A trumpeter's tale

Pale-winged trumpeters behave like monkeys but sound like raspberry-blowing schoolchildren. **Joseph Tobias** infiltrated a flock of these peculiar Peruvian natives and was swept up on a journey of jungle discovery. Words and photos by Joseph Tobias

Midnight in the rainforest: no moon and barely a gleam of light. I listened carefully to the whine of mosquitoes, the bleep of tree frogs and the croak of crested owls. I had been kneeling awkwardly for hours, constantly changing position, unable to see my ownw hands.

And it wasn't just for fun. I was waiting for the night chorus of the pale-winged trumpeter, an eccentric bird I'd travelled thousands of miles to study with fellow biologist Nathalie Seddon here at Cocha Cashu Biological Station, Manu National Park, Peru. This was a bird whose breeding biology was highly unusual, whose communication system was controversial, and whose foraging and territorial behaviour was abnormal. It was revered as a mascot and talisman by Amazonian tribes, and we had come to Cocha Cashu to decipher its mysteries.

The problem was that we hadn't found one yet. Though trumpeters are diurnal, terrestrial, group-living birds, they are hard to find during the day. The quickest way to track them down – so we were told – was by listening for their strange serenade, a ventriloquial hubbub given only at night.

This had all seemed perfectly reasonable at the outset but now, hounded by thoughts of a cosy sleeping bag and haunted by rustlings nearby (jaguars, no doubt), I began to think it wasn't such a clever strategy after all.

Finally, after two seemingly interminable nights, a vibrato call rose in the distance. It took a moment before I realised what it was. Trumpeters – at last! I switched on the torch (glimpsing the rat I'd thought was a jaguar), then sprinted through the undergrowth, adrenaline pumping, desperately trying to pinpoint the song's source before it ended.

On this occasion, the call lasted long enough. We had found, if not the trumpeters themselves, at least the tree in which they were roosting. The trick now was to mark a path to this tree, then return before dawn the next day. This we did, and six trumpeters duly fluttered to the ground, which was good. Then they saw us and ran away fast, which was bad.

Trumpeters are plump, tasty birds, much prized by hunters throughout Amazonia and nervous as a result. It took a while for us to earn their trust, after which we followed them everywhere, from first light to last, so we could find them again the following dawn. Unfortunately, this amounted to a daily 12-hour assault course in a sauna. The trumpeters thought nothing of flying across muddy creeks, making us follow on foot. They took great pleasure in detouring through swamps and tangled tree-falls, leaving us cursing, netted in cobwebs and besieged by ants. It was a gruelling task at times, but offered a keyhole through which to glimpse the ways of the forest. And there was something touching about being adopted by a tribe of beautiful birds who soon, we were convinced, waited for us when we lagged too far behind.

The pale-winged trumpeter belongs to the Gruiform order of birds, which contains cranes, bustards, coots, crakes and rails.

Then a vibrato call rose in the distance. It took a moment before I realised what it was. Trumpeters!

They were gentle creatures, often comical, at times hilarious. But mostly they were quirky.

Quirk number 1: food. Fallen fruit is standard fare for trumpeters, and they eat it in enormous quantities. At Cocha Cashu, you can locate big fruiting trees by listening for the shrieking of monkeys that gather, sometimes in their hundreds, in towering canopies full of figs. Primates perform a useful service for trumpeters, showering discarded fruit as they forage. If you wait long enough, a group of trumpeters will eventually drop by to scavenge scraps from beneath the canopy table.

Trumpeters have another favoured food: snakes. They love snakes. They even have a special call that means: "Snake!" If they find one, the group will gather round, dragging, pecking and mauling it. On one occasion, I observed one of the trumpeters stumble off ▶

Where man-made trails or narrow roads are available in the rainforest, trumpeters habitually follow them in single file for up to 100m. The birds travel long distances between specific fruiting trees (the territory of this group was 70 hectares), and the paths probably help them reach their destination more rapidly.

There are three species of trumpeter – the pale-winged (*above*), the grey-winged and the dark winged. All live in South America.

Nothing excites trumpeters more than a snake – here one individual begins a tug of war with a tree.

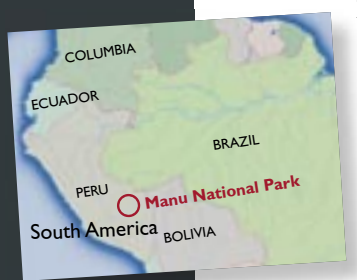
A trumpeter manages to keep a small snake to itself, avoiding conflict with other members of the group.

Manu National Park

The biological diversity in Manu National Park is staggering. The bird list alone exceeds 1,000 species, the longest for any protected area in the world and we encountered many other fabulous creatures including ocelots, anteaters and sloths.

Cocha Cashu Biological Station was set up to study this diversity and is located on the shores of a remote ox-bow lake. By the time of our visit, there had been no hunting for 30 years and so large animals were common. Monkeys were everywhere; peccaries, too. Scores of these black odiferous pigs would squeal past, clacking their stubby tusks in alarm. The predator that spooked them would remain eerily invisible.

