Chiky meets Jean

The biggest news by far from the month of March was our trapping and ID’ing of our second group, Jean 4. The day was a long time in coming, but in only 5 days after the arrival of our caller monkey, Chiky Basterd, we lured the entire Jean group into our cage. Now we have two groups with snazzy bead collars running around CICRA, and we can’t wait to see how they interact.

Calendar of Events

March
18th
Chiky Basterd settles into his new home at CICRA

April
4th
Miners strike in P. Maldonado, CICRA on high alert

April
16th
Research Assistant Holly McCready arrives

Latest News

The caller monkey, Chiky Basterd, arrives at CICRA
Jean 4 is trapped and ID’ed
New research assistant Holly McCready joins team
Local gold miners to go on strike starting April 4th
The agouti is part of the Order Rodentia. It is closely related to the guinea pig, but larger, with longer legs that average about 20 inches in length. One of the best ways to spot an agouti is by its extremely short, nobby tail attached to a brown behind that’s usually running away from you down the trail.

The agouti pictured below is a frequent visitor of the CICRA station and we chose it as our featured creature for its unique relationship with the giant *Castaña* (Brazil Nut) tree, *Bertholletia excelsa*. As it turns out, the agouti is the only animal that can break through the hard *castaña* seed shell to eat the nuts. This means that the *castaña* tree literally depends on the agouti for seed dispersal, but if the agouti only breaks through the shell to eat the seeds then how do you think the seeds get preserved and dispersed? As clever and stealthy as agoutis are, they are also quite forgetful! The agouti frequently breaks through the *castaña* shell only to store the nuts in a secret location, which no one else will find (kinda like squirrels and acorns). Sometimes the agouti loses track of all its secret stashes and, if you’re lucky, 50 years later you have mature *castaña* tree!
Chiky Basterd

You’ve read about him, you’ve heard rumors about him, and if you’re like us, you’ve even dreamt about him. At last, your long and anxious wait can end because the Chiky Basterd is here. Christened as such by the Taricaya Centre in an unintentional misspelling, we now realize that no name could suit Chiky better. He only likes to be handled on his own terms and only eats the finest insects that are handpicked from the jungle. His calls attract tamarins from miles around and no predator dares threaten him while he’s at work.

Chiky Basterd, as you already know, is the project’s long awaited caller monkey. Caller monkeys are widely used for introducing naïve animals to baited traps. The caller monkey serves this purpose in two vital ways; 1) to attract nearby groups to a trap site with its vocalizations, and 2) to assuage fears of the actual cage. On occasion, it is possible to attract and trap naïve groups without caller monkeys, which is what we have attempted to do for the past four months. During this time we have learned that CICRA’s population of saddleback tamarins is as uninterested in exploring the traps as they are at trying bananas, especially when every tree around them is blooming with its own deliciously enticing fruit.

Thus far, Chiky has performed brilliantly in the field. Not only does he have the vocal chords to compete with Luciano Pavarotti’s finest, but he’s charismatic enough to win over new groups in days, as witnessed with our latest trapping of Jean 4 (see subsequent article). Chiky’s exact age is of yet unknown, but he weighs in at around 200g and still lacks his third molar. So we liken him to a larger toddler (A.K.A. he’s in his terrible threes).
Chiky’s Photo Portfolio

Chiky playing in his jungle gym. The enclosure is made of recycled wood and wire mesh (1meter cubed).

Chiky tries his hand with a mechanical pencil.

One of our favorite pictures of Chiky basking in the sunlight.
The splendid news that a wild group was finally habituated to our traps left me with a veritable smorgasbord of emotions and thoughts. Why, oh why, had I told them not to trap?! What if it never happens again? Oh man! It really happened though! That’s the important thing! Bollocks – it’s only worth something when you have concrete evidence of it. What if this is the beginning of the whole trapping spree I’d planed for October and November last year? Worse, what if it’s not! Jean 4 could be an outlier you know. And so on, and so on.

Luckily, we had so much to do that it had to end eventually, with more pressing matters at hand.

“Right,” said I, “Let’s practice!”

The plan was this: Gideon would go to the field site, replace the cage with architecturally superior one, re-string the doors, and await our arrival. We would snarf breakfast, grab Chiky, fill two large backpacks with the trapping supplies, grab tarps, nets and string for the processing centre, and of course, more banana for bait.

The night before the day, we set up a mock scenario, identifying down to the very last detail the responsibilities of everybody during the full 2 hours it would take to process two animals. We rehearsed it till we could recite it from memory. Just in case, Karina and Erin, who were to be the main handlers, wrote it all out on a piece of Rite-in-the-Rain paper and were going to pin it up inside the net. Emma collected all the materials she would need to collect fresh poop samples from each animal. Gideon examined every single zip-tie holding the best of our cages together and tested and re-tested the doors, ensuring no escapes and no rough edges that could hurt the animals. I fluttered about like a particularly mindless butterfly, examining for the umpteenth time our trapping supplies, playing the blood-draw procedure in my head on repeat.
Eventually, it was time to go to bed and we all departed, nervousness racking us with no hope for respite.

