



by Paul Rubio

Shawshanka1/istock

MENELAUS BLUE MORPHO BUTTERFLY

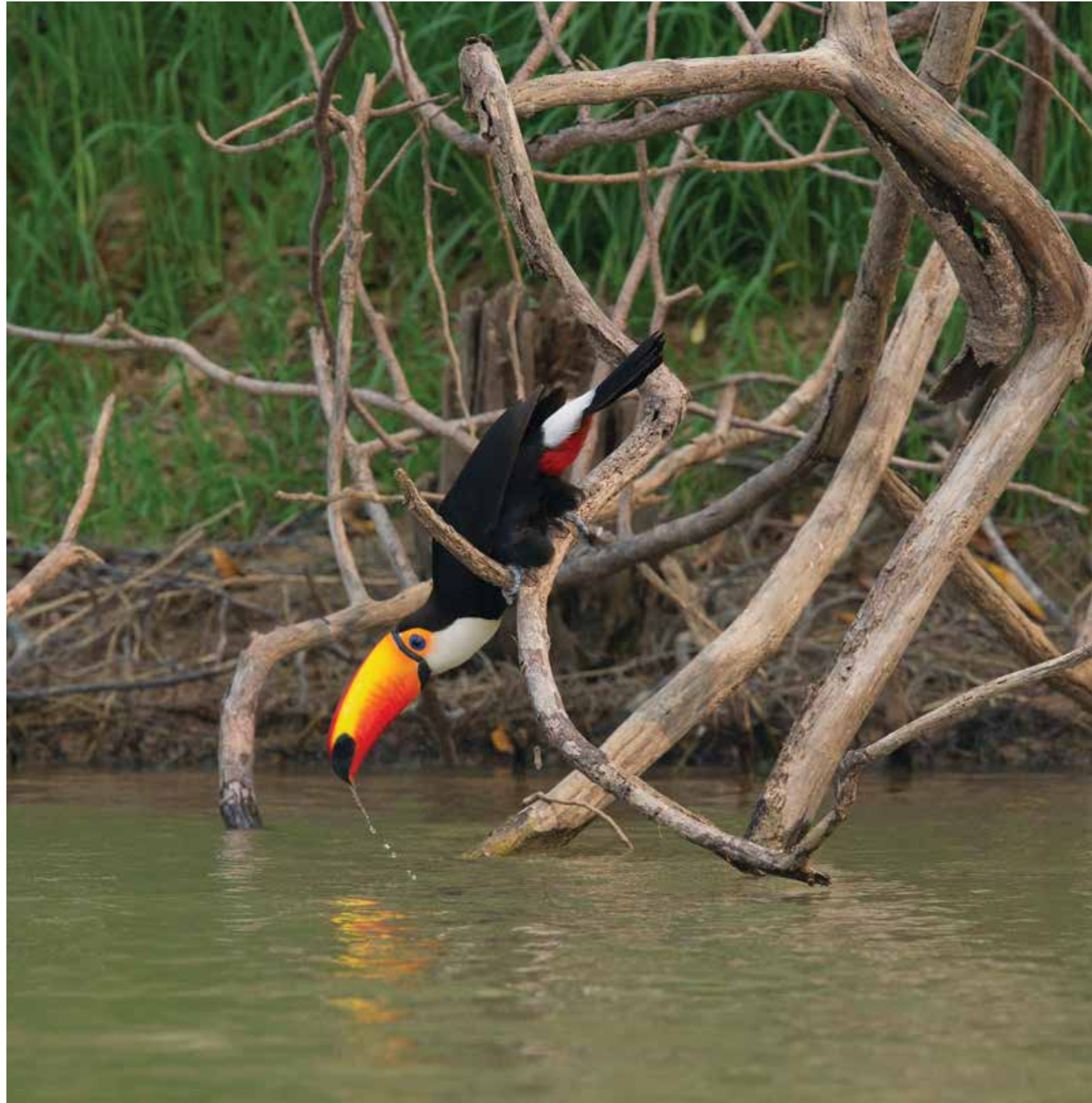
MORPHO MENELAUS

Call it the insect version of *The Ugly Duckling*. A hairy, brown-and-yellow, cannibalistic larva transforms into the most colorful and iconic butterfly of the neotropical world: the blue morpho butterfly. The wingspan of this iridescent giant of the forests nears 6 inches, the upper side shimmering in cobalt blue and framed by a black trim. However, this sparkling natural splendor is hardly recognizable once the morpho is at rest. With its wings closed, a pale brown underside becomes visible, a color that facilitates camouflage. In addition, this color pattern is punctuated by natural eyespots, or ocelli, eye-like markings intended to trick potential predators into believing the butterfly is a larger, more fearsome animal. Blue morphos' preferred diet is sap and fruit juice from rotting trees and fruits, which they consume through a long proboscis. Through their antennae, they are able to taste and smell the air, scoping out feeding sites. ▶

SOUTH AMERICA'S FASCINATING FAUNA

MEET EIGHT OF THE MOST CAPTIVATING ANIMAL SPECIES THAT ROAM THE **RAINFORESTS, WETLANDS, AND SAVANNAS** OF SOUTH AMERICA, **UNDERSCORING THE REGION'S EXTREME YET WANING BIODIVERSITY.**

by Paul Rubio



TOCO TOUCAN

RAMPHASTOS TOCO

The largest of all toucan species is highly recognizable from its presence in zoos and aviaries, the pet trade, and, yes, boxes of Froot Loops cereal. But, in a more positive, noncaptive (and sugar-free) setting, the toco, or giant toucan, illuminates the skies of South America's core, flying high above the woodlands and savannas of eastern Bolivia, Paraguay, and southern Brazil. It impresses with its black-and-white plumage and blue-and-orange framed eyes, but its most striking feature is a massive, yellowish-orange bill, which comprises 30 to 50 percent of its entire body surface area. The toucan's bill regulates body heat and assists in grabbing and consuming hard-to-reach arboreal fruits as well as insects, frogs, small birds, and small reptiles. Though not monogamous, toco toucans typically travel in pairs and reproduce annually. After mating, the female will lay between two and four eggs, which hatch in a mere 18 days.

