prevents the development of swamps and lakes. As all protected areas in the Amazon region, the area has a high biodiversity, like the neighbouring Yasuni National Park, which is considered the most diverse Park in the world. All large Amazon mammals are present: the lowland tapirs, two species of deer, all Amazon cats including jaguars and pumas, capibaras, two species of dolphins, manatees, giant and neotropical otter. Monkeys are represented by 10 species, while rodents and bats are represented by dozens of species. The current number of registered bird species is under debate, some claiming 530 species

while others suggest that more than 580. At the peak of the wet season, thousands of hectares of forest become inundated, with an estimated 350 fish species, two species of caiman, boa constrictors and anacondas, countless frogs and toads and dolphins swimming deep in the flooded forest. The largest network of lakes is in the eastern part of the Park, and can be easily reached from Lago Agrio over an asphalt road. The other lake network is located at the border with Peru, and requires some extensive travel. The river system covers the Aguarico, San Miguel and Cuyabeno along with their tributaries. The so-called "dry" season runs from mid-December to the end of the middle of March and the climate corresponds to a wet tropical forest, with precipitation of about 3000 mm or 180 inches per year, and humidity ranging from 85% to 95%. The annual temperature oscillates around 25 °C or 77 °F. The Sionas live in the area of the upper Cuyabeno lakes network and along the Tarapuy river, while the Cofans, and the Secoyas live on the banks of the two major bordering rivers, the Aguarico and the Putumayo River, both affluents of the Amazon. Until the 1980s, these communities have mainly lived of fishing, farming and hunting. Since then, the life of the indigenous communities in the Wildlife Reserve has changed due to improved access with roads built for oil exploitation and earnings from ecotourism.



Flooded forest or varzea

The typical landscape of the flooded rainforest or varzea found in Cuyabeno, which can only be explored by canoe. We were able to visit this fascinating and complex environment thanks to our friends of [Tropical Herping](#), a specialized and highly professional wildlife photography/tourism company based in Quito, Ecuador.



Humboldt's woolly monkey or Chorongo *Lagothrix lagothricha*

Another typical monkey species inhabiting the rainforest canopy of Cuyabeno, which is rarely observed elsewhere. Chorongos are very shy and can usually be approached only with difficulty.



Amazon Tree boa *Corallus hortulanus*
 A beautiful orange-phase juvenile specimen of this common species. Amazon Tree boas are ready to bite if provoked, striking fast and far.



Pinktoe Tarantula *Avicularia avicularia*
 A large South American rainforest species, commonly found at night and usually above the ground.



Yellow-handed titi monkey *Callicebus lucifer*

Another monkey species which is quite rare elsewhere but which can be - with some luck - encountered and photographed in the flooded forest environment of Cuyabeno is the strikingly patterned, tree-dwelling Yellow-handed titi monkey *Callicebus lucifer*.



Amazon kingfisher *Chloroceryle amazona*
 Possibly the most common of the Amazonian kingfishers, usually observed perching on horizontal fallen tree trunks overhanging the slow-flowing waters below, or flying at speed across the watercourse.



Yellow-rumped cacique *Cacicus cela*
 A mating pair of this common but strikingly colorful species and their social nest built by the river's edge.

