

FROG

encounters

by
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Some of the most rewarding wildlife encounters that I have experienced in Costa Rica are with several of the smallest creatures, amphibians. Costa Rica has over 175 species of amphibians, with frogs making up most of that number. In the Northeastern region of the country is the tropical lowland rainforests of Tortuguero, an area of river canals, freshwater swamps, dense vegetation and a nesting beach for the green sea turtle. But it is also an ideal habitat for frogs.

I was fortunate to see this bizarre looking creature at the Mawamba Lodge in Tortuguero in February 2004. Paulo, one of the lodge's groundskeepers, was raising these frogs to be released into the jungle. One evening before dinner, Paulo asked me to follow him. We walked passed several glass tanks full of developing tadpoles and stopped at a large tropical plant. He turned over one of the broad leaves to show me a Gaudy Leaf Frog sleeping. Green was the only color of the frog blending in perfectly with the leaf.



Gaudy Leaf Frog

One species that can be found in this region is the Red-Eyed Tree Frog, also called the Gaudy Leaf Frog. Although they spend their adult lives in the trees and plants of the tropical jungle, the young are dependent on water for their development.

With all their bright colors; deep green body, blue stripes on its sides, orange fingers and toes and blood red eyes, you would think it would be easy to spot them. But they have excellent daytime camouflage, appearing leafy green stuck to a green leaf. The colored elbows and knees

are tucked closely along the sides of the body with hands and feet underneath and eyes closed completely removing any sight of color except green.

If the green camouflage fails to conceal them from predators, they surprise would-be attackers with a sudden burst of bright colors, startling their enemy for a moment and allowing them to escape to safety.

Paulo picked one up and set it on his opened hand to show the growing crowd. Now all the bright colors appeared on the frog as it slowly moved its way across Paulo's hand. The Red-Eyed Tree Frogs are very agile creatures, able to leap away quickly when it proves necessary. Otherwise they are very mellow individuals. They tend to walk and climb rather than hop. Each hand and foot have sticky suction pads at the end of the toes allowing them to stick and climb on the vegetation.

I thanked Paulo for showing me and allowing me to take some pictures of the Gaudy Leaf Frog, one frog I may not have seen without his help.

If a person knows a little about frogs, their behaviors and habitats, and the person searches hard enough, they will be rewarded. Just a couple of months ago in February 2006, I

Poison Dart Frog



was back in Costa Rica and headed up to Tortuguero once again to photograph this Amazon-like region and its protected inhabitants. Maybe to see the Gaudy-Leaf Frog again.

One evening after enjoying dinner with a German couple and with Rich, a travel mate, at our lodge, Samoa Lodge, Rich asked what everyone was doing for the evening. My response to the group was, "I am going to look for frogs to photograph".

We said our good nights and headed off on different paths from the open-air restaurant; the German couple to their bungalow and Rich and I to search for frogs. We started across a wooden bridge crossing over a shallow slow moving creek. I leaned over the railing, and shone my flashlight along the edge of the creek and the nearby grass. I wasn't sure what species of frog we might find but that did not matter to me. We continued over the bridge following the well-groomed trail that was lined with short tropical hibiscus plants dotted with red, pink, and peach flowers. Panning the flashlight from side to side on the ground, I checked closely along the edge looking for frogs or any other creature that may be out that evening.

The path led us to an intersection where a right turn would take us to our cabin. As I turned the corner, my flashlight rays caught a large object on the edge of the path. I shone the light directly on the object, illuminating a big brown frog. It was sitting motionless. I didn't know what type of frog it was at the time as I had not seen this species on any other trip I had been on in Costa Rica. Not having my professional camera with me, just a good point and shoot camera (one that I call my "just in case" camera), I ran back to the room about 10 meters from the sighting. Rich stayed close to the frog, shining the flashlight on the amphibian to track it if it should attempt a get away before I got back.

Quickly I returned and took a few nice shots. Afterwards, I checked my amphibian field guide to learn that this

was the Smoky Jungle Frog, the 2nd largest amphibian in Costa Rica, which can grow up to 18 cms (8 inches). These cannibalistic amphibians eat other smaller frogs, insects, scorpions and even small snakes. It is more challenging to find frogs in the jungle because many species like the Red-Eyed Tree Frogs and Smoky Jungle Frogs are nocturnal and are well camouflaged in the dense foliage of the tropical rainforests during the daytime.



One species that does not behave like other frogs is the Poison Dart Frogs also called the Blue Jeans Frogs or Strawberry Poison Dart Frogs. This particular species is active during the day (Diurnal). Growing to no more than 5 cms (2 inches), these colorful tiny frogs really stand out in the rainforest dotting the tropical greenery. However, these beautifully colored amphibians are very toxic because of the poisonous alkaloids found in the skin. The Blue Jeans Frog has no need for their body colors to blend into their surroundings for protection. Instead, they advertise their toxicity with bright colors alarming predators to imminent danger. Many poison dart frog species have developed striking colors; yellow, red, blue, purple – the colors of poison recognized in the animal world. The Native Indians of Central America used to dip the tips of their hunting arrows or blowgun darts in the poison to instantaneously paralyze monkeys and birds, hence their name, Poison Dart Frogs.

Rich and I had a free afternoon so we decided to take a walk into the lush rainforest next to our resort. Shortly into our hike, Rich noticed and alerted me to something moving just in front of me in the grass covered trail. He wasn't positive what it was. I stopped in my tracks, cautious as to what I may step on, knowing about the deadly snakes that live in this country but also not wanting to hurt any other animal. I focused my eyes on the area in front of my feet. A tiny creature shuffled through the brown and green foliage catching my eye. I crouched down to get a closer look. Out hopped a tiny brightly colored Blue Jeans Frog onto a fallen leaf. "Oh Wow, it's a Blue Jeans Frog," I informed Rich. A bright red head and body with dark blue legs, enabled us to follow this miniature frog as he hopped about the large blades of grass and fallen leaves. We took a few steps further spotting more and more of these colorful amphibians. Tiny red dots popped out from under the thick green ground cover.

The smallest of creatures found in tropical rainforests have provided me with the best wildlife encounters, my most memorable experiences and many extraordinary photographs. So on your next hike, wherever that may be, keep your eyes open for the little creatures, the frogs. ca

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