

Into La Moskitia: Embracing the Forest and Unexpected Tribulations of Finding Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao cyanoptera*) Nest Trees

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The days start clamorously at the Mavita field station. Within seconds of the sun peaking over the horizon, a cacophony echoes throughout the village. Scarlet macaws are the obvious ringleaders, but their morning greetings are accompanied by parakeets and the yellow-naped amazon; all three groups seemingly aim to be louder than the others. After a morning briefing, we all set out for work by loading into one of the trucks. Today we will be venturing into the hilly Zone Two, a plan which necessitates we ride the MOTOTRUCK (by far our favorite transportation option because of its similarity to

a roller-coaster ride).

We finally arrive at our first nest site of the day, and despite it only having been a week, we have already developed a fine-tuned system to collect data at each stop. Like clockwork, we hop out of the truck and get our notebooks out. We circle the tree to note its condition and almost stumble into an enormously intricate orb-weaver web. We note the number of cavities on the tree, their position, the amount of canopy cover, the height of the tree, the diameter of the trunk, and identify all bird calls heard in the vicinity. Once we wrap up at this site, our eyes immediately start searching for a nearby non-nest tree to survey, all to repeat this process again.



As the day starts to heat up, we enter a great rhythm and start speeding through our planned list of sites; crossing precarious streams with a bright confidence. There is something strangely satisfying about watching our notebooks fill with measurements and observations, knowing that each number represents another tiny piece of the pine-tree nesting puzzle we are trying to understand. We are not simply looking for macaws anymore. We are looking at trees differently, noticing cavities we would have completely missed a week ago, instinctively estimating tree heights, and scanning the canopy for movement whenever we hear a familiar screech.

Then, almost on cue, the sky opens.

We are halfway through our lunch break, huddled beside a stream with our rice, beans, and plantains, when the rain starts pouring down. Between bites, we ask our local guide about the crested caracara perched nearby, seemingly completely unfazed by the sudden downpour and watching us chomp down our lunch with what feels like considerable interest. It is a strangely peaceful scene despite the chaos around us. Some of us frantically try to pull on our rain jackets before everything gets soaked, while others have already given up and simply stand there, staring up at the sky and enjoying every refreshing drop.



The rain comes down so heavily that conversation becomes difficult, and for a few minutes there is nothing to do but eat and laugh at the absurdity of our situation. Our notebooks and equipment are tucked safely away, our food is balanced precariously on our knees, and the stream beside us is quickly swelling with the rainwater. Yet nobody seems particularly bothered. After days of heat, humidity, mud, insects, and long walks through the forest, standing outside in a tropical downpour somehow feels like a welcome part of the experience.

Eventually, the rain eases enough for us to pack everything away and continue. By now, we have learned that weather in La Moskitia operates largely on its own schedule, similar to familiar Edinburgh. A morning can begin under brilliant blue skies, turn into torrential rain over lunch, and finish with the sun blazing down again by the afternoon. Our fieldwork has to adapt accordingly. It is easy to forget why you are doing it when you have spent hours measuring trees under the midday heat, but we had already experienced the moment that made all of it feel worthwhile. Early in our fieldwork, we finally saw a scarlet macaw emerging from one of the very cavities we had been learning to measure. The daily routine started to come natural to us, with waking up, running for breakfast and moving in between



trees. But there was still something missing. We were trusting the process that the trees that the guides lead us to, were the cozy homes of macaws, without any signs of them. Was it true that they were around? That they indeed selected pine trees to protect their younger? These were the existential questions that kept popping into our heads, until...

Until we were approaching a nest tree, in a remote area away from the road, and we spotted a vibrant red head, popping out from the broken top cavity. We were silently screaming of excitement (a very fun activity that we recommend, by the way) and rapidly grabbed our cameras to record the iconic and unforgettable moment. Seeing our little friends in the wild was the most fulfilling event of data collection, that made us believe in our project, in our mission to make a difference to this community and to the future of this hunted species.



By the end of the day, we are tired, muddy, and carrying notebooks full of measurements, but we have also managed to visit another series of nest and non-nest trees. As we climb back into the MOTOTRUCK for the journey home, the forest begins to cool around us. We are already comparing notes, arguing over which bird calls we heard, and laughing about who got the wettest at lunch.

Tomorrow, we will do it all again.