

# EL SALVADOR'S CLOUD FORESTS, QUETZALS, AND RAVENS

By AUSTIN L. RAND  
CURATOR OF BIRDS

CLOUD FOREST occupies the highest peaks and ridge crests in El Salvador. And this cloud forest assumes a strange importance in the minds of biologists here. The extent of these forests is not great, probably only a score or so of square miles all told. Most of them are difficult to reach and they are not typical of the country. Perhaps these very things are their attraction. Compared with most other parts of the country—cornfields, pastures, coffee fincas, and brush—that have a long dusty dry-season, the cloud forest is truly tropical with its lushness and greenness throughout the year.

My son Stanley and I have visited three of the four important cloud forests here. It's an old story to me, of course. I've lived month after month in dripping mist-filled cloud forest that stretched for hundreds of miles in Madagascar and New Guinea. But to Stanley, fresh from temperate climates, these cloud forests fulfilled all his ideas of what a tropical forest, a teeming jungle, should be. The tall trees were heavy with epiphytes and lianas, there was undergrowth galore that made forcing a way through the forest very difficult, and here and there were shrubby glades. When the clouds were not down and the sun shone, the undergrowth was in twilight, even at midday, and the glades sparkled by contrast. As Stanley said, now he knew what Kipling meant when he had the Ethiopian and the leopard look into the forest and say that all they could see was spots and streaks. The patches of light and dark make no patterns at all to an uninitiated eye.

## AN EERIE PRESENCE

How different it is when the clouds are down! And the clouds are usually down, for clouds and not rain give the perennial moisture that makes cloud forests possible. Then the clouds swirl through the glades, through the trees, and finally into the under-

growth. And they seem more than clouds. The forest is filled with a semisolid, slithering something that is moving, flowing back and forth through it. It gives an eerie, lost-world feeling of a living presence everywhere about you. It's really dark in the forest then. And even though not rainy, it's wet. The moisture condenses on the leaves, the moss is saturated, and everything is dripping.

It was *Mira-mundo*, "the lookout over the world," where we first visited the cloud

magnificent moonrise over banks of mist and clouds, and valleys far below.

Next morning we started on the wary little mules. Again I admired the sure-footed strength of the little beast that carried my 250 pounds up these steep trails. Hard by the cattle station was an enormous eucalyptus tree, at least five feet in diameter. Of course we'd been told that El Salvador was an old country, that the Hacienda San José where we got the mules was more than 200 years old. And the old



HUMID UPPER TROPICAL ZONE VEGETATION ON LOS ESESMILES

forest. It took us three hours by jeep and a six-hour climb by mule beyond a hard road to reach these few square miles of cloud forest. The jeep was faster than the mules, but the mules were more comfortable. We spent the first night in the bunkhouse of a cattle station, in an atmosphere that recalled a ski hut in the Alps: the chill (for it's chilly at 5,000 feet in the mountains in the tropics, and the damp drives the chill in), the lantern light, the bare interior of the building, the wind whistling outside, a

coffee plantations and cleared fields told the same story. But this old giant of a blue-gum tree, an import from Australia in one of the most inaccessible parts of El Salvador, drove the fact home to me in a way that nothing else had done.

We climbed over grass and shrub slopes. Ahead we saw the tapestry of the forest canopy. The colors were green-olive, brown-olive, gray-olive, and rust-color, with many a dark blotch where a gap in the canopy let us look into the shrubbery beneath. Almost completely lacking were the vivid greens and yellow-greens that even in the dry country we'd left below were common along the waterless water courses.

## LIKE A TUNNEL

At an entrance like a tunnel the trail went into the forest. Across the top of the entrance a lilac-flowered shrub had flung a branch. Then we were in a world of shadows and dull green, the inside of the cloud forest. A friendly proprietary, the Freund Company of San Salvador, had placed a house in a clearing in the forest at our disposal. This was very near the point where the boundaries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras meet. The caretaker, who was there with his wife, child,

## 'MONTH OF CHILDREN'—

(Continued from page 2)

of children on the second floor who had just run up the stairs for the pure joy of riding down again, making this vicious circle over and over. Patient John philosophizes, "Anything moving is the greatest attraction for children."

