

# Tambopata: The Third Time IS the Charm!

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*Macaws gathered on a clay lick.*

**P**revious Visits. My first visit to the Tambopata Research Center (TRC) in southeast Peru was in October 1996 and the second was in March 1998. Each visit entailed a morning flight to Puerto Maldonado, considered a frontier city by many Peruvians, and a looong 8-hour journey by motorized canoe up the Tambopata River. We arrived at dusk, tired and hungry, and unpacked by candlelight, dazed and confused. When departing, we faced a shorter (about 6 hours) downstream boat ride back to Puerto Maldonado where we spent the night in a noisy hotel prior to a morning departure (there are no afternoon flights) back to Lima. But, each visit was a marvelous experience.

This was my seventh visit to the rainforests of Peru. My passion and quest were to observe parrots and other critters in the wild. The macaw clay licks, revealed by Dr. Charles Munn in his *National Geographic* (Jan. 94) article, were a major draw and I've seen the "coll-

pas" at Manu (see *AFA Watchbird* Vol XXVII), Timpia (twice), Heath River and Tambopata. My wife, Rita, had accompanied me on four of these adventures. Since TRC was one of her favorites, it became the destination to scratch my most

recent "itch."

Manu is the most wildlife-rich destination reasonably accessible to the average tourist but involves either an arduous two-day overland journey or charter flight from Cuzco. Timpia (Machiguenga Center for Tropical Studies), with its three clay licks, also requires an air charter. Tambopata (second, only to Manu, in overall



*Blue and Gold Macaws "kissing" on their perch high in a skimpy tree.*



*The author and his wife, Rita, mucking along a wet trail and having a lot of fun.*

wildlife) is much more reasonable in cost and has a premier clay lick as well. Also, I wanted to see a new lodge, Posada Amazonas, which now provides a welcome and pleasant break in the long journey to the TRC.

Rainforest Expeditions ([www.perunature.com](http://www.perunature.com)) owns both the Tambopata Research Center and the newer Posada Amazonas (in partnership with the Ese'ejá Native Community). This environmentally sensitive organization has won both the Conservation International Ecotourism Excellence and Conde Nast Traveller Ecotourism Awards. For questions or further info about Rainforest Expeditions email co-owner Kurt Holle at:

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Parrot fanatics should check out:

**[www.perunature.com/  
parrotlovers.htm](http://www.perunature.com/parrotlovers.htm)**

### **Posada Amazonas**

This 24-bedroom lodge has been open since 1998 and consists of several thatched roof buildings used for bedrooms, a library and exhibit building, a meeting center, and a large bar-dining room-kitchen facility. Each bedroom has its own bathroom and shower and the rooms are open to the jungle. Candles and oil lamps provide soothing light after dark. The food is Peruvian-style and very tasty. The lodge is close enough (two hours) to Puerto Maldonado that blocks of ice can be brought in so that blended drinks can be made with a generator-powered blender!

Our guide for the entire visit was Silverio Duri, an Ese'ejá Indian, and one of the best I have encountered in all my visits. Rita and I were accompanied by a client, Rita Blakeslee. Our trip was structured so that we spent two nights at Posada Amazonas, four nights at the TRC and then two more nights at Posada Amazonas on the way out. This arrangement really simplified the long journey to the TRC and allowed us to catch a morning flight from

Puerto Maldonado without the noisy hotel experience.

### **Adventures at Posada Amazonas**

This lodge turned out to be a most worthy destination in its own right, ideal for the folks that don't have a lot of time and want a genuine rainforest experience. Our flight arrived in Puerto Maldonado late morning and we were met by Silverio, taken to the Rainforest Expedition office for a courtesy break and then to the port to board our 40-ft long motorized canoe. Gone were the pickup truck rides from my previous visits. We rode in a bus-type vehicle with a thatched roof!

We arrived at the lodge and were greeted by a member of the staff for a quick briefing and a refreshing glass of native juice. There was plenty of time to unpack, get acclimated, and visit the bar, all in daylight. Our room was spacious and attractive and we really appreciated having our own facilities. Early March is at the shoulder of the rainy season in this part of Peru. In previous visits, I had experienced rain in the dry season and great weather in the rainy season but, on this visit, we experienced RAIN in the rainy season. It had rained quite heavily in the days prior to our visit and the trails were slick and muddy, often with standing water several inches deep. However, rubber boots are provided at the lodges and we found that they were very necessary for all of our activities throughout our visit. We got a lot of use from our ponchos but our spirits were never dampened because we got to do something interesting for at least a piece of every day.

Our first highlight was to climb a 37-meter observation tower that placed us above the jungle canopy and also treated us to a beautiful view of the Tambopata River. We saw lots of birds including Squirrel Cuckoo, Rufus Motmot, White-bellied Caique, and Yellow-ridged and White-throated Toucans. A good macaw show included Chestnut-

fronted, Scarlet, and Green-winged. We also saw White-eyed and Dusky-headed Conures as well as Yellow-crowned and Mealy Amazons.