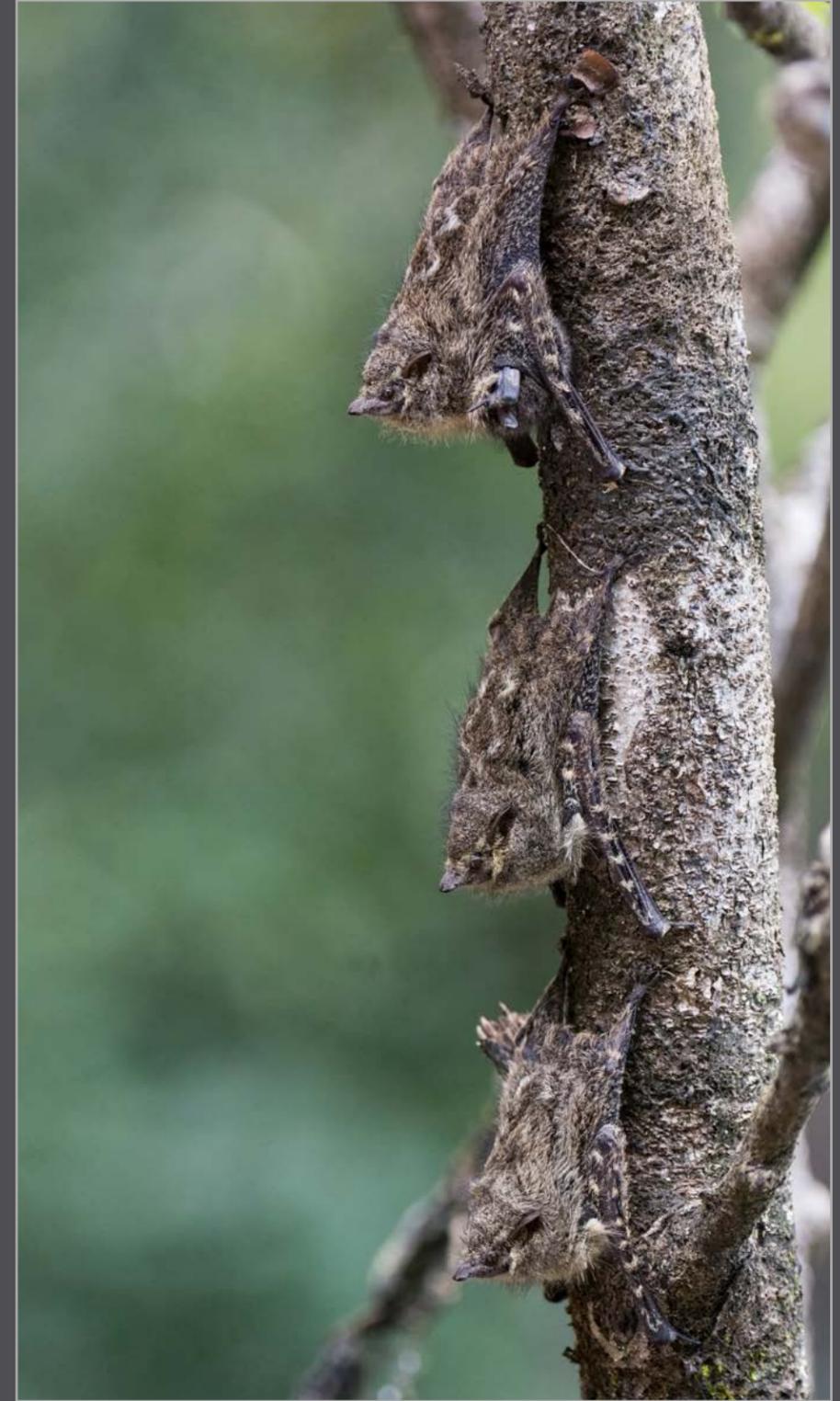


White-tailed trogon *Trogon chionurus* and Blue-and-yellow macaw *Ara ararauna*

The White-tailed trogon (female on the left, male on the right) is usually observed as it perches on low branches, allowing a relatively close approach. On the contrary, the huge and raucous Blue-and-yellow macaw (center) is only occasionally and briefly spotted perching on tall palm trees or flying above the canopy in noisy flocks.

**Lake at sunset**

During the rainy season the huge lakes of Cuyabeno are filled with clear, cool water - and are a favourite site for a refreshing early evening dip (if one is not worried of the caimans). These same sites will become a flat pan of glutinous - and later on deeply cracked - mud during the dry season.