Finally, the teacher called a halt to the visit, and all prepared for an exit, which, of course, was past the book and souvenir shop. Here the teacher was forced to give "only five minutes now" to choose some little memento. So the two Book Shop attendants stood their ground as the horde of 35 to 40 youngsters attacked. Speed,

dexterity, patience, and fortitude were required by the two young women, but they report that the situation was relieved somewhat by the fact that most of the children were attracted by the same item—the mystifying magnetic mummy, King Tut, selling for 50 cents. This fascinating fellow plus the souvenir rings, the chenille fuzzy pins, and the glass figures helped to double the sales in the month of May.

In closing may we make this suggestion to teachers: Why be like everyone else? The average teacher usually plans her class visit to the Museum in spring. To avoid crowded halls and crowded schedules, bring your students in January or February!



mule, cow, and dog, looked after us for our few days' stay.

It was the dry season, and so part of each day was fine. But mornings and evenings the clouds extended over from the Atlantic slopes to drench the forest and then were dissipated in the hot dry air that covers most of El Salvador. Ravens, of the same species that range over the northern parts of the Old and New World, came croaking about the clearing, especially when the mists were dense. Now, as well as associating these birds with the Tower of London (where they used to, and perhaps still do, keep a pair), with Poe's "Nevermore," and with spruce forests, I'll always associate them with mist in a tropical cloud forest.

#### THE QUETZALS APPEAR

The quetzal is of course the most famous of the cloud-forest birds. Nearly as large as a crow, with plumes almost a yard long, back and plumes glittering green and vivid pink below, the male is a magnificent bird. It is recorded as a shy bird, shunning man and his clearings. I hardly dared hope to see one. But before breakfast I was out walking the trail in the half light of dawn. The forest was drenched, but the mists were rolling back, and the rising sun was just touching the tops of the tallest trees. Ahead of me I heard a half whistle, half hoot, and in a moment two quetzals came flying to perch in a tree directly overhead. One, the male, had long flowing plumes. The other was presumably its mate. Though they were in plain sight, I could see little color in the shadowy morning light. Then, as if for my benefit, the male made a circular dancing flight up into the sunlight. Its iridescent green back gleamed, its vivid red flanks and belly glowed, and its undulating plumes—nearly three feet long—added grace to its movements. This view of the quetzals was one of the grandest pieces of good luck I've ever had. To have even glimpsed them would have satisfied me. Here I had one practically perform for me.

But birds generally were hard to find in the forests, as I've found usual in such mountain forests. There were only a few exceptions. Along the trails were two species of tiny hummingbirds that continually startled me by buzzing in my ears, and when I turned to look they would be somewhere else. One was slaty below, with white head markings, and always seemed to be chasing another one. The other was glittering green above, with a metallic violet gorget that had elongated corners. They seemed to "own" certain glades, perched there, squeaked, and sipped at inconspicuous flowers in the shrubbery. A little tan-breasted flycatcher was another species that defied what seemed to be the almost universal rule of cloud-forest birds. It neither skulked in the shrubbery nor dashed away after a glimpse of me. If not the most common, it certainly was the most con-

spicuous bird. It sat up on dead twigs on the outer edges of the treetops, and from there made rapid rallies, in typical flycatcher fashion, for insects.

#### VISITORS FROM THE NORTH

This is my first trip to the American tropics, and I was thrilled to see two species representing American families I'd never seen before. One was one of the wood-hewers, birds that, like gigantic brown creepers, spiral up tree trunks. The other was one of the toucans, a jay-sized green bird with an immense bill that gives it a head-heavy appearance, like a hornbill, that came into the quetzals' tree just after they left it. Then there were old friends spending the winter here while their summer home was in the grip of an Arctic winter: a yellow-bellied sapsucker from the northern spruce-aspen forests that looked out of place, going from bare place to bare place on the tree trunks, avoiding the epiphytes; and a yellow, black-capped Wilson's warbler that gleamed through the shrubbery, apparently as much at home as in the dwarf bushes of the Mackenzie Mountains.

