



EXPEDITION DIARY Azores 2010

By Ronald Seipold & Malika Fettak

29 April

Hello everyone and welcome to the first diary entry for Biosphere Expeditions' Brazil expedition. I am Malika Fettak, Operations Manager of Biosphere Expeditions and Ronald Seipold will be your expedition leader. Working with us will be Marcelo Mazzolli, the scientist on this expedition.

At the moment I am still in Germany, preparing paperwork and equipment, but soon I will be meeting Ronald in Madrid and both of us will be flying to Sao Paulo for more preparation work and some extreme shopping for the expedition. Once we have picked up and packed the expedition Land Rover we will be driving to Matinhos, meet Marcello and hopefully find a beautiful spot to set up base camp.

I'll let you know our mobile phone number during the expedition once Ronald and I have purchased a new Brazilian SIM card. Remember that this is for emergency purposes only (such as being late for assembly, for example).

Best wishes for now & more news from the field in a couple of days...

Malika

P.S. This diary is now also on www.biosphere-expeditions.org/diaries, so you can pass this on to your families & friends for updates on what we are up to.

1 May

Nice & warm sunny weather in Sao Paulo since Ronald and I arrived two days ago. We picked up the expedition Land Rover - a shiny & brand new Defender showing no more than 15 km on the odometer! The rest of the time we spent with shopping, accompanied by Daniel (of an agency located in Sao Paulo) who did a great job being our guide and translator, consultant and driver in this unbelievably big & busy city - would have been completely lost without him ;).

We bought a Brazilian SIM card, so please note the expedition leader number (Ronald) for emergency calls (i.e. if you arrive late at the assembly): +55 41 92093731.

We are ready to leave tomorrow morning - the Land Rover fully packed with all the equipment. We can't wait for the morning to come to arrive at base camp .

You will be hearing from us again soon.

4 May

Base camp is a fantastic place to stay! We had to wake up Marcelo, our scientist on this expedition, having fallen asleep in the hammock set up on the veranda while waiting for us to arrive on late Sunday afternoon. The road up to base is an off-road experience: stony, bumpy & a bit muddy, but still good for driving as it has been dry during the last couple of weeks. And we no longer have to cross rivers as a couple of narrow wooden bridges have been repaired since the last expedition.

With the help of Mario, a local guy living close to our camp, we have been starting to build wooden platforms, which will be used as a base for our tents. The large wooden cabin had not been used for a while, so it urgently needed a complete clean-up as well as some construction work. But we hope to have everything ready in time....

The weather has been great these last few days - around 20 degrees C and no rain so far. It is still pretty humid even when the sun is shining. The evenings are pleasant (it gets dark already at about 18:30) and even this time of year some mosquitoes are bugging us during dawn (definitely bring some repellent). Unfortunately we heard about some rain due within the next few days. We will see - anyhow the weather is changing very quickly during this time of year and we will have to face all kinds of different conditions. So, be prepared .

We are looking forward to meeting slot 1 in Curitiba soon.

18 May

Two days before the team arrived, the weather changed: heavy rain and a remarkable drop in temperature. We still managed to get everything prepared not taking into account a last minute "strike" by one toilet that we were not able to fix before leaving for Curitiba. Sunday stayed dry and all team members arrived on time and with all their luggage - at the assembly point. So, the start of this year's expedition couldn't have been a better one. After a brief inspection of our new home for the next two weeks we were served a warm meal by our cook (she was already part of the last expedition here in Brazil). Lunch was followed by the usual risk assessment and the first part of Marcelo's scientific introduction explaining the Brazilian governmental ideas and support of environmental projects in general. After a cold night in a tent (it was definitely below 10 degrees), Marcelo continued his talk in the morning, giving us a better understanding of our project in this area. We also did equipment training and data sheet procedures. Just as we were preparing for the first bush walk behind our cabin, it started to rain. This didn't prevent us from practising new skills: GPS handling, setting up a camera trap and making a mud track trap. I used the afternoon to check the level of rivers south of the cabin - rivers that have to be crossed by car or on foot to get to our trails in that area.