The morning dawned dark and thunderous, threatening rain. It had already rained all night, and the canopy was dripping. We jumped out of bed and got dressed hurriedly while it was still almost dark out. We made it to the lab to find Erin there, bright-eyed and awake, feeding Chiky his first bit of fruit for the morning. I realized that the canopy probably made it sound like it was raining a lot harder than it really was, and that Karina and Emma were probably under the impression that we were not going to be out that early, since they lived in small cabins in the jungle. Figuring that they would eventually join us, Erin and I got all our stuff packed. In ten minutes, the other girls were there, gushing their apologies, which I brushed off with little attention. We needed to pack and get all our things strapped together. And somewhere in there, we would have to eat, because lunch would most definitely be delayed by the success of our venture. If it were successful, of course.

Gideon had rushed out with the trap a full forty-five minutes before we were ready to leave. By now, I was betting that he’d be furious at how late we were. This energized us quite a bit, and we pushed to get there in time, trying to remember all the things we would need out there….

Continued at www.PrimatesPeru.com/blog
Some of the tasks that we have to complete to make this project successful are unimaginably challenging – like following Jean4 in The Inferno, succumbing to the bamboo and lianas that ruthlessly maul you. There are others that don’t sound half as bad but in reality, are about as tedious. This morning I found myself engaged in one such activity – the de-burring of a butterfly net that has definitely seen better days. Being used heavily in the first week of Chiky’s arrival to bring The Master his bug buffet, this net was literally wound into a tight knot from the burrs.

I placed a small stool on the porch outside the lab and prepared to let my mind run free whilst my fingers worked at rescuing the net from an early grave. Of course, the best-laid plans never do hold up. In minutes I had a little panic attack having now covered myself in all the burrs that I had just released the net from. Dusting them off I glanced idly towards my feet to notice a swarm of army ants between the planks of the boardwalk. I braced myself for the bites that were sure to come, having been bitten twice this morning by members of a different colony, but was pleasantly surprised to note that they were not interested in me in the least.

I settled down once more to enjoy a pleasant bit of day dreaming and must have gotten involved in some internal argument in my head, leaving my hands still for a moment, because a little noise to my right caught my attention and when I turned to look I was greeted by a wholly unexpected sight. For months I’ve lived at this station and have been aware of the largish lizards running around under the boardwalks surrounding all the buildings in camp, but they are so sensitive to us that they immediately dart off upon approach. These South American ground lizards, *Amieva amieva*, are gorgeous creatures with white heads held high, bright green behinds and almost bluish hind legs. Their most remarkable feature is the striking change from white head to green behind that occurs half way down their body with no fading of colours into one another. The white just stops cold and gives way to green. This must give them the ability to be camouflaged in grass and scrub but it is quite unnerving to perceive just a floating head or body!

My de-burring seemed to have stilled me to the point where the lizards basically thought I wasn’t actually there. My glance to the right revealed a large and beautiful specimen of *Amieva* wandering towards me, in that typical lizard way – a fast dart punctuated by moments of frozen stillness. One was making his way over to me and came to a rest an inch from my toe! I was able to admire his beautiful scales from a couple of feet away on my perch…this one is quite the flashiest reptile I’ve seen so far!

The little *lagartija* having slithered passed me, I continued to work steadily, enjoying the satisfaction of burrs falling like rain around my feet, the rhythmic *scratch-scratch-scratch* as I ran my nails along the fabric of the net, and the feel of the soft sun on my arms and neck. I am a true sun-lover and the contentment of this homely scene was marred only by the escape of my mind, yet again, into an area that had been trying it for some time now.

You see, it wasn’t by accident that I was so pleasantly occupied at 9am on a Thursday morning. The reality of it was that I, and the eight or so people left at the station, were stuck in apparently endless idling in anticipation of a possible visit to the station by gold miners from the surrounding areas.
All our troubles center around two enigmatic figures – the chemical element mercury, one of few that is a liquid at room temperature, and Minister Brack Egg, heading the Ministry of the Environment.

Mercury, as you all know, is that intriguing element present in thermometers that one’s parents were always terrified one would swallow. A broken thermometer in my home resulted in temporary chaos, with everyone charging everywhere trying to prevent kids and pets from getting near the stuff. I broke a thermometer once, in middle school, and was unhindered by any sort of authority from exploring the contents to my heart’s content. I prodded the little globules, noted that two globules would merge together almost magically and realized that the element was one of the most beautiful I’d ever seen, better than gold even! Indians all over are falling over in dead fainted at my heresy but the two – mercury and gold – are connected in a way that I would never have imagined in 7th grade. Eventually, this special connection would come home in a big way, introducing anxiety, frustration and even anger into our lives.

