

Straight in the Eyes

6 March 2009
Amazon Basin Rainforest

The trip into the Amazon basin begins by air, but must end on the water because there are no roads.



Straight in the Eyes

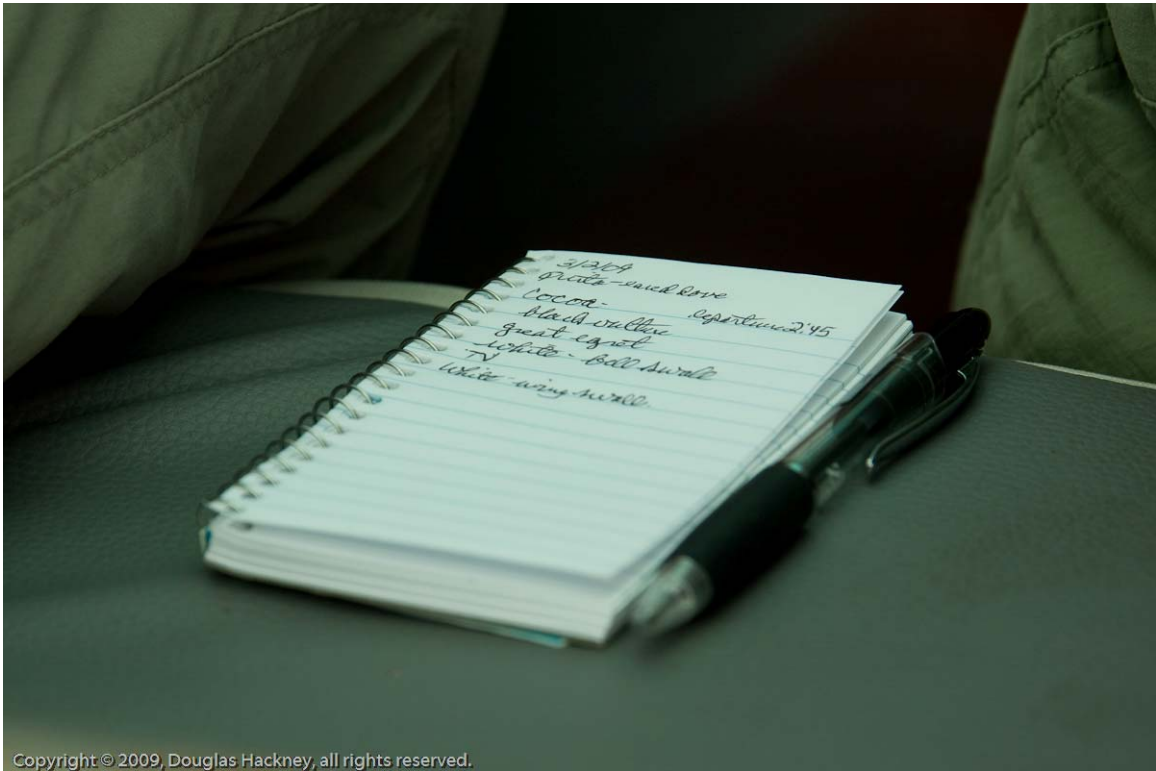
Most people who visit the Amazon basin on a serious mission are bird watchers. That should be no surprise, since more than 66 percent of the world's bird species are found on the South American continent, and most of those species are in the Amazon rainforest.



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Birders come to the Amazon basin to work on their life list, the list of bird species that they have spotted during their lifetime. It is a serious, life-long quest. One birder we met hoped to reach 3,000 species on his life list during his trip to the rainforest.



To us, being non-birders, a bird is usually just another bird.



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But even to us, some of the birds in the rainforest are definitely not your average bird.



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The Amazon basin contains 20 percent of the Earth's fresh water. Consequently, to travel you need to move on the water. That involves canoeing back into the rainforest, often down tunnels through the jungle.



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Along the waterways you see some common animals, familiar even to us.



