
Thanks Wild Bill

Posted by Oldtimer - 02/06/2006 02:20pm

Bill that is great! I Love all the stories. I just came back from the tropical forests of Venezuela myself and I am familiar w/ the type of stories that you describe. There is a lot of wild places down there to explore. I am glad you guys enjoyed the Panama trek.

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2006 Panama expedition is history...!

Posted by Wild Bill - 02/05/2006 10:34am

In China this is the "Year of the Dog" and University of Texas football fans might claim it's the "Year of the Longhorns," but for tree climbers who were members of January's expedition to the Republic of Panama this is definitely the "Year of the Harpy Eagle."

High up in the steep mountains above the coffee-growing town of Boquete, Panama, we came face to face with a young Harpy, one of the rarest birds in the world. It was our third expedition to Panama but the first time any of us had seen a Harpy in the wild.

We had hauled our climbing gear up the Palo Alto Trail that Monday – Jan. 23, 2006 -- to the cloud forest that began at about 6,000 feet, and had spent the morning and early afternoon in a pair of big trees at the top end of a coffee plantation.

Joe Maher ascended a 75-foot strangler fig that was loaded with more than a dozen varieties of high-altitude epiphytes. The rest of us – Thomas McCroskey, Abe Winters and I – scaled a 125-foot eucalyptus that overlooked the nearby coffee trees and a steeply sloped cattle pasture.

The sky above us was clear blue, but near the end of our climb some black clouds were beginning to form a few miles off to the west, where the huge green bulk of the Baru Volcano soared to a height of 11,400 feet.

The volcano, which last erupted more than 500 years ago, is so vast that it has its own miniature weather system. From experience, we knew it would rain again that afternoon – like it does almost every afternoon in this steamy tropical corner of Panama, just nine degrees north of the equator.

We packed our harnesses and ropes and headed on foot back down the steep trail to meet our driver, who we hoped was waiting for us 1,500 feet lower on the mountain with his crew cab pickup truck.

Joe suddenly halted, whispered for everyone to move to the right side of the trail, then pointed to a medium-sized tree about 20 yards away.

There, on a limb about 10 feet below the crown, sat a huge white bird that was intently watching us with menacing eyes while it dined on what appeared to be a small rodent.

"I think it's some kind of white hawk," Joe said, while Abe and Thomas feverishly snapped photos of the bird with their digital cameras. "I'm not sure, but it's not a bird I've ever seen."

A few moments later we decided this was not a hawk, but what kind of bird was this 20-inch tall raptor?

"I think we're looking at a Harpy eagle," Joe finally decided. "If it is, it's a juvenile because it doesn't have its black markings yet."

That suspicion was confirmed a few hours later, when Abe showed a photograph of the bird to some excited shopkeepers in Boquete. "They all looked at the picture and agreed," Abe said. "They said it was the first time a Harpy had ever been spotted this close to town."

Will Holladay, a 50-year-old bush pilot from Alaska who spends his winters in Panama, agreed two mornings later with the shopkeepers' assessment. "My wife has lived here all her life and she's never seen a Harpy," Will said. "You were incredibly lucky to see that bird."

The Harpy – its scientific name is "Harpia harpyja" – is the national symbol of the Republic of Panama, just like the Bald eagle is the national symbol of the United States. It is extremely rare and usually dwells in tropical forests that are far away from human habitations.

The Harpy is among the largest of the 50 known species of eagles. It can grow to 40 inches in length and can weigh up to 20 pounds. It has short, thick wings that allow it to maneuver like a jet fighter through the canopy at speeds up to 50 mph, while searching for its favorite meal of small tree-living mammals.

Those four or five minutes that we spent watching the young Harpy seemed to define our entire two-week tree-climbing expedition to Panama.

The first week had been held in lowland rainforest, on the western end of Isla Colon. The island, named for Christopher Columbus, is located on the Caribbean coast of Bocas del Toro Province and is just a few miles from the border with Costa Rica. We were based that week at the Institute for Tropical Ecology and Conservation (ITEC), which is a biological field station in the remote beachfront community of Boca del Drago.

We had started the expedition with seven members, but three of them were participating only in the first week of climbing. They were Kathryn Herold, a Panamanian who had recently learned to climb from Joe; Tom Lyon, a Pennsylvania businessman who had been taught by Tim Kovar of Tree Climber's International; and Dr. Peter Lahanas, director of ITEC.

Along the way several other people who were quickly fascinated by our "unusual" adventures joined us. One was Ron Zohar, a 25-year-old former Israeli soldier who had wandered into Boca del Drago looking for adventure and a place to stay for a few days. Ron's first-ever climb was a surprising 85-foot DRT ascent to a teaching platform that Joe had built in a ceiba tree near the ITEC compound.

