

# **GUYANA- THE MYSTERIOUS LAND OF GIANTS**

**By Dmitri Allicock**



**Guyana national flower- Victoria Regia {Amazonica} largest lily in the world**

Of all the animals on the planet, the largest seems to intrigue us the most. How do giraffes' long legs and necks help them find food? Can butterflies grow bigger than some bird? Is it true that some snakes grow as long as 40 feet? The last days of the colossal land mammals were millions of years ago and no land animals today reach such a size. The largest mammal on Earth is also the largest animal to ever live on land or in the ocean, dwarfing even the largest Dinosaur, and is the living fossil called the Blue Whale. Measuring more than 110 feet and weighing 200,000 lbs this magnificent animal is still mostly a mystery to science. It has a heart the size of a car, its tongue weighs as much as an elephant and a Blue Whale fluke or tail fins equals the wingspan of a small aircraft. The mysterious deep uncharted mist- shrouded rainforest of Guyana is home to the lost world of many fascinating giants and secrets of our time- some yet to be discovered.

Located next to the equator and nestled in the northeastern shoulder of South America, Guyana enjoys a privilege location where nature can be appreciated at its purest. This only English speaking county of South America is home to one of the largest unspoiled rainforests on earth, with plants and animals unknown to science and untouched by humans. Guyana 83.000 square miles lies where the Guiana Shield, one of the world's four remaining large tracts of relatively undisturbed tropical rainforest, and oldest land surface in South America meets the Amazon Basin in a breathtaking collision of nature.

Framed by Venezuela, Brazil, Suriname and the Atlantic Ocean, Guyana is a paradise for nature lovers. With verdant rainforest carpeting 80 percent of the country, and other habitats varying from exotic mangroves to wild coastal swamps, rugged Atlantic beaches, lofty mountain ranges and sprawling savannahs that conjure comparisons to eastern Africa's Serengeti or Masai Mara, Guyana offers the chance to view remarkable wildlife against the backdrop of one of the world's most unspoiled natural wilderness areas. This natural paradise has attracted many world famous animal and nature conservationists including the latest Jeff Corwin, best known as host and executive producer of the Animal Planet cable channel television programs, *the Jeff Corwin Experience* and *Corwin's quest*.

This sparsely populated lost world holds fascinating secrets and ecosystems which play host to a remarkable diversity of flora and fauna, including healthy populations of many species that are listed as threatened or endangered. Many giants call this pristine land their home and enjoy to the fullest, the rhythm of life in their natural undisturbed world.



**Jaguar {Panthera Onca}**

The **Jaguar** {*Panthera onca*} of Guyana is the king of the Amazonian jungle and is the emblematic animal of South America. Of all the big cats, the jaguar remains the least studied. While some information comes from the wild, most of what is known about jaguars has been learned from captive animals. The Jaguar is the largest cat in the Americas and ranges from the southwestern US to Argentina. It is the handsomest of all the great cats, taller and stouter than a leopard with a shorter tail. There is much color variation in jaguars, but in general, they are a tawny golden color on the back and sides with a white underbelly, and are spotted with black rosettes all over.

The 'black jaguar' is one such specific color variation and its rosettes are visible at certain angles; black jaguars occur rarely in all populations. Jaguars vary in size, with adults generally weighing between 200-250 pounds and measuring approximately 8 feet from nose to tail.

They are top predators in the forest and savannahs and are excellent swimmers. They are stocky and strong, and stalk their prey rather than chase it. They will hunt at any time of the day or night, using their powerful jaws and teeth to pierce the skull of their prey, a technique unique to jaguars and very useful for cracking the shells of turtles, one of their favorite prey. Other prey includes capybara, deer, monkeys, and fish. In areas where humans live, jaguars will also prey on domestic animals such as dogs and cattle.

Jaguars are secretive, but like many wild cats, they take advantage of man-made trails and roads in the forest, so, sometimes, lucky travelers can see jaguars when driving through some of the bush trails of the rainforest. The jaguar is Guyana's national animal and two can be found proudly sitting within Guyana's coat of arms. Jaguars are common but are only killed when they become a nuisance by destroying cattle. They are very bold and will come quite near into town in search of prey.



**Anaconda {Eunectes Murinus} called Camoudie in Guyana**

Guyana famous for its numerous waterways is home of the great snake. The huge **anacondas** reach their greatest bulk in the moist forest of the interior but large ones are also found frequently on the coast. It has been reported that anacondas have been seen and killed in Guyana that were more than thirty feet in length. In Spanish, the name Anaconda, means "*bull killer*." It is the largest mammalian predator in the world and is on the top of the food chain in many South American countries. They can eat an adult cow, a small crocodile and even a human. They are the only predator that can attack and kill a jaguar.