Facilities were modest. We lived in a mouldy tent and bathing was only possible from a bucket of water drawn from the lake at night when the biting flies had abated. It would have been lovely to swim, but tales of piranhas put us off, as did the glow of crocodilian eyes in the torchlight. Set against these hardships were the intoxicating beauty and complexity of the forest, the isolation and the company of the trumpeters.



with a snake, try to swallow it, then trip over it like a newborn elephant standing on its trunk. The others quickly caught up and yanked the serpent from the thief's gullet. One claimed the prize, escaped the ruckus and the process was repeated. The birds spent the next hour trapped in this cycle, engaging in tugs of war until the snake snapped. And then they left it, mangled and barely eaten.

Quirk number 2: sex. Trumpeters are one of very few animals that have chosen the path of co-operative polyandry. In other words, one dominant female mates with a group of males, each of whom helps rear the offspring. Our tamest group of six trumpeters consisted of four quarrelsome males, one smug-looking female and a gooseberry – either a juvenile male or a subordinate female.

Quirk number 3: entertainment. Research suggests that gulls and crows 'play' with food and other objects, but biologists find it hard to believe that birds do anything just for fun. There must be benefits, such as honing hunting skills or aiding communication. Every now and then, the trumpeters indulged in inexplicable behaviour. They juggled with dead leaves and twigs. They chased each other in wide arcs, scrapped, danced about and performed somersaults. Presumably this had a role in shuffling hierarchies, but it looked suspiciously like fun.

Quirk number 4: communication. The night chorus of the pale-winged trumpeter is neither beautiful nor trumpet-like. It sounds more like a cast of cartoon characters breaking wind. Indeed, tribesmen told early explorers that these birds sang through their backsides. Hearing the noise, the explorers believed them. Back in 1758, Linnaeus named the trumpeter genus *Psophia*, from the Greek *psophus*, meaning inarticulate. Even in the 20th century, naturalists asserted that the birds' booming call was made by the anus and not the beak. Despite these colourful claims, alas, trumpeters sing through a syrinx, just like other birds.

The night chorus of the pale-winged trumpeter sounds like cartoon characters breaking wind.

The night chorus, we found, was one of 12 distinct stereotypic calls. The calls signified

Two members of the group sunbathe. This may help drive out small parasites from their feathers.

different types of predator, different sources of food and so on. One querulous mew meant: "I'm lost. Where are you?" This was always answered by another unique call – a sharp grunt, which meant: "Over here." This context specification is unusual in birds, and presumably arises from the fact that a lone trumpeter is a dead trumpeter in a forest packed with predators. As for the myriad of squeaks, chirps and hums, who knows what information they contain. In its complexity, this repertoire rivals that of many lower primates. Inarticulate they are not.

Moreover, communication is not always vocal. During social interactions, subordinates stooped beside dominant birds as they stood flicking their wings imperiously. Such posturing was often interspersed with allopreening – one bird neatening the feathers of its neighbour. Allopreening is related to hygiene, comfort, maintenance of plumage and bonds, and is perhaps a dominance interaction in itself. A chin or nape is nibbled in a seemingly affectionate manner. The recipient falls into a heavy-lidded trance, which looks very much like rapture.

During bouts of preening, individuals often pluck horseflies and mosquitoes from each other's backs. This helped explain a story we'd heard (and at first disbelieved) about trumpeters being valued as pets by tribespeople because they picked biting insects off sleeping babies. This behaviour stems from an instinctive curiosity and a nose for snacks. Trumpeters also make excellent security alarms, launching a volley of harsh cries at the slightest disturbance. Because of these qualities, trumpeters are popular in Amazonian menageries. Cantankerous in company, they usually rule the village roost, dominating other domesticated birds, such as curassows, guans, chickens and chachalacas.

Turf war

The trumpeters' aggression manifested itself in strained neighbourly relations. In all, we witnessed three territorial battles between our group and the group next door. When these rival factions met in the undergrowth, they threw themselves into a bickering scrap. Confused skirmishes broke out, disintegrating into beak-to-beak combat. Only when the neighbours noticed an attendant biologist nearby did the altercations die down. The newcomers – not yet habituated to people – sounded the alarm and beat a retreat, leaving our birds to strike triumphant poses, convinced they had won a fair fight.

Trumpeters are not like ordinary birds. Something about their manner and trust is oddly endearing. The structure of their society is fascinating and bizarre. They live in permanent troupes and survive on a diet of fruit topped up with snakes. They communicate through complex signals, they fight as a unit and they play. They are, in fact, honorary primates. All the more tragic, then, that they are so ruthlessly hunted in forests so rashly destroyed.

Towards the end of our study, the trumpeters began to check potential nest holes every day. Mating was frequent, egg-laying imminent. It was a difficult time to leave. For one last morning we followed the birds through the dappled fabric of the forest. And when our time was up, we raised a hand, half in jest, half in fond farewell. The trumpeters sauntered off into the shrubbery without so much as a backward glance. I was reminded, not for the first time, of Zen monks in simple robes strolling sedately through their garden. After the forest had reclaimed them, we loaded a canoe and motored down the Manu River, watching jaguars patrolling the banks, bracing ourselves for civilisation.

Dr Joseph Tobias is a freelance writer, photographer and environmental consultant with a passion for South American wilderness and wildlife. He is writing a field guide to the birds of Bolivia and is setting up a forest reserve in the Andean foothills.