

Go Peru

CSI: Amazon

Laurence Mackin goes on the trail of big cats in the Peruvian rainforest

A SMALL GROUP gathers to examine the scene. Dark mutterings and speculation go on behind hands in the humid air. There are signs of a violent struggle, but it takes an expert, Dr Alan Lee, to walk us through a rough timeline of events. "He saw her here, chased this way – and here," he says, pausing for effect, unable to hide a grin, "is where he made the kill." The spot is marked with deep claw

marks. This puma has made light work of a rabbit down a dark jungle path in the dead of night – and none of us can hide our glee.

Las Piedras biodiversity station lies about eight hours by boat from the Peruvian mining town of Puerto Maldonado. Visitors are not here on safari; they come to work as research assistants on bird- and mammal-based projects.

We are here to study mammal and bird behaviour in the jungle on specific transects – paths that have been cut through the jungle – and on a nearby *colpa* or clay lick: the earth here is packed with potassium and sodium, and large groups of animals gather to eat the clay and socialise. It is something of a grazing ground for some of the most colourful creatures in the jungle, most notably the macaw and parrot families that call this area home.

But before recruits are let loose on the jungle there are two days of rigorous training, to get to grips with the equipment. Large machetes are sharpened and tested. GPS devices are carefully explained – and pretty much dismissed as useless, because of the remoteness of the region and the jungle's iron-clad canopy, so compasses and maps are our navigational tools.

There are intakes of breath when the group tests an innocent-looking venom extractor – essentially, a plastic syringe with a blunt end instead of a needle – though it is reassuringly simpler to use than the binoculars and telescope. We are given data sheets to fill out with details of animal behaviour we observe. But first we have to find the creatures.

Off to the jungle, then, for our first transect, a task that for most of us will become a daily ritual. We walk at a snail's pace

“The spot is marked with deep claw marks gouged in the soil . . . A puma has made light work of a rabbit down a jungle path in the dead of night – and none of us can hide our glee

marks gouged in the soil, a few lone pieces of fluff signifying another death in the jungle.

The scientists go to work, measuring, photographing, debating theories and motives, checking undergrowth for other clues, trying to form a definitive picture of what happened. After some huddled debate one thing is clear. This was no ordinary perpetrator: this was a puma.

A crowd of rubbernecks would never normally get this close to a scene, but this is no ordinary tourist crew. Out here the predators come in all shapes and sizes, from tiny coral snakes, just 20cm long, that can easily kill a man to pumas and jaguars that roam the forest, invisible until they leave their



HIGH LIFE Expedition leader Andy Stronach in the Amazon. Photograph: Laurence Mackin



along the pre-cut paths, keeping eyes and, more importantly, ears open for any movement or sound. Predictably, we are beyond useless, although the guide spots three leaves 20m up in the canopy that he insists are mealy parrots. He's not wrong, though it takes some fumbling with the binoculars before we believe in his seemingly super-human powers of observation.

Among the most common sights on these transects are various species of monkey. Long-limbed spider monkeys freefall from one tree to the next with effortlessly athletic crashes; saddleback tamarins scramble up trunks, eyes glinting in the sunlight that fights its way through the canopy; in the distance, howler monkeys raise a ghostly chorus, sounding like the wind of a rising storm; dusky titi monkeys chatter among themselves, ignoring us for the most part; one squirrel monkey decides he's had enough of our presence and

Go there

There are no direct flights to Peru from Ireland, but several airlines, including KLM (klm.ie), Lan (lan.com) and Iberia (iberia.com/ie), fly to Lima via their hubs. From there you can fly on to Puerto Maldonado with Lan or Star Peru (starperu.com). As locals are charged less for internal flights, you might be able to save money by booking through a Peruvian travel agency.



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