

AFA Members Go To Peru!

Tambopata – Education & Excitement

By Brenda Piper

The Tambopata Research Center Lodge - we were the last guests as you can see that the riverbank has been eaten away almost to the lodge itself. After we left, the lodge was disassembled and most parts used in the new lodge which was almost complete.



had met together. From Lima, we took a short flight to Puerto Maldonado, where we boarded a bus to the Tambopata River. A shallow, motor-driven boat took us up the river to Posada Amazonas, the first lodge on our excursion.

Posada Amazonas is a nice transition stop on the trip. Each room has its own bathroom with all the amenities of home, although you do use river water for your shower. The rooms are spacious and comfortable, with one wall completely open to the jungle 20 feet away. Only a railing separates you from the butterflies, armadillos, birds and bugs of the jungle. You know that Expedia.com commercial with the mosquito



EarthWatch volunteers weigh and measure “chicos” as part of the Tambopata Research Project.

In 2004, the American Federation of Aviculture had originally offered an Educational Retreat to Peru in conjunction with Rainforest Expeditions, scheduled for January 2005. Unfortunately, the post-convention Watchbird, which contained all of the pertinent information for the event, did not come out until after the sign up deadline. Because of this, the minimum number of participants needed for the event was not met. Still, there were five of us who decided to go to Peru for the Parrot Lovers Tour.

We each arrived in Lima, Peru the day or night before our scheduled departure. In the morning, we met in person for the first time for breakfast in the hotel. Although we had all corresponded via email prior to the trip, it was the first time Ingrid, Diane, Don, Jean and I



Macaw peeking out of the artificial nestbox made of PVC by the Tambopata Research Center workers. This particular nest contained a 30 day old chick that was brought down for weighing and measurement.

net and the giant bugs? No, it's not quite like that, but there is a mosquito net and you do end up with a few "critters" on the netting in the morning. Bug bites are rare if you follow the pre-trip instructions. I didn't get a single bite in the entire trip.

Posada Amazonas has a small clay lick that is very nice. There is a 135' tower that you can climb which takes you above the canopy with a terrific view of the entire area. We climbed that tower one early morning (with numerous stops for the less athletic folks in the group – me!) and watched the mists dissipate slowly over the river. White bellied caiques and Amazonian parrotlets flew by below us and perched near us. Huge Mealy amazons chugged slowly by and cobalt-winged parakeets streaked across the horizon.



One of the "chicos" at the Tambopata Research Center sitting on the rafters watching for guests to offer a treat.

Posada Amazonas' capacity is approximately 30 people and it was quite full. We joined some other guests for a ride on a raft around an oxbow lake. There were numerous birds to be seen, including hoatzin, blue-crowned conures, large and small macaws, guan, motmots and kingfishers. We were lucky enough to see a group of 5 giant river otters fishing and eating and lolling in the sun. There were three children in the group, approximately 6, 8 and 10 years old. The two boys asked if they could fish and one of the local guides showed them how to fish for piranha. As you can see in the photo,

Who Knew?

When my good friend, Ingrid Harrington, told me she was going to a bird conference and bought some raffle tickets for a trip to Peru, who knew the "I'll go with you if you win," would open so many doors.

I'm not a bird person, and I went to Tambopata Research Center in the Peruvian rainforest with "bird people." Bird people are different than "not bird people." I have a cat. I do not spend hours researching the perfect diet for my cat. I do not share e-mail with other cat lovers, discussing food, toys and caring information concerning my cat. I do not—ok, sometimes, but not often—tell people the amazing things my cat does.

Bird people have instant rapport with each other. No sooner have they met than the bird stories start. Bird people bond with each other within seconds over love of birds. As I observed this phenomenon, I felt that deep down the common bond was about survival, not only survival of their particular pet bird or birds, but survival of all birds, themselves and the planet

There is a passion of concern and caring; having a bird is a lifestyle commitment of time, love and energy. And for this investment the owner receives a connection to the planet that rewards his or her very "being."

This connection inspires them to care about our environment in the same way they care for their pets. So a trip to the rain forest is a personal pilgrimage to bird heaven. In order to support the birds, we must have the environment that allows them to flourish.