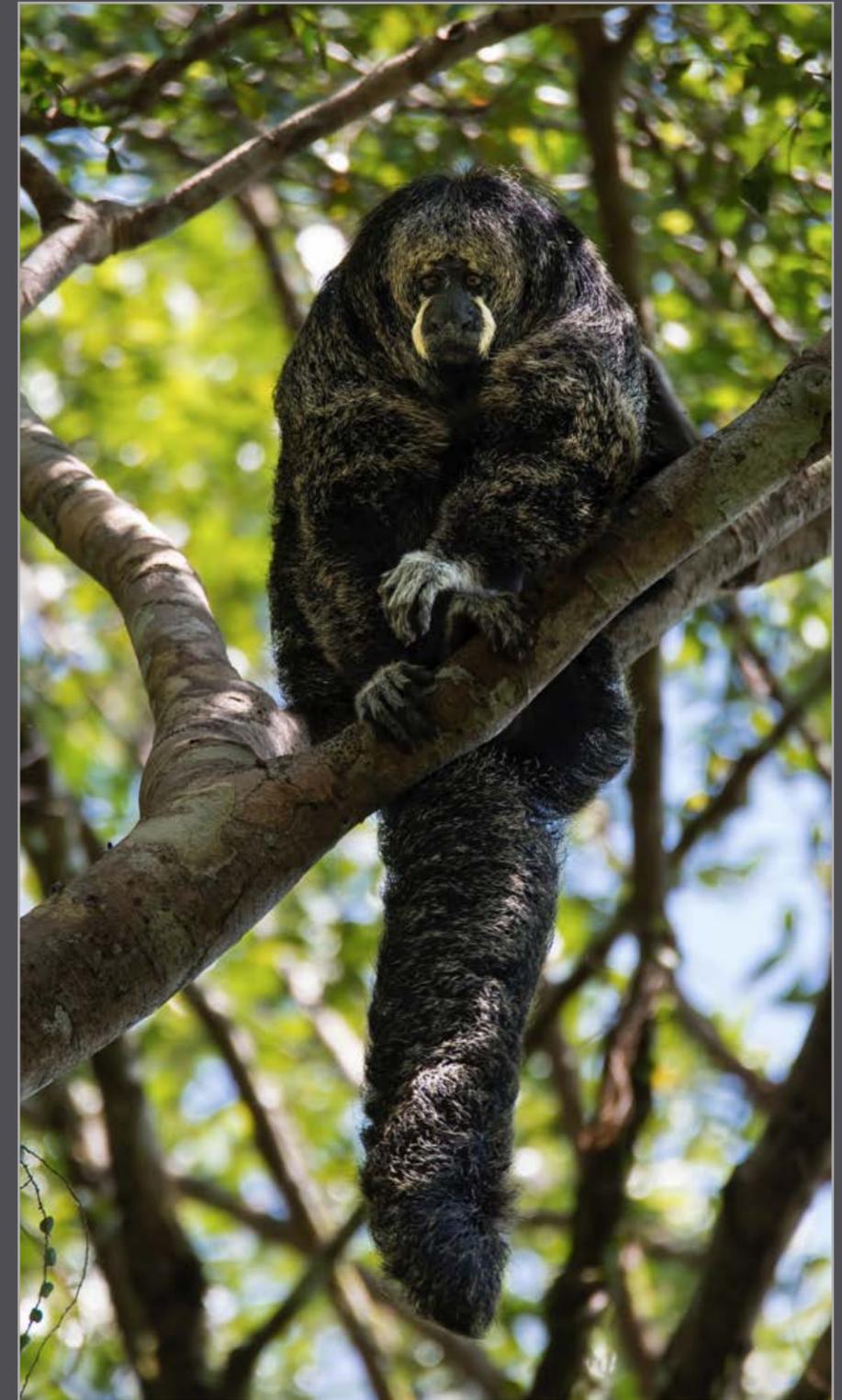
Rufescent tiger heron *Tigrisoma lineatum*, Common Potoo *Nyctibius griseus* and Proboscis bat *Rhynchonycteris naso*

Three relatively common species of the Cuyabeno habitat - Tiger herons (left) and Proboscis bats (right) are often and easily sighted along the reserve's watercourses, but spotting a Common potoo (center) can be a very demanding exercise due to the bird's extraordinary camouflage, which really makes it look like a broken tree stump.



Many-banded Aracari *Pteroglossus pluricinctus*

Occasionally observed in noisy, small groups raiding other birds' nesting sites and preying on the chicks.



