

B B C

NOVEMBER

2025

Issue 12 Vol 43

# wildlife

[discoverwildlife.com](http://discoverwildlife.com)

Exploring  
the Amazon  
jungle by boat

Italy's Marsican  
brown bears

Protecting birds  
of prey in Kenya

The  
**TRAVEL**  
issue

# NIGHT PROWL

How 'noctourism' is changing the way we see wildlife





# TAKE ME TO THE RIVER

Going deep into the Amazon on a river cruise offers a different way of experiencing this extraordinary place

Words by PAUL MCGUINNESS





A river cruise along the Amazon offers 24/7 wildlife watching

RIVER BOAT: AGUA EXPEDITIONS



The blind pink Amazon river dolphin, or boto, lives only in freshwater

IT'S MY LAST MORNING IN LORETO, PERU, AND I'M up with the lark in the hope of finally seeing my first toucan. I've got coffee and my binoculars, and I'm on the deck of the *Aqua Nera*, the boat that's been my home for the past week.



The coppery-chested jacamar, *Galbula pastazae*

Flooded forest makes up most of the vast Loreto region

We're moored on the Amazon River and the number of birds I can see is staggering. Blue-headed parrots dance among the branches. Brightly coloured jacamars call from tree to tree, occasionally flitting over my head to perch on the boat, before darting off just as I train my camera lens. To my left, two black vultures hunch on a rickety looking branch, for all the world looking like the Scouse vultures in Disney's *The Jungle Book*. I imagine them sardonically mocking my fruitless search.

This is my second time in the Peruvian Amazon – I didn't see a toucan on my first visit either. I'm soon distracted from the

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Paul McGuinness is the editor of *BBC Wildlife* and has a particular passion for the wildlife and culture of the Americas. He visited Loreto courtesy of Aqua Expeditions.

trees by movement in the water, and sure enough a pod of botos – pink Amazon river dolphins – plays around the end of the boat. I've watched them every morning around this time. The thick, cocoa waters of the Amazon make it hard to pick them out beneath the surface, but I soon learn to watch for small fish flying through the air as the dolphins play with their food. Further from the boat, I notice smaller, grey tucuxi dolphins. It's hard to choose which pod to watch.

I think back to my arrival last Monday. Leaving Lima, my flight rose through the Pacific mist, the rugged Andes spiking through the clouds before the mountains quickly gave way to the edges of the jungle. It's this juxtaposition that gives the Amazon such a rich diversity of life.

We landed at Iquitos, the largest non-island city in the world that's inaccessible by road, and the capital of the Loreto department, a flooded forest region that borders Colombia, Ecuador and Brazil. Many

#### Where is Loreto?



Loreto is an Amazonian region in north-eastern Peru bordering Ecuador, Colombia and Brazil. Iquitos, its capital, is the largest city on Earth unreachable by road.



The lettered aracari is one of the 18 elusive members of the toucan family in Peru



Leafcutter ants can lift up to 50 times their own body weight

of the houses are built on stilts, or designed to float when the waters rise. But as this is November, the end of the Amazon's dry period, water levels are low (the river level varies by a good 10m here from wet to dry season). A skiff takes me half-an-hour or so upstream to the *Aqua Nera*, a kind of floating boutique hotel. The drama of the approach is thrilling, heading towards a boat hung from the bank with kayaks and skiffs, promises of adventures to come.

**I**'M HERE FOR A NUMBER OF REASONS, but what intrigues me most is to discover how different an experience staying on the river will be to when I had stayed near Puerto Maldonado in the more mountainous south 14 years ago. That trip was an incredible experience, but staying in a lodge meant following well-trodden trails through the jungle, and watching wildlife from canopy walkways and observation decks. Would a river cruise prove to be a more immersive experience?

After a welcome drink and snack, and an even more welcome shower, I'm keen to get out on to the water. Dusk brings the first

outing, and with it come a number of wildlife sightings I'll never forget. Our skiff turns off from the Amazon's brown waters into the black water of a creek. Our guide, Alejandro Enriquez Aguilar, points out the extraordinary nests of weaver birds as we go, dangling like coconut husks on long strings beneath branches where monk saki monkeys sit. We exchange happy greetings with children splashing around in the water.

Channels begin to open up and we moor along a brook that, in a matter of weeks, will be a lake. The change in seasons shapes the landscape here, even relocating villages as erosion moves the higher ground and reroutes the river. Beneath a tree where a sloth sleeps, juvenile caimans lurk in the long grasses. The air is thick with the sound of an astonishing frog chorus. As night falls, and I look at the moon and stars, I realise that the trees are topped with what must be over a thousand cormorants, silhouetted against the sequined sky. I don't know how long we sat there, gripped, or when we left, but I do

remember the fireflies that danced along the riverbank in the spot where we'd seen those children swim earlier. Back on board, as much as I'd been looking forward to a pisco sour on the deck, the day had caught up with me and I took myself off to bed.

