



Blue and gold macaws at Cocha Salvadore, Oxbow Lake.

MANU...

a wonderland of birds

by Jerry Jennings
Woodland Hills, California

Of the twenty nine hundred species of birds found in South America, over one third make their home in the Manu National Park and Biosphere Reserve. Located in the Amazonian rainforest of southeastern Peru, Manu is the world's largest rainforest preserve. With over 4.5 million acres of untouched wilderness, Manu is larger than the state of Massachusetts, yet not a single road traverses it. With the exception of a small group of primitive Indians living in Manu's most remote corner, Manu is uninhabited. In 1977 UNESCO recognized Manu as a biosphere reserve and as one of the only preserves protecting an entire unhunted and unlogged watershed. The World Wildlife Fund has called Manu the most important rainforest preserve on the planet, for Manu protects more species of plants and animals than any place else on earth.

Manu's remoteness has saved it from human influence. Nowhere else in South America can so many birds and animals be seen in an eden-like atmosphere, where wild creatures do not shy away from their potentially greatest predator — man. Stretching from the cloud forests at 10,000' to the lowland rainforests at 1,000', Manu is the last redoubt for the giant otter. Other extremely rare animals, including the black caiman and the harpy eagle, are readily observed along with twelve species of monkeys, the spectacled bear,

jaguar, ocelot and puma.

If mammals are abundant, the diversity of the avifauna is overwhelming. Macaws abound as nowhere else. Five species can be seen in any given day, including the scarlet, blue & gold, greenwing, severe, and the blue headed — a species unknown in aviculture. Conures of numerous variety are constantly flying about. Cobalt winged parrots zoom past at astonishing speeds, and blue headed pionus are always within earshot.

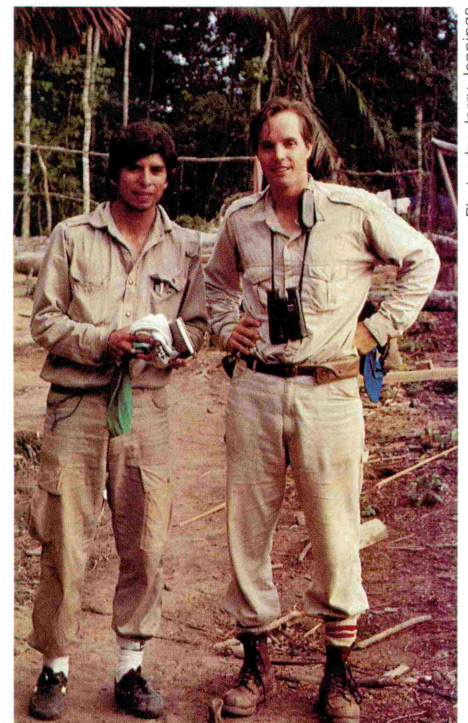
Getting to Manu is an adventure in itself. Leaving Cusco at an altitude of 11,000' by four-wheel drive, we crossed the spectacular Andes, passing along steep river gorges, below snowcapped peaks and beside ancient Incan tombs. Single lane dirt paths are often the only hint of a roadway, which snake through mountain villages, whose inhabitants are the descendants of the Incas who ruled an empire spanning the spine of the Andes from Chile to Colombia. As the road descends from the high grasslands into the cloudforests of Manu, a foglike mist appears, shrouding the trees in mystery. Entering this enchanted forest was an experience of another dimension similar to discovering Brigadoon every hundred years.

The road through the cloud forest was fraught with the excitement of discovering a lek (gathering or congregating) of Andean cocks of the rock.

Over a dozen colorful males vied for the attentions of a handful of hens, who watched their dancing suitors in silence. Mot mots sat on limbs over the dirt track, wagging their tails in curiosity at the strange visitors. The sounds of the forest mixed with the roar of the river hundreds of feet below.

After an arduous fifteen hour journey, we arrived late at the Jungle Lodge on the mighty river, Alto Madre de Dios. Dinner and a good night's rest prepared us for the next day's journey. Heading down river shortly after dawn in 40' canoes powered by 55 h.p. outboard motors, we coursed through rapids and shallows, occasionally having to get out and push the boat through low water. Along the banks waded countless species of egrets, herons and terns. Skimmers patrolled the shores, while kingfishers perched on the dead limbs of old snags. As dusk approached, macaws began their flights overhead bound for their evening roosts, while we searched for a suitable campsite on a sandbar at the river's edge.

Arising again at the crack of dawn, we broke camp and continued downstream to the mouth of the Manu River. While the passage had been fairly rapid downstream, the journey up the Manu would be slower as we fought the current. As soon as we crossed the boundary line into the park, the change was apparent. For the first time caiman were found sunning themselves on sandbars un-



Photos by Jerry Jennings


David Ricalde, president of *Asociacione Conservacion Para Selvo Sur*, and Dr. Charles Munn of *Wildlife Conservation International*.

afraid a hunter would seek them out for their skins, used to make shoes, belts, and handbags. Caimans as large as 18' in length attested to the fact they had been secure for a long time. If the Alto Madre de Dios provided a glimpse of wildlife, the Manu was awe-inspiring. The banks of the river were crowded in comparison. Egrets were everywhere, as were many other species including Orinoco geese, roseate spoonbills, screamers, wood storks, and the endangered jabiru stork.

Eight hours upriver from the mouth of the Manu, we made our landfall. Hiking inland from our beachhead, we walked through forest in the dark to the edge of Cocha Juarez, an oxbow lake. A twenty minute paddle in a dugout canoe brought us to the jungle lodge of Boris Gomez, our host for the week we would spend in Manu. Not then complete, the lodge is the only facility permitted in the park by the Peruvian government. It is designed to serve the needs of field biologists studying the area's wildlife and to serve a small number of intrepid adventurers seeking a unique experience with wildlife.

The forest around Cocha Juarez abounds with monkeys, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and other mammals. Never having been hunted, they are easily approached and usually show no fear whatsoever. The greatest congregations of life are found around fruiting trees. Large figs provide incredible quantities of fruit that attract a menagerie of species. In one tree alone, we observed four species of monkeys, two species of toucans, a white headed piping guan, and several smaller birds all at the same time.

The return to civilization was by another route. Returning down the Manu by canoe, we made camp at a sandbar at the river's mouth, to await the arrival of a single engine Cessna aircraft at a jungle dirt landing strip. We would be ferried out two or three at a time, enjoying a bird's eye view of the forest during a one-hour flight to Puerto Maldonado, a boomtown on the confluence of the Madre de Dios and Tambopata rivers.

What a thrill to see and experience what few human beings have seen before and to get a taste of what the rainforest must have been like prior to the Spanish conquest. The people who make this adventure possible are dedicated to the conservation of this, one of the last untouched forests in the world. Knowing them and their dedication leaves one with a great sense of elan that the forest will indeed survive. 

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