

In Belize - Stars in the Rainforest



Daryl Hannah in Belize

When asked the question "What are your impressions of Programme for Belize and the challenges facing environmental protection?" Daryl Hannah replied

"I'd like to be positive but it shocks me that, in a country the size of Wales, this reserve is just over 250,000 acres. That sounds big but it isn't. It is scary and sad if that really is the best we can do as a human race to protect the rainforest.

"But there's hope too. The work that the charity [WLT] is doing is brilliant and inspired. It co-ordinates the purchase of endangered parts of the forest, then places them in trust for local people. It's a bold and great thing to figure out a way for the people who were born on this soil to sustain themselves economically, as well as preserve the forest for future generations. Now Programme for Belize wants to save another 160,000 acres of forest. And I want to help them".

Daryl Hannah visited the PFB lands with John Burton and a group of journalists. While in Belize she particularly enjoyed sightings of Toucan, Kinkajou and Morelet's crocodile. She also

encountered vast quantity of biting insects as well as a number of large spiders (commonly known as Tarantulas, but they aren't really). In fact these large spiders are very much stars of the rainforest. When you are out after dark spotlighting you are conscious of hundreds of single, 'cyclop' lights shining out of the darkness. These are the eyes of the many spiders of the forest. Spiders have eight eyes, which, when caught in the spotlight, sparkle as one large one. *"Handling these big, furry spiders is usually a cure for arachnophobia",* says John Burton. *"Most people start off thinking that they couldn't possibly handle one but when they do they feel quite a kinship with them and suddenly start laughing for some reason!"*

The trip to Belize was funded by Jaguar Cars and arranged by Verla Neal, the Programme for Belize Tourism Development Officer. We were all extremely impressed with the organisation of the visit: the itinerary worked like clockwork, transport arrangements and accommodation and food at La Milpa Field Station were all first class. So why not book yourself a few days in the forest? Verla can also organise your stay on the reef or anywhere else in Belize.

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PFB's exciting Harpy Eagle Restoration Project

The Harpy Eagle is one of the largest of the fifty species of eagle, and can be over a metre in length. They have a very restricted range and are now rare residents in Belize. In an attempt to build up numbers, PFB is involved in reintroduction on the Rio Bravo Conservation Area. The released birds are being monitored using radio collars and satellite transmitters. One of the birds has travelled over 100 km since his release in January 2005. His flights have taken him from Belize to Mexico, to Guatemala and back to Belize. Other introduced birds have remained in and around the Rio Bravo. PFB is working with The Peregrine Fund and its biologists and volunteers.

Right: A Harpy Eagle chick. Adults are monogamous and raise only one young every two or three years.



Saving the Coastal Steppe on The Ranch of Hopes

Surprises in Student Research

As part of the WLT's ongoing programme of cooperation with the University of East Anglia, we were pleased to be able to assist with placement of two Masters' Degree students. At the invitation of our Argentinian partners, Fundación Patagonia Natural, Ana Ribiero studied the impact of sheep grazing on the bird populations on the coastal steppe, and Rebecca Beale studied the competition between Maras (Patagonian Hare) and the introduced European Brown Hares.

Surprisingly, almost no differences were detected in the bird populations occurring in grazed areas when they were compared with the areas with no sheep present. However, a possible reason that Ana suggested, was that even in the areas where sheep are grazed on the Estancia la Esperanza (Ranch of Hopes), the densities are low, and the ungrazed areas may not have had sufficient time to recover from the effects of overgrazing. She concluded that long-term studies would be important to follow up her initial surveys. And perhaps more interestingly she suggested that managing the reserve to maintain a mosaic of areas, some heavily grazed, some lightly grazed and others ungrazed, would probably increase bird species diversity.



A Mara pup, also known as the Patagonia Hare.

The studies on Mara will also provide some base-line data for the management of the reserve, but these studies also highlighted the huge differences in the populations of the native Maras, and the introduced hares. The Mara is very localised, occurring in scattered pockets, whereas the Brown Hare is widespread and very abundant.