Tuesday was our first full day in the field. We split into two teams. Marcelo headed for a reconnaissance trail which starts close to Base Camp with a possible connection to so called Celso's trail, a trail south where we stayed overnight on our 2008 expedition. Unfortunately parts of the trail were not really visible anymore and the thick rain forest prevented any GPS signal reception. As the group worked its way through the jungle, it got later and later and finally dark. Everybody returned to the cabin late. And yes, we have to admit that some got scared and/or exhausted on this unexpected long and rainy "night walk". Sorry guys! Chapeau for your good spirits and sense of humour. I must mention that this team spotted a lot of tapir tracks and installed a camera and two track traps on their way back. The second team worked their way through two rivers in the Defender. A third river had to be crossed on foot to reach the start of the 'Donkey' Trail. We passed an abandoned cabin on a hill (unbelievably it still has a sign outside that indicates that it had been a kind of bar and barbeque house - who the heck came to this remote place for a grilled chicken ???). Shortly beyond this cabin I expected to find the start of the trail I remembered from last expedition. However, a new fence kept us out and the trail was reclaimed by the rain forest. With the help of our GPS, we bush whacked through the green and finally found the "lost" trail. One result of this new fence is that this trail is clearly not used by locals any more. We found many tracks of tapir as well as those of racoon and possibly ocelot. We left one camera trap and two mud track traps behind us. Let's see what results we get ...

Wednesday greeted us with clear skies. Given that Marcelo's team had such a long hike the day before, we decided to have a shorter day for those who felt tired. This team left the cabin a bit later that morning to continue the trail behind Base Camp. But again this trail kind of disappeared and they made their return earlier than expected. More tapir tracks led them to set up one more camera trap.

The second team with Al, Alastair, Sylvia, Gosia, Felicity, Martina, Frank, Anne and me headed towards Celso's trail. On our way we found two possible puma tracks (!), a cat scat with fur (has to be DNA analyzed to confirm), also possibly a racoon track, several deer tracks and a fox track. Next to an abandoned cabin on top of the hill we enjoyed our lunch in the sun. As it is more than difficult to dry any clothes in this humidity it was also a chance to dry some of the wet clothes. On the way back we installed a camera trap on a small side trail where we found a strange manmade construction nearby that looked like an animal trap. Not even a closer look gave us a clue about its functionality. What a sunny day makes a difference: the mood was much better and everybody was looking forward to new experiences. Later in the evening Marcelo heard the noise of an animal in the front yard and found an opossum sitting in a tree just 2.5 meters above ground. It was probably very scared as it almost didn't move - a chance to take some good pictures.

The weather stayed sunny on Thursday. One team installed two cameras on the Limeira Road trail as they had seen a lot of ocelot and tapir tracks as well as armadillo tracks. A second group accompanied me in exploring the southern trails. As we again managed our way to the far end of the dirt road our next challenge was to cross a wide river on foot. Afterwards we followed a stream bed to find the "entrance" of one of the major trails. Martina spotted an animal (size of a bigger dog, black with short fur) that rushed up the steep bank and disappeared within a second in the shrubs. Unfortunately we couldn't identify any tracks in this muddy area. As we struggled again with the reception of our GPS and no visible trail showed up, we returned to the river. The sun was really warm and it was difficult to go back to "work" after lunch. We walked another trail where we left one installed camera behind. Tracks of tapirs, fox and ocelot as well as sightings of a toucan, hummingbirds and parrots completed the day. Despite Anne's sore muscles, Sylvia's sore knee and Alastair's twisted ankle, the group was in a great mood.

On Friday Felicity, Frank, Martina, Anne and Alan accompanied me on another try on one of these southern trails. In the first small river to be crossed on foot, Felicity and her rucksack took an unintentional bath. Frank offered to get her back to the cabin, where she quickly recovered and is in best condition! The others continued the "mission". We started with a search for the trail we wanted to take the day before but again were unsuccessful. Very likely this trail or this part of the trail was taken over by the rain forest. We explored one other trail leading up a hill to the east. Besides a few tapir tracks this trail didn't give us the expected findings. On our way back we turned into a different trail winding alongside a small river. We were rewarded by more tracks and finally installed one more camera. The second team worked on data entry in the morning and left afterwards with the cars for a place that was recommended to Marcelo by a local. It is located approx. 10km towards Curitiba where animals find a kind of transect from one side of the road to the other. It is also within a small area with very low density of humans. The group had to walk about 20 minutes, bush wracking down a steep and muddy creek. They found a lot of animal activity but the terrain didn't allow identifying any of the tracks. A camera was installed and on their way back several team members took the chance of picking up some beers in a small kind of shop next to the dirt road. In the evening most of us spent hours to find and remove ticks. These ticks are very small and hard to see. Martina, our tick master, helped to remove about 70 (!) ticks, mainly from other bodies. No question that the new trail was named 'tick trail'. By the way, day by day we created more and more nick names: Martina = 2 nd wife, Claire = Mrs. Livingstone, Felicity = Mrs. Darwin, Frank = Wickinger (German for Viking), Alastair = husband, Alan = Schotte (German for Scotsman) and Gosia = crocky. Please don't expect me to the background of these nick names in this diary J).