Another was Gayatri Thampy, a Bombay-born primate researcher from Ohio State University who was spending extra time at ITEC to improve her Spanish-speaking skills and to immerse herself in Latin American culture. She took climbers into the swamp forest to find and meet the local troops of howler monkeys.

And none of the expedition members are likely to forget the fantastic tree-covered mountain farm on the slopes above Boquete that is owned by Maria Amoruso and her sister Mimi. Their 105-acre farm borders the Baru Volcano National Park and is covered with hundreds of huge trees.

The expedition – our third to Panama -- started the morning of Sunday, Jan. 15, with a van ride from the tiny Bocas del Toro International Airport (the "international" part dates back to the days when Panama and Costa Rica were on speaking terms and allowed their national airlines to fly between the two countries) down the 18-kilometer "road from hell" to the ITEC compound on the opposite end of the island. The 12-foot-wide road, allegedly paved with tar and gravel, had gotten worse each year due to the annual rains of 200 inches or more.

ITEC had just completed its month-long Christmas session for college students who do research there while earning credit for independent studies, so there was room for us.

The field station also has several four-week teaching sessions each summer for undergraduates, grad students and researchers who study tropical ecology, rainforest biology, primate behavior, pre-Columbian archaeology, marine biology, coral reef ecology or outdoor photography. Joe teaches a month-long climbing course there each year for canopy researchers.

The station is just a few yards from the beach and overlooks the Almirante Channel, where Christopher Columbus reportedly anchored his fleet May 9-12, 1502, during his fourth voyage to the New World. Across the channel is the wild and wooly Soropta Peninsula, a dense, snake-filled jungle where former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega supposedly hid for several days while being chased by U.S. troops in 1989.

We had selected ITEC for three reasons: the area was isolated, the food was good, and the local trees were gigantic.

Climbers who have been on previous expeditions to ITEC might be pleased to know that Enrique Dixon Jr., son of favorite native guide Enrique Sr., now manages the field station, which gives Pete Lahanas more time to teach his courses in tropical rainforest ecology.

After all the climbers were settled into the rustic dormitory at ITEC (they now have more than one shower and one commode for the whole compound, thanks to Enrique's hard work), Joe conducted a class on single-rope techniques for those climbers who had not previously learned it.

Pete led an orientation hike the next morning through the nearby primary rain forest and then into the adjacent swamp forest, which as usual left everyone sweaty and covered with mud. After lunch at Restaurante Yarisnori, a sand-floor diner a few dozen yards down the beach from ITEC that is owned by Juany and Willie Serracin, everyone headed into the primary rainforest for their first real climbs of the expedition.

Soon, every climber had several ascents to add to their log books.

Kathryn Herold left us early in the week to fly back to her job near Panama City.

One of the high points of the first week of the expedition was when Lyon managed to stick his head and shoulders above the top of a 150-foot virola (wild nutmeg) tree. The other climbers were all in a nearby 175-foot almandre tree, and they feverishly photographed Lyon with the mountains of Panama in the background. Fortunately for Lyon, virolas have thick trunks that usually extend to the very top of the trees so he never had to climb above his anchor point.

The second high point was an all-day climb into the true giant of Isla Colon, a huge ceiba tree in an agricultural pasture. It had a trunk diameter that was wider than a dozen adults, a limb spread of 153 feet and a height that required 400 feet of rope for a double-rope climb to just the medium-high branches. On our first expedition, Abe had set a record with a 101-foot throw into the tree; this time around he got his throw line over a limb at 109 feet.

A third highlight was when we piled into the ITEC boat and Enrique Dixon Sr. took us up the Banana River, a wild mangrove-lined place where the crocodiles were gathered to greet us. We finally reached a narrow spot where the boat could go no farther, and climbed right out of the boat into a 70-foot red mangrove. On the way back to ITEC, the elder Enrique (a Ngobe Indian who learned English from his father and grandfather) took us on a side trip to his 50-hectare farm on Ground Creek to show us the big new home he is building with his own hands from native hardwood.

We said goodbye to Lyon on Sunday morning at the tiny airport in Bocas del Toro. The rest of us then boarded a water taxi for the half-hour ride across the bay to the dirty banana port of Almirante on the mainland.

In Almirante we immediately struck a deal with a local taxi driver. He drove us east along the twisting, steeply sloped Caribbean coast for about 55 kilometers. Suddenly he turned south at Chiriqui Junction and headed straight up into the Cordillera Central (Central Highlands) that also marks the continental divide and is part of the same mountain chain as the Rockies and the Andes.