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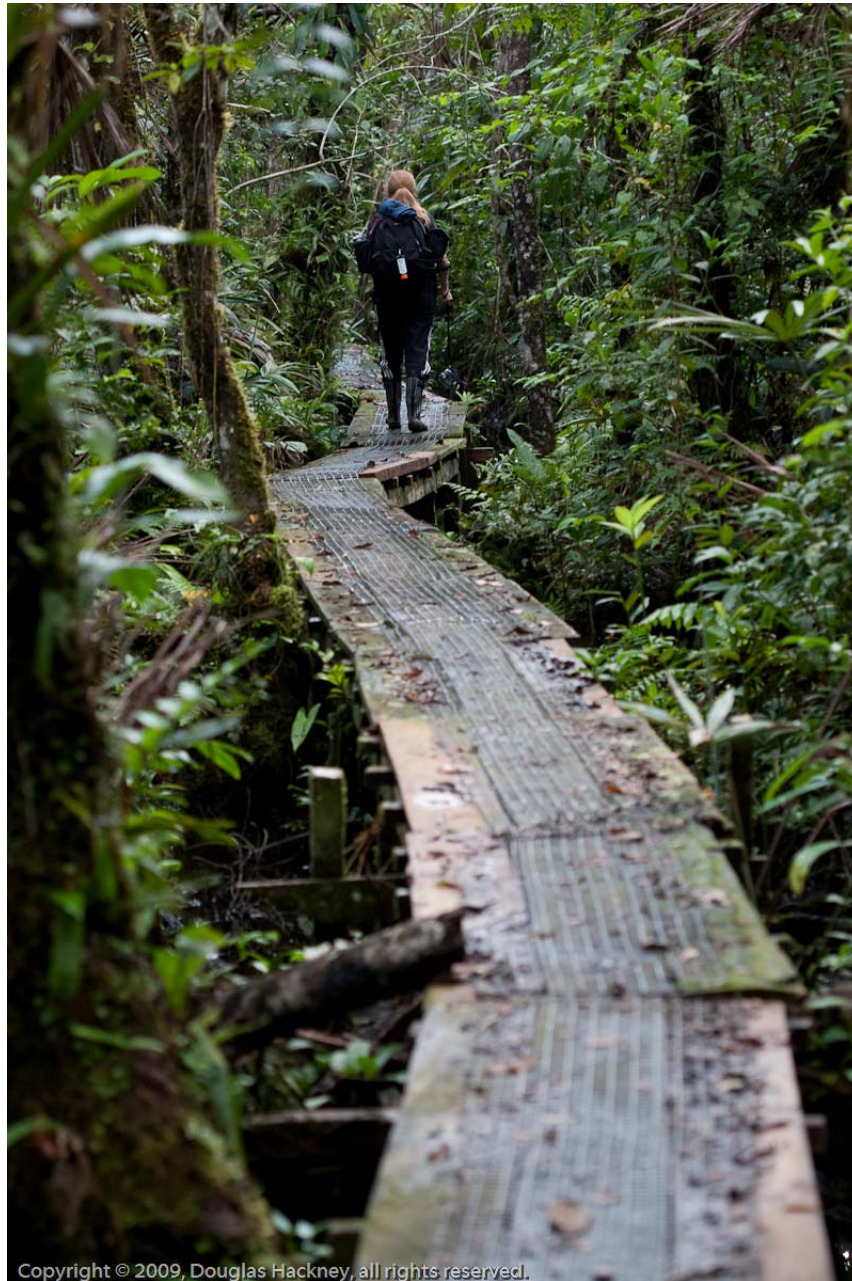
And some that are not so common, such as this tarantula spider that was much bigger than my open hand.



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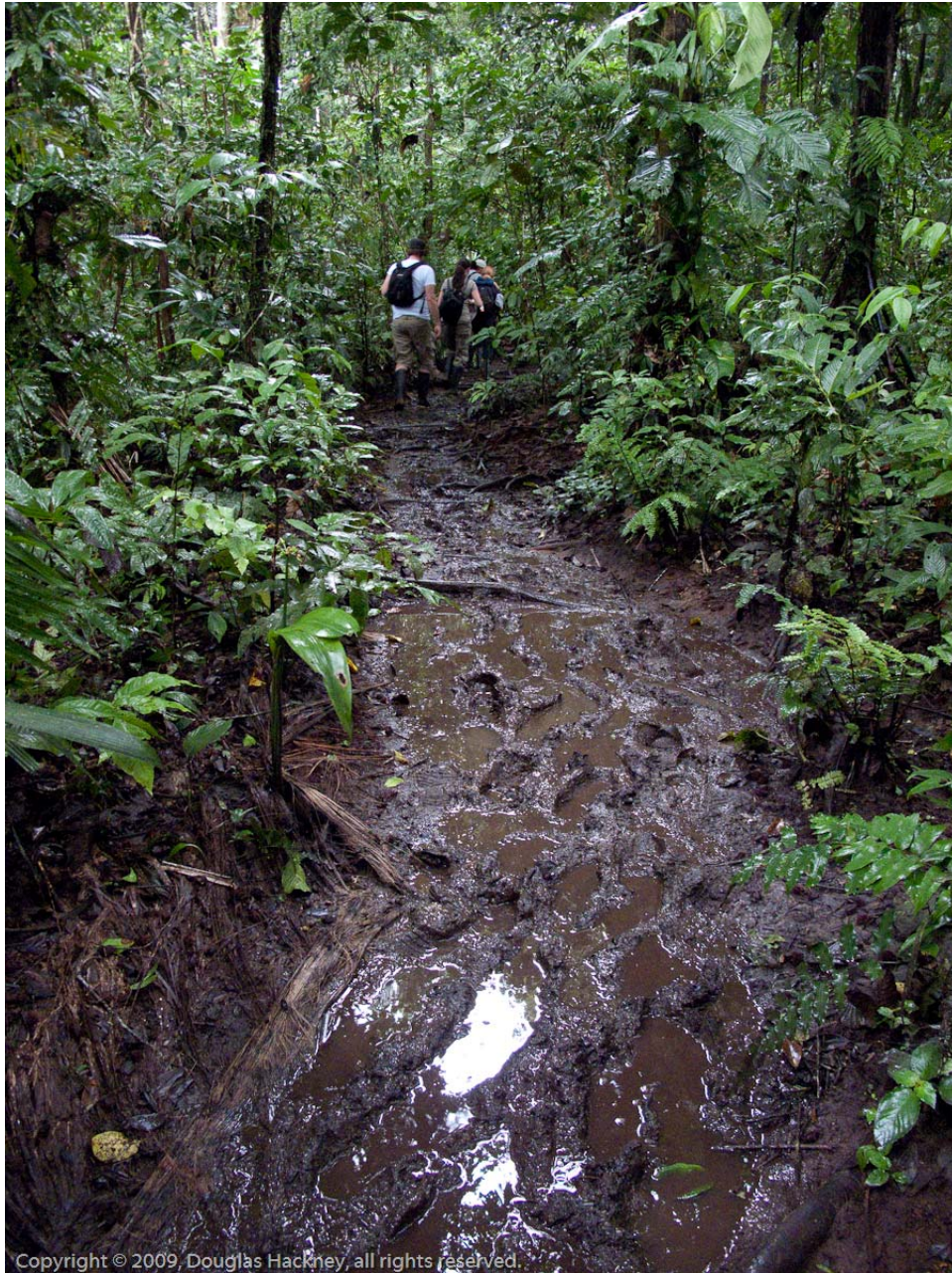
When the canoe lands, it is time to hit the trails and explore the rain forest.