There are two small clay licks near Posada Amazonas. One favored by the smaller parrots like conures and pionus and the other by the macaws and amazons. Attendance is not as regular as the larger licks at TRC, Manu and Timpia and we didn't have much luck due to the rainy weather. However, we were treated to a rare sighting of a pair of Blue-headed Macaws *Propyrrhura couloni* near the lick. While waiting at these licks and walking the trail network, we saw Fork-tailed and Sulphur Flycatchers, Black-tailed and Masked Tityras, Fork-tailed Woodnymph, Eastern Kingbird, and Yellow-backed Tanager. On our last day, we had about a dozen titi monkeys playing in the trees very near the lodge. Yeah, a great taste of the rainforest.

Other activities at the Posada

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Amazonas included a visit to a farm worked by Ese'jea Indians where we saw starfruit, mango, banana, lime, papaya and ugly trees, among others. We also visited a medicinal plant center where a shaman not only cultivated many types of plants and trees but also treated locals for a variety of maladies. Fascinating.

### **Up the River**

Traveling the Tambopata River is an experience in itself. With the heavy rain coming off the mountains, the river can rise dramatically and the banks calve bringing large trees along with the process. Thus, the boatmen are very careful to avoid floating debris and whirlpools. The distance from Puerto Maldonado to the Tambopata Research Center is about 100km as the parrot flies but much further for us non-flighted folks because of all the twists and turns in the river.

About halfway into the journey, we enter into the Tambopata-Candamo Reserve, over 2.2 million acres of undisturbed and almost completely uninhabited rainforest. There is a myriad of wildlife to see along the way. We saw Great and Snowy Egrets, White-necked Heron, Bat Falcon, Roadside Hawk, Orinoco Geese, Brown-chested Martin, Giant Cowbird, White-winged Swallow, and many other birds. A highlight was a group of Capybara, the largest rodents in the world that grow up to as much as sixty pounds. Another treat was a family of Red Howler Monkeys cavorting in the trees right above us.

### **Tambopata Research Center**

The 13-bedroom lodge is older and, of course, more rustic. The complex consists of four interconnected thatch-roofed buildings joined by covered walkways. The guests share the showers and toilets. Again, the food was great and the bar served cold beer, thanks to a propane refrigerator. No ice here.

Research is a continuing process at the TRC with researchers almost

always in residence. Rather than cite all the "ologies," suffice it to say that these people are using innovative protocols to study bugs, birds, reptiles, fish, mammals, and plants. During the tourist season, the researchers double as guides. Thus, the tourist is exposed to several guides, experts in their fields, to explain the mysteries of the rainforest. This marriage with ecotourism generates revenue to develop improved services and infrastructure as well as design new and exciting ways to

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interpret nature and observe wildlife. With 25km of trails at the TRC, there is much to see and explore.

### **The Macaws of Tambopata**

Macaws normally lay two or three eggs during each breeding season and begin incubating immediately. Since the eggs are laid three or four days apart, the chicks hatch accordingly with the first chick growing exponentially before the next chick hatches. This first chick is bigger and more aggressive in receiving food from its parents and the smaller, later chicks often die of starvation. In the early to mid 1990s, researchers would climb to the nests (both natural tree cavities and man-made boxes) and pull the weaker chicks for handfeeding. Although some were lost, over thirty chicks were successfully fledged back to the jungle. These Blue and Gold, Green-winged and Scarlet babies, known as "chicos," added to the aura of the center by flying down to snatch food and interact with the tourists. It is interesting to note that none of the Blue and Gold chicos

returned after fledging.

The chico appearances are not as regular now but, most exciting, several have taken on wild mates. During our visit, such a pair of Scarlets flew down to the "treat station" for a banana snack. Some of these pairs have already produced offspring. The research continues under the leadership of Don Brightsmith of Duke University (see *AFA Watchbird* Vol XXVIII, No. 3 for more details of his work). Don spends many weeks in residence each year and supervises a number of staffers who monitor the macaws and habitat in his absence. Rita's biggest highlight of our visit was to observe the measuring, weighing, and physical examination of a baby Scarlet Macaw.

To do this, one of Don's assistants climbed a rope, carrying a covered bucket, about 80 feet up to an artificial nest box. She then pulled the chick, placed it in the bucket, and lowered it to the ground by a smaller rope. Here another assistant did the physical, recorded the data, and returned the chick to the bucket for the return trip. Since these inspections are done from the time the eggs are laid, the parents get used to these intrusions without any problems. During the 12 weeks or so prior to fledging, the chick's tail gets very dirty and damaged due to the close quarters of the nest. During our visit, we saw several flying macaw families with a recently fledged chick as evidenced by a raggedy or missing tail. Neat!