Opposite, Patricio Robles Gil/Naturep/Nature in Stock; Mark Bowler/Getty Images.



RED-BELLIED PIRANHA

PYGOCENTRUS NATTERERI

They're feared in fresh water the way great white sharks are feared in salt water. Yet red-bellied piranhas, recognized by their glowing, reddish pectoral and pelvic fins, only grow to about 8 pounds (versus great white's 2 tons) and tend to be omnivorous, feeding primarily on small creatures like crustaceans, insects, and fish (versus great whites' completely carnivorous diet). So where does our fear factor stem? Let's thank the cheesy *Piranha* films of the 1970s and '80s, which homed in on the razor-sharp, serrated teeth and incredibly powerful jaw muscles of piranhas, but more so President Theodore Roosevelt's 1914 account of piranha brutality in his book *Through the Brazilian Wilderness*—and perhaps a bit of reality? Roosevelt's detail of a cow's mauling by ferocious piranhas wasn't a case of alternative facts, rather a very contrived case of starved and confined piranhas pushed to the brink. These rare attacks, however, can occur as the result of provocation or starvation, and there are at least a half-dozen news reports of serious injuries and even human deaths from the last decade stemming from the piranhas' primary habitat of the Amazon basin. ▶



AMAZON RIVER DOLPHIN

INIA GEOFFRENSIS

Also known as the pink river dolphin for its distinctive color, these toothed whales live only in fresh water, namely in the rivers and lakes through the Amazon and Orinoco basins. Though current estimated populations are said to be in the tens of thousands, they are becoming increasingly vulnerable due to the polluting of South America's rivers and lakes, the commercial fishing industry (the dolphins become caught in the large nets used), and even the regional aquarium trade—yes, sadly, the story of pink Flipper is being retold in real time in aquariums throughout Brazil and Venezuela. Unlike their saltwater counterparts, Amazon River dolphins tend to be solitary and rarely travel in pods. They do, however, have many traits in common with their peers: They're highly intelligent, employ elaborate courtship rituals, are sexually dimorphic (males are larger than females), communicate through song and whistle, and rely on echolocation to locate prey.