In some places where there is deep water, the trails are elevated on planks.



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But at least 98 percent of the trails are down on the ground.



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Some trails are narrow, and are seemingly swallowed by the jungle.



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Down on the floor of the jungle, it is hot and wet. Things decay quickly, such as this leaf, which will completely decompose in as little as two to three weeks.



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And this dead bug, which had tiny mushrooms growing on it within days.



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And this seed pod, which was covered in fungus in the same amount of time.



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When you are down on the ground in the heat and the moisture—looking up—all you can think about is what the view would be like up on top. What would it look like from up there?



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And it is true, some views, some mysteries, can only be answered from up above the canopy.



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So, to answer the mysteries, you have to climb up there, all 40 to 50 meters / 131 to 164 feet of it.



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Being above the top of the canopy provides a completely different perspective on the rainforest.



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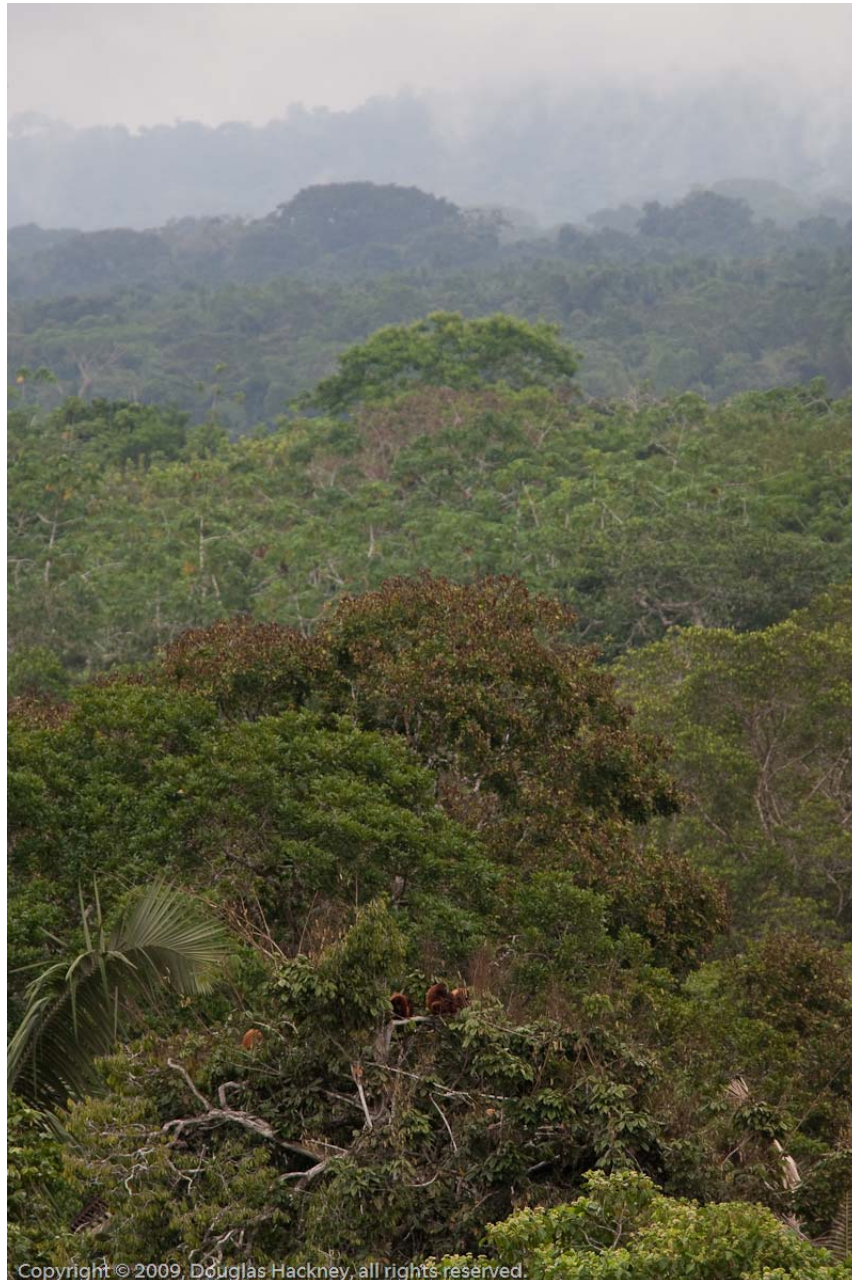
Up there, you discover that the trees host another forest, a forest of small plants that grow on the trees themselves.