Monk saki monkey *Pithecia monachus*

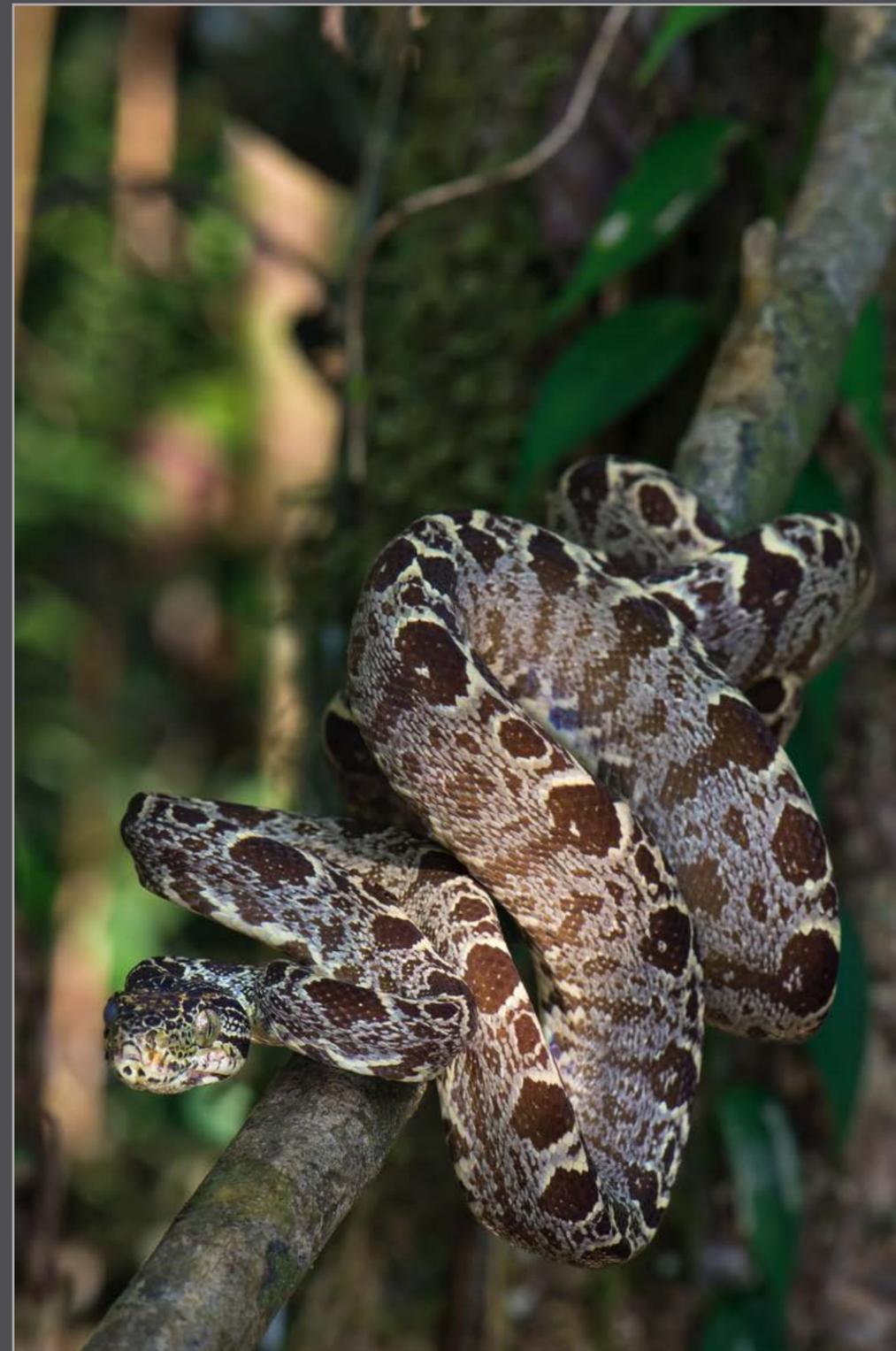
An extraordinarily strange-looking monkey!

**Flooded forest or varzea**

The periodically inundated environment of Cuyabeno can only be explored by canoe when flooded. It is not uncommon to see caimans, anacondas and even freshwater dolphins briefly surfacing and blowing in these still (or very slow-flowing) black waters.



Ecuadorian capuchin *Cebus albifrons aequatorialis*
Clever, very active, highly social and ruthless - a frequently observed monkey species.



Amazon Tree boa *Corallus hortulanus*
This is the typical or "garden" color phase of this iconic species.



Greater yellow-headed vulture *Cathartes melambrotus*

Birds of prey and winged scavengers can occasionally be observed as they soar by in the stretches of blue sky among the broken forest canopy, but Cuyabeno's flooded and thickly forested environment is not ideal for such observations.



Amazon River dolphin *Inia geoffrensis*

Despite our stubborn and repeated efforts, this is the best we could get of of this species! This is in fact what most visitors will be able to glimpse of the elusive river dolphin.



Black-tailed trogon *Trogon melanurus*

Trogons of many colorful species are found in tropical rainforests worldwide.



Little blue heron *Egretta caerulea*

A typical inhabitant of the flooded forest or varzea inundated habitat.



Striated heron *Butorides striata*

Due to obvious reasons the flooded forest of Cuyabeno is a true paradise for waterbirds .

