



EXPEDITION DIARY Peru 2011

By Jiri Haureljuk

3 June

Hello there. This is the first diary entry for Biosphere Expeditions' Peru 2011 expedition and I am Jiri Haureljuk, your expedition leader.

I have just arrived in Puerto Maldonado and met with Biosphere director, Dr. Matthias Hammer and our two scientists, Dr. Alan Lee and Sara Rehman. We are all getting stuck into sorting out last bits and pieces, printing all the data sheets, organizing local guides and just making sure everything is ready by the time you all get here.

As it is my very first time in this part of the world, I am already in awe of this very special place with its lush vegetation, strange sounds, beautiful birds flying around and sloths hanging around in the trees. No, I am not in our research station yet, but just in the Wasai hotel!

I hope all you team members are as excited as I am and I am very much looking forward meeting you. As I am heading up river on Saturday, it will be Alan who will take you to Piedras research station on Sunday. If there is any problem, his mobile number is +51 973170252. Please make sure you are at the assembly point at 6 am. We need to leave on time in order to make it to the base before dark.

Safe travels and see you soon.

P.S. A video diary entry is now also at www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1. Just click on the link and go to the "Wall" (you do not need to be a member of Facebook to see the video).

3 June

Nothing is as constant as a change of plan on expedition, so today I have some kind of good news and some bad news.

First, the bad news. A road is being built through the forest towards Brazil (including a massive bridge at Puerto Maldonado, which you will see from Wasai). This is an ecological disaster that we and many others have been arguing against. We've lost this battle, sadly, but we continue to fight on for biodiversity in this region. One consequence of this road, which is kind of good news, is that it cuts down our travelling time to base by several hours, so **THE ASSEMBLY TIME FOR ALL SLOTS OF THE EXPEDITION HAS NOW CHANGED FROM 06.00 TO 08.30**. The place (lobby of Wasai hotel) is still the same, but the time is new. Breakfast starts at 07.00 at Wasai, so please make sure you come to assembly well fed & watered, ready for departure.

I have attached a rough plan so that you all have an idea of what will be going on. Remember to stay flexible with timings and expect the unexpected, though!

Also, Alan will be in the Wasai lobby at 19.00 tomorrow (Saturday) for anybody who wants to meet up beforehand. We'll do the same for the next slot, so anybody who wants to go out for a drink or dinner is welcome to join in.

We look forward to meeting up with slot 1 soon and slot 2 later.

4 June

Last entry before I head into the forest. As you can see on www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1 I am busy with paperwork and Peruvian coffee ;) Sara, Matthias and I will be 24 hours ahead of you and Alan will collect you at 08.30 at Wasai.

See you soon.

4 June

We're 24 hours ahead of the first team and my first sight of the river is enough to realize we have arrived at very special place. Sandy banks lined with towering trees, thousands of butterflies sucking up moisture (and sodium) from the mud, two macaws resting on a giant Brazil nut tree and a rather unwelcome committee of biting sandflies.

5 June

On the journey upriver team 1 watched spectacled caiman resting on the sand banks and schools of turtles sunbathing on the tree logs, with butterflies decorating their heads. Gloria, our cook, made us some welcoming refresco and the team members had their first chance to look around base. Matthias then delivered a health and safety briefing, followed by an introductory walk in the forest. Alan was impatient to see his favorite macaw colpa and took me across the river to have a look and build a new hide. I was very excited to see numerous tracks of capybara on the beach and tapir footprints in the forest. We then headed across to the Brazil nut trail to assess the state of our trail system and shortly after found our first jaguar footprints.

6 June

Training day. The team first learnt how to use GPS, compass, binoculars, rangerfinders, and the telescope. We then tested their newly acquired skills on a short navigation walk. It was quite amusing to watch everyone disappear into the thick forest, armed with just compasses and hoping they will all come back. They did, the training paid off.

Alan and Sara then gave us a talk on mammal identification and we could test it immediately as Sara (team member) spotted a troop of saddle-backed tamarins and some dusky titi monkeys behind the kitchen. Our first monkeys! Things got much more serious after lunch, when the team was introduced to data collection, observation techniques and datasheets. Alan then explained all about macaws, their behaviour, conservation and how the data will be used. I think by then everyone suffered from serious theory overload and as a reward, I took everyone down to the river for a night walk.

7 June

Practice day. In the very early morning, half of the team went to the macaw clay lick for a training session with Alan, whilst the other half went with Sara, to do some training on the mammal transect. I have completely fallen in love with the macaw colpa. Seeing macaws in the wild has been a dream since I was a child. I wasn't the only one. From the moment the macaws finally arrived, everyone was hogging the telescope and refusing to let go!