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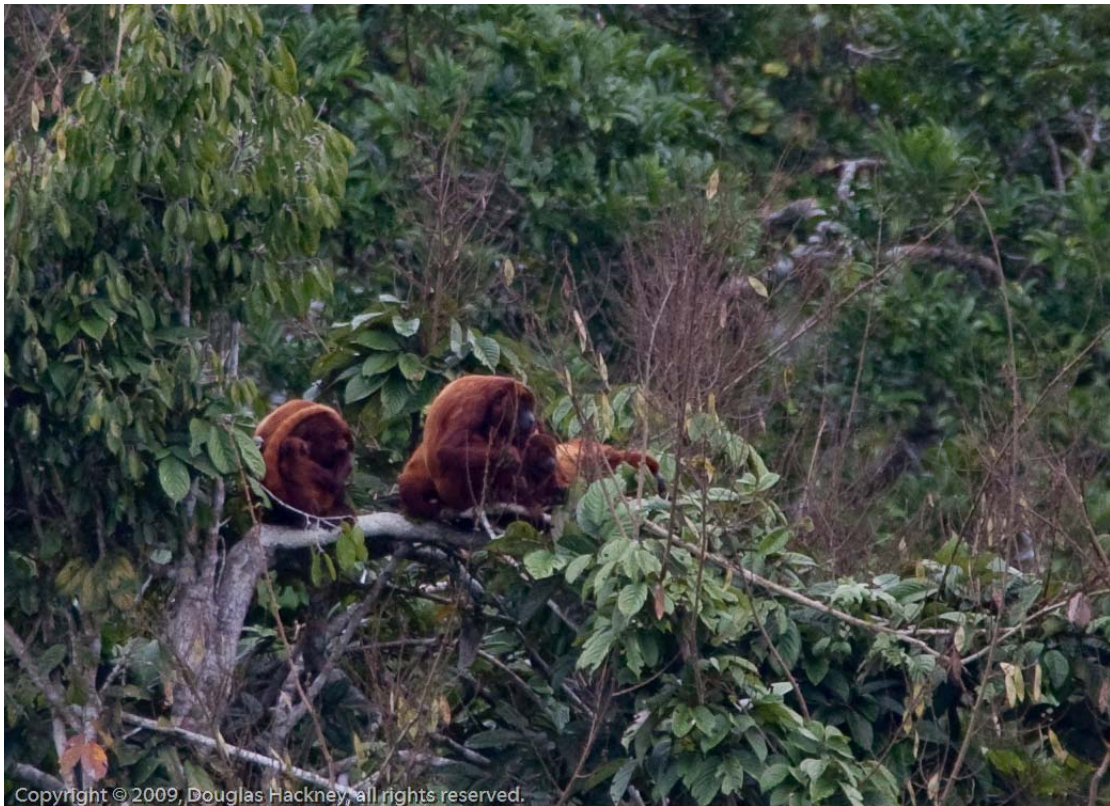
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And some views, especially those including animals that live in the canopy, are unique to this place.



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Such as this family group of red howler monkeys.



Click here to listen to the sound of red howler monkeys. It's the roar you hear...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ln4RRKC2zY>

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For others, you are limited to cereal boxes or the canopy. Your choice.