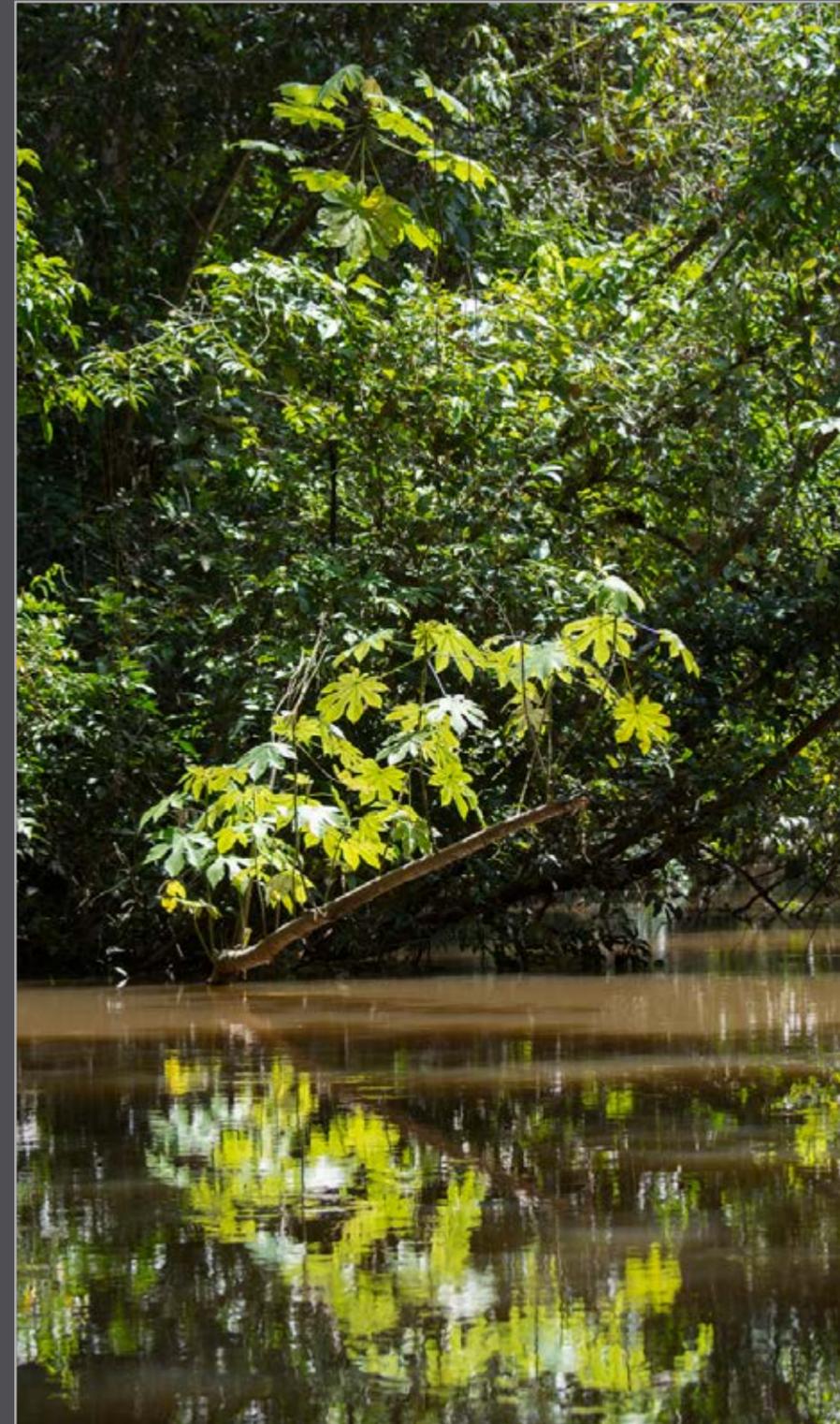
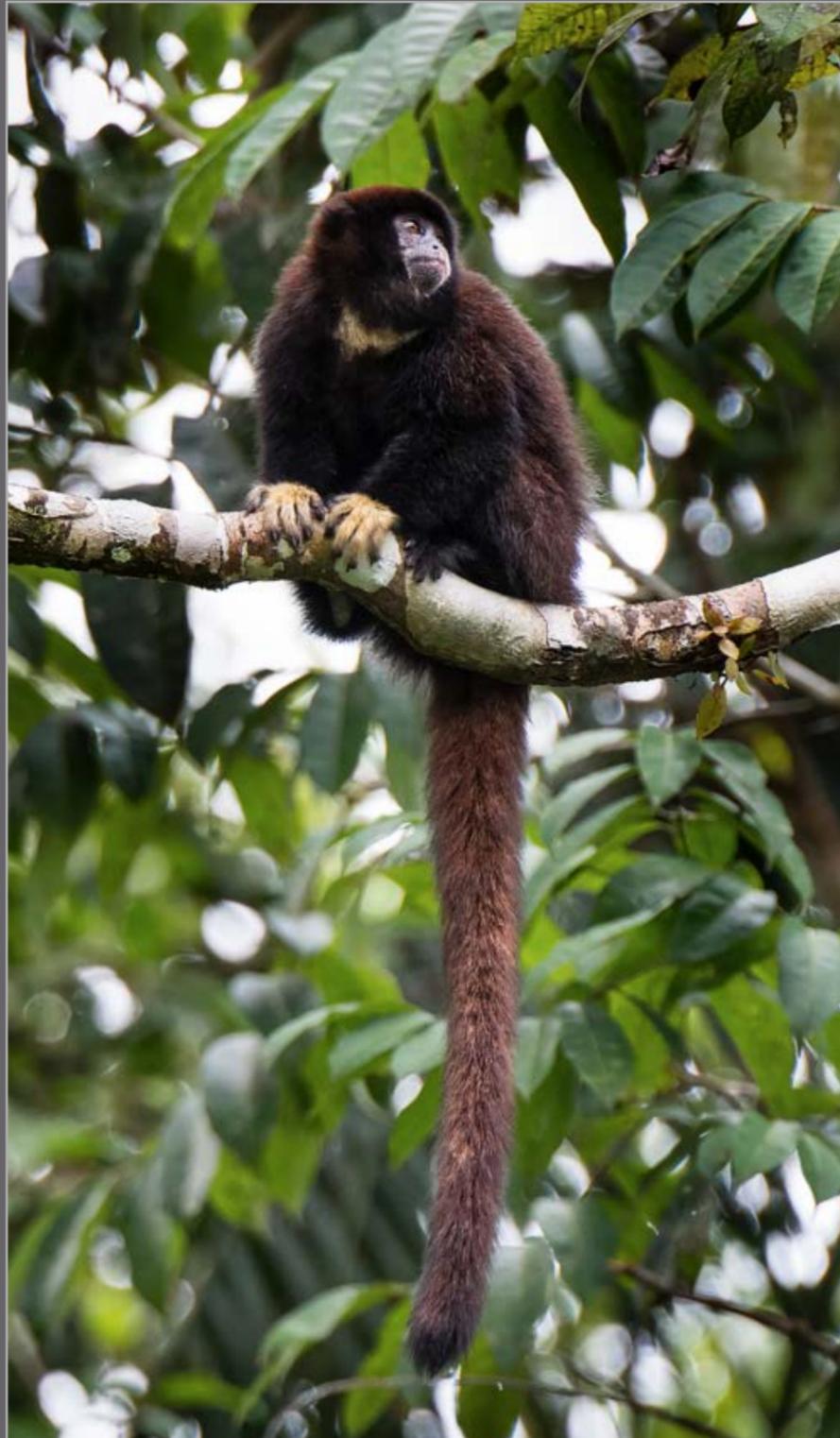


