

An account from Zoology graduate, Marc Duquette

I joined the BRASS/EI Pilar project because our director, Anabel Ford, needed a zoologist. It seems fitting then that the things I most remember about this place are the animals:

The family of howler monkeys that greeted us during my first visit.

The swarms of stingless bees that seemed to greet us as we walked into Plaza Copal.

The aptly-named ghost anoles, always seeming to appear out of nowhere on the trunks of trees.

The sickle-billed hummingbirds flitting between the heliconias in the Forest Garden.

The lizard-eating snake we found crossing the great causeway.

The playful red-lored parrots, glimpsed high in the trees over the Triple Plazas.

The distant, cackling call of a laughing falcon.

The hanging, wicker-like nest of a kingbird.

The little rainforest toad hiding in the pleats of a fallen palm frond on the Chikin Trail.

The various woodpeckers and jays periodically seen flitting through the branches.

The furrowed wood turtle crossing the road as we drove in one day, not a quarter mile from the park's entrance.

The clusters of hairy caterpillars on trees, ready to spray a cloud of noxious gas if disturbed.

The coatimundi wandering up the side of Alta Vista.

The pin-feathered forms of baby euphonias huddled inside a planter at Tzunu'un.

The scary-looking but harmless tailless whip scorpions hiding in Zotz Na and other archeological tunnels.

The blue-spotted treefrog clinging to a liana on the Kanankax Trail.

The frustration and elation at hearing that a jaguar with cubs was seen.

The porcupine carcass that jaguar left behind, the worry for her and her cubs, and the relief upon hearing this clever jaguar had found a means of hunting porcupines without sticking herself.

The rain-bringing *u*o toad we dug up while re-daubing the house at Tzunu'un.

The indentation left in the soft earth of the Kanankax Trail where a tapir had laid down less than an hour before.

The pepper treefrog waiting by the side of the road as we left.



Belize is a wonderful country. Beautiful forests, high biodiversity, and 40% of the landscape consists of buried archeological sites. These qualities are beautifully embodied by El Pilar. To call this ruin unorthodox would be a massive understatement. Professor Anabel Ford has decided to keep the ruins of El Pilar buried. Now, as an antiquarian, I was initially skeptical about Dr. Ford's 'archeology under the canopy' strategy of excavation. However, I have since come to appreciate the good professor's wisdom; by leaving the monuments covered, the soft limestone is protected from erosion. More than that though, it emphasizes the forest as a garden, a garden tended by the Maya.

Since Stephens and Catherwood 'rediscovered' the Maya ruins in the Yucatan, people have pondered what caused the Maya to abandon their cities. While the issue of the Classic Maya Collapse remains unresolved, much of the recent literature on the subject suggests that the Maya degraded their environment by intensive slash and burn agriculture. Dr. Ford is one of the few experts to contest this hypothesis. Instead, her research indicates that the Maya were horticulturists extraordinaire, employing a form of forest gardening that made use of hundreds of forest plants for food, raw materials, and medicine.

Until the Spanish arrived, the Maya utilized a long-interval form of slash-and-burn agriculture, selecting a few crops to start, slowly letting the forest grow back, weeding, pruning, and harvesting useful products at various points in the forest's regrowth. The animals too were a major component of this garden system, acting as biological controls for pest species, dispersing seeds, and occasionally serving as sources of meat and hides. El Pilar is meant to stand as an example of this forgotten knowledge, as a reminder to the surviving Maya of their true heritage, one far greater than any monument.

Admittedly, the unorthodoxy of Dr. Ford's methods has led to problems. Due to a prolonged absence and miscommunication with the antiquities service, our group arrived to find the site grossly mismanaged. Vulnerable ancient walls were left exposed to the elements, aesthetically pleasing plant life was hacked away, and the house at Tzunu'un was allowed to decay and collapse. It took most of the season for Dr. Ford to finally convince the parks board to run the park her way and repair the damage.

Still, things are looking up. While a painful rash kept me from experiencing this firsthand, an encouraging message came back during my last week in Belize. My teammates had encountered a group of five spider monkeys (who in typical spider monkey fashion proceeded to scream and throw twigs at them for half an hour). To me, this seemed a good omen: spider monkeys had not been seen at El Pilar for many years. Moreover, spider monkeys live in extended family groups of up to fifty individuals, splitting up into groups of 3-5 to forage during the day and all roosting in a single tree at night; what was seen was likely just a small group of a much larger family. To me, this seems a good omen, because it means that the forest is healthy, and displaced wildlife are slowly returning to El Pilar.

If you visit El Pilar, do not come looking for the vestiges of an age of warriors and kings. For now, those things remain safely buried. What is here for all to see is something much simpler, and in many ways grander than the many pyramids of Tikal, the statuesque masterworks of Copan, or the splendid tomb treasures from Palenque. It is the rustle of the leaves in the wind, monkeys and parrots in the treetops, a jaguar print in the mud, a half-glimpsed peccary in the bush. Most beautiful of all, you hear the voice of a people, now reduced to a faint whisper, a voice that says "Man can learn to live *with* nature, if only he will have the patience to listen and learn."

Just pray that Dr. Ford doesn't bring Ixpay to work that day. That dog will scare away *everything*.

Marc Duquette