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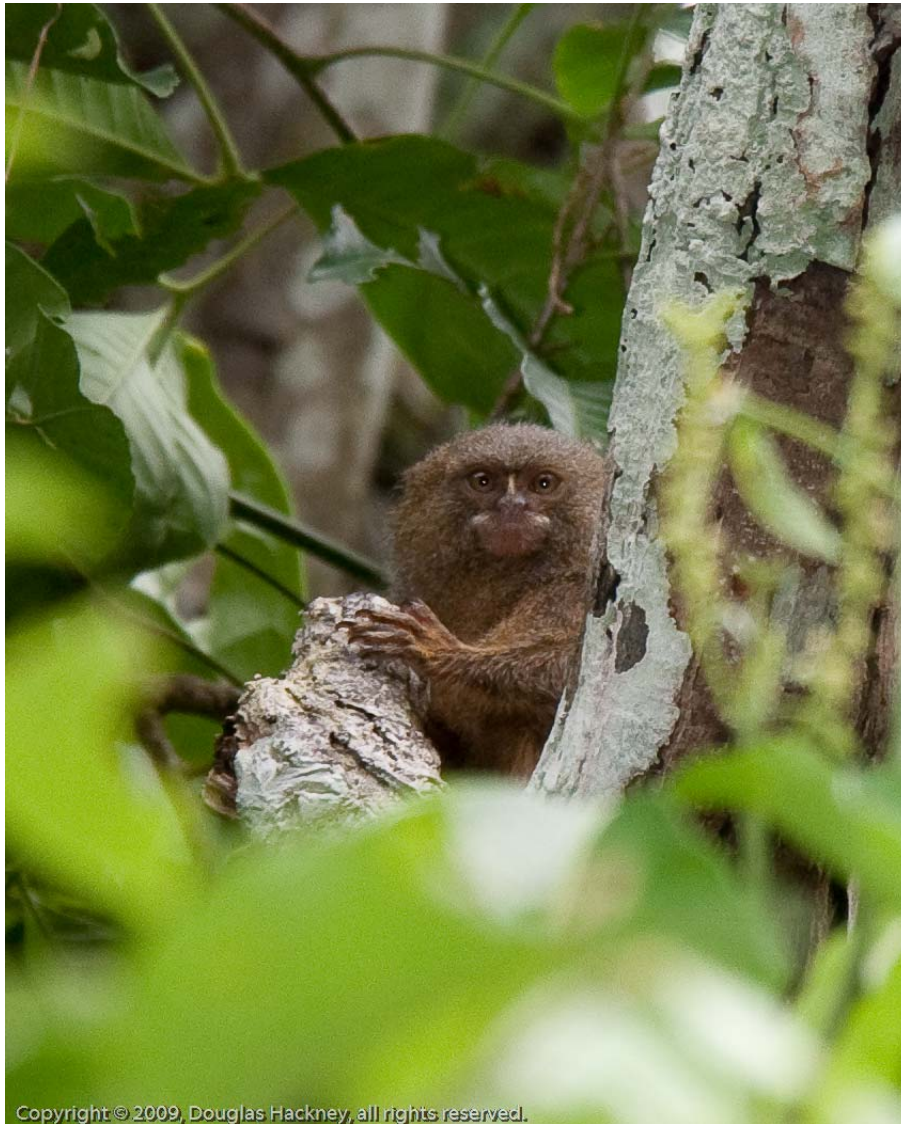
But even though the view from above the canopy is glorious, the floor of the jungle provides views equally surprising.

Such as parrots that eat clay to neutralize the poisonous seeds that comprise their diet.



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The smallest monkey in the world, which would fit in your palm.



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And huge two toed sloths.



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Unusual flowers.



And flowers that aren't just flowers,



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they include a little guy just trying to defend his home from strange, very large intruders.



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Or beautiful flowers,



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that turn out to be on a completely different scale than you'd expect.



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In fact, the floor of the jungle has a very interesting cast of characters.