The mammal transect was equally rewarding. In order to learn how to record mammal behavior, I had to pretend to be an animal. That wasn't very difficult. I think I made a decent impression of tamarin, tapir and brocket deer. But I felt rather insulted when my jaguar impersonation was described as a peccary!

After lunch, Matthias took Sara and Ege to assess the state of the Waterfall trail and the rest of us headed across to the mammal colpa with Alan to start working on "The Matrix", which is a network of footprint traps.

Matthias's team returned to base with tales of jaguar prints and our first sighting of spider monkeys. An excellent day was followed by an excellent dinner.

8 June

Split into three groups, we had a very early start again, rising with the sun. Deepika's and Flavio's datasheet was full of amazing encounters, but the one that stood out the most was their encounter with white-lipped peccaries. They literally walked into a herd of at least fifty animals. I am sure they will remember their stench forever! Another group went with Matthias to look for cat sign up a river, first getting into mud up to their waists and then getting soaked to the bone, but did not find any. All the rest worked on The Matrix until everybody was exhausted. Great effort everybody!

9 June

I went with Matthias (who left us today) through all the important paperwork and finishing earlier than expected, I then headed for a walk to Transect A, to clear my head. And what a walk! Within an hour, I came across howler monkeys, a red squirrel, spider monkeys, capuchin monkeys, saddle-backed tamarins and a fresh puma footprint.

The macaw colpa team was also beaming upon their return. They managed to observe and record well over fifty macaws feeding on the clay click. The Matrix team arrived shortly afterwards, with blisters, blunt machetes, and exhausted looks in their faces, but smiling. Job well done, no more making footprint traps! The Matrix is done.

10 June

A video of an expedition day (looking for cat sign, pretending to be a jaguar to test a newly installed camera trap, and a well deserved "power shower" after the day's work) is now up on www.facebook.com/biosphere.expeditions1.

10 June

When I arrived back at the station there were lots of stories of interesting sightings I had missed. Everyone was in good spirits and pleased with what they have achieved so far. Rain followed me to the station and we spent the whole afternoon under the roof. Then a friaje arrived, jackets came out and everyone was asking for extra blankets. Luckily the rain stopped late in the evening and we even managed to squeeze in an extra night walk. What a crazy day!

11 June

My mission of the day was to find the stream at the end of Brazil nut trail and set up some camera traps there. Rita and Sara joined me and on our way back we had an amazing David Attenborough moment. We heard a loud noise coming out of the trees, as if someone or something was trying to crack the brazil nuts. We went in to investigate and found a troop of white-fronted capuchins, hard at work. Two of them had a nut each and kept bashing it against the branch, trying to open it. I managed to record a bit of footage, before the capuchin dropped the nut to the ground. He did look quite embarrassed and left us in stitches. What great fun!

Everyone else got back from their activities, full of stories of numerous jaguar footprints, all over the transects and trails. We have named the largest male "Matthias" - his footprints were reported from both transect C and the Brazil nut trail.

After dinner we learnt that Gloria, our cook, has spent some time observing us and giving us names of animals we are meant to resemble. Everyone was bit worried, but in the end she was spot on. Among those that fitted the most was a sloth (Cornelius, for his love of spending most of his days in the hammock), a male howler monkey (Alan, apparently for an army of followers, female to be precise, not sure where Gloria got this from), a pair of macaws (Flavio and Tina, very fitting), a spider monkey (Sara for her vegan diet) and Amazonian red squirell (Charlie, in Gloria's words for being small but quick and good with a machete).

12 June

Gloria just couldn't wait. The whole morning she was asking when the soccer game would start. After all it was Sunday and we had to put science on hold. Today we were out to have lots of fun. The kick-off was scheduled for 11 and the appointed captains, Gloria and I, chose their teams carefully. Well, Gloria clearly went for all the good-looking guys and left me with all the girls. As much as everyone was looking forward to the game, it wasn't as easy as it looked. Playing in the sand in high heat and humidity, I had to order a break every ten minutes or so. And the score? It was 3:3 for a very long time until Ege scored a golden goal. Alan, Eric and I then jumped into the river and drifted on the current all the way to the waterfall. Others took a boat and arrived shortly afterwards, very keen to jump into cool water, wash off the sweat and escape the sand flies. Gloria showed us how to jump through the waterfall and soon everyone joined in. Refreshed, everyone felt the itch to do more on this "day off" and after lunch most team members departed for their little private walks. I think they have started to realise that they only have few days left and the presence of the jaguars around the base was enough to motivate everyone to go explore, rather than spend another afternoon in the hammock.