All of this takes us to a remote part of planet Earth—an adventure beyond words. The culmination of the sights, sounds, smells and feelings remind us of our connection to Mother Nature.

The "clay lick" is Mecca for birds. It is a place for research, eco-travel and us. The Tambopata Research Center is the image of political correctness. A partnership between Rainforest Expeditions and the local community provided us with lodging, food, river transportation and a fabulous guide.

Silverio, our guide, inspired us with knowledge and respect for the deepest aspects of the rainforest. He was our constant support. The support included answering all of our questions, waking us up for early morning bird watching, excellent spotting, picture taking, and being there for us. The being there for us included knowing us and our wishes. That included finding walking sticks, spotting that particular bird we were looking for and being sure our secret wishes were honored.

So we all got our wishes. Ingrid saw her caiques; Brenda got to interact with a green-winged macaw that was raised at the research center; and Jean and Don saw the blue and yellow macaws in nature. I, too, got my secret wish, one that the birders also would understand—I got to see what the rain was like in the rain forest. ■

Diane Chais

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Photo Eric Outwater

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they were successful on their first attempt and quite proud of their accomplishment.

In no time, we were back in the boat heading upriver to the Tambopata Research Center (TRC). Because it was the rainy season, the river was quite high and it took 8 hours rather than the usual 6 to get to TRC. The boat trip was both exciting and relaxing. We would go for a half hour just watching the riverbank



Two young gentlemen savor the excitement of fishing for piranha at the oxbow lake.

and suddenly Silverio, our guide, would point out capybara families on the riverbank. The birds along the way were numerous as well: great egrets, cattle egrets, snowy egrets, king vultures, black vultures, roadside hawks, and of course, lots of parrots. There were two stops along the way at ranger stations as we entered the park area. Did I mention that it was 90 degrees out and 99% humidity? It was amazing how quickly we became acclimated to the heat and dampness. And though there were periodic showers, it was only on one day that the rain prevented us from doing a lot of hiking.

We arrived at Tambopata Research Center to find that large chunks of the riverbank had been crashing into the river, along with many of the large trees. As you can see in the photo, what had been a ten minute walk from the river to the lodge was now only a 30 foot wide strip of grass. The TRC is used mostly for work by research scientists and EarthWatch volunteers, so there are not quite as many amenities as at Posada. You do have your own room, but you share the other facilities with the volunteers.

Our days were spent hiking in the jungle checking out the flora and fauna, such as poison dart frogs, numerous butterflies, small caiman, monkeys, and the occasional boa. On several mornings, we were up at 5:00 AM getting in boats to head up to the clay

lick. You must arrive well before the birds do and you must stay as long as they do. If you are lucky, you get a lot of parrots coming in to the clay lick flying only 20 feet over your head as you wait at the tree line. We saw red & green, scarlet, severe, red-bellied and blue & yellow macaws. There were more white-bellied caiques. There were so many Mealy amazons on the lick at one point that they looked more like vegetation than a group of birds. My ultimate thrill was seeing six blue-headed macaws together on the lick. Our guide told us that it was not common to see these macaws on the lick and to see that many at once was very lucky. My trip was made!

One of the projects that TRC is working on is monitoring the red & green and scarlet macaws in the area. They have increased the number of nesting sites in the area by creating durable PVC nestboxes (see photo) for the birds to use. EarthWatch volunteers monitor the nests, periodically climb to the nestboxes and bring the chicks down to be weighed and measured. One of our hikes included watching as the volunteers perform this work, which was very rewarding.

In previous years, TRC volunteers had pulled the 'second chick' from the nestboxes as these chicks invariably died because the adults normally can only feed one chick to fledging. These 'second chicks' were named chicos and were handfed by volunteers and released back into the wild. Because they were handfed, they have minimal fear of people. Chicos are very smart and will hang around the lodge (see photo) waiting for someone to offer them a cracker or cookie. While we were there, the chico in the picture sneaked into one of the rooms and was caught opening a Tupperware container of peanut M&Ms. Many of the chicos have taken wild mates and are raising chicks in the vicinity of the lodge.