On Saturday (another sunny day) Alan, Gosia, Michael, Alastair, Sylvia and Marcelo followed the house-keeper who showed us a sort of trail that starts behind the house and leads north back to the dirt road. This trail led up the hill (highest point of the trail was over 600 meters) and was really steep. Parts of the path had to be cut to get through but many tracks such as armadillo, deer, tapir and peccary made it worthwhile. Again a camera trap was installed. Further on Alan spotted a Coral snake which took off pretty quickly. On the way down the group ran into a pristine waterfall with a height of more than 15 meters. Team two went back to check the digital camera trap and the mud track traps on the 'Donkey trail'. On their way they found a lot more tracks than a few days before: armadillo, deer, tapir racoon and several ocelot tracks. And believe it or not – the camera trap captured three animals on film: the head of a tapir, the tail and a part of the body of an ocelot and an armadillo ! For such a short period of time it was a fantastic result. The group managed to explore this trail a bit further on and installed a second camera trap. We have now set up 10 camera traps in total. Hopefully we will get more pictures. But we all have to be patient as most of the cameras are analogue cameras and therefore the films have to be developed after the end of the expedition. Of course we will let you know about the outcome.

Today is our day-off. We are staying in a little town called Paranagua next to the coastline. My next diary will be sent after the end of the expedition when we will be back to civilization ...
Greetings from all team members (who are all in an inspiringly good mood).

22 May

Teams set out on monday to retrieve camera traps and explore trails further. Slippery, muddy trails due to rain, made progress on foot difficult. Vehicles had just as much difficulty, with the Defender getting stuck in a muddy ditch on the dirt road and having to be pulled out by a tractor.

The next day, a group accompanied Marcelo to meet Renata, a specialist in big cats for this part of Brazil. She also works on jaguars in Peru. Recently she has found prints of a jaguar in Serra da Graciosa, a mountain range that separates Parana state's coast from the interior. Its southern extension is one of the largest remaining areas of the Atlantic forest in southern Brazil. The Serra is rich in flora and fauna, ranging from lowland sub-tropical to cloud forest varieties and. This area is situated just on the other side of the highway of the area we are based in, but it still takes a long time to drive.

A sunny Wednesday saw, Anne, Alan, Felicity, Jacqueline and Marcelo heading for the southern trails to retrieve camera traps. The rivers caused no problems for the car to cross, as water levels seem to lower as quickly as they rise. Marcelo caught a glimpse of a cat-like shadow that disappeared in the bush - too short to identify the species. Anne, who likes snakes, was delighted to watch a Fer-de-lance snake cross their path. The team enjoyed the walk and returned to Base Camp with two cameras in their backpack.

The second team made it up to Donkey's Trail. Unfortunately, the team discovered that somebody had stolen one of the cameras! As we hadn't previously seen any human tracks of locals using this trail, we assume has been taken by a hunter. Bad news! At least the second camera had some shots

Sunny weather continued on thursday. One team retrieved the last of the cameras installed in the field. It had a clear picture of an ocelot! This is our second shot of an ocelot and helps a bit to overcome the disappointment about the stolen digital camera (including the memory card with the taken pictures). We also found some more tracks of tapir, peccary and cat (to be verified).

A second team headed out to explore a long trail north of Base Camp. On the way they found tracks of armadillo, racoon, deer and fox on the dirt road. The trail itself does not appear to be under permanent use any more, so they had to search and cut their way through the bush. Some more tracks of tapir and of a small cat (will be verified by Marcelo with the help of photos taken).

In the afternoon we finished all data sheets and data entry and Marcello gave a summary talk. After dinner we watched a BBC documentary film 'Planet Earth'. It's one of the best reports of worldwide experts about the environmental situation, threatened species and conservation work in general.

Our last day was spent packing up all the equipment and getting the tents and wooden platforms down. the cabin was filled with all the tents hanging up to dry.

Thank you for your contribution, work, team spirit, patience and sense of humour. Updates on the results of the camera traps will be sent. Please don't forget to upload your photos to www.biosphere-expeditions.org/pictureshare.

Ronald & Malika