

THE DARIEN: Where the Road Ends and the Wilds Still Remain:

Photography and Wildlife in the Rainforests of the Darien, Panama

Project Description

The 29,800 mile Pan-American Highway that links the Arctic Circle in Alaska with the southern tip of South America has one 54-mile wide gap—in the Darien province of eastern Panama, at the border of Panama and Colombia. This is where the road ends and the wilds still remain.



At 1.4 million acres, the Darien National Park is the largest intact tropical rainforest in Central America. The Darien is both a Global Biodiversity Hotspot, and because it provides a land bridge that links two continents, one of the most important migration corridors on earth.

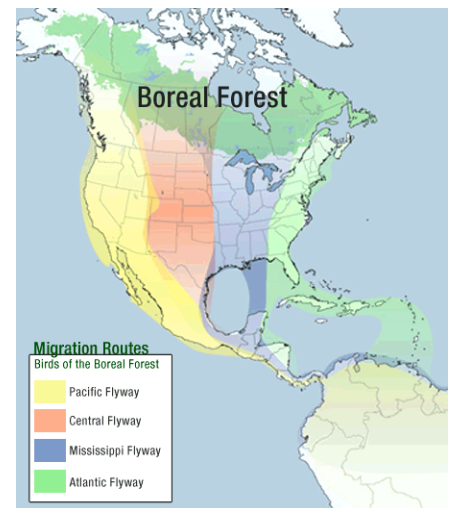
So far, it is a place with few humans. And it remains one of the highest areas of biodiversity in Central America and indeed, the Western Hemisphere. To date, few efforts have been made to chronicle the biological riches of this region. Limited access by roads, lack of electricity, and the threat of Colombian FARC guerrillas detracts many from making the journey in.

In December 2009, our project was to travel there and use photographs and words to begin documenting the range of non-human inhabitants of the region—some of the fascinating flora and fauna that share our space on the planet. This Darien project is part of our larger conservation photography effort, which is to examine the natural ‘lifelines’ which connect Panama north to the Arctic Circle.

Connection to Environmental Conservation and the Study of Visual Journalism

Visual journalism has played a crucial role in environmental conservation in the U.S. As the environmental movement grows, more people are starting to recognize the role that photography can play in wildlife conservation and education—in preserving and protecting some of the planet’s wild creatures in their wild places.

Through photography, it’s possible to craft a portrait of a place and landscape, but also to allow humans to meet some of their more interesting and colorful neighbors on the planet, be they macaws, frogs, howler monkeys, or butterflies. This is particularly important when those neighbors can’t speak for themselves, and live in places that are remote and wild enough that they don’t have human constituencies to mobilize for them. That’s the impulse that has inspired and shaped this project.



Photographic Challenges

The jungles of the Darien provide two kinds of significant photographic challenges, one set is technical and related to light, the other concerns wildlife as subject matter.

Technically, shooting in the rainforests of the Darien presents a multitude of challenges. Rain, ticks, chiggers, mold, bats, dirt, mud, spiders, snakes, and a near-100% humidity are the daily constants for the working environment. Also, the locations are remote and the availability of electricity limited. The biggest daily struggle, however, is with light. Shooting wildlife under and within the rainforest canopy means a constant battle with very low light conditions. Most often, you are on the forest floor shooting up with your telephoto or extreme telephoto lens, trying to navigate one of the most dense broadleaf covers of any forest in the world. (For comparison's sake: some of the denser forests in the United States have values of 6 on the leaf area index (LAI) scale used by ecologists to measure the thickness of a forest's leaf cover. In the Darien, those values can be up to 22.)

Darkness is often complicated by rain. At the higher elevation cloud forests, patches of fog and mist are punctuated by occasional intense sunlight, usually backlighting the subjects (spider monkeys, toucans) in question.

The second major photographic challenge concerns actually finding the wildlife in order to photograph it. Many of the large and charismatic mammals, like the jaguar, are nocturnal and notoriously elusive. Even some of the loud bird species that alert you to their presence are frequently obstructed by leaf cover. John Kricher, the author of [A Neotropical Companion: An Introduction to the Animals, Plants, and Ecosystems of the New World Tropics](#) (1999), gives an account that colorfully describes this set of challenges:

The rainforest, unlike the African savannah, does not provide easy views of its abundant animal life...You really have to work at it to see rainforest animals well. Many are highly cryptic, a result of evolution in a predator-rich environment. Even the most gaudy birds may appear remarkably dull in the dense forest shade. To make matters worse, some tropical birds, such as trogons and motmots, tend to sit very still for long periods and can easily be missed even when close by. Monkeys noisily scamper through the canopy, but tree crowns are so dense that we can only catch a glimpse of the often hyperkinetic simians. Iguanas remain still, suggesting reptilian gargoyles stretched out on tree limbs high above the forest floor.

The animals are there, but finding them is a different matter (37).

Connection to Visual Education

As visual educators, our job is to help students better perceive both the wilds around them and those at a great distance. Taking these photographs has alerted us to the massive impact that humans are having on habitat loss and species degradation and extinction.

This project has been important in helping our students to begin to imagine how their media skills could be put to use in addressing important environmental concerns.