Often confused with the python, anacondas and pythons belong to two different families of snake. Anacondas belong to the boa family and are found in South America and the Amazon basin. A python belongs to the family Pythonidae. It prowls the thick and dense forest of South Asia, South East Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Anaconda is the heaviest and the biggest snake in the world. On the other hand, the python is no doubt the longest snake in the world. There are two kinds of anaconda, yellow and green anacondas, with the yellow being the smaller. The yellow anaconda lives primarily in southern South America, reaching lengths of about only 10 to 13 feet (3 to 4m). An anaconda can weigh as much as 550 pounds or more and can grow up to 25 feet. Yet, many tales have survived in Guyana of much larger snakes killed, some measuring up to 40 feet. In contrast, the python can grow as long as 33 feet or more. However, a 20-foot anaconda will outweigh a much longer python.

Called camouidie in Guyana this non- venomous snake prefers to be undisturbed. It comes in contact with humans when hunting prey such as domesticated chickens and ducks when it is usually killed. Most myths and legends of great snakes have its genesis in the unwarranted fear of this creature. Reports of attack of humans are rare and some varieties of the species are even kept as pets. Needless to say, they should only be kept by very experienced large snakehandlers since this snake is a wild, meat- eating animal.

Anacondas live near rivers, lakes and swamps and like to live alone. Water is their main escape method when confronted with danger. Rather than attacking they will choose to slide into the water unnoticed if possible. Anacondas eat amphibious animals like frogs, toads as well as fish, caimans, birds, ducks and turtles.

Anacondas are very difficult for scientists to study or even find. They are really quiet and leave no trail. They spend a lot of their time in the dark waters of their habitat. What is known as the common anaconda inhabits the rivers of northern and Amazonian South America, east of the Andes. Anacondas don't lay eggs as many other snakes do, instead give birth to live young, around 24 to 35 at a time.

While the anaconda is also known as the "water boa," it spends a great deal of its time basking in the sun. Here, outside of the water, it is considered less dangerous, with its weight not being as well supported (for larger specimens). Still, inside or outside of water, they will hunt, though not necessarily in the sense of pursuing their prey. Anacondas are opportunistic hunters, like the crocodile, and typically will wait for their prey to come to them. That's not to say one won't slowly advance towards you if interested, but they rather prefer the surprise attack, being content to wait patiently close by. Simply put, anacondas are ambush experts.



**Otter of Guyana {*Lontra felina*}**

This Guyana and South American **Otter** or “*Water Dog* “ is the world's largest, at some 6 feet (1.8 meters) long. It lives in the remote rivers and creeks of the Jungle.

These huge members of the weasel family swim by propelling themselves with their powerful tails and flexing their long bodies. They also have webbed feet, water-repellent fur to keep them dry and warm, and nostrils and ears that close in the water.

Fish make up most of the giant river otter's diet. They hunt alone or in groups, sometimes using coordinated efforts, and must be successful often to meet their daily intake quota. Each animal may eat six to nine pounds (three to four kilograms) of food per day. Fish are supplemented by crustaceans, snakes, and other river creatures.

Giant river otters live in family groups that include monogamous parents and offspring from several breeding seasons. They den by burrowing into banks or under fallen logs, and establish a home territory that they will aggressively defend.

Like most other otter species, giant river otters come ashore to give birth. Females retreat to their underground dens and deliver litters of one to six young. Young otters remain in the den for a month but grow up quickly. After nine or ten months, it is difficult to tell mother from child.

Giant river otters have been hunted extensively and are now among the rarest otters in the world—only a few thousand are believed to survive in the wild. Famous animal and nature conservationist *Diane McTurk* has devoted her life to saving Guyana’s and the Amazon’s endangered giant river otters.

For the past 40 years her Karanambu Ranch, wilderness preserve and eco-lodge located north of Guyana's Rupununi Savannas, has been devoted in the care, rehabilitation of orphans and protection of these playful giants. Getting there requires either flying or driving overnight from Georgetown then a few hours by boat.



**The Harpy Eagle {*Harpia harpyja*} Guyana's largest bird of prey**

With a name that derives from the ferocious half -woman, half -vulture creatures of Greek mythology, the **Harpy Eagle** is Guyana's and South America's largest and one of the largest and most powerful birds of prey in the world. The prehistoric sharp, shrill alarming screech of the Harpy Eagle triggers the imagination of the natural world and lost Jurassic wonders.

The Harpy Eagle is often called the "Flying Wolf". It has slate-black feathers above and a white/light grey underside, with a black band across the chest. An unusual double crest of grey head feathers - raised when the bird is alerted or angry - adds to its formidable appearance. A facial disk of feathers, similar to that of an owl, helps focus sound waves and provides for enhanced hearing capabilities.

As with many birds of prey, the female Harpy can be nearly twice as large as the male: up to one meter (3.3 feet) in height and nine kilos (20 pounds) in weight, with a wingspan of up to 2.5 meters (8.2 feet). Compared to other eagles its wings are relatively short, a design which allows for superior speed and maneuverability while navigating the thick foliage of the rainforest.