Anyone who has ever ridden with a Panamanian taxi driver will appreciate that our cab made it to Boquete, on the Pacific side of the country, in record time. I refused to look at the speedometer but McCroskey said it routinely was at about twice the posted speed limit.

We settled into the hotel in Boquete at lunchtime, had our first hot showers in a week, and then toured the five-block downtown area. It was the last day of the annual flower festival – Boquete is internationally famous among professional florists for its tremendous variety of blooms – and we ended up in an impromptu parade that featured marching musicians (they sounded like the town band from Mayberry on the old Andy Griffith television show) along with the flower festival queen and her court.

After an early breakfast the next morning at Olga's café (despite rumors to the contrary, she's not related to Alice Lou of the Waffle House restaurants in Dahlonaga, Ga. and Columbus, Ohio), we found a taxi driver who was willing to drive us as least halfway up Cerro Plantera Mountain to the Palo Alto Trail. We backpacked our equipment the rest of the way up and down, stopping only to climb and to photograph the Harpy eagle

Tuesday morning we headed by taxi back down the mountain and into the Pacific dry forest around the pleasant town of Caldera. We bounced down another rock-filled dirt road for about two miles, walked across a suspension bridge with occasional rotting timbers, then hiked a half mile to a series of shallow hot springs that several of us had visited the previous year.

After quick climbs into several medium-sized trees of unknown variety around the springs, we were soon sprawled in the 105-degree water and sipping on our favorite beverages. Every time the water got too hot, we ran fifty yards or so to the mountain-fed Caldera River to cool off.

As Joe put it, "There might be better ways to waste a day, but I don't know what they are...."

We took a day off from climbing on Wednesday to tour the local coffee plantations and processing plants with a native guide named Carlos, no last name provided. It's a safe bet that none of us will ever drink instant coffee again (And, if you don't know what a "floater" is, then we ain't telling!).

Late Wednesday afternoon, Thomas McCroskey (who had learned tree climbing from Harv Teitelbaum at Tree Climbing Colorado) got in touch with someone who claimed he could drive us to the top of Baru Volcano in his "slightly" modified Toyota Hilux crew cab pickup truck to see the sunrise. He would pick us up at the hotel the next morning at the ungodly hour of 2 a.m.

"Slightly modified" was the term that Will Holladay used for his four-wheel-drive pickup truck. There was no "slightly" to it: the truck had 33-inch wheels, super-strength axles with beefed up shocks and springs and suspension system, a heavy-duty transmission that did two mph in first gear at 5,000 rpm, a specially-g geared rear end, a five-ton winch on the front

bumper, skid plates at strategic points under the truck to protect vital components, and a super-sized box in the back that was full of every imaginable tool for rescuing stuck vehicles.

Will rhymes with Thrill, and this was a guy who was definitely into extreme four-wheeling. He had come to Panama some years earlier to provide air support for humanitarian-aid workers who were trying to deliver medical help to indigenous natives. He met and married a Panamanian woman, and now spends his winters there and returns to Alaska each summer. He also is a skilled carpenter and teaches classes on construction techniques to the local Ngobe (pronounced No-bay or No-bee) Indians so they can get better-paying jobs.

It took Will about 20 minutes to drive from our hotel to the main entrance of the Baru Volcano National Park. The road, what little there was of it, seemed to end at the gate. It was replaced by something that seriously resembled the rock-filled bed of a very steep waterfall, minus the water.

It was roughly 10 miles from the park entrance to the volcano's peak. It took three hours and some-odd minutes to drive it. Will's truck bounced off boulders as big as small houses, crawled up 45-degree slopes, tilted 45 to 60 degrees on its side in ruts that seemed deeper than the Grand Canyon, and traversed narrow ridges with only inches to spare on either side of the vehicle.

Through it all the long, tall man remained calm behind the steering wheel. Finally, about five miles up the alleged road, Will stopped and turned off the engine. "The easy part's behind us," he said. "You can take a break here while I put snow chains on the tires."

We stood in the dark at about 8,000 feet on the side of the volcano and looked up. It was the clearest sky any of us could remember, filled with more stars than we had ever seen. "I'm so busy looking at the brightest stars that I'm not even paying attention to the thousands of dimmer stars around them," Abe said. "Even the Milky Way takes up only a small part of the sky."

A couple of minutes later we were back in the truck and headed on up the mountain. Every time we thought the "road" could not get any worse, it did!

"We'll remember this ride for the rest of our lives," I said.

"It'll take me the rest of my life to forget it." Joe replied with a groan.

We finally reached the summit at 11,400 feet about a half hour before sunrise, and Will turned left into a narrow parking spot beside the next surprise of the day.

