

feature

Escape from Ant Paradise

Text and photographs by Brian Fisher

May 2: African gray parrots chatter as they fly overhead, and the red-chested cuckoos have started to sing the sun down over the forest canopy. It's 5 p.m., and the day is ending. The expedition's scientists are making their evening rounds: our mammalogist baits live traps with oil palm nuts to catch nocturnal rodents and insectivores, while our herpetologist sets out by dugout canoe to survey a small stream by listening for frogs calling for mates.



When a civil war broke out in the capital of the Central African Republic, ant researcher Brian Fisher and colleagues had to flee to safety.

Nightfall is my favorite time in the forest, and not just because the swarms of sweat bees and horseflies have departed. The evening affords the chance to sit and simply appreciate the magnificence. The discomforts, miseries, and perils of working in the field are legion, but each day still offers a moment, however fleeting, when we are suddenly struck by the beauty around us. There are so few places left where you can stand surrounded by pristine forest. For me, walking into these vaulted spaces is much like entering a living green cathedral.

We are working in the Dzanga-Ndoki National Park and the Dzanga-Sangha Dense Forest Reserve, situated in the southwestern corner of the Central African Republic. As its name implies, the Republic rests in the heart of Africa, bordering Cameroon and the Congo Republic. I and five other biologists have been invited here by the United States arm of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to organize a multidisciplinary biological inventory of the region with the help of nearly 20 local assistants.

Our mission is straightforward: to document the diversity of life in the region for conservation and science. As the Edens disappear, so do countless life forms yet to be discovered. Managing protected natural areas without knowledge of their species diversity is akin to running a grocery store without knowing which products you have for sale. A biological inventory is in many ways a stocktaking exercise, and inventories such as this one of Dzanga-Sangha form the basis for many conservation strategies and actions.

As in many tropical countries, baseline information on the various animal and plant groups in the Central African Republic is pitifully scarce. This is especially true for the smaller creatures. For example, not one published study documents ants, my specialty, for this country. Over the next year, each researcher in our group will analyze what we collect during this trip, and eventually prepare a book on our findings to be published by the California Academy of Sciences.

May 2: The sweat bees (genus *Trigona*) that congregate by the thousands around our arms and heads have made turbans the trend in field wear fashion. Mosquito nets wrapped around our heads make the bees tolerable since they can no longer bathe in our eyeball juices.

It is still difficult to keeping a straight face while talking to someone wearing an unraveling mop of white mesh, but we're all adjusting. Lunchtime, however, is a challenge, as it occurs at the peak of bee activity, and it's difficult to eat with a net over your face. We've all made the mistake of attempting to stuff a spoonful of food through the net. Drinking that way works fine though, and provides the added benefit of straining out all the bees that have fallen into the cup.

But these bees have their positive side. Our local field assistants, the BaAka pygmies, returned from the field today with sweat bee honey they found in the base of a tree. The honey is much darker and richer than the kind produced by European honeybees and is a prized find in the forest. We were all surprised to see



Author Brian Fisher takes a break from surveying insects in the Central African Republic to deliver the daily expedition dispatch to the World Wildlife Fund via satellite phone.

the BaAka drink the honey by the cupful, but soon we were all taking turns to slurp it up. That is, until someone remarked that it had been manufactured from our sweat. After that, it lost much of its appeal.

Our camp is situated on the banks of the 300-mile-long Sangha River, a major route of entry into the country and a convenient spot for a bath. While you bathe, little fish swarm around and nibble on your skin. So far, no big fish have taken any bites.

Until last night, we thought the only real dangers were the hippos that live downstream and the electric catfish that will give you quite a jolt if you walk into one. Then we all awoke to the screams of the BaAka as they beat the water with canoe paddles. Evidently, a Nile crocodile came by for a taste of the sheep we had tethered near the water and planned to eat for dinner. Bathing won't be nearly as much fun anymore, and I, for one, will forego it at night.

May 25: The trip has been a real success. What we've found gives a flavor for just how rich these forests are in life. I've collected more than 300 ant species, and the group's insect specimens number well over a million. Our frog collection consists of 42 species, including two or three that may be new to science. We pulled about 40 different fish species from the rivers, caught 64 species of birds, and trapped more than 180 different bats, rodents, and mammalian insectivores such as shrews. We found so many plants that the total number hasn't been tallied yet, but our botanist will add many entries to his rich list of more than 1,700 known plant species in the region.



BaAka pygmy field assistants, who helped find specimens, share a laugh with author and expedition leader Brian Fisher.

After 45 days in the country, we are leaving the forest and all its amazing animals for the village of Bayanga. It will be a stopover on our 200-mile journey to Bangui, the capital, where we will board a flight to Paris, now 3,600 miles away.

June 1: We stepped ashore in the river town of Bayanga after a long day on logging trucks and dugout canoes, only to be greeted by the news that Bangui is under siege. Rebels have made a coup attempt on President Ange Felix Patasse. The rebels have already taken strategic sites in the city, including the radio station and the main road leading out of town—which is also our route from Bayanga. People are fleeing the capital, toting their belongings in bundles on their heads.