CAPYBARA

HYDROCHOERUS HYDROCHAERIS

It may look like some rare form of a Giant Schnauzer or an alienish, bunny-beaver hybrid on steroids, but the capybara is simply the world's largest rodent. Growing to over 4 feet in length and at least 100 pounds in weight, the capybara thrives in semi-aquatic habitats across South America from the tropical rainforests of Ecuador to the wetlands of Venezuela and the marshes of Uruguay. They are grazing herbivores, feeding mainly off aquatic plants and grasses. Unfortunately for them, they're prized prey for South America's apex predators such as anacondas, caiman, and jaguars. They can sometimes evade these predators—they are surprisingly quick on their feet, swim with agility, and can even hold their breath underwater for up to five minutes as a method of evasion. Even still, their life span is but five years due to natural predation. This highly social species lives in groups ranging from 10 to 100 individuals, depending on the season, with females generally outnumbering males and the group controlled by a dominant male. They mate exclusively in the water, and gestation ranges between four to five months, typically with four pups in a litter.

BROWN-THROATED SLOTH

BRADYPUS VARIEGATUS

There's a reason why "sloth" and "lazy" share the same word in Spanish: *perezoso*. These round-headed, sharp-clawed, enigmatic creatures spend between 15 and 20 hours of the day not just resting but also sleeping. The remainder of their languid day is spent high in the treetops, slowly foraging for leaves, though they will descend to use Mother Nature's ground-level "restroom" about once every eight days. The brown-throated sloth is the most common of Earth's four three-toed sloth species, and a further seven subspecies of brown-throated sloth have been officially classified. Together, they inhabit the rainforests of Honduras down to Brazil. They have acquired their common name thanks to the dark brown fur on their throats, with the rest of their bodies covered in a lighter beige and brown fur that is tinted green from the growth of algae in their hair follicles. Of interest, phylogenetic studies of sloths reveal a significant evolutionary divide between three-toed sloths and their two-toed cousins, placing each in a different scientific family altogether. >



Brown-Throated Sloth



Capybara

Kevin Schaefer/Minden Pictures/Nature in Stock. Opposite: Top, Eim Hogue/Tandem Skills + Motion; bottom, JohannesCompani/Stock.

OCELOT

LEOPARDUS PARDALIS

About twice the size of a house cat, the ocelot is often referred to as a dwarf leopard and happens to be the largest species of the genus *Leopardus*. But looks and nomenclature can be deceiving. Ocelots are altogether classified in a different genus than leopards (which belong to the genus *Panthera*, the same as tiger and lion), and they bear closer relation to other small felids such as kodkods, margays, and Andean mountain cats. These small but mighty wildcats inhabit tropical rainforests, cloud forests, savannas, and even mangrove swamps across the Americas, with a small population as far north as Texas and the highest densities in Peru and Venezuela. Carnivores, they hunt mainly during twilight and nighttime, feeding on small mammals such as rodents, rabbits, crustaceans, and birds. And, unlike other cats, they're not afraid to swim or get wet to capture their prey. They lead solitary lives with limited social interaction, except to mate. Typical litter size is two to four kittens, which will stay with their mothers until approximately 2 years of age.



GOLDEN LION TAMARIN

LEONTOPITHECUS ROSALIA

Averaging a mere pound in weight, this new world monkey, with its distinctive reddish mane, is endemic to the Atlantic coastal forests of southeastern Brazil, a habitat that has been destroyed more than 95 percent in the name of sugar plantations and agriculture. It's no surprise then that golden lion tamarins are classified as endangered with an estimated wild population of 3,500 compared to tens of thousands in the 1940s. Yet, this small number marks a big victory over a previous census as low as 150 back in 1969. In fact, the golden lion tamarin happens to be one of the greatest conservation comeback stories of the last half-century, thanks to efforts led by the National Zoo in Washington, D.C., and the World Wildlife Fund to breed and reintroduce these gregarious monkeys back into their native habitat. The current population of 3,500 is considered stable but confined to three small patches of tropical Brazilian rainforest. Given this habitat fragmentation and continuing threats of habitat loss and the illegal pet trade, captive populations are still bred in zoos to promote genetic diversity and to augment the size of wild populations. ♦

Top: Jürgen & Christine Sohne/FLPA/Nature in Stock; bottom: Ralph Cleverer/Tandem Stills + Motion.

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