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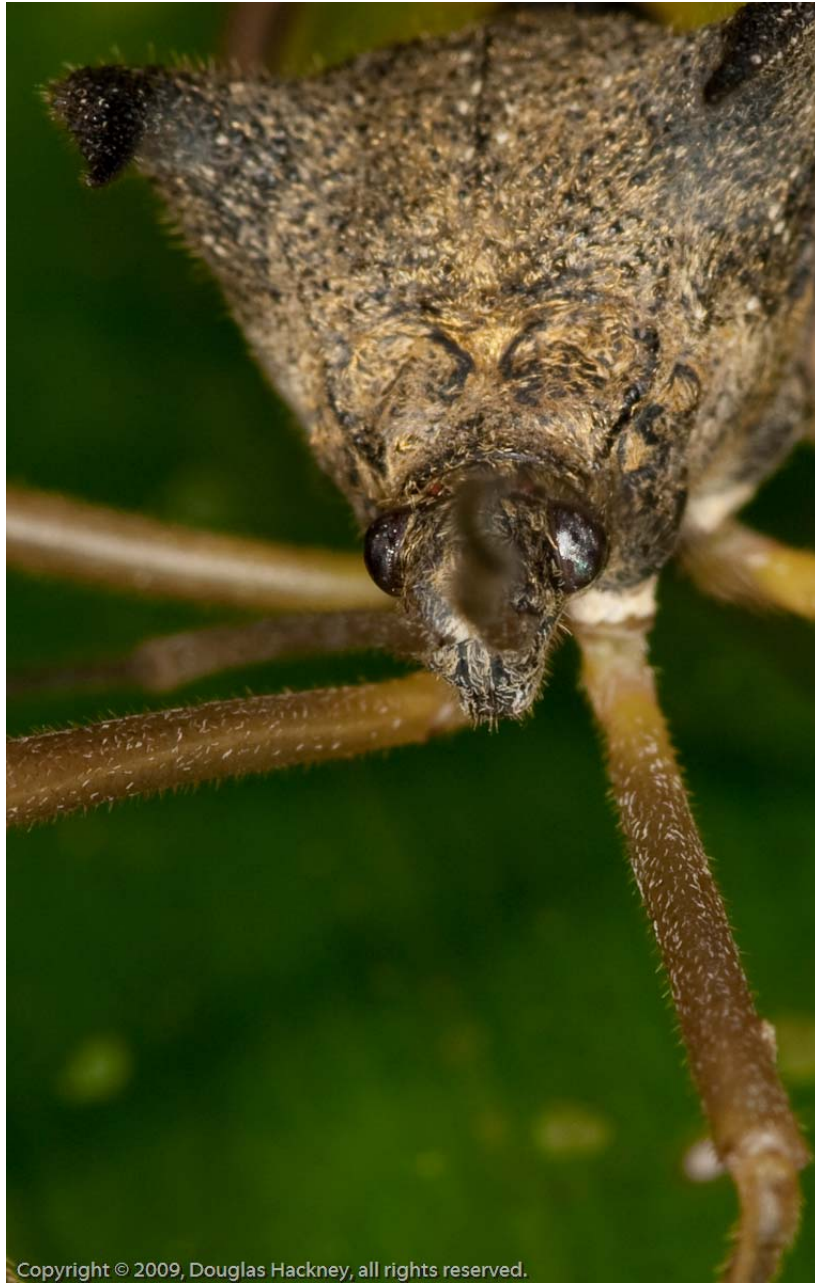


