

*Strange as it may seem, to study Peruvian vegetation a scientist normally visits the Field Museum first before traveling to Peru. Why? Because over a period of more than 40 years, Field Museum has developed its collection of Peruvian flora into the world's best and most complete source of information for anyone interested in the botany of Peru.*

*Today, the Museum continues its interest in Peruvian flora through the work of Dr. Donald R. Simpson, Assistant Curator of Peruvian Botany, and his field assistant Sr. Jose Schunke. With support from a National Science Foundation grant, Dr. Simpson is helping the Peruvian Forest Service gather information on forest resources in the westernmost region of the Amazonian jungle of Eastern Peru. What follows is a description of his trip inland and the start of his expedition.*

## flight across the Andes

by Donald R. Simpson

Assistant Curator in Botany

LEAVING Lima the two-motor DC-3 heads out to sea, in the opposite direction from our destination, a town located beyond the Andes Mountains in the Amazon Basin. Just out from land, over the Pacific Ocean, the plane begins a slow spiral climb, a necessary prelude to crossing the mountains. The westernmost ridges of the Andes rise so abruptly from the narrow Pacific Coast desert that there is not enough room over the land to gain altitude for crossing the mountains. Finally we reach the desired elevation and leave the ocean behind.

As the plane heads inland, one can see that the brown, bare mountainsides become tinged with green as we proceed eastward. Now a scrub vegetation appears, where at lower elevation there was only sand, dust, and rock, and a little higher there are small terraced fields surrounding tile-roofed villages. There is enough rain at this altitude to make possible some agriculture. Higher still it is too cold for crops, the fields are replaced by vast stretches of barren grasslands and rock fells, with here and there a sheep corral and adjacent shepherd's hut, both built of crude stone.

Above this cold, barren highland rise the great jagged snow-covered peaks. This part of the Andes, called the Cordillera Blanca or White Mountains, includes Peru's highest peak (22,205 ft.). They present a dramatically exciting panorama whether seen from the air or from the adjacent Huallas Valley (pronounced Wi-yas). This highland is often partly hidden from view by big, fleecy, white clouds that are pushed up from the humid Amazon Basin. As the plane makes its way through these clouds, every few seconds there is an opening on one side or another through which is revealed breathtaking scenes of enormous jagged peaks with sides covered by snowfields and glaciers.

Something else is breathtaking, literally so. You first notice it when you reach about fifteen thousand feet altitude. The cabin is pressurized, partially, but a light-headed sensation tells you something is amiss. The stewardess comes by explaining that we are to take one of the thin rubber tubes connected to wall nozzles beneath the window and breathe the oxygen being supplied through it.

Crude though it sounds, it is effective and when, after putting the oxygen tube down to take photos for a couple of minutes, the feeling of light-headedness returns, one has to take time out again for a few breaths of oxygen.

As we cross the highest ranges and continue eastward the land below changes rapidly from the high, barren mountainsides to mountain valleys with bright green irrigated fields. Beyond, lower mountain ridges show more green as patches of woodland appear in moist swales and canyons. A little further and the trees cover most of the hillside; the transition from grassland to forest is almost abrupt.

Now we are over the great "selva" itself, that almost unbroken tropical rain-forest that starts here on the rolling eastern foothills of the Andes and flows away to the Atlantic coast of Brazil nearly two thousand miles away. "Selva" is the Spanish word for any forest or jungle, but in Peru there is another term, "La montana" that one commonly hears in conversations about the "selva." "Montana" is Spanish for mountain and has that meaning in most of Latin America, but in Peru it means the forest region of the flat, eastern lowland part of the country.

The forest-covered foothills soon give way to a vast flat plain, where dense jungle extends as far as one can see. The forest covering seems to be broken only by occasional meandering rivers and streams. Soon one can see that we are approaching a very broad river and near its margins a number of oxbow lakes. This is the Ucayali, one of the main Peruvian tributaries of the Amazon.

The plane has been descending slowly since passing the crest of the mountains, and as we approach the river we are only a few hundred feet above the tree tops. The air in the cabin has become warm and humid; we are aware now that clothing appropriate for Lima will not do here. Our destination is Pucallpa, a fast growing frontier town and river port on the banks of the Ucayali River.

As the plane approaches the runway it passes low over one of the oxbow lakes, then a strip of cut-over forest, and finally the cleared ground of the airfield. We get a fleeting look at palm trees seen from directly overhead, a beautiful pattern that one remembers long after. Now the plane, on the ground, rolls to a halt near the newly-built, one-room terminal and the doors are opened. Immediately the air becomes still warmer and the humidity must be near one hundred percent. This is our introduction to "La montana." ■



*Above the cold, barren highland rises the snow-covered Cordillera Blanca.*





Simpson, Donald Ray. 1970. "Flight Across the Andes." *Bulletin* 41(4), 13-13.

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