At daybreak, I pull back my curtains to see a motorised canoe loaded high with bananas pootle by. Smoke rises from beyond the treeline as locals make charcoal to sell to the Chinese restaurants in Iquitos, by now the best part of a day's travel away. The big draw of staying on the river is waking up in a different place to where I'd gone to sleep, and I race up the spiral staircase to the deck.

A short skiff ride away I find myself on my third boat of the day – a kayak – and it isn't yet 8am. It begins to rain gently, and I spot a kingfisher flit along the opposite bank. As I get closer, it flies 50m or so further downstream, repeating this for maybe 1.5km as I slowly follow it.

Before coming out here, people had asked me what I was going to the Amazon

TOUCAN: MATEUSZ PIESIAK/NATUREPL.COM; LEAFCUTTER ANT: MARK BOWLER/NATUREPL.COM; TREE BOB: DANIEL NUÑEZ/NATUREPL.COM; CORMORANTS: JANET HORTON/ALAMY

Amazon tree boas  
constrict their prey  
live and whole



to see. It's an understandable question – after all, many wildlife trips have a quest element: whale-watching boats hope to spot an orca; an African safari comes with a list of the Big Five to be ticked off. But, despite my dreams of spotting a toucan, you don't go to the Amazon to see something specific, you go there to see it all.

**L**IKE AN INCREASING NUMBER OF wildlife operators in the region, my boat is staffed by local Indigenous Amazonians such as Alejandro. Over lunch I pick his brains about the importance of wildlife tourism here. He explains that while it's crucial to many businesses in Iquitos, the people who live out in the remote jungle

are far less reliant on it. "We always have something to eat every day. I don't have money in my pocket, I have fish in the water. I plant banana. I plant yuca." Alejandro explains how life in the Amazon is changing. The promise of education means a lot of younger people leave for the city and never return. He himself left his remote village close to the border with Ecuador, some 15 days' travel away, as a child and has never been back.

In other areas, logging and petroleum industries threaten the jungle, but Alejandro proudly tells me it's not such an issue here, that local communities band together to protect their region. "We understand this is the last resource we have. Local people don't make big damage. Who makes big damage

is the companies – lumber companies especially. But in this section we are in a very good condition taking care." Signs along the rivers dictate which areas can be visited by tourist boats and which are off limits. Everyone respects them.

And so my week passes. By spending day and night on the water, I learn to read

“By spending day and night on the water, I learn to read the rhythms of the jungle, dictated by the river”

Neotropic cormorants  
flock in vast colonies,  
into the thousands





The brown-throated sloth is a surprisingly agile swimmer and climber



River cruises like *Aqua Nera* are mini wildlife sightseeing hotels

## “Bullet ants pack the most painful sting in the world”

the rhythms of the jungle, as dictated by the river, the tides, the weather. Every day there is a choice of excursions. I pass on the piranha fishing, opting instead for a jungle walk, and I thank the forest gods I do as I am richly rewarded with bountiful wildlife.

**B**EING BACK ON TERRA FIRMA (OR at the very least, terra slippy), feels strange and it’s while watching my footing that I notice the leafcutter ants. Like something out of a cartoon, they carry hunks of leaves through the small volcano-like opening of the nest. Close by, at the base of a

tree, Alejandro points out a colony of bullet ants. These are the largest species of ant, and pack a sting generally considered the most painful of any creature in the world. Alejandro tells me of a rite of passage in some Amazonian communities that involves thrusting a hand into a glove filled with these ants to demonstrate suitability for marriage. The pain is agonising and lasts for days.

As this sinks in, an arboreal inhabitant has come to check us out. A juvenile brown-throated sloth reaches out to me from its tree. I step back, careful not to engage too closely, but this year-old sloth seems as fascinated by me as I am of it. After a few

minutes entranced, I force myself to leave it be, and soon spot a pink-toed tarantula.

Overhead, a young boa snake makes its way through the branches. Monkeys howl, raptors screech and, in a clearing, giant *Victoria amazonica* lily pads wallow in mud that will be part of the river by Christmas. As parrots swoop through the canopy, I idly wonder if today will bring my first toucan sighting, but immediately chide myself. Have I not seen enough today without wanting more?

**B**EFORE I KNOW IT, MY FINAL morning arrives, and I’m packed and ready to leave the *Aqua Nera* still without having seen a toucan. As another ringed kingfisher whizzes gracefully by in a blur of reds and blues, I begin to fantasise that the toucan is actually an elaborate hoax. After all, if you were going to make up something absurd, it may well look like a toucan.

Then a flash of black and yellow catches my eye. It couldn’t be... could it? So many tales from the bush end with a miraculous last-minute sighting of a long-yearned-for species that it would almost be too much of a cliché to see one now – although I’d take it.

The flash settles into a recognisable shape in the vegetation: it’s not a toucan. But I decide that this, my first sighting of a yellow-hooded blackbird, is a great way to bow out and I head below decks to grab my bags and begin the slow journey back to Iquitos, with its markets and restaurants, roads and hotels, leaving the river and the jungle behind.

When friends ask me what I saw, it’ll be hard not to sound smug. “I saw the Amazon,” I’ll think to myself while showing them photos of sloths, birds and dolphins. And, really, what more could I wish for? **W**