



Magnificent Manu

by Tad Foringer, Hampton, Virginia

Parrots are expensive! Especially when one's love and curiosity take takes him to the faraway places where these amazing creatures actually live in the wild. Fortunately, my wife (Rita) shares that interest and eagerly accompanies me on some of these expeditions.

Before this last trip, I had visited the Explorama lodges near the Amazon and Napo Rivers northeast of Iquitos; the Tambopata Research Center (twice) south of Puerto Maldonado; the Pampas del Heath Lodge (actually in Bolivia across from Peru's southern Heath River border); and Timpia (tribal center for the Machiguenga Indians) north of Cuzco. My main focus was to observe parrots and other wildlife in their natural habitat. Of particular interest to me are the macaw clay licks where parrots congregate daily to socialize and eat the clay. It is reported

that eating the clay provides needed minerals and offsets toxins ingested with certain fruits and seeds. There are about 30 known clay licks in Peru but many are inaccessible to the average tourist. However, several have been developed into ecotourism sites where poachers have been converted to protectors for the tourist dollar.

But I kept hearing and reading that Manu was the ultimate rainforest destination. A 1997 *AFA Watchbird* article by Rae V. Anderson gave an exciting presentation of Manu that further piqued my interest. Pristine, untouched, abounding in wildlife, relatively free of tourists and campers, more expensive than other destinations – and the best macaw clay lick! I had to see it! So, I contacted InkaNatura Travel and arranged to visit not only Manu but also the Colca Canyon in southern Peru.

Incidentally, the Colca was absolutely spectacular but that is another story.

Getting There

Manu National Park is huge, about 4 million acres or three times the size of Delaware. It does abound in wildlife – more than 1,000 species of birds and 200 species of mammals, reputedly more stuff than any other park in the world, with the possible exception of the new Madidi National Park in Bolivia. Yeah, I was really getting excited!

It is located about 100 miles north-east of Cuzco and is accessible from Cuzco by either an arduous two-day overland trip or by a 35-minute charter flight. Since we were somewhat limited on time, Rita and I opted to fly and that turned out to be an adventure in itself. At the plane, we met our guide for Manu, Doris Valencia Puclla, as well as a couple from Germany and a fun banker, John Urofsky from Philadelphia. Imagine flying in a small two engine plane, looking for a break in the clouds (no NavAids here), diving into a hole, and swooping down to a landing on a wet, grassy strip cut into the jungle at Boca Manu!

The airfield consisted of a thatch-covered platform with a radio powered by car batteries, a doorless outbuilding, and a fleet of two wheelbarrows for luggage handling. We transferred to a motorized canoe for the 1 1/2 hour ride up the Madre de Dios River to our lodge.

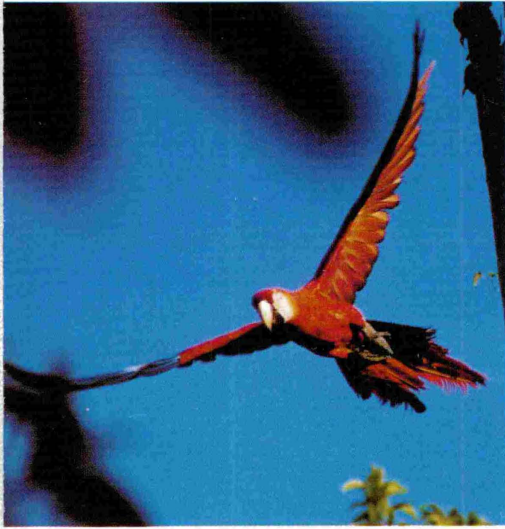
Manu Wildlife Center

The center is not located in the Manu National Park for the simple reason that no tourists are allowed there, only conservationists and researchers. Many people book “cheaper” trips and find themselves in what is called the Tourist Reserve Zone. They might end up disappointed. The Manu Wildlife Center, however, is located on a 50,000 acre private reserve and is one of only two lodges that I know of in this very desirable area. The center has 15 fully screened private bungalows, separate toilet and shower complexes, dining room, and a neat social/bar building. There is no electricity but there is a generator that can be fired up to

Photos courtesy of the author



Tad and Rita at community of Boca Manu



Scarlet Macaw on final approach.

charge camcorder batteries or to power a blender to make pisco sours, Peru's national drink.

We were fortunate to be assigned to the "Jaguar" bungalow, one of the few containing its own toilet and shower. We were delighted because it can be really bothersome to use the communal facilities during a downpour. But any of the facilities in the rainforest can generate surprise. During our first night a tree frog jumped on Rita in the bathroom. Shades of Ally McBeal!

The center director, an Australian named Julian Grey, has a construction background and is working to convert

more of the bungalows to full facilities and he is up to eight completed. The food was great and featured many local dishes and, all in all, it was probably the best lodge we have encountered.

There was only one other small group at the Manu Wildlife Center when we arrived and another couple arrived the day before we departed. Each group has its own guide and all activities are done with only that guide, so the Manu experience can be as good, or as weak, as the a group's particular guide. Our experience at other lodges was enhanced by the variety (locals and researchers) and expertise (birds, plants, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, etc.) of the individual guides. However, Doris was very good with primary expertise in ornithology (thank goodness!) and a strong smattering in the other disciplines. We lucked out!

Amazing Wildlife

I know many of you can hardly wait to get to the parrot stuff but I have to tell you about the other critters first. The Manu area is, indeed, rich in wildlife. Along the rivers we saw Great and Snowy Egrets, White-necked and Great-billed Herons, Slate-colored Hawk, Sand Bittern, Spotted Sandpiper, Pale-legged Hornero, Yellow-billed and Large-billed Terns, Horned Screamer, and Razor-billed Curassow.