### **Adventures at the Tambopata Research Center**

The normal day for a parrot fanatic at TRC used to be to wake up at 4:30 am or so, have a snack and take the longboat across the river to an island/sand bar to wait for the clay lick "show."

On this visit, it was the same drill. However, the island was GONE! Must have washed away in a big storm since my last visit. Now the observation is much further to the left,

facing the lick, although just as close to that portion of the lick face as before. However, if the parrots decide (they can be fickle) to visit further to the right, the distance can be a lot farther than before. The serious photographer should bring at least a 500mm lens for acceptable photos.

The show is just as spectacular whatever the distance. If the weather cooperates (the birds do not usually come if it is raining or foggy) the parrots begin to arrive at daybreak from all points of the compass (great chance for great overhead pix). They congregate in the trees above and beside the clay lick. When each of the species reaches critical mass, they begin to descend to the clay lick to ingest the clay (offsets their diet toxicity much like we take an antacid). The smaller birds (conures, pionus, and parakeets) come first followed later by the amazons (Mealy and Yellow-crowned) and macaws (Chestnut-fronted, Blue and Gold, Green-winged, and Scarlet). What majesty! What beauty! Rainbow colors and raucous calling – the graceful flight of the macaws and the amazons flapping so hard to fly. Clouds of birds flushing off the lick when a “sentinel” calls an alert. Do you get the impression that I think this event is awesome?

After the clay lick activity, we return to the lodge for breakfast and prepare to spend a couple hours exploring one of the trails. Then it is time to relax before lunch. After a “siesta” during the hottest part of the day, we hit another trail before heading back to the lodge for a cold one before dinner. Evenings (it gets dark a little after 6:00) are spent trading stories with staff and other visitors, watching a slide show (projector powered by a generator) or going on a night hike to look for frogs, tarantulas, and other nocturnal critters. Finally, we go to bed around 9:00pm or so to fall asleep to the sounds of the jungle and get rested for another exciting day.

There is so much to do at the TRC. A visit to the palm swamp and

climbing a 60-ft tower to see Blue and Gold Macaws returning to their nest at day's end is such a memorable experience. You can fish for piranha or look for giant otters at an oxbow lake. But the overlook trail that winds its way along the top of the clay lick is my most favorite place on earth. On a clear day one can see the snow-capped Andes in the distance with the Tambopata River and rainforest in the foreground.

Silverio led us along this trail one mid-morning and we were amazed to observe 60-70 large (Scarlet, Green-winged, and Blue and Gold) macaws reach critical mass and descend to the clay lick right below us! This late show does not happen regularly and is counter to my experience at other clay licks.

On yet another day as we traversed this trail, we saw several spider monkeys then a group of a dozen red howler monkeys, and, in the bamboo forest, a family of dusky titi monkeys. I was taking photos of this group when a youngster crept down from the branches closer, closer and closer until he was almost full-frame in my viewfinder. Incredible. As we rested on an overlook bench, some Cobalt-winged Parakeets gathered in the tree above us. Soon there were hundreds. They would flush off the tree in a chattering green cloud, swoop over the river, and return. Again and again.

Silverio was a master at spotting and identifying wildlife, especially birds. Our partial list at the TRC includes Blue-throated Piping Guan, King and Black Vultures, Tropical King Bird, Blue-fronted Jacamar, Magpie Tanager, White-fronted Nun Bird, Beolaceous Jay, Slate-colored Seedeater, Laughing Falcon, and Sun-colored Night Hawk.

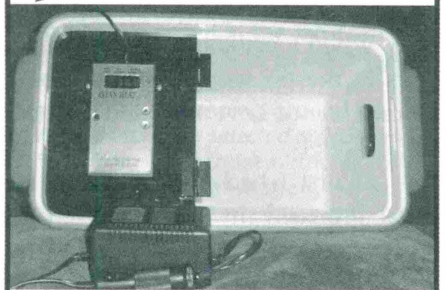
Mammals, in addition to all the monkeys, included agouti, bamboo rat, and red bracket deer. Silverio led us along trail C-1 and showed us a tarantula family (parent and two babies that were plenty big for me). He somehow spotted a 5-ft caiman that we had to struggle to discern it from the vegetation and shadows.

But, the highpoint of my visit was a snake! We were still on C-1 with Silverio in the lead, the two Ritás in the middle with me at the rear. I glanced two or three feet to the side and saw the last several feet of what seemed to be a HUGE boa constrictor. I alerted the others and gave the snake's tail a gentle tug and, sure enough, the head came around to investigate. That made for some great photos and even greater memories.

### Closing Thoughts

My first two visits to the Tambopata Research Center were wonderful. Some activities were rained out but most were not. Some days the parrots came to the clay lick and some days they did not. But each visit revealed new and wondrous things. This third visit was no exception and, coupled with the delightful sojourn at Posada Amazonas, the third time was definitely the charm! ♦

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