

9-28-2010

Jungle Jane . . .

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Recommended Citation

Soderlind, Rebecca, "Jungle Jane . . ." (2010). *2010-11 Postcards*. Article. Submission 8.
http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/intl_postcards_1011/8

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Journals from Galapagos, Ecuador

2010-09-28 Jungle Jane...

Due to the inconsistencies of Ecuadorian Internet, these adventures are being reported to you a little late. My apologies, Linfield.

I'm alive! I made it there and back in (mostly) one piece.

Wow, Tiputini Biodiversity Station is an amazing place. I wonder what it would be like to get my graduate degree in Tropical Ecology and come down to work in the Amazon for the rest of my life.

Monday we left USFQ bright and early to catch our plane. It turns out that even planes are on Ecuadorian time here, usually leaving about a half hour late. We waited around the airport for a while, all decked out in our jungle clothes. Some of the guys had gone shopping for quick-dry clothing the day before, saw that it was expensive, and decided not to buy any, choosing to go in jeans and sweaters (I'm not kidding) for each day. I can't imagine how miserable they all were. Ugh!

After our plane, we caught a bus to the dock in Coca, where we boarded our first motorized canoe for a few hours on the Napo River. I was sitting close to the front and it poured rain the entire ride. Even though we were "covered" by the tarp over the shell of the boat, the forward momentum of the boat had the raindrops pelleting us. I got soaked until someone pulled out their umbrella and we set up a blockade. I set it in front of my seat, protecting me from feet to waist, and then simply wore my rain jacket pulled tight over my face. It was really wet. My luggage was totally soaked. Thankfully they had suggested we pack everything inside of our luggage in a garbage bag, so that protected everything except the actual duffle bag.

We arrived at the oil company checkpoint and loaded up into the safari van. I got a "window" seat. I put that in quotes because the van doesn't actually have any windows...or doors, but it was still nice to sit on the edge. The benches are like church pews- really uncomfortable. We passed the workers laying pipeline for the oil company. The road we use to get to the Tiputini River is the Via Maxus, a major road put in by the companies to facilitate oil extraction.

Next, another boat, this time zooming along on the Tiputini River for three hours. Usually it only takes two hours, but the river was so low that we had to constantly dodge logs and river debris, going much slower. By the end of it we were all excited to get there! Those benches were hard also.

That night was great! I absolutely love how dark it is there. LOVE IT! I could open, and then shut my eyes, and it looked exactly the same! The noises were also just wonderful. There is a giant

frog that sends out a call all night that is literally- "Whoooooop! Whoooooop!" So funny! I can do an exact impression. A special skill of mine, I suppose.

The next morning we woke up at 5:45 for breakfast (we eat early so we don't waste any time) and headed out on our first hike. I ended up going out with Esteban, our professor, the first morning. We hiked down to the oxbow lake- a former bend in the river that collapsed in on itself, making a lake. The hike was fairly uneventful, as it rained the entire time and the animals were all hiding. We did see a frog, though.

Once we got to the lake, we took a canoe out on the water. We were able to see a lot of birds and bats. I was put in charge of bailing out the boat, as the canoe had a hole in it and kept filling up with water. It was actually funny, how absurd it all was, us out in the middle of the Amazon in our sinking boat in the pouring rain. It was great!

We had hiked way out from camp and were picked up by the boat out on the river, rather than hiking all the way back. While we waited for the boat we hung out on the riverbank, slipping around in the clay and (too cool!) watching RIVER DOLPHINS! They would poke their heads out of the water, and then duck back down quickly. We could see the spray from their blow-holes and the water rippling around them. They have a much shorter nose than their ocean counterparts. Very cute, and such a unique color. Instead of being a cool gray, these guys are almost pink with a tinge of gray. Very strange to look at. They are almost blind because the water is so murky that they really have no need for eyesight. They do have a strong echolocation system though.

That afternoon we went high up into the canopy on the bridges and platforms. At 140ft in the air, you can see about as far as Quito. Not really, but it is awesome! I climbed another 20ft onto a bird watching platform. We had to climb this rickety ladder up from one of the main platforms. This small platform was exactly 2.5ft x 2.5ft. Yikes! I sat there for a while, just trying to take everything in. It was amazing! It was also just incredibly high up! Scary!

We left the bridges and went over to the broad bird-watching platform, an even higher platform way up in the canopy. We had to climb up, up, up the scaffolding to get to the top. I probably lost two pounds in sweat just climbing the ladders. That day was way cooler, though, because of the rain.

From the bridges we had seen a family of Woolly monkeys, who live in clans of 40+. We were able to see the same family from the bird-watching platform.

Wednesday, we started out the day in the woods, watching poop. Yup, we literally watched poop for hours and hours. Esteban wanted us to see the speed with which things are cleared from the forest floor and brought a bowl of feces, generously donated by his dog, for us to spread around the forest and document. Yuck.

We did get to see some serious dung beetle action though. They are so fast and so efficient. We saw them work in teams, rolling balls to lay eggs in, or on their own, looking for some fast food. We saw fighting beetles and mating beetles. Mostly though, I kept remembering that we were still looking at poop.