At a beautiful oxbow lake, we observed a family of endangered Giant Otters at play. These fellow are really big – five or six feet long and up to 75 pounds! Their snorting and antics entertained us for hours. We saw Smooth-billed and Greater Anis, Amazon Kingfisher, as well as many of the unique hoatzins. Chestnut-fronted Macaws and Blue and Gold Macaws flew over as well as several pairs of Amazons. Then, just before we left the lake, a family of Red Howler Monkeys showed up in the trees above us and we enjoyed watching them play.

But the list of sightings goes on! In various places we saw the Cuvier's Toucan, Wattled Jacana, Paradise Jacamar, Spix's and Piping Guans, Olive and Crested Oropendula, Tricolored Trogon, White-lored Euphonia, Yellow-rumped Cacique, and more. Get the



Macaws on and above the clay lick.

idea? This place had it all and I haven't even started with mammals.

On one of Doris's power hikes, we were surprised when a group of peccaries (wild pig) crossed the trail just 50 feet in front of us. During this outing we also saw a lek (breeding area) where the beautiful Band-tail Manikin treated us to his display. Blue Morph and Owl Butterflies flitted past us and we saw some incredible caterpillars.

One of our major outings was to spend a night at a mammal clay lick, which is unique to the Manu Wildlife Center. Mammals eat the clay as an antacid just as parrots do. But the mammal lick is deep in the jungle and they come only at night. Our goal was to see the Brazilian Tapir, which can weigh 600 pounds, and is the largest land animal in South America. To do so, we camped on an observation platform and slept on mats under mosquito netting. Our guide would wake us each time an animal visited the lick, then we would peek out from our netting to observe. Actually, a 600 lb. Tapir doesn't sneak up quietly and we had 10 or 12 sightings although I suspect they were the same five or six tapirs. It was an unusual experience as I had only seen one tapir close up in my previous four rainforest trips.

Monkeying Around During Siesta

No, not that! But almost as exhilarating. The rainforest can be hot and muggy especially in the afternoon. After one of our power hikes and a great lunch, we were resting in our bungalow and trying to cool off. I, of course, was dozing when Rita shook me awake and excitedly whispered that there were monkeys right outside! A large group of at least 40 brown Capuchin Monkeys were swinging and crashing through the brush and trees just 20 feet away. There were adults, juveniles, and even mothers with babies on their backs. This display went on for at least 10 minutes and we were mesmerized. What a treat!

And, yes, we saw many other monkeys during our visit. The list includes Spider and Squirrel Monkeys, Yellow Saddleback and the mustachioed Emperor Tamarins, and the Red Howlers mentioned earlier. Other mammals included Red Rook Deer, Capybara, and Agoutis.

The Macaw Clay Lick

Some of you parrot fanatics thought I would never get to this part! Well, there is some good news and some bad news. The good news is that the



Jaguar bungalow at Manu Wildlife Center

clay lick is excellent, one of the best I have seen. It is lower and more compact than Tambopata with better photo opportunities.

The bad news is not really that bad. The Blanquillo Manu clay lick is owned by the Boca Manu community. To see the clay lick, one must use a floating blind owned by a consortium of tour operators and, since it can hold 40 people, it can be crowded. Luckily, during our visit there were only about 15 guests. Most tours include only one visit to the clay lick. For an additional visit, you have to obtain permission from the folks who operate the blind (because of space limitations), coordinate the plan with the lodge staff, and pay an extra \$20. Picky, picky.

There had been quite a bit of rain prior to our visit so the water level was high. Since the floating blind had to be tethered to the opposite shore, we were about 300 feet from the clay lick itself. In low water, the blind would have been anchored in midstream and we would have been much closer. It was a great show!

First the green parrots came – Mealy and Yellow-crowned Amazons, Blue-headed and Black-headed Pionus, and

Photos courtesy of the author



On floating blind at the Blanquillo Manu macaw clay lick.

White-eyed Conures. Good count, over 150, and lots of activity. Occasionally, one of the “sentinel” birds would sound the alarm for a perceived threat and all the birds would launch off the clay lick in a raucous green cloud! After about an hour or so twosomes and foursomes of Green-winged Macaws started to arrive in the trees above the lick. They eventually reached critical mass and, joined by a few Scarlet Macaws, took over. Again, the count was very good – upwards of 200! Although we saw a number of Blue and Gold Macaws elsewhere during our visit, they do not regularly show up at this lick. This time we were treated to red clouds of birds as they spooked off the lick. It was a good outing and we were even treated to a pancake breakfast on the floating blind.

Wet Departure

During our visit at the Manu Wildlife Center we were blessed with really good weather. The morning of our departure to meet our charter plane at Boca Manu, however, it was raining as only it can in the rainforest. Hard! When we arrived at the airstrip we found that our plane wouldn't be coming to pick us up until the strip and turnaround area was less wet. I understood the full implication of this when I noted that some bored traveler had carved this message on a bench: “RHL, waited for plane IIII II days, Sep 97” That got my attention!




Observation platform at the center's mammal clay lick “You expect me to sleep where?”

There's not much to do on that thatch-covered platform. And we waited, and waited, and waited. Finally, after the rain abated, we heard the plane coming in on final approach and we knew that we were going home!

Looking back, I believe that Manu is all it is reputed to be. Yes, it is more expensive than other destinations but the saying that “you get what you pay for” is really true in this instance.

Is my rainforest quest over? Not even. We are already planning our next trip with InkaNatura so that I may show Rita the Sabeti clay lick at Timpia

and shoot the rapids at Pongo de Mainique. Also, I have heard that another major macaw clay lick has been recently discovered on the Urubamba River just upriver from Sepahua! I've gotta see it... 



Charter plane at Boca Manu airstrip.

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