After dinner, another fun activity followed. This time we had to keep quiet as we slowly drifted down the river in our boat, looking for caimans. We found a healthy and thriving population along the banks of Las Piedras and even managed to spot our first capybaras. Like shadows, they suddenly appeared on the river bank, a tiny herd, with a few babies. What a fantastic day!

13 June

One survey was spiced up with our first dramatic encounter with white-lipped peccaries, whose stench we could smell before we could hear them. Completely surrounded by a foraging herd some fifty strong, I had no choice but to bash my machete against the tree to scare them off. They were too many and were a little too close for comfort.

The macaw team reported numerous macaws on the claylick. And yet again, Matthias's footprints were everywhere, including on the Brazil nut trail and Transect C. I feel it is just matter of time, before someone is going to bump into him.

14 June

Survey teams come in one-by-one, tired, but with full datasheets. Sara and her team confirmed yet another female jaguar footprint and it started making more sense that she really might have a cub somewhere there and is therefore not moving around much. Matthias could then easily be the cub's father. Or as Alan speculated there could have been a large kill somewhere. Aside from our wild thoughts, most impressive were the footprints themselves. In one track trap, nicknamed "jaguar's dance matt", Martha counted over 20 footprints, belonging to the same animal!

15 June

On the macaw colpa we recorded some 25 red-and-green macaws. Among them was one scarlet macaw, who seemed to have a somewhat close relationship with one his red-and-green cousins, something which even Alan found hard to believe, until we produced a photo. We also saw a couple of capybaras, wading through the shallow water right in front of the colpa.

16 June

Alan, Charlie and Sara bagged an elusive saki monkey on Transect A!

Nick and Martha retrieved the memory card from one of the camera traps and finally. The jaguar!

Flavio, Tina and Nick did their best to enter the rest of the datasheets. To keep them sane, Nick read out all the numbers in various voices, his imitations of Roger Moore and Sean Connery were pretty impressive. Alan then took charge, went through the data and presented us with the results in the form of various graphs, happy - we have done well! Gloria made her last amazing dinner and the time to reflect has come. Our last feedback session lasted for hours, with the help of Gloria's rum, and it was great to hear how much everyone enjoyed their time here. It was a great team effort and from day one, everyone worked incredibly hard to make their time here worthwhile. Well done team and a real showcase for "the more you put in, the more you get out".

17 June

Some last walks in the jungle and an unexpected bonus. A picture of a puma on the mammal colpa camera trap! Great result for the very last day of this slot 1 and a great inspiration for slot 2!

19 June

Team number two assembled at Wasai lodge with the mountain of food I had bought the previous day. Everyone was in high spirits and after organising our load, we were finally on our way. The journey upriver was, as always, amazing, yet a little slower, due to a drop in the water level. We managed to spot an endangered black caiman, not far from the station.

20 June

Everyone was up at 5:20 when a troop of howler monkeys set off their alarm clocks and started howling very loudly just next to the lodge. During training, team members got to know more about navigation, how to use a GPS and a compass. This was later put into practice on a short walk, which also included a brief introduction on machete use and track trap making. Sara then introduced the team to the mammal world around Las Piedras and how to recognise its various members.

During a walk in the afternoon, Matthias' footprints were everywhere, there were even a few tapir prints around. Probably the most significant find on the walk was a strong presence of white-lipped peccary; I came across three large herds, numbering at least 150 animals. This time I stood my ground and let them come quite close.

As I returned back to the base, the entire team was heading out for night walk. Glad to have such keen team members with us!

21 June

Another day of training started with a very early start. Howler monkeys yet again provided the perfect alarm clock. Alan and Aldo took Savannah, Tristan, Uwe, Anne and Marina to the macaw colpa and Sara headed over to Transect C with Ines, Ken, Mark, Connie, Thomas and Lisa. Good luck with your monkey impressions Ines!

22 June

With the training over, the entire expedition team headed to the forest to practice their new skills and hopefully bring back some useful data. I took Tristan and Savannah to explore transect B. The monkeys we managed to spot, fled instantly and we felt that being out of our concession, hunting was still going on here.

Sara took Lisa and Marina on the river trail, Connie and Mark managed to spot their first tamandua on Transect C and Uwe with Anne spent a quiet morning observing some spider monkeys and brought back some good data. Sam and Tamara had their first training session at the macaw colpa with Alan.