That afternoon we went floating in the river. We dove in at one point and floated for two hours down the Tiputini. It was an excellent way to spend the afternoon. The boys especially were back and forth across the river, pulling on vines and climbing on logs. I hung on to a few vines, feeling the power of the river as it tried to pull me along. The vines were really strong, sometimes holding up to four people. We were in the water as the sun was setting and it was stunning. There were even monkeys playing in the trees along the river as we floated.

That night, after showers to wash the river off, we went for a night-time boat ride, Cayman hunting and enjoying the breeze generated by the moving boat on the river. We didn't see too much, just a few small Caymans and a turtle, but I really enjoyed the ride. We turned off all the lights at one point and just listened to the river and the sounds of the night. Very powerful. I love the dark!

That night we played cards until late in the library. The library (which has about a hundred books,) is the only building with power all the time. It is also much cooler because it has an AC that runs a few times a day. Cards were fun. Someone brought chocolate (that miraculously didn't melt) and we used it as the prize.

We found a tarantula that night. It was just a juvenile and climbing on the wall of my building. I call spiders to me (as you will see soon.) Ugh!

Thursday we were given the option to go on a hike or return to the canopy bridges and the bird-watching platform. I decided to go back up into the canopy. Jose, our guide, ended up taking us on a bit of a hike though as well. He was an incredible guide. We got so close to a small family of spider monkeys! They were literally twenty feet in front of us in the trees! And they were low, which made them easy to see. I got some really great shots of them. I have far too many monkey pictures on my camera, but they are fascinating.

Jose also fed us a plant that we were supposed to chew for two minutes, and then spit back out. It turned our entire mouths blue. My mouth was WAY bluer than anyone else though. I don't know how that worked out, but I know that even now, two days later, my tongue is still a little blue. When I brushed my teeth that night, my toothbrush came back out stained blue as well. Jose said that the indigenous people of the region use that plant to dye their clothes. He also told us that if we had swallowed any of it that our urine would have been blue as well!

For dinner that night we had vegetarian lasagna with LOTS of mushrooms! I was in heaven! Only half of us were there to eat it though because the group that had gone hiking rather than up into the canopy got left by the river without a boat back. As was the plan when my group had hiked to the lake a few days earlier, they were supposed to be met by a boat that would

bring them back to camp. Unfortunately, one of the professors forgot to tell the boat to meet them and they were left on the riverbank for an hour and a half as dusk fell. Because they got back so late they literally had to scarf down dinner then turn right back around and head out on our night hike that we had planned for that evening.

THE NIGHT HIKE! People must pay thousands in exposure therapy for the terror I experienced on this single, hour-long hike. I have never seen so many giant spiders in one expanse of time. I also saw a snake and a cricket as large as a soda bottle. Its antennas alone extended an additional eight inches from his face.

At one point Jose took us off the trail, wandering through dense foliage crawling with venomous critters! When I asked him if this was actually a trail he said, "Of course." When I emphatically told him that I didn't believe him he just laughed and kept walking.

Near the end of our hike, after seeing half of the Discovery Channel's "Top Ten Mostly Deadly" list live and in person, Jose stopped us all and told us to turn off our flashlights that we may enjoy the sounds of the jungle. ENJOY!? Yeah, right! Every rustle sounded ominous, every snapping twig, I was sure, a Wolf spider coming to drag me to his den. Ohhhh! Even now I'm shivering thinking about it.

The real excitement didn't happen until we got back to camp, though. We don't wear our hiking boots out on the trails. Instead we wear these tall rubber boots so that snakes, if they bite us, will have a more difficult time reaching flesh. This means, however, that we must leave our other shoes about camp during the day. When I returned to camp after our terrifying night hike, I found my shoes, just to see a Brazilian Wandering Spider, also known as the Banana spider, climbing out of my left shoe. This in itself is, of course, terrifying, but, when combined with the fact that this spider was as large as my spread out hand and the knowledge that this is the world's deadliest and most aggressive spider, it was a little more than scary. I have never seen a spider this big! Jose tried to shoo it from my shoes a little and it scuttled TOWARDS him, fangs extended, ready to attack! These spiders are so aggressive! I couldn't believe it! It was a blessing this was our last night because I don't think I could have slept there for a week knowing that these creature were sleeping right next to me.

Jose wasn't nearly as concerned as I thought he should have been. I guess after living in the jungle for ten years, one becomes fairly immune to its monsters. Hmm... Like I said, people must pay thousands for the exposure therapy I had in one night.

I hung out in the library for a while, feeling safe with the linoleum flooring around me. Eventually I went back to our bunks and fell asleep, clutching my flashlight for protection.

The next morning we headed out, back to Quito, back to spiders only as large as my pinkie finger, rather than my whole hand. We got back to the house around six o'clock after leaving Tiputini around seven thirty that morning. It was a long day. I showered...and showered...and showered, then had dinner and fell asleep watching television with my family.

I just brought down a giant pile of laundry that I'm sure Carmen, our maid, is loath to explore. It is just a damp, fungus growing pile of gross. It wasn't nearly as humid or hot as it could have been, but it was still really warm and I was still really sweaty. I can't imagine how everyone that wore cotton, wool, and jeans felt. Yuck! Now I'm happily wrapped back up in my pajama pants, sweater and bed piled high with blankets. It's a good thing!

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GAIAS Galapagos, Ecuador