



FINAL REPORT

Prepared for:



Prepared by:



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INTRODUCTION

Last December, my wife (Ly) and I had the pleasure of travelling to Panama to conduct what was likely the most extensive artistic study of the Harpy Eagle in the wild. The trip was made possible through the support of the Worldwide Nature Artists Group and the recently created WNAG Flag Expedition Program. Our expedition had the honour of being the first in this groundbreaking program.

Stating that we feel that the Expedition was a success would be an understatement. Not only were we able to observe adult Harpy Eagles, but we managed to spend time near a nest with a 4-5 month old eaglet, and had the opportunity to document several of the Harpy Eagle's prey (e.g. sloth, anteater, coati, etc.), along with many of the other species that benefit from a healthy ecosystem.

Furthermore, we had the unique opportunity to spend ten days with the native people at a remote Emberá village, where we were honoured to be the first outsiders they ever hosted. Next to being able to spend days watching the interaction between a Harpy Eagle and its chick, getting to know the Emberá was one of the most rewarding experiences we ever had.

WHAT WE DID

Initial Plans

When we left Canada, our tentative plans were to visit the following locations:

- Mogue area: reports of two nests with sub-adults.
- Sambu River area: reports of a nest under construction; unverified reports of another possible nest 8 hours up the Sambu River.
- Chagres National Park: reports of two nests with sub-adults.
- Soberania National Park and Parque Natural Metropolitano: observation of Harpy Eagle's prey and other species that live in the rainforest.

Unfortunately, at that time none of these nests had what we would have considered the "ideal" conditions (i.e. a young eaglet) that would have guaranteed several hours of observation of both adult and juvenile birds. So we had planned to visit as many sites as possible, to increase our chances of seeing and documenting a Harpy Eagle in the wild.

Revised Plans

Once we arrived in Panama, we received the good news that there were reports of an active nest near the village of Llano Bonito, which was accessible via the village of Mogue. We debated whether we should visit some of the other areas first (and "save the best for last"), or whether we should head over to Llano Bonito first to verify those reports. Ultimately, we decided on the latter, knowing that we could go back to the original plan if the reports turned out to be unfounded. As it turned out, the nest near Llano Bonito

was PERFECT, so that is where we decided to spend the bulk of our time. In the end, our trip included visits to the following locations:

- Llano Bonito area (via Mogue): nest with 4-5 month old eaglet and a second nest with a sub-adult; checked on a third nest that had a sub-adult, but no activity was observed while we were there.
- Chagres National Park: visited one of two nest sites with sub-adults, but saw no activity.
- Canal area: great opportunity to observe several other birds of prey (kites, ospreys, etc.), iguanas, as well as Capuchin and Howler monkeys.
- Soberania National Park and Parque Natural Metropolitano: able to observe and document several of the Harpy Eagle's prey, as well as many of the other species that call the rainforest their home.

Highlights

1. Opportunity to watch the interaction between a Harpy Eagle mother and its chick in the wild, especially considering how alert and active this particular chick was.
2. Honour to be the first outsiders to ever stay at the remote Emberá village of Llano Bonito. Hospitable, but shy at first, the natives quickly warmed up to us and took us in. Ly fit right in, after she was painted by the women and given one of their traditional skirts (called a "paruma") to wear.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Ecological Impact

The Harpy Eagle, the most powerful bird of prey in the world, has few (if any) natural predators. Only **humans** are a threat to this species, through direct persecution and loss of habitat (primarily deforestation due to development, logging, and agriculture). Governments continue to turn a blind eye to the destruction of one of Earth's most spectacular natural habitats, and conservation organizations are faced with an uphill battle. Because of their long chick-rearing period and delayed sexual maturity, these external threats are extremely hard to offset, making it difficult for diminishing Harpy Eagle populations to rebound.

Although loss of habitat could have the most serious long-term consequences for this and all the other species that depend on the rainforest for their survival, we learned that the most immediate threat to the Harpy Eagle is direct persecution. Harpy Eagles are frequently shot by humans, making education programs and better law enforcement more important than ever.

We intend to work with local conservation groups (e.g. the Panama Audubon Society), utilizing the Expedition to generate excitement and renewed interest in the conservation of the Harpy Eagle and its habitat.

Artistic Impact

“A man who works with his hands is a labourer. A man who works with both his hands and his head is a craftsman. A man who works with his hands, his head and his heart is an artist.”

I have always felt that being an artist was more than having the physical ability to place graphite on paper, or paint on board. Art, by definition, demands an emotional connection between artist and subject. For me, this connection is impossible to achieve unless I have had the chance to spend time getting to know my subject in its natural habitat. The intricacies and interdependencies found in nature can never be accurately replicated or observed anywhere else.

These feelings have been reinforced a hundredfold during this Expedition. I would have been happy to see a Harpy Eagle in the wild, even if just for a few minutes. However, nothing could have prepared me for the overwhelming experience of sitting “under” a Harpy Eagle’s nest, uninterrupted, for days at a time. I was able to observe and document each bird individually, as well as their behaviour towards each other; I was also able to watch how they responded to other things in their environment. What does the eaglet do when it takes a piece of food that is too big for it to swallow? How does the adult behave when vultures circle above, attracted by the prey it has brought to the nest? How does the eaglet react when a hummingbird steals some nesting material for its own nest? Does either bird notice or care about the line of leaf-cutter ants that is traveling along the branch where the nest is located?