Bridled Forest Gecko *Gonatodes humeralis*

For the same obvious reasons - walking is difficult here - observations of land-based microfauna can usually only be made in the immediate vicinity of the lodges.

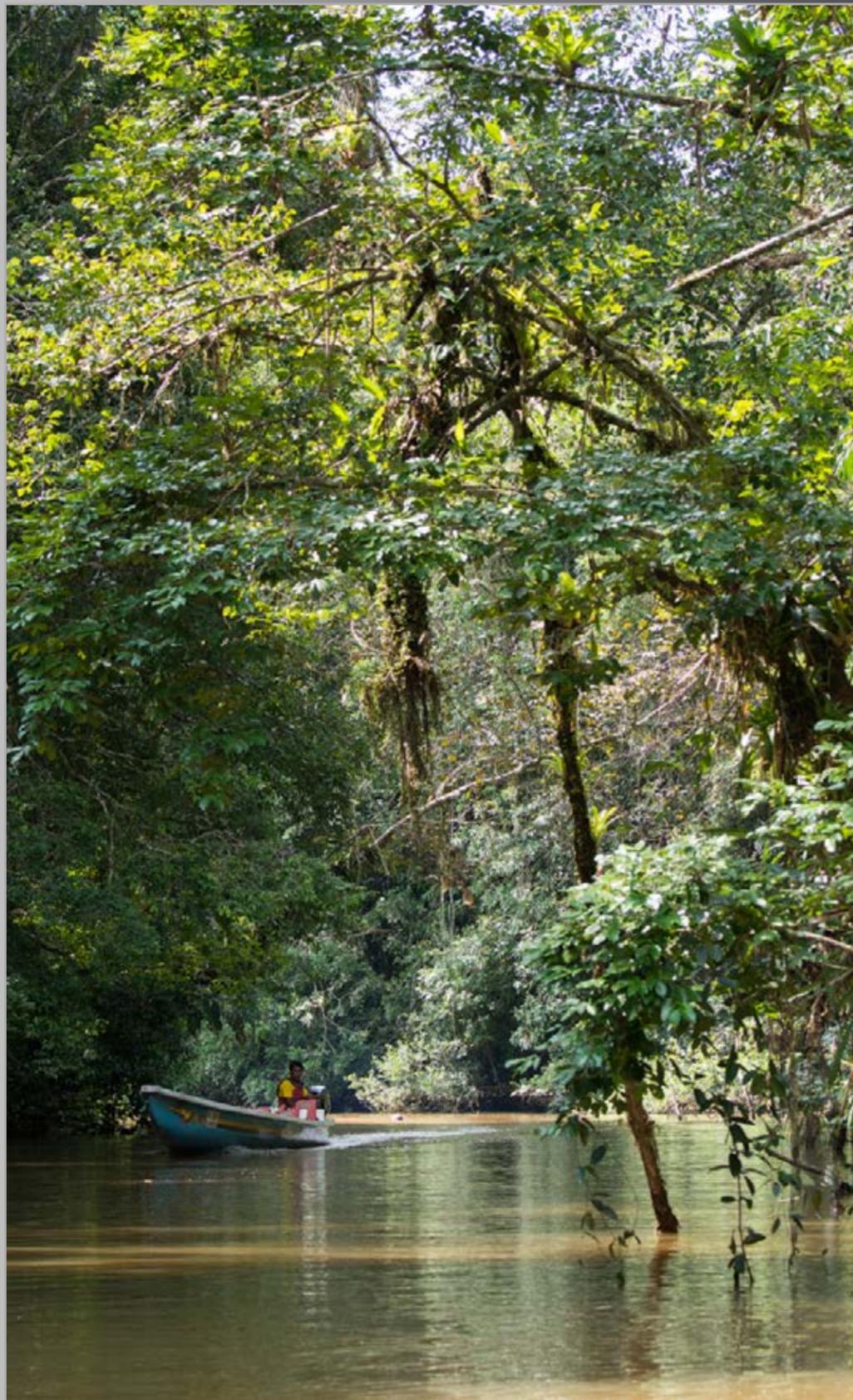
