

Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve
Headwaters Tour- February 2-14, 2009
Trip Report- Robert Gallardo



"El Subterraneo"-Rio Platano headwaters

Trip Summary

This trip marked my fourth journey down the entire river with each one being an incredible experience in and of itself. One cannot help but marvel at the thought that there still exists a magical place like this in Central America in this day and age where seemingly everyone and everything is electronically connected. It continues to be the region's largest wilderness and a place of astonishing mystery and beauty. And although we would encounter an unusual amount of rain for this time of year we would still be rewarded with an assortment of unforgettable sights and sounds.

Day by day itinerary

Day 1:

Arrive in Tegucigalpa–trip orientation

Night in Tegucigalpa

Day 2:

Overland drive to Bonanza

Night in Bonanza

Days 3 & 4:

Hike to put-in site

Night(s) along route

Days 5 to 9:

Rafting headwaters of Río Platano

Nights at various river camps.

Day 10:

Arrive at village of Las Marias

Night in Las Marias

Day 11:

Motor boat to coastal village of Brus Lagoon

Night in Brus Lagoon

Day 12:

Flight to La Ceiba

Night at Lodge at Pico Bonito

Day 13:

Land transfer to San Pedro Sula airport–Departures



"Motley Crew" at Rio Platano core zone limit

The Hike

The changing climatic patterns worldwide have made it difficult to predict weather patterns just about anywhere, even here in the tropics. This trip date was planned nearly two years out in the hopes that it would be the beginning of the dry season when "spring-like" weather kicks in and when the birds really begin to sing. Well, there was no dry season, nor even a sign of it during the trip. From the outset there was rain and even the trucks had some trouble getting in and out of Bonanza. The hike was, for no better words, the "hike from hell" and was even the most difficult walk-in that I have ever done. I truly commend the gals for making it all the way to camp. For those of us who walked all the way it was a grueling 16 hours.



"A world of mud"

But it was not all rain and gloom as the first morning at the put-in spot gave us some sunshine and hopes for a beautiful day. As we spent a good part of the morning "recovering" (for better words) we bird watched along the river and were duly rewarded. A large flock of **Olive Tanagers** kept coming in and out feeding on a variety of flowering trees and vines. Amongst them was a bird Barbara and I could not identify. It looked like some kind of tanager. Who knows? Also nearby was a confident **Speckled Mourner** that fed on some moth larvae and I got some good photos. Sitting just above the water I found a **Violet-headed Hummingbird** nest.

We got into the river after lunch and saw our first **Sunbitterns** and a **Sungrebe**, seemingly far upriver. Later on we also rafted right underneath a **Black-and-white Hawk-Eagle** which is a treat anywhere.



Barbara and Glenda birding on river at put-in site.

Each day we moved farther and farther downriver and encountered rain nearly every day. We got caught setting up tents in the rain twice, and once just as it got dark. Not fun. One nice morning we jumped a pair of **Scarlet Macaws** as they fed low next to the river.



The beautiful Sunbittern, a common sight along the river.

Several days we spotted a number of seemingly tame **Crested Guans** that sat high up in some nearly leafless leguminous trees perhaps to dry off and warm up after the nearly daily showers.

One night at Guapote Camp I heard two **Spectacled Owls** calling up on the ridge. I called them in and they came flying across the river valley right over us. It is a very large owl indeed. At the same camp I also spotted two **Great Green Macaws** that quietly preened high up in the subcanopy. I had my new Swarovski spotting scope so at least we got some great looks at the birds we did find. On two different mornings I recorded a **Clay-colored Thrush** of all things. Quite strange to find this species in virgin rainforest. New, but expected, for the Biosphere were three **Short-tailed Nighthawks** that were seen at dusk. We also saw seven **King Vultures** with several being seen very close up. This was my first headwaters trip in which I didn't get a Life bird nor a new bird for Honduras, but the mammal sightings made up for it.

We not only recorded all three species of monkeys, but saw a **Tamandua**, **Baird's Tapir** and a **Jaguar**. Yes, a real live, wild Jaguar!



Tapir Karma



Jaguar Karma

The two days after the Subterraneo portages tends to be "the" day with the best odds to see the Neotropical rainforest megafauna. This was to be no exception. I had let the group know this the night before. At camp the morning of this day we had two sets of tracks in the sand. Just for records sake I took these photos. This was also the first time I had my own digital camera so I shot away like a mad man. Perhaps it was this set of photos that gave us our really only break for the trip. After all, with so much rain and cold river water we needed to be treated with something spectacular, right? Well, at least I thought so.

We hit the river and the morning rolled on..... with no luck. Close to 11:00 I spotted something along the shore that just didn't quite look right, like a rock out of place. It was tapir, resting. I signaled the rest of the rafts behind us then pulled out my camera. The tapir was very much non-chalant, at first. After I got a couple prize winning shots it jumped into the river and the other two rafts got up-close views. Mom nearly petted it. She was so excited she forgot to take pictures.



Baird's Tapir

With this sighting I have seen a total of four tapirs on two different trips. This time I got superb photos.

No less than a minute or two after our tapir experience our raft guide Luis whispered "tigrillo", which translates into something like "ocelot". I peered through the branches of a fallen tree along the water's edge and what I saw was no ocelot, but a full grown Jaguar looking right at me. As I pulled out my camera it made two grunt-like noises. I signaled back to the other rafts. I was able to shoot off several pics as it casually walked back up into the rainforest and although I was unable to capture its face I got this nice shot.



Jaguar-the most prized of the Neotropical denizens.

Taking a closer look at you can see that it's missing nearly half its tail. What could have happened to it? At least it didn't have some kind of chip on its shoulder with humans. I personally think that it was hot on the heels of the unknowing tapir as they were so close to each other. Who knows, perhaps another 15 minutes later and we would have witnessed a life and death battle between the two! Regardless, seeing both these magnificent creatures one right after the other made every step in the mud and every raindrop well worthwhile.



A morning with some sunshine

Let's hope the next adventurous crew has the opportunity to see some of Rio Platano's megafauna and under some better weather conditions.



"The Fantastic 7"-Flight from Brus Lagoon to La Ceiba