Our evenings, when we could stay awake, were invigorated with slide presentations and talks by Dr. Donald Brightsmith, research director for TRC. On one evening, Dr. David Phelan of Texas A&M was there and was kind enough to give a talk on avian diseases. Dr. Phelan was there helping collect blood samples for the research project. Lectures and discussions were part of the original Educational Retreat itinerary, so we were especially grateful to both gentlemen for taking the time to share their knowledge.

The new lodge was under construction and nearing completion, so we were the very last guests to stay in the original Tambopata lodge. Because my room faced the river, I listened to large chunks of the riverbank crash into the river each evening. By the time we left, the distance to the river was now about 10 feet. As we left in the boat on that last day, they were car-

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rying the mattresses and other furnishing to the new lodge. We spent one last day at Posada Amazonas and then headed back to Lima and then home.

Rainforest Expeditions and the AFA plan to offer the Educational Retreat to Peru again this year and we hope that more people will avail themselves of this wonderful opportunity. Watch the AFA website and the Watchbird for updates as we finalize the dates.

■

How I Got to Tambopata, the Long & Hard Way

I have an adorable white-bellied caique, YoYo, who has completely captivated our family for the last 7 years. She is endlessly fascinating & hilarious to be around. I read just about every English language parrot magazine and am on several internet lists about caiques in particular, and parrots in general. If you have ever known a caique, you'll know what I mean.

The articles in Bird Talk by Donald Brightsmith, Ph.D., from Duke University are particularly interesting to me because they describe where the magnificent scarlet macaws come from and their natural behaviors. Don spoke about his research at the Tambopata Research Center at the 2000 AFA convention in Los Angeles and so it became my dream to go to Tambopata one day, because this is also where white-bellied caiques live. I wanted to see their habitat so I could provide a good home for her.

In 2001, I planned a trip & was to accompany my caique internet buddy, Chris Hickey, with a few others to visit Peru. About eight weeks before departure, I got the devastating news that I had breast cancer and should see a surgeon & oncologist immediately. My life just took an unexpected detour.

The next three years were filled with chemotherapy, surgery, radiation, and the love and support from all my family, friends, employees, my husband's co-workers, clients, internet buddies, and

even complete strangers. YoYo was my special friend during this time and never left my side. She never held a grudge when I was bald, even though she couldn't hair surf me, which is a great delight to caiques.

So then came 2004, and the AFA convention was scheduled to be in San Francisco—great! A bunch of us decided to go together, and we had a blast. But the most exciting thing for me was the raffle—the grand prize was a trip to Tambopata!!! Oh, boy! Who would go with me if a miracle happened and I won the trip, I wondered. My husband declined, but my dear friend Diane Chais volunteered, so I bought \$40 of raffle tickets for the trip and crossed my fingers. I wanted to win that trip so much. In my mind it would be sort of a wellness celebration to go to Tambopata and climb the tower, and be at the top of the world!

Imagine my surprise when at the end of the raffle drawing, my name was called as the winner of the trip. I couldn't believe my good fortune! Everyone was so happy that I won.

Diane and I went to Tambopata in January 2005 and had the best time. The entire experience was just wonderful. Our fellow travelers added so much to the experience, including Brenda Piper, AFA 2nd Vice President, and our wonderful guide, Silverio Duri, who made our wishes come true. Jean and Don Smith from Maine joined us, and Don Brightsmith was our charming host and the answer man.

The caiques met us at the top of the 140 foot tower, and they acted just like YoYo! I've come to realize she's a wild creature after all & not that domesticated. She's just kind enough to tolerate humans in her life.

I would especially like to thank Don Brightsmith for donating the trip to the AFA convention raffle and to Dr. Benny Gallaway for accepting the donation.

You, too, can go to Peru to see the magnificent parrots, birds, mammals, insects, fungi, rocks, moon and stars, plants, rivers, rain, fish, people, sky, endless forest, etc., by contacting Rainforest Expeditions at <http://www.perunature.com/home.php>, and I hope you go soon. If you would like to join our small internet list to get details about your upcoming trip, ask questions, or see a few of our pictures, please join us at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TRC-PARROTS/> ■

Ingrid Harrington
YoYo & Mr & Mrs Jasper

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