**Flooded forest or varzea**

Cuyabeno can also be visited during the dry season, when a great part of the area can be explored on foot. However, from a scenic point of view, the Reserve gives its absolute best when fully inundated.



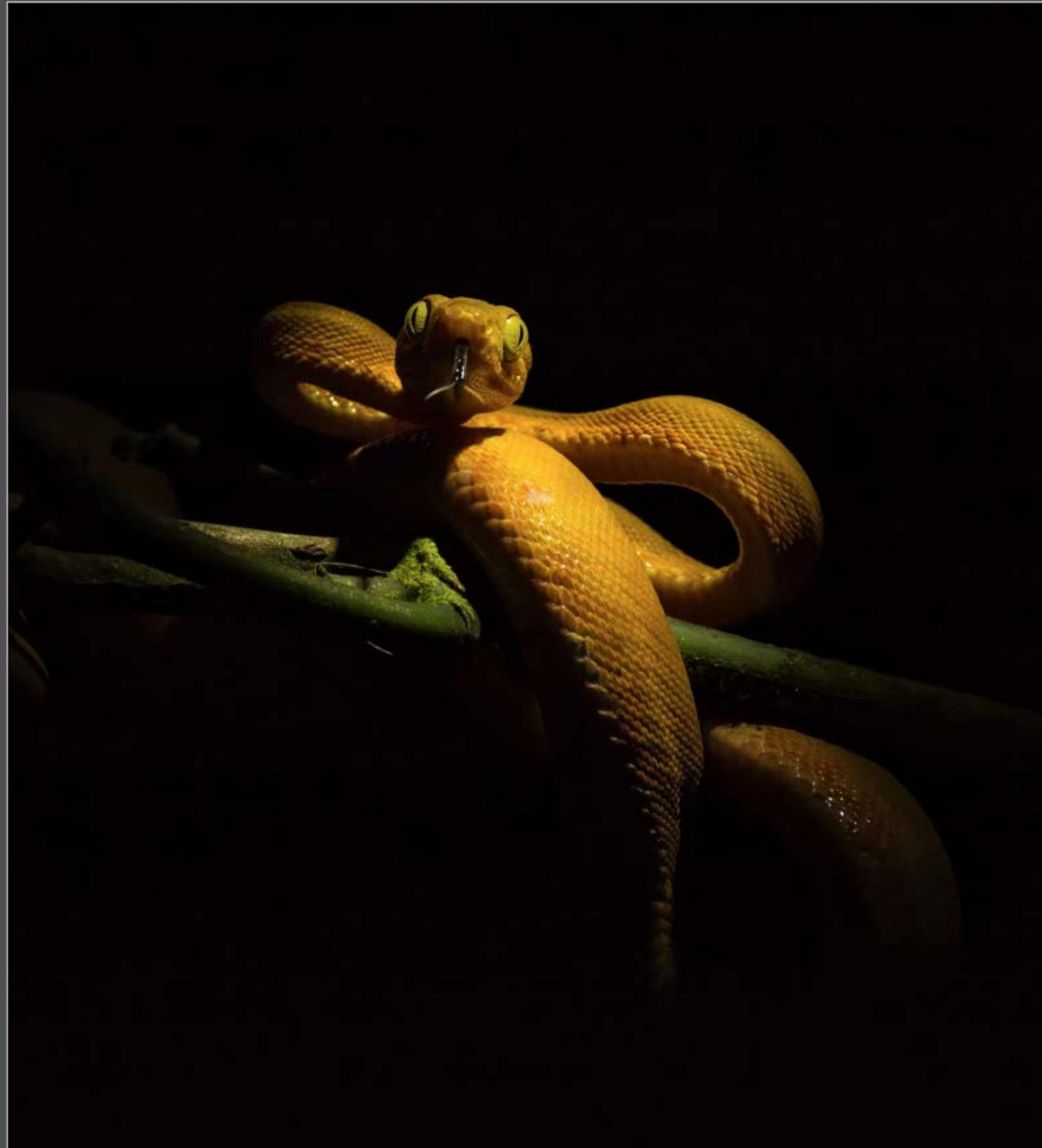
Yellow-handed titi monkey *Callicebus lucifer*