The most important – and hardest – step in creating a piece of art is the idea, and my ideas emerge from my experiences with my subjects. They depict a snapshot in these individual animals’ life stories. This Expedition has reinforced how important it is for me, as an artist, to leave everything else behind and take time to really connect with the protagonists of the stories I want to share through my paintings. Hopefully the strength of that connection will spill over and carry my viewers along, immersing them deeper in the beauty of the natural world and bringing them closer to all the remarkable creatures that are a part of it.

Political Impact

Panamanians have a slight inferiority complex, especially as it relates to their “neighbours to the west” (Costa Rica). We often heard that although Panama boasts a greater variety of bird species (940 to Costa Rica’s 850), and 125 animal species found nowhere else on earth, Costa Rica “gets all the tourists...”

Having visited both countries, our impression is that Costa Ricans gear more of their infrastructure towards tourism, whereas Panamanians lack that focus. For example, during a domestic flight in Costa Rica, we found ourselves on a colourful plane, with a young pilot who joked around with the passengers prior to take off. In contrast, our domestic flight in Panama was 2 hours late (no explanations), the pilot was impatient and curt – bordering on rude – and on the return trip we had to leave part of our luggage behind because the flight was overbooked.

With the amount of violence in its history, the many years in which Panama was the object of another country’s interference (Spain, Colombia, U.S.A.), and with 37% of the population living below the

poverty line while a minority controls most of the wealth and virtually all the power, it is perhaps easy to understand why Panama has a hard time believing in itself, building on and promoting its strengths, and ridding itself of government corruption and favouritism.

Yet, an increase in trade is having a beneficial impact on Panama's economy. And as more visitors start to discover the country's astonishing biodiversity, there is hope that Panama's tourism will continue to develop slowly and in a sustainable manner. Even today, there are opportunities for visitors to directly impact struggling indigenous communities, which will in turn give them the means to more fully participate in the building of and conservation of their country. We trust that this Expedition will play a part in renewing interest in Panama, its rich culture and natural beauty.

Social Impact

When we embarked on this Expedition, conservation issues were first and foremost on our minds. However, we were quickly reminded that conservation does not happen in a vacuum, and everything has social consequences.

In order to observe the Harpy Eagle, we needed the consent of the Emberá community in whose land the nest sites were located. The Emberá are one of seven native tribes that still inhabit Panama. We traveled through several villages, but the one where we spent most of our time was made up of about 18 extended-family units. They live in the same manner as their ancestors did for hundreds of years, in thatched-roof open-sided huts, making a living from subsistence agriculture (plantain, corn, rice, etc.), as well as hunting, fishing and raising poultry. Many of the men make carvings from the cocobolo wood, and the women weave beautiful baskets, which they send to neighbouring villages when they hear that groups of tourists will be visiting. They receive no government assistance and, because of their remote location, they also do not get the extra resources that regular visits by tourists might provide.

Incentives to continue to live in harmony with the environment and protect the Harpy Eagle must always be evaluated against their need to survive. The natives are also faced with the issue of balancing two competing forces: the desire to maintain their traditional culture, while adapting and benefiting from modernization and a growing economy.

Yet, whenever we asked them about their needs, the only concern they brought up related to their children, who they speak of as "their future". The Emberá understand the importance of a well-rounded education, and hope to improve their children's chances of success by providing as many opportunities as possible for their mental and physical development. They specifically mentioned the ongoing need for basic school supplies, an English language course and, if possible, equipment to help them start a baseball program. Besides being Panama's favourite sport, baseball would be a great way to keep the children occupied, while teaching them the value of working together towards a common goal. We know that we cannot save the world, but we believe that we can make a difference to this one community. We will soon be developing a plan for the collection of donated school supplies and baseball equipment.

Close to the end of our time in the village, the question that everyone, young and old, kept asking us was “When are you coming back?”, to which we had no answer. Maybe we will be able to return to Llano Bonito, but this time we hope to take along some of the supplies they so desperately need.

Appreciating What Is

Our philosophy for this Expedition (and other trips like it) has been that “it doesn’t have to be fun to be fun.” Instead of having pre-conceived ideas about what each experience “should be” like, which invariably leads to disappointment, we have learned to simply appreciate each event for what it actually is. When something unexpected happens, we say to each other: “It is what it is”. The flight was overbooked and we had to spend an extra night somewhere? It is what it is. Rain prevented us from spending a good day near the nest site? It is what it is; maybe we needed some time to rest and get to know our native hosts better. With this mindset, every detail becomes a part of, and enhances, the experience, instead of taking away from it. Knowing that we cannot control everything has enabled us to relax and truly enjoy whatever has come our way.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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| WNAG Flag Expedition #1 | http://www.natureartists.com/flagexpeditions/ |
| David N. Kitler | www.natureartists.com/david_kitler.asp |
| Worldwide Nature Artists Group | www.natureartists.com |

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