



FLAAR

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Guatemala: a Paradise of Nature

Luis Villar Anleu with photographs by Ricardo Mata



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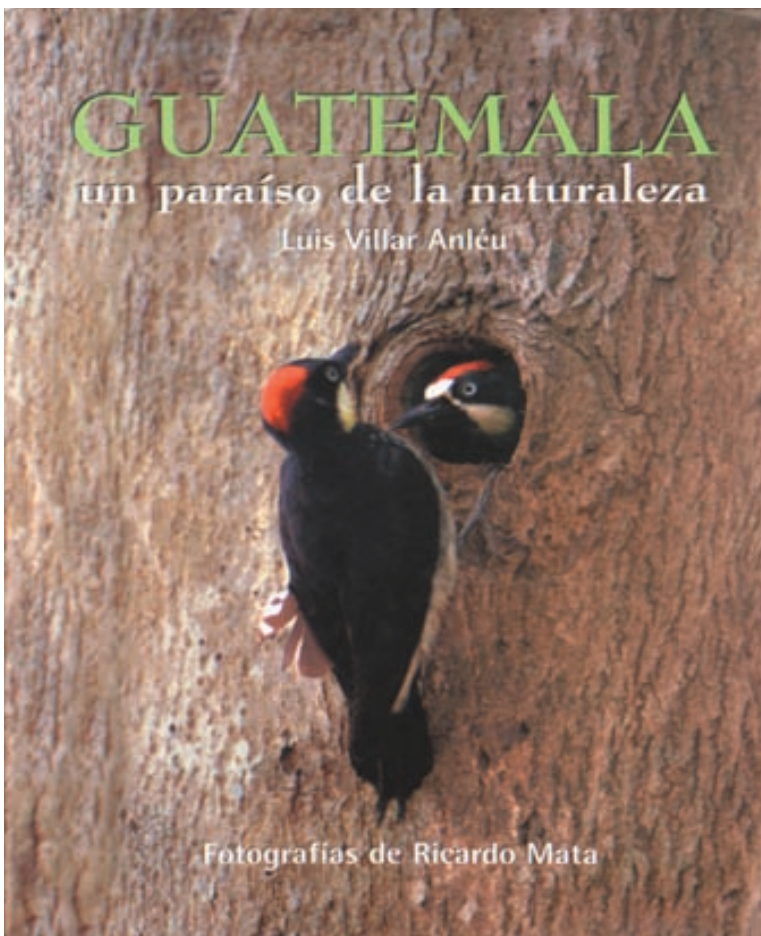
Guatemala: a Paradise of Nature

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A book review by Nicholas Hellmuth, FLAAR

This is a book review of an exquisite symphony of color photographs of landscapes, birds, animals, plants, and ecology of Guatemala.

FLAAR has a long-time interest in the tropical ecology of Guatemala. Our entire organization was founded decades ago to help fund a project at Lake Yaxha, Peten, Guatemala. Five years labor there resulted in the creation of Parque Nacional Yaxha-Sacnab, so we feel proud of our beginnings: FLAAR saved a substantial chunk of Peten from being ravaged, burnt over for milpa, and turned into a cattle ranch.



Although our original project at Lake Yaxha was to research the Maya archaeological remains in this area, we were not blind to the tropical flora and fauna all around us.

Now, over 37 years later, we are even more interested in the plants and animals of Guatemala, in part because there are a lot fewer of them today than there were in 1969 when we started. So part of the programs we are interested in encouraging for 2006 onward relate to high quality photography of the natural habitat of Guatemala.

Since much of the year we are stuck in the frozen north of Ohio, far from Guatemala's wonderful climate, one way to contribute while we are here up north is to draw attention to the several books that address themes of personal and professional interest to us. One such book, that I review here, is "*Guatemala: un paraíso de la naturaleza*," by Luis Villar Anleu, with photographs by Ricardo Mata.



I regret that I have not had the opportunity to get to know Luis Villar, but from the comments on the inside cover I can value his expertise.

Ricardo Mata is a distinguished Guatemalan photographer whose work I have known for decades. I also know his son, also a professional photographer, Ricardo Mata, Junior. The entire Mata family are well known in Guatemala. Ricardo's brother, Dr Guillermo Mata, is a founder and past Rector of the Universidad del Istmo. His son (Dr Guillermo Mata's) is president of the Museo Popol Vuh (of Maya archaeology) at the prestigious Universidad Francisco Marroquin (where FLAAR had an office for five years).

Since I am a photographer myself, my review will primarily be on the photographs.

The book is in handsome hard-cover coffee-table style. When you take the dust jacket off, the book itself repeats the front and back cover motif, so the book continues to be as attractive even if the dust jacket were to be torn or missing all together.

As typical of luxury books of this nature, it is sponsored by a corporation, in this case the Empresa Electrica de Guatemala. This is a comparable tradition in Mexico, where most of the best coffee table books are published by the profitable local companies.

The book was printed in Barcelona, Spain. The date is not clearly listed but I am estimating 2003. Other than the Empresa Electrica there is not really a publisher. Books such as this tend to be given as presents to friends, relatives, and government officials, and only enter the market later on. ISBN is 84-89775-33-8.







The frontispiece is a striking photo; almost looks like one of the Monterrey pines or cedars or whatever those famous trees are around Pebble Beach near Carmel, California. Except that the kind of rock reveals this is not California. Then come a series of double-page spreads before you get the table of contents. This concept of putting a whole series of double-page spreads up front is effective for setting the tone of the book. I have not seen this in other books.

As a photographer I noticed a few places with the telltale artifacts of scanning (clouds get too pink) and some soft shots that were not shot on a tripod and were possibly enlarged from 35mm. But in general the prepress work is better than average.

The shot of the parrot on page 18 is excellent; the focus is sharp as a tack. You will not likely get this kind of shot with digital (I am assuming it is 35mm or medium format). The photo of the macaws on the facing page is also excellent, since these are not easy creatures to capture on film (they are nasty birds, and move too quickly to keep in focus, even when not flying).

The shots of jaguars are well done, and I am assuming they are in parks or zoos. You don't tend to see felines in the wild that pose like this. In over 35 years in Latin America I have only seen two felines during the day in the wild: one from Tikal to El Remate in 1965, and one on the road to Calakmul in the 1970's. Neither of them posed long enough for me to get my camera ready.

The cute red-eyed frog is best known from relatives in Costa Rica. I have always wanted to photograph the Costa Rican ones.

For the photograph of the crocodile I hope Ricardo Mata was using a telephoto lens. These things can move quickly, as I can attest having had one as a "pet" inside my house in Zone 9 in Guatemala City for about 2 years. (it is a crocodile and not usually an alligator though both inhabit Guatemalan waters; I would have to look up in my reference books to tell which is which).



And on the subject of dangerous creatures being photographed, the snake on p 51 is truly venomous. The double-page spread of a snake on pp. 124-125 is well illuminated. You can see why the Toltecs and Aztecs (and the Maya and Teotihuacanos before them) considered that the snakes were “feathered.” The scales do look like feathers in this kind of lighting.



My favorite creatures of all are the