All foreign borders and Bangui airport, the only international airport in the country, are closed. There are rumors of rebels traveling on nearby roads. Our lack of visas for neighboring countries and the logistical constraints of transporting the 700 kilograms of bird, mammal, frog, snake, and insect specimens in our luggage complicate matters further.

Being stranded in a million hectares of rainforest in the Central African Republic filled with the most amazing variety of critters isn't generally the kind of situation I want to escape. But after almost seven months of continuous fieldwork in Africa, I need to get back to the Academy to resume my responsibilities as a curator of entomology and to continue my research on ants.

June 5: For the last few days we have been hoping that the situation in the capital would be resolved quickly. But each day has brought news of intensified fighting. The fray has been joined by troops from Libya, Angola, Rwanda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. News has reached us that thousands are fleeing Bangui and that violence has frozen the capital in fear.

The citizens of the Central African Republic are the ones paying the price for those fighting for power. Over the last few days, hundreds have been killed. Their names are announced on the radio each day, and their bodies are left on the city streets. People who have stayed in the capital face the threat of rape, looting, and expulsion from their own homes by the rebels. And now the violence has spread to outlying cities as other factions rush to profit from the capital's chaos. It is time for us to go.



After 45 days in the Central African Republic, the team of scientists returned with a vast array of unusual specimens.

June 6: Our lucky break has arrived. WWF officials in Gabon have called our satellite phone to tell us that Paul Erkert, a pilot with SIL International, a missionary group working in Africa, could fly us the 500 miles to Gabon from a small logging town in neighboring Cameroon. The catch is we have to meet him there by six tomorrow morning.

June 7: After packing well into the night and sharing a last meal with local WWF staff, we caught a few hours of sleep before awaking at 3 a.m. We board the dugout canoe in the early morning darkness, and I hope we will be among the lucky ones to find a way out.

We all sit almost at eye level with the Sangha River, our canoe low in the water under the weight of our gear. As the unwieldy 20-foot boat strains to maneuver in the dark around this wide, shallow river's shifting sand bars, I make careful calculations as to what I will grab first the moment we begin to sink. Our canoe founders twice on the sand, forcing us to jump out and help lift the boat back into deeper water.

The trip along the river goes smoothly until we reach Libongo, Cameroon, just before 6 a.m. We immediately send word to the airport that we have arrived, but the gendarmerie posted at the river refuses to grant us legal entry into the country without visas, and escorts us to the police station.

The pilot shows up after an hour or so to investigate the reason for our delay and says he no longer has time to take us to the international airport at Douala. But if we can leave town before 9 a.m., he can take us as far as Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, where he is meeting his next clients. From there we can catch a bus to Douala. We have to make a decision quickly, or risk being stranded in Cameroon without a way to return to the Central African Republic.

Still without visas at 8:30 a.m., we decide to make a run for it, even though we are told we'll be arrested if we try to leave town or land in Yaounde without papers. We excuse ourselves from the police station saying we need to get breakfast and meet the pilot a few moments later on a dirt strip at the edge of town. We stuff our luggage into every available nook of the tiny single-prop plane, and climb aboard.

Noting that this is the fullest his plane has ever been, Erkert charges it down the earthen runway so we can chance our luck in another town. We enjoy skimming just above the canopy until it becomes evident that this is all the overburdened craft can manage.

We land in Yaounde three hours later after crossing huge expanses of forest. We hand in our passports to be stamped with a visa and go off to eat. Paul, who is known by every customer and vendor in the market, buys us little fried fish wrapped in newspaper, and we sit around crunching their tiny heads. When we return to the airport, we find our passports untouched and personally escort them upstairs to the immigration officer. Luckily, there is a soccer match on TV, and the immigration officer stamps our passports without ever taking his eyes off the set—thus failing to notice we are entering the country illegally.

After a three-hour ride in a bus overflowing with people, chickens, and large cooking pots, we reach the coastal city of Douala. Without reservations, we arrive at the airport early, still carrying our dinner - a paper bag of warm barbecued goat meat - just as the Air France office opens for the flight. It takes some fancy

footwork to persuade Air France to let a bunch of smelly, hairy-faced, goat-eating biologists on the night flight to Paris, especially since our tickets are still locked up in an office in war-stricken Bangui. But after four long hours of negotiating and three phone calls to Air France in Paris, we all find seats.

We climb the steps to the large Boeing, inhaling our last breaths of the humid air of central Africa. After traveling for nearly 40 hours and more than 500 miles by truck, dugout canoe, small plane, and bus, we are relieved to be heading toward the safety of Paris, but also sad to leave the forest. Here we are, still in our field clothes, I with only one shoe on and a five-day-old infection that has left my other foot a swollen mess, our herpetologist still clutching his snake stick. We are leaving Africa, leaving the green forest that had swallowed us deep into its bowels. No more elephants, bongo, sitatungas, water chevrotains, gorillas, or chimps. We still itch, we still smell of the forest, and, as we board the plane in the darkness, I wait and listen for the red-chested cuckoo to sing, "Please don't go."

Brian Fisher is assistant curator of entomology at the California Academy of Sciences.