After dinner, Alan gave his favorite speech on parrots and everyone felt like a macaw expert.

23 June

We made our priority on this slot to discover a mysterious, hidden mammal claylick, Alan had heard so much about. It was clear to us that the peccaries had to go somewhere else as our old claylick was becoming pretty much deserted. As soon as we left the Brazil nut trail, Alan navigated us through dense vegetation. After crossing a stream with crystal clear water, we knew we were not far and half an hour later, we reached our Shangri-La.

We found a new mammal claylick and judging by the footprints all around, it was the one the peccaries were going to. Alan installed his camera trap, Tristan shared his ever popular trail mix and we headed back. From the footprints, we found that Matthias was still suffering from diarrhoea.

24 June

Thomas, Connie, Tamara and I left early in the morning to retrieve camera trap data. I was certain we would have a good result in our camera traps as there were jaguar footprints everywhere. There were also plenty of monkeys, who kept us entertained throughout our long walk and we even managed to find another mammal claylick. I ventured inside the forest to have a look at the swamp nearby, but instead discovered a claylick, at the base of an overturned tree. Alan explained to us that these are temporary claylicks and are quite common.

Sara, Tristan and Savannah went out on on Transect A, with Sara all smiles, as she finally managed to spot her first monk saki monkey.

Mark and Sam volunteered to head over to the control matrix. The camera traps finally revealed their secrets before dinner and yes, jaguars were the highlights. I was particularly excited to see them sniffing at a Davidoff scented patch of dirt and wondering what they thought of it. Sara's camera had ocelot pictures on it and some great shots of trumpeters. Gloria cooked yet another magical dinner, crowned with ever popular rice pudding and when Tristan pulled out his bottle of picso, we could only toast to yet another great day.

25 June

Sara was keen to see the new colpa herself and took Savannah and Sam to install a mini matrix and one more camera trap. Aldo crossed the river with ever keen Uwe and Anne, to explore Transect B, while Alan had a very early morning on Transect A with Mark and Tristan. I went to the macaw colpa with Tamara. With the weather on the verge of a dramatic change, the birds were keen to feed and were there at the claylick in huge numbers. Blue-headed parrots, mealy parrots and both scarlet and green macaws. In the end it was a hawk and a pair of vultures who scared all the birds off.

But this was only the beginning of the day I would remember forever. With a mammal matrix planned for the afternoon, I decided to climb up the hide earlier and wait for the team to arrive. This is a brief entry to my diary:

"The wind rushes through the jungle and drowns all the life. Then silence, nothing moves. New sound arrives. Faint growl, panting, growl again. Peccaries? More growling, more panting, loud crack of the branch. Closer, closer. And then first, short glimpse of a large spotted body. A jaguar! For a moment it is gone. A glimpse? A mere glimpse lasting no more than a millisecond. Is it all I am allowed? I lean out of the hide, hoping for more. Jaguar, a female, jumps on a fallen fig tree and walks across. She stops and sniffs an old bromelia plant. Picture! Take a picture?"

My heart is pumping, my hands shaking. She walks on without noticing me. And then out of nowhere, a second jaguar appears. A majestic male jumps on the log and follows his partner. Where did he come from? How could I have missed him? He pauses, briefly looks at me and disappears into the bush. I can hardly breathe. Amazing! The whole moment lasted not more than a minute, but it seemed like an eternity. How deep were his eyes. Did I get any pictures? Are they in focus? I couldn't care less. My hands are still shaking. What just happened? Was it real? I check the camera. Wow! I could have at least extended the zoom and turn the video recorder on. Who cares. A jaguar! Two jaguars!"

26 June

Sunday marks the day off and arrival of a friaje. Overnight the temperature has dropped dramatically. Jackets and warm hats come out after lunch and everyone leaves for various walks. In the strange weather the forest is quiet. I head down to Transect C, believing jaguars will be there. And they are! At the 2400 m marker I can hear loud growls and hissing. They are mating! I leave them to it and return to base. Alan immediately plans a reverse Transect C for the morning and Connie and Thomas volunteer to go with him. If only they knew ...

