

ECOCLUB: International Ecotourism Monthly, Issue 48, May 2003.

WILDLIFE AT THE DRY TROPICAL FOREST IN DOMITILA PRIVATE WILDLIFE PRESERVE NICARAGUA, CENTRAL AMERICA

by Jean Michel Maes PhD. Director of Entomology Museum Leon, Nicaragua
jmmaes@ibw.com.ni

& Eric Van den Berghe PhD., Professor of Biology and Sciences at Avemaria College,
San Marcos Nicaragua ericvdb@avemaria.edu.ni

Dry Tropical Forest is a very endangered ecosystem and rapidly disappearing in Central America. Dry tropical forest once covered most of the Pacific coast from Northern Mexico to Panama. Even in historic times this ecosystem has been fragile and quite heavily impacted by Pre-Columbian cultures, some of which probably collapsed because the ecosystem cannot support intensive agriculture in the long term.

The ecosystem is most similar to African savannah with both animals and plants being strongly convergent in form and function. Most trees with deep taproots, thorns, and losing leaves in the dry season. Anyone who has visited the east African Game parks will immediately notice the similarity, but with some striking differences as well. This type of forest has been reduced to a very few scattered remnants and is considered even more endangered than the Rain forest which receives the bulk of the publicity. It is also far more difficult to restore because the dry climate for six or seven months of the year makes it extremely challenging for new seedlings to become established if the shady canopy has been removed.

Domitila boasts one of the two best preserved dry forests in Nicaragua with giant trees comparable to the rain forest, however, unlike the rain forest, wildlife is easier to see, yet there is similar diversity to climax rain forest. Biologically, there is just as much to discover in dry forests as in rain forest, with many new species still being discovered each year in the last remaining patches of the very endangered habitat.

The Dry Tropical Forest is highly seasonal ecosystem, with a very well defined and prolonged dry season from December to the end of May. For butterflies this is important because butterflies have generation of dry season and generation for rainy season, par example *Eurema proterpia* (Pieridae). On this specie we can see the difference between the two generation on the male as well as on the female.

Domitila is one of the few places in Central America, where you can observe Dry Tropical Forest butterflies. Butterflies are easy to observe on the Reserve trails and for some species the setting of trap is necessary in order to observe them more easily.

For viewing wild mammals, Domitila is unsurpassed in Nicaragua. Howler monkeys and variegated squirrels that look like skunks are hard to miss. Meanwhile, pacas, agouti, sloths, kinkajou, coatimundi, kit foxes, porcupine, not to mention jaguarundi, margay, and other felines are seen regularly, plus this list is by no means exhaustive.... In one 24

hour period at Domitila, I have seen up to nine mammal species from this list, a feat, which I have not been able to match anywhere else in Central America, and WITHOUT baiting. The typical visitor can expect the monkeys and a couple of other items, especially if one goes out at night to see the animals that reside in hollow tree trunks during the day.

For birds, the variety of habitat, and especially well preserved habitat, makes this area truly exceptional. The Domitila dry forest is the only place I am aware of in Nicaragua where king vultures are seen regularly. It is also host to a large roost, and breeding habitat, of critically endangered yellow naped amazons among half a dozen parrot and parakeets to be seen. Violaceous trogons as well as motmots are common trailside, as are a variety of hummingbirds, and seasonal migratory species...although an exhaustive list is not yet available, it is not unreasonable to expect some 300+ species will eventually be documented from the area, as this is the number reported for nearby Volcan Mombacho where the average visitor sees far fewer species than at Domitila.

Lakeside, and in the lagoons, diverse herons and egrets abound, as do jacana, and double crested cormorants, more exciting, are occasional anhingas, rosette spoonbills, rails, purple gallinules, fulvous tree ducks, various kingfishers, and others. Marine birds such as terns, brown pelicans, and oystercatchers also come inland on occasion to make Domitila a birdwatcher's paradise. It is really one place where you can expect unexpected birds!