

A night in the rainforest Jude waxes lyrical

I am sitting at the rainforest edge. It is five o'clock and already dark I can see the stars mounted in a velvet black sky. It rained earlier so they twinkle really brightly. At my feet a myriad tiny stars twinkle back from the long grass, like tiny spots of dew; the eye shine of innumerable spiders. In the bush opposite a group of fireflies are sending morse signals to each other.

Occasionally there is a distant lightning flash as George, prowling the night with a tripod and a powerful camera, takes yet another amazing picture of bugs at night. To my right the darkness is broken by torch beams that strafe the sky, like anti aircraft spotlights did in the second world war, catching bats circling the forest flying high above Daniel Hargreaves's triple high net. These are molossids and I can sometimes hear them without a bat detector.

*The isle is full of noises
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight
and hurt not.*

It is impossible for me to differentiate between the frogs, cicadas, katydids and owls that call into the darkness. The howler monkeys who greet every downpour with cries of misery have fallen quiet now. The boats which chug up and down this river all day; the small boats with a single occupant, the larger ones bearing military personnel (we are on the border between Nicaragua and Costa Rica) and the huge barges that carry everything that the small outposts need up from El Castillo to the far flung communities have fallen silent.

I'm sitting on a concrete step which leads into the Refugio's owner's home, as yet oblivious to the fact

that I am donating blood to the local and unusually silent mosquito population.

Entranced, I have forgotten that we found a coral snake six feet from where I am sitting a couple of days ago. Here there is no room for fear or thought. I am absorbing everything my senses are offered, like a black hole, sucking everything in.

If I were capable of thought I would remember psychologist Maslow's concept of Peak Experiences, (a term used to describe certain ecstatic states, particularly ones tinged with themes of euphoria, harmonization and interconnectedness. Participants characterize these experiences, and the revelations imparted therein, as possessing an ineffably mystical and spiritual (or overtly religious) quality or essence.)

If one word were to form in my head it would probably be "magic". I sigh deeply and drag my attention back to a bunch of dancing lights moving silently out of the corner of my eye. The mist netters are checking the mist nets again. We have yet to catch anything but it really matters not.

This is our last night here and after five days we all have a strong sense of place. Moving quietly like you might in a particularly impressive cathedral, the Spirit of Place is tangible.

We will leave here infused with a feeling of deep calm. Instead of the smell of incense our clothes will carry the smell of sweat. We can only hope the customs officials do not open our cases.

But that is tomorrow and I am absolutely in the here and now.

A shooting star falls languidly to earth. I finally manage a contented sigh. The night has made us all fall silent.

A figure moves languidly towards the net. The call goes up "BAT". More lights move towards the call, faster now, bringing their wearers

with them and the team is soon removing it.

Our ID skills are now such we know that this is not a bat we recognise. We can identify it to family but no further. It is bagged and dispatched to Fiona Reid who is sketching the bats we catch. It takes even her a while to identify it and then she is very excited. This first bat of the night is *Cormura brevirostris*, the chestnut sac-winged bat.



This is our fortieth and final new bat species. It is also a very rare bat and this was the first time that Fiona, who is a leading authority on Central American bats, had ever seen one in the hand.



Without doubt the cutest bat we caught was *Ectophylla alba*, the Honduran white bat. These are very sensitive bats and we were only allowed the briefest of photo opportunities so I was delighted with this picture.