Harpy talons can grow as long as five inches, and are longer than the claws of a brown bear. They protrude from yellow feet as large as a human hand.

Harpy Eagles are found in tropical lowland forests from southeastern Mexico through Central and South America to Paraguay and northern Argentina. However, due to extensive deforestation, severe habitat fragmentation throughout its range, and human predation (usually to defend domestic animals), the bird is now an endangered species. It is listed as "Near Threatened" by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) and appears on the "Red List" of threatened species

maintained by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN). Guyana, with its vast stretches of undisturbed rainforest, has one of the healthiest populations of Harpy Eagles and one of the few places left where a sustainable population can be found.

They can most often be seen in the Rupununi region. In recent months they have been spotted by birders in far ranging parts of Guyana: in the Iwokrama International Centre for Rainforest Conservation deep in the interior and Development and near Shank lands Rainforest Resort near the coast. Active nests also are reported in the Central and South Rupununi regions. Harpy Eagles are monogamous, mating for life. Their nests, built loosely of sticks and fresh leaves, are usually located in the fork of trees that tower above the main canopy, often as high as 30 to 40 meters (100 to 130 feet). In Guyana, Harpy Eagles favor ceiba and kapok trees.

The birds generally produce two eggs but raise only one chick, neglecting the second egg after the first hatches. Both parents care for the chick, providing food for up to ten months but raising only one bird every two to three years.

Harpy Eagles are formidable hunters with a similarly menacing reputation. Monkeys, sloths, iguanas, possums and smaller birds, as well as other medium- and large-sized animals that inhabit the surrounding trees, are all counted among the bird's prey. Harpies are daytime hunters, able to reach speeds of up to 80 kph (50 mph) and carry prey weighing up to half their own body weight. Guyana is home to over 50 species of birds of preys or raptors including hawks, falcons, eagles, kites, caracaras and ospreys.



**The Arapaima {*Arapaima gigas*}**

The **Arapaima** also called pirarucu or paiche is a living fossil and one of the largest freshwater fish in the world which rivals the beluga sturgeon of Russia, growing up to 15 feet and weighing 440 pounds. It can be found in the Essequibo region and Rupununi Rivers as well as the Amazon River Basin.

An aggressive hunter, the arapaima is a predatory fish which prowls floodplain lakes, gulping fishes, insects. It is known to leap out of the water like *the ballet grand allegro*, grabbing small birds from the overhanging trees. For the arapaima, low-water or the dry season is a time of gorging and building fat reserves that will nourish it during the floods of the rainy seasons, when prey are dispersed through the forest and difficult to find.

Many fishes have trouble surviving as lakes' temperatures rise and dissolved-oxygen levels fall, but the arapaima thrives because it breathes atmospheric oxygen through its mouth.

The Arapaima is grey and decorated with an orange speckling at the posterior end. The scales can grow up to six centimeters long on the largest Arapaima specimens. You will find two symmetrical fins on the body, located at the posterior end.

The Amazon's seasonal floods have become part of the arapaima's reproductive cycle. During low-water months (February to April) arapaimas construct bottom nests and females lay eggs. Young begin to hatch as rising water levels provide them with flood conditions in which to flourish. Adult males play an unusual reproductive role by incubating tens of thousands of eggs in their mouths, guarding them aggressively and moving them when necessary.

Historically, the arapaima has been hunted throughout its Amazon basin range for its scales and tongue, which are used for tools, and for its tasty flesh. More than 50 percent of the total body weight of this fish is made up of boneless meat, a fact which makes it even more popular as food. The bony tongue is used to prepare cylinders of dried guarana, while the scales are sold as nail files. (Guarana is an ingredient used in a South American beverage.) A majority of the caught Arapaima fishes are sold and consumed in Brazil. Arapaima harvesting is today forbidden in many regions including Guyana, but the illegal fishing still continues. Due to heavy commercial fishing, arapaimas, especially large ones, have become rare.

The exuberance of the tropical rain forest, associated with hot and humid climate of the Amazon Basin is responsible for the largest biodiversity of plants and animals on Earth and Guyana remains one of the last largely unexplored frontiers of adventure tourism.

Many more unique giants are found in sustainable populations in this green inferno , including the giant ant eater, largest fresh water toad, largest bat in South America, the world largest rodent- capybara, the giant South America River Turtle, the world largest sub family alligatorinae- the black caiman, The goliath bird-eating spider, giant armadillo and many more.

These natural wonders have survived harmonically in their world from the time the first mammals appeared in the Cenozoic Era, and plate tectonic history. Italian explorer, Amerigo Vespucci after whom the Americas were named, would have been amazed by this evolutionary treasure house that has withstood the test of time. Showcasing these giants may hopefully serve to encourage the cause of conservation of these species and their habitat, understanding their true value and meaning to our changing world.