Antonio Brack Egg, on the other hand, is a widely despised individual in these parts. In November, before our first evacuation, he made an announcement that would result in the effective banishment of miners and all mining operations from about 80% of the Department of Madre de Dios. He has a background in science and environment and is striving to save one of the most biodiverse parts of the nation from a slow and ponderous demise. However, in the process he is doing away with a large part of the economy of the department. Mining is the sole reason for many towns near us to exist – people are either mining on the river or making products that the miners need. Everyone is tied up in it, so this announcement shook the very foundations of the people.

Truth be told, Brack is fighting against a lot of other factors: illegal mining, destruction of the riverbed, and health issues to do with mercury poisoning over the long term. While the President of the country is loathe to let standing forests lie untouched, Brack is of a different mindset. He’s genuinely trying to help, but his charisma is distinctly lacking.

Earlier this month he finally came out with an actual protocol for instituting this mining hiatus. He allocated only the southern shore of the Madre de Dios and below for mining, preventing any mining north of the river. We are on the northern shore, and therefore protected. He also banned any mining on the river itself, which will put a stop to most of the illegal mining in the area. Instead, everyone that mines must have paperwork. If you think about some of the rules, there really isn’t a need to protest, except if you’re illegal.

In any case, protesting is happening whether we will like it or not. The law in Peru allows a group to officially apply for a day on which to hold a strike. The incongruous reality of it is that they then burn down blocks of government buildings, block roads and airports and stop all stores from running during this period.

In the last few days I have heard everything from “Aww! Nothing will happen, don’t you worry!” to “This strike will last two weeks. It’s going to be bad, very bad!”
At this point, I’m really only sure that there are several angry groups out there, that they are traveling to Puerto Maldonado on the 4th, that every single person is going to remain indoors having stockpiled food for about a week, and that the miners will proceed to conduct some displays the extent of which are largely dependent on the amount of alcohol in them and the response of the government to them. I suppose it will also depend on how much police presence is at Puerto.

Speaking of which, we are to be joined tomorrow by three stern policemen. Why, you may wonder, would we need any such thing? It all, I’m told, comes down to a badly drawn map. ACCA, the organization that runs CICRA and a bunch of other field stations, is conducting a large-scale corridor project to attempt to link major fragments of land in Peru and Bolivia together. Within Peru, they have focused their efforts on connecting the Los Amigos Conservation Concession with the Tambopata National Reserve. The bit of land that connects these two pieces dwarfs each piece itself. It is depicted on this guilty map as a large square that dominates the picture. Below it was a bad legend (or a decent misunderstood legend) that implied to those that read it (in the mining towns) that ACCA was attempting to buy this large piece of land between the two reserves, or at the least, prevent subversive practices like mining from going on in there. Poor ACCA had just realized how lofty their goal of “convincing locals to participate in the project” really was. Moreover, it had one itself a reputation to boot. Now the enemy has a face, a name, a nice link to DC (the best way to make oneself unpopular) and some conveniently boycottable locations.

So on this sunny morning, I’m reminded once more of the interplay between all these things – a badly drawn map, a man with an unusual name, and a chemical element that just won’t stay solid at room temperature! Together they have resulted in the large-scale evacuation of most of the region, with more people leaving Puerto Malonado than the jungle. We in turn are hoping to avoid most of the disruption by staying in the jungle and close to an exit point, should someone pay us an unwelcome visit.

The strike is on the 4th of April. The days that will see the mining towns upriver of us emptying are the 2nd and the 3rd, so we are to have those three nice policemen living here for a while. The navy is sending marines to patrol the waters too and perhaps they will drop in for a meal now and then. Then everything will cool down in the jungle and heat up in town. If things go well, the return journey back to the mining towns will be a lot less feisty, so we mightn’t need to worry more at all. Right now we’re focusing on keeping all lines of communication between town and ourselves open and the rest of the time, we’re trying to trap monkeys, as always.

That’s about all there is to think about these days. That and feeding chiky, which is an ever present worry. I’m going to get back to bug-hunting now, actually.

Blog post by Mini Watsa, to see more visit www.PrimatesPeru.com/blog.
PrimatesPeru Health-list

Here’s the tally for the month, not including mosquito bites…

Gideon
53 Chiggers
0 Bott flies
1 Chiky bite

Emma
0 Chiggers
0 Fire Ants
0 Bullet Ants
0 Wasps

Mini
20 Chiggers
2 Bott flies
2 Head spikes
1 Hand full of thorns

Karina
17 Chiggers
0 Wasp
10 Fire ants
1 Bullet Ant

Erin
21 Chiggers
15 Fire Ants

Muchas gracias!!

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