This *Mira-mundo* forest and a few square miles of forest on another hill to the east along the Honduras border called Los Esesmites are the only places where the Central American backbone of mountains with its cloud forests spills over into extreme northern Salvador. Originally there was probably much cloud forest on the central range of volcanoes (Santa Ana, San Salvador, San Miguel, and San Vincent) and perhaps on the coastal Balsam range, but most of it has gone into coffee or bush, and now what's left is a few square miles on Santa Ana, its subsidiary cones, and perhaps a square mile on San Salvador.

We visited the Santa Ana area on one of the smaller peaks locally known as Frog Mountain. We went all the way by jeep, up through the coffee and red dust, the grass, and shrubbery, into the old crater. Inside the crater is what is called Frog Lake. Perhaps in the wet season it may be a lake swarming with frogs, but it was a grassy meadow grazed by cows when we saw it. Around it, on the inside of the rim, was light, rather dry cloud forest.

A one-day trip to a cloud forest is the act of an optimist. We snatched things here and there. Every different place you visit seems to have a few things different, no matter how similar the places appear, and this forest, though poor and scrawny, was no exception. We found cloud-forest species new to us. Robins, like our bird in size and shape but dusky and with a chestnut collar, sang loudly in the trees. A little cloud-forest warbler with a brown breast mark gleamed through the branches and twigs. And strangely, white-winged doves, the same species as we have in the southern United States, cooed from the forest edge where they were apparently nesting.

When we visited the Volcano of San Salvador we had to leave the jeep at San José on the shoulder of the mountain and get a local guide to show us where the trail started for the two-hour climb on foot. It always amazes me how mountain people disregard the slope of mountains. They travel in spurts at a fast walk, or even a run, with rests here and there. And they keep up their rapid pace for distances that have a lowlander gasping in amazement as well as from lack of breath. They climb with as little apparent effort as a plainsman walks on the level. Our guide was like this. But there's a corollary to the endurance of mountain people, as we found in New Guinea. Mountain people when they get on the level have no more endurance than plains people in the hills.

The forest patch on the summit of San Salvador, the volcano that overlooks the capital and gives it its name, is fine and tall, but it is much dryer and has fewer epiphytes than the other forests. Here jays, of a species blue with a black head, gathered in bands, calling in the tree tops. They were the only conspicuous forest birds on our trip. Even more interesting to us was the country just below the forest and above the coffee. Here were planted flower gardens—not the vivid blooms of the tropics but familiar northern things: fields of roses, geraniums, daisies, pinks, carnations, and the like. At this high altitude they thrive and are gathered to be sold in the cities.

Here we found several birds new to us. The most important perhaps was a dingy little flycatcher that only an expert's eye would recognize as the second record for El Salvador. The most spectacular, however, was a mocking-bird with deep blue upper parts, white under parts, and a lovely rich song.

#### SUMMER LECTURE TOURS GIVEN TWICE A DAY

During July and August, conducted tours of the exhibits, under the guidance of staff lecturers, will be given on a special schedule:

**Mondays:** 11 A.M.—The World of Animals (general survey of the animal exhibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

**Tuesdays:** 11 A.M.—Places and People (general survey of the anthropology exhibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

**Wednesdays:** 11 A.M.—Green Magic (general survey of the plant exhibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

**Thursdays:** 11 A.M. and 2 P.M.—General Tours

**Fridays:** 11 A.M.—Secrets in Stones (general survey of the geology exhibits); 2 P.M.—General Tour

There are no tours on Saturdays and Sundays, or on Wednesday, July 4.





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