The thickly forested, tree-fringed waterways of Cuyabeno Reserve make wildlife observation (not to mention photography) rather difficult at times, but as everywhere else luck plays its part in the game, and the natural environment is always exquisite.



Flooded forest or varzea

Canoes and small motorboats are the only means of exploring the winding waterways of Cuyabeno Reserve.

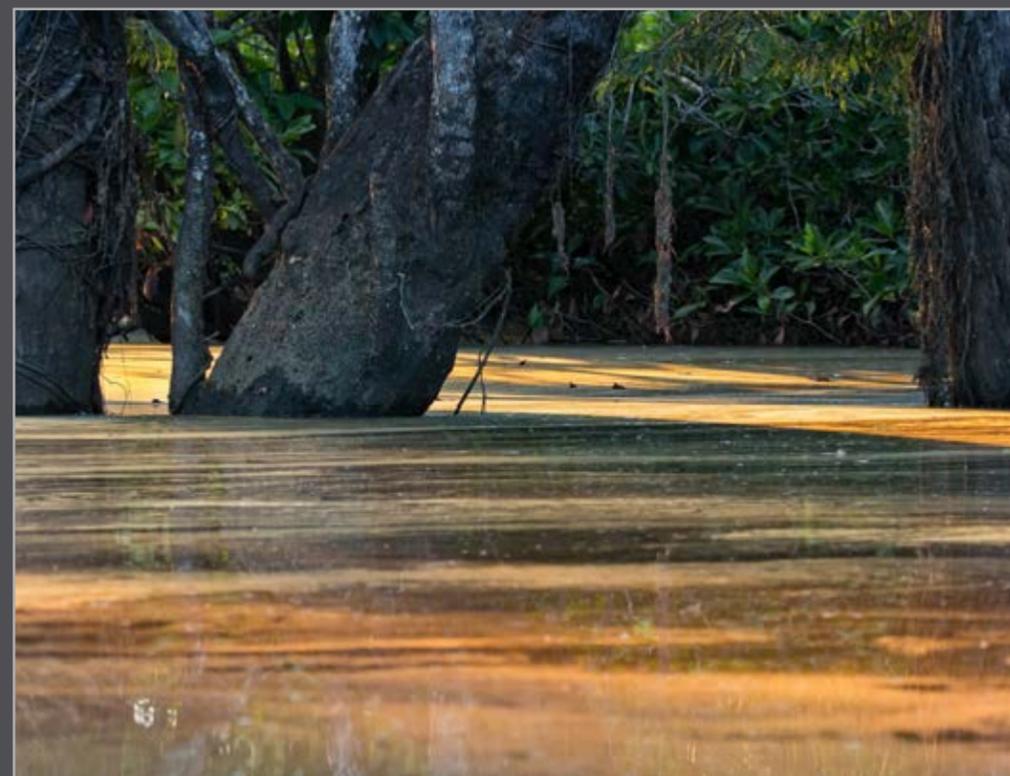


Amazon Tree boa *Corallus hortulanus*

This striking (in all senses!) species is most easily observed at night, slowly cruising by canoe and using a torchlight to search the shrubbery overhanging the waterways.



Monk saki monkey *Pithecia monachus*
With its strange features and thick tail this species makes a wonderful photo subject.



Flooded forest or varzea
Algal blooms occasionally color gold the overflowing streams.