27 June

Who better to describe the events of the morning, then Alan himself:

"We set off at 04:00, the weather cool and the forest still. After about 20 minutes we encountered night monkeys. Then, rounding a corner the flash of a big cat eye were highlighted in the trail for a second. The cat did not stay, turning around and disappearing quickly along the trail. Tom and Connie had not seen it - but not to matter. Within minutes after continuing, big cat eyes were seen rapidly advancing down the trail towards us. In the bright beam of the maglite we could see it was a large jaguar coming rapidly towards us. We stepped off the trail and took the light off it in order not to blind it - but when it got to 5 meters away, I stamped my foot as it showed no signs of stopping. We stared at the massive animal and he stared at us. After a few seconds of this I said to the stunned Connie and Thomas - 'Take a photo!'. After some unzipping of bag and fumbling around in the dark, the bemused, maybe bored, jaguar turned around and started up the trail. Tom was too awe struck to figure out how his video recorder worked.

But by now we could hear the female jaguar calling. We knew we would have another chance - if we were brave enough to follow. And we were. Sneaking down the trail as quietly as the dry leaves would allow, approaching the intimidating snarls and growls of the lovestruck jaguars, we finally saw another jaguar on the path in our lights. It was smaller and more wary - the female. Over her low growls, we could hear the male behind her.

Unfortunately she was just beyond the reach of the capacities of Tom's video camera. Soon she turned and headed away, and we followed her plaintive 'meows'. After a while we could hear the jaguars moving off the path to our right. We thought the fun was over, and started to move forward quickly in order to make up lost ground. Despite this I managed to spot a curled up vine snake resting in the undergrowth - a much easier target for Connie and Thomas. But while they snapped away, the jaguars could be heard again close by. We moved forward slowly, listening to distant territorial roars and the female's plaintive calls and I caught a glimpse of a jaguar crossing the path, moving right. Then the roaring got louder and louder. A battle of the titans of the forest commenced, Matthias vs. Jerry, out of view from us in the shadows of the forest, but recorded for posterity on a Dictaphone."

And how lucky we have it all recorded. Jaguars themselves captured on the camera. What an expedition!

Aldo, Ken and Uwe returned later with some solid shots of white-collared peccaries and Marian observed and recorded some great tamarin behaviour. Even the macaw colpa was busy, despite rather chilly weather and Mark and Sam reported well over 30 macaws feeding on the clay. Sara then took Ines, Tamara and Ken to check the control matrix and as expected, traps were full of jaguar footprints. Ken even managed to spot a rare glimpse of a king vulture sitting on the top the tree.

28 June

Reverse transects ruled in the cool early morning. Sara took Uwe and Anne on Transect A; Aldo left with Tamara and Marina hoping for a bit of jaguar action on C and Alan went to see what was left of the well-forgotten Transect C2. Armed with machetes, this was the activity of choice, the slashing will certainly keep both Mark and Sam warm.

I then took Uwe with Anne to check the footprint traps on the mammal colpa, but the jaguars were well gone. There were not even prints along the main trail.

On the way back, we noticed a lone spider monkey sitting on the top of the tree and calling her friends. Aldo explained to us that it got probably left behind and is now keen to get back to her family. Tristan and Savannah showed up as well, like two ghosts, their camouflaged tops working perfectly. They found a young sloth swimming across the river. Jose picked it up and they then took it to the base to recover. When we got back however, it was gone.

29 June

The reverse transect appears more popular than ever, the base is almost empty in the mornings. Alan couldn't wait to leave, his wish to explore remote Loretillo river was just about to be fulfilled. We dropped off Uwe and Aldo at the macaw colpa and carried on further upriver, stopping at the beaches, looking for cat signs. The banks were full of tapir footprints. We also found signs of both neotropical and giant otter. Apart from one very old track, jaguars were not as present, but footprints of margays and ocelots were numerous. Spider monkeys were hopping from one bank to another, using long jumps from branch to branch, totally oblivious to our presence. Tristan even managed to spot his first white-collared peccary. What a great little adventure.

30 June

The last full day of expedition started early in the morning, with Alan taking Ken and Sam on reverse Transect A, shortly followed by Aldo with Tristan and Savannah. The collection of camera traps was entrusted to Ines, Anne and Connie. Mark went on his own to collect the mosquito net and spot jaguar at the mammal colpa. On this last free afternoon, everyone disappeared into the forest and the base was pretty much empty until our final meeting. Alan ran through the results - there were some great pictures on camera traps as well. A superb ending to the day, was a "caiman cruise", with a great sighting of a herd of capybara, not far from the base. And then we just drifted down the river, without the engine, quiet, looking at the stars and dreaming about coming back.

1 July

We left the base after lunch, with very big knots in our stomachs. Taxis were waiting and, with reverse culture shock, we have arrived back into Puerto Maldonado with mixed feelings. If we just could go back once more ..

Great expedition, great team, great results. Thank you everybody!