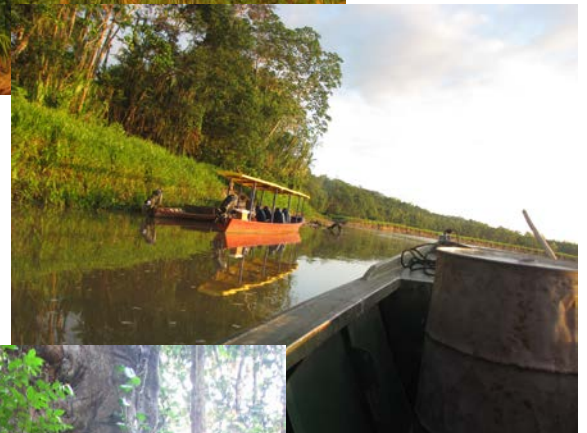


Friday, September 20 – Taller canopy tower, small oxbow lake, lodge trails and night hike

We are up at 4:00 for a quick breakfast, in the boat by 5:15 and birding by 6 am (it's only a 15-20 minute boat trip). It's a calm, beautiful morning as we watch the sun rise.



The sun is up by the time we arrive at the boat landing area. There are two other boats at the dock, so we wonder if we will have company. Then it's only a short hike through the forest. We go first to a higher, larger canopy platform, again in a huge kapok (or Ceiba) tree.



This platform is over 180 feet above the forest floor, and 235 steps to the platform. Ann feels like she's

training for the "Bisbee 1000" (steps that is) which takes place in mid-October (and she will be there).





This tree is unbelievably large. The branches supporting the platform are 5-8 feet in diameter, each bigger than most trees that

we are used to. And the platform is also much larger, in two sections with “step-ladder” stairs between them. It would easily hold 30-40 people without crowding, but thankfully we are the only ones there this morning. Photo at left: *(left to right)* Donna, Doug, Doris, Ann, Ed, all with our pantlegs tucked into our socks, attempting to foil the insects.



On the platform we are over 180 feet in the air and the tree continues for at least another 75 feet above us. It is certainly much larger than the one we were in yesterday. This one must be well over 250 feet high. Most of the



canopy trees far below us are 75-100 feet tall, much bigger than the biggest oak tree you'll ever find in the Midwest, but far below the crown of our Cieba.

What a glorious experience to be high above the Peruvian jungle canopy at 6 am, before the “platform flies” wake up. It’s a beautiful morning, the forest hasn’t heated up yet; and we are
188 above it all anyway, enjoying a gentle, caressing breeze.

The people from the other two boats we saw at the landing must be elsewhere. They must be out on one of the many trails in the area. That's fine, we're happy to have the tower to ourselves.

There are plenty of birds up and about and we benefit from the good eye and binoculars of Ernesto our boatman, who assists Doris in spotting birds . . . and he's GOOD. It turns out we never have flies or other insects bothering us as we did yesterday at the smaller tower. Perhaps we're too high for them?

For this trip, Ann switched from binoculars to a monocular. Aside from looking rather like Captain Hook on the watch for Tinkerbell, this works better for her than binoculars because of her left eye and the Crystalens implant that does not work well. But it's been an adjustment learning to use it. She's gotten pretty good at it, and when you consider that the monocular is just ½ of a really good pair of binoculars, it should work. It is much lighter to carry and fits into her pants pocket.



We watch birds for perhaps two hours and have some excellent sightings, always seeing many “new” species among the few that have grown familiar to us on the trip. And then we're hungry. Ernesto and Raoul packed a cooler with our breakfast up onto the platform, high above the forest. Once we've finished eating it's time to go. Bird activity is already dying down in anticipation of the hot mid-day, and most birds will then wait for early evening to get “out there” again. So down into the forest we go. This is a picture of Ann at the base of “our” Cieba tree. And this is from over half way down, just inside the forest canopy (perhaps 100 feet from the ground). Shows just how BIG this tree really is!

Then a short, leisurely stroll over to a small oxbow lake nearby. These lakes are formed when a curve in a meandering river is cut off by a change in the course of the river during flood. The formation of oxbow lakes is not an “exotic jungle phenomenon”, but is common throughout the world and in the US as well.

The oxbow lake we visit is beautiful. Our transportation is a plywood platform built atop two large canoes to create a flat deck for a stable “canoe-catamaran” craft - even chairs.



This is idyllic. There is even cloud cover and a breeze. We are out just over an hour and we see tons of water birds, including the strange-looking Hoatzin. And still absolutely NO bugs.



After the lake it's back to our boat and home for lunch and a siesta, then up and at it again at 3:00 pm to look for birds in the forest undergrowth.



As we walk back to our boat, we see some interesting mushrooms, a strange blue color. According to Doris these are bioluminescent. It's a shame we won't be here at night to see them glow in the darkness.



On the boat trip back we see many Side-neck Turtles sunning themselves on logs in the river. They are called “side-neck” because they don't pull their heads straight back into their shell, they fold it along the side. It's safely tucked away; protected, only in a way different from other turtle species. And look closely. Yes, that's a butterfly perched on one turtle's nose.

We are always amazed at our jungle adventures because we encounter so few obnoxious bugs (with a few VERY notable exceptions however). But we do try to travel at the end of the dry season and before the rainy season gets started. This would be the time that flying insect pests are at their lowest anyway. Still we feel fortunate with our trip timing. Yes, there are always roaches, but they are everywhere on earth, as are flies.

Here, where there are mosquitoes and other pests aplenty, we sleep under netting and do not go into the jungle without covering all exposed skin areas (and some non-exposed areas) with Deet. Our pants legs are tucked into our sox and we wear long sleeved shirts. It only takes one of the wrong sort of bite to give you malaria . . . or worse. Doris was suffering from a Botfly bite during the trip. Look it up . . . it's FAR too disgusting to describe here. Doris tells us that she has been down in the jungle so many times that she's had malaria, several severe but un-identified fevers; and this Botfly is not her first. She makes sure we're taking every possible precaution against insects, and she does the same. But she says that if you're down here long enough, “eventually they'll all get you”. We only have two more days to worry about and one of them will be all travelling. We only need to make it through tomorrow unscathed, and perhaps we won't need to “use” our many inoculations.

Soon we're all cleaned up, at least for the moment (“clean” doesn't last long here), and have a wonderful lunch and a welcome siesta. Then it's 3:00 and time to go out again.

Now it's HOT, and no breeze to moderate it. This particular combination of heat, humidity and still air is something we've never encountered in the U.S., even deep in the Everglades. On a couple of our Panama trips, yes . . . but we were younger and tougher then.

The birds we look for this time of day are the tiny creepers and hoppers, gray and brown. They inhabit the forest floor and are VERY hard to find and harder still to get a decent look at. By about 4:00 pm, Ann begins telling herself, "I can endure this", but she doesn't really believe it. It is so hot and sticky. Sweat is rolling off of us in buckets. We are not seeing many birds. So Ann decides to return to the cabin for a nice shower and long read with her Kindle. At first Doris is afraid that she won't find her way back. The trails are a real maze, but they're well marked and after the group walks her back to the first signpost, she assures us that she will be fine. And ½ an hour later she's Deet free and as sweet smelling as you can be in the jungle, for a few minutes anyway. ½ hour later, Ed shows up to "check up on Ann". Yes, he's had enough too

Even Donna and Doug, our hard-core birding partners, call it a day at 5:30 pm. I think we have all been in the afternoon jungle long enough. If you are paying a lot of money for the Lodge and a guide of Doris's caliber, you don't want to "waste it". But enduring is not pleasant, and today we simply don't. Doris usually nags us to keep at it when we think we should quit early. She's well-aware of what we're paying and wants to be sure we feel we got good value. But today even Doris is ready to call it quits. But . . . she suggests that since we got an "early out" this afternoon, that we go out again tonight after dinner and look for owls. We're all too tired to argue, so it's a night hike for us after dinner.

We've seen plenty of great birds, but the last few days of this trip have convinced us that we will never be "real" birders. So many species are similar to others, we can't identify them. We can't recall the names. When a bird is gray or brown, hops around in heavy jungle undergrowth, never really sitting still for long, and is only 2-3 inches in total length, we might just as well pack it in. Our eyesight just isn't acute enough and furthermore, we just don't care enough. But Donna and Doug, our birding partners, do and so we go along. Once in a while we get a fix on something like an "Olivaceous-throated Antpitta" (yes that's a real bird we saw today), but it's hard to fight the "I don't care about this bird" attitude. We have also been spoiled by some of our birding earlier in the trip. We're a bit jaded about birds by now. We prefer them big, and colorful, and co-operative!

At 7:00 pm we're all showered, AGAIN, and cooled off a bit. Two a day is typical here, and it is still impossible to stay dry for more than a few minutes. We meet in the lounge area of the dining room for some bird list updating as we enjoy a nice, cool drink. Dinner is excellent again. We can complain about the heat and humidity (and DO) but the food we've been served at every one of these remote jungle lodges has been great. By now there are a few other people here, but nowhere near a crowd, so it's very quiet and seems private.

Then it's out for owls (we hope). The night hiking is no problem thanks to our wonderful headlamps, but spotting any owls proves not merely difficult but impossible. Doris tries everything including her recorded calls. We hear lots of "jungle night noises" and even a few owls, but we can't coax anything into headlamp range. No owls for us! This is the first time on our entire trip we have been "skunked". Yes, we saw a handful of small birds this afternoon, but nothing that was especially noteworthy for us. This morning up on the canopy tower and at the oxbow lake were wonderful, but it was all downhill after that. It was clear that Doris was pretty disappointed with the afternoon and evening today.

So back to our cabins for a good (hot) night's sleep under our bug nets.