The top of the mountain was covered with hundreds of radio and television towers, microwave towers, repeater towers, and cell towers. Dozens of concrete buildings, some as big as small warehouses, filled every inch of flat space on the peak. The humming noise of heavy electronics equipment was everywhere around us.

There was nobody there but us.

"That used to be a paved road where we just came up," Will explained. "The Panamanian government built it around 1970 so they could install the tower farm up here, but they never maintained it after the construction was complete. This place gets more than 200 inches of rain a year, so the road got washed out almost as soon as it was built. When it rains, the old roadbed looks like a river."

He said the few technicians who come up to work on the equipment use small all-terrain vehicles or dirt bikes to scale the mountain.

The only naturally growing things on the mountaintop were elfin junipers about eight to 10 feet tall, mosses and lichens, and occasional red flowers called Indian Paint Brush. We took turns climbing about three feet up into a juniper, staking claims to having made the highest climbs in the Republic of Panama.

The sun came up a few minutes later, and with it came the rising clouds of steam from the jungle below. Soon we were floating in a sea of gray nothingness. The temperature at the summit was about 45 degrees Fahrenheit and the wind was steady at about 30 knots.

We breakfasted on snack bars and bottled water, then Will cranked the truck and we headed back down the side of the volcano. He stopped again about halfway down and we were ready with the throw lines and climbing ropes.

Within minutes, Joe and Abe were headed up a large tree of unknown species. Thomas followed them a few minutes later, while Will watched in thoughtful silence.

"That's a very interesting knot you're using," he finally admitted. "Can I learn to climb like that?"

An excited Will was soon dangling 40 feet up in the air, where he almost kissed a limb in his first-ever roped tree climb. He immediately made arrangements to take Joe's tree-climbing course.

During the return trip to the hotel we discussed a plan to hike and climb the next day along another well-known nature trail in the mountains above Boquete. Will immediately offered to drive us to the trailhead.

He showed up early the next morning with his wife and another woman named Maria Amoruso. Maria spoke nearly perfect North American-style English and immediately told us about an idea she and her sister, Mimi, had for a steep and heavily wooded 105-acre farm that they had inherited from their late grandfather.

"Our dream," she said, "is to build an environmentally friendly tree house. Will you come and look at our trees and tell us if it's possible?"

Their farm was beautiful, filled with thousands of huge native hardwoods and bisected by a roaring whitewater creek, and we never did hike the nearby nature trail. Joe, who had built several teaching platforms in trees near ITEC, was soon deep in conversation with Will, who already had several drawings for a proposed tree house. The rest of us joined Maria, a committed environmentalist who studied ecology at the University of Panama, for a rain-soaked hike across the farm.

All too soon, it was time to head back to the hotel to pack for the next morning's commuter flight to Panama City. Joe headed back to Bocas del Toro for several additional days at the ITEC compound. Thomas left early Sunday morning to catch a Continental Airlines flight to Houston and then on to Denver. Abe and I spent an extra day and night in Panama City.

Sunday morning, Abe and I toured the awesome Miraflores Locks on the Panama Canal and watched a huge container ship and a tanker go through the process of being lifted 56 feet in just a few minutes, so they could sail from the Pacific to the Atlantic sides of the narrow nation.

Our cab driver then dropped us off at the 1,000-acre Metropolitan Nature Park between the canal and downtown Panama City, where we were met by a young biology student who led us to the proper trailheads. The heavily wooded park is privately run by a non-profit Panamanian foundation and is closely affiliated with another park along the Erie Canal near Cleveland, Ohio. It is located on land that was once used by the U.S. Army to test jungle warfare equipment.

Although tree climbing is not currently allowed in the park, a program for canopy exploration and research is being considered by the governing foundation. The Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, a branch of the Smithsonian museum in Washington, is already doing ground-based monitoring of the effects of carbon dioxide on the trees and other vegetation in the park.

Abe and I soon headed back to downtown Panama City for our last night in the tropics. Abe was housed in a new hotel near the main gambling casino (Ooops! We ain't supposed to admit we even went near the place) while I stayed at my usual abode, the older but less expensive Hotel Covadonga about two miles away.

Monday morning came all too soon, and it was time for the long taxi ride across town to Tocumen International Airport for our American Airlines flight to Miami and on to Atlanta. The 2006 tree climbing expedition to the Republic of Panama was over!

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Posted by Electrojake - 02/05/2006 11:42am

Thanks for taking the time to compile & post your article on this year's Panama excursion.

It had something for everyone, well beyond tree climbing and research. e.g. The Toyota Hilux adventure to the top of Baru Volcano (radio-site). Even a tip on instant coffee!

If you set up a link to photos, please post.
Thanks.