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And even the familiar ones,



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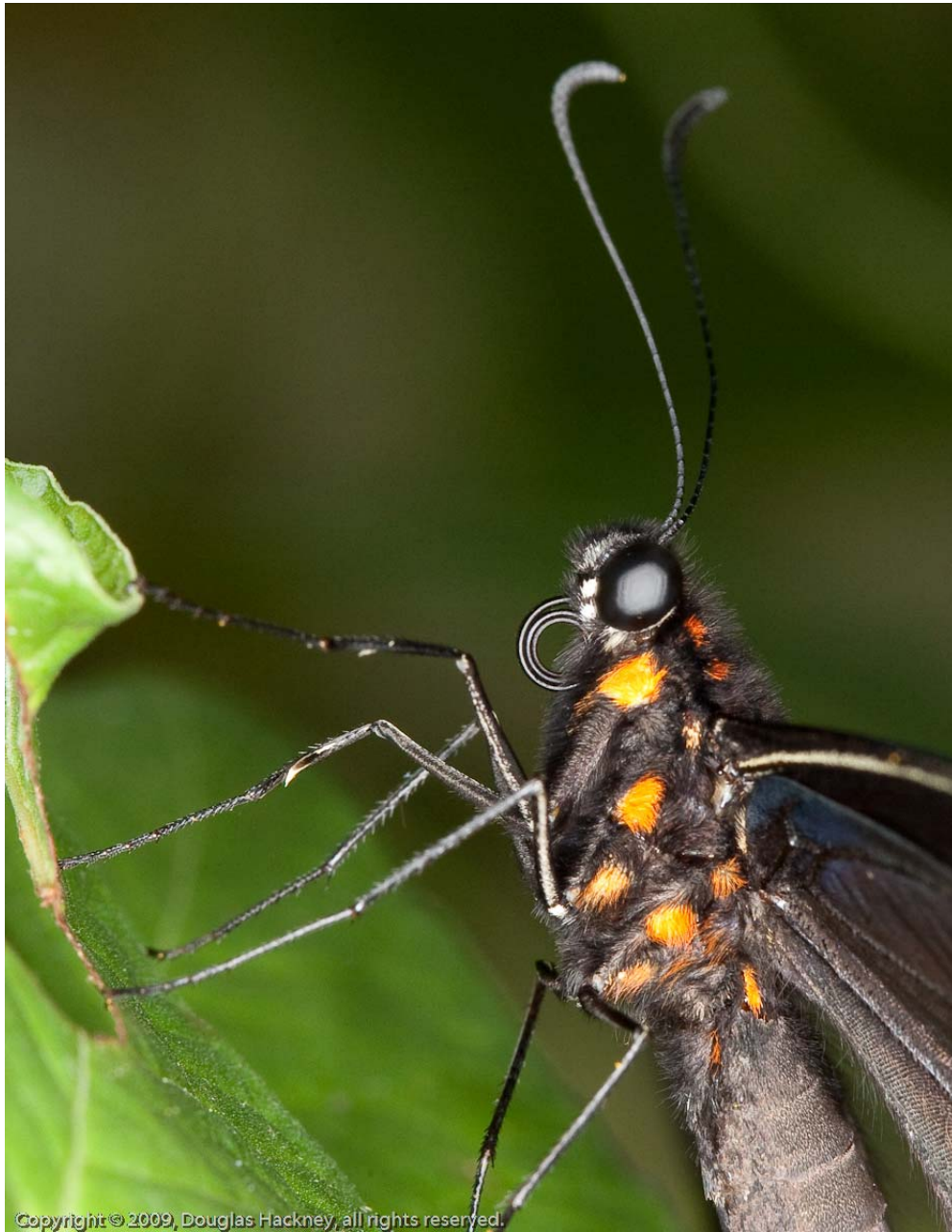
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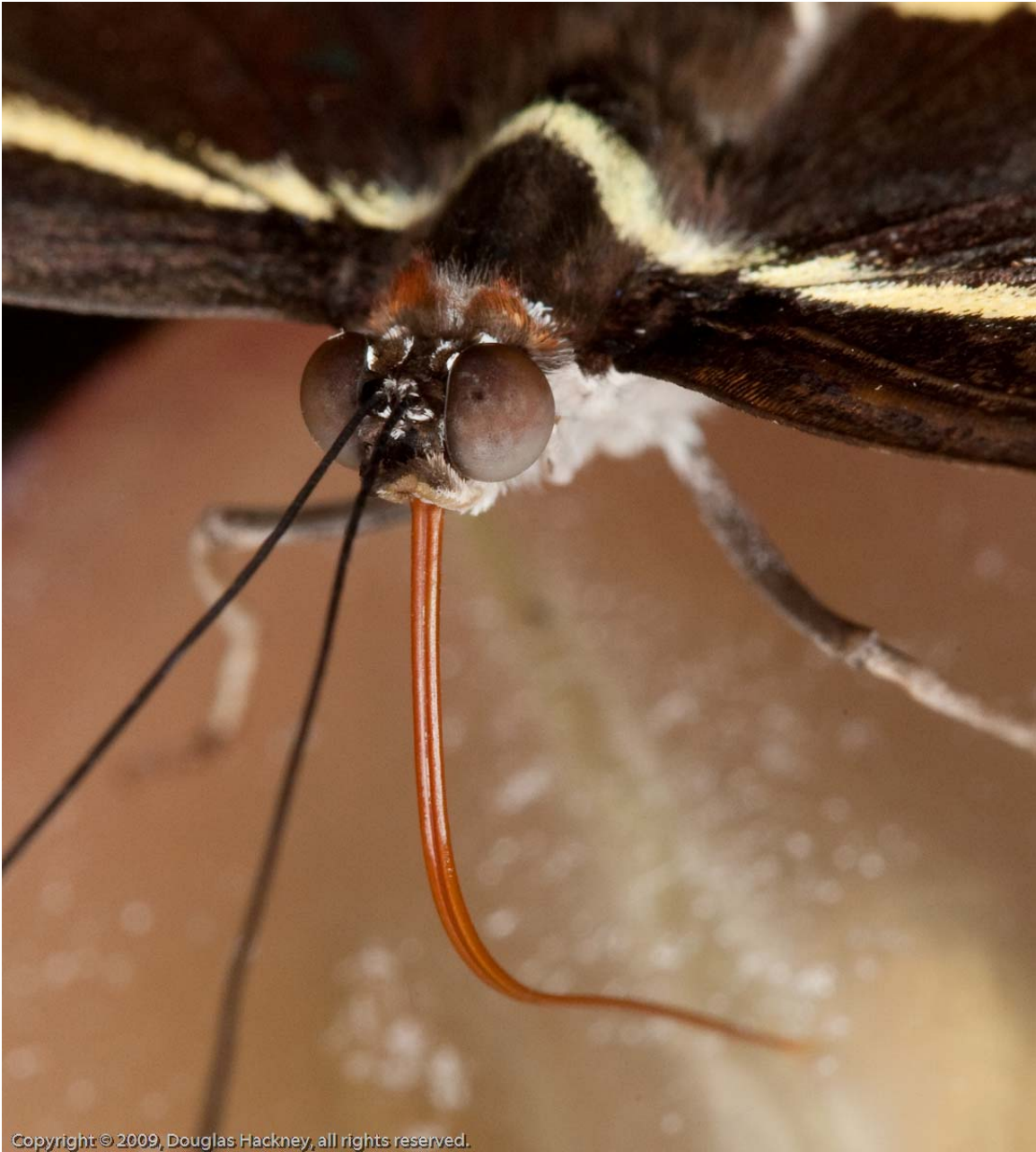
Look less and less familiar the closer you get.



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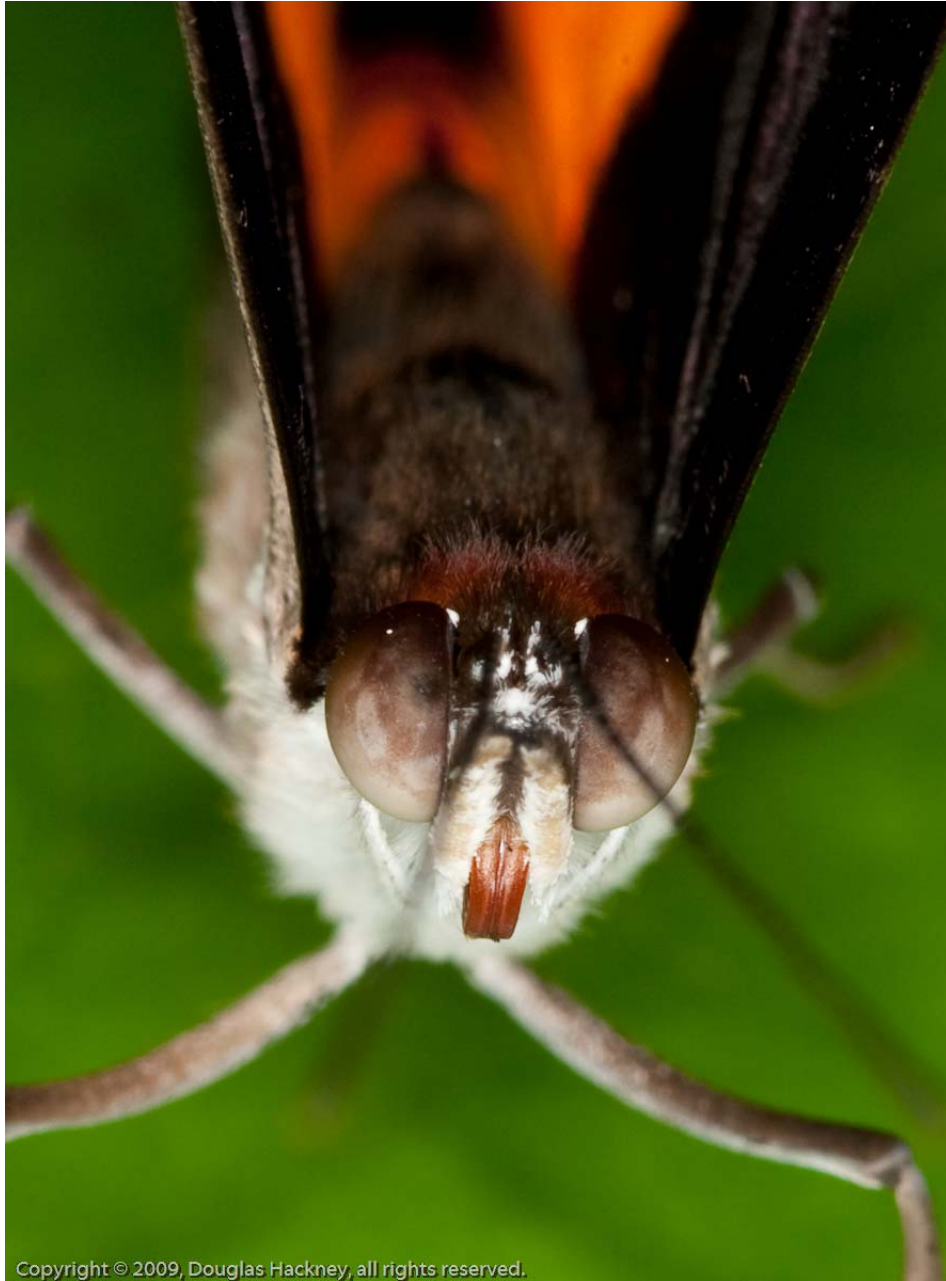


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And just like the people we meet out here—even though we don't always share the same cuisine—



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—you can always find common ground if you look them straight in the eyes.



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The Amazon basin rainforest covers more than 405 million hectares / one billion acres.

More than 20 percent of the Earth's oxygen is created by the Amazon basin rainforest.

There are more than 3,000 freshwater fish species in the Amazon basin.

Scientists have cataloged more species in less than 20 hectares / 49 acres of Amazon rainforest than exist in all of North America.

All photos by Douglas Hackney



Douglas and Stephanie Hackney, members of one of the estimated five million species that live in the Amazon basin rainforest, are on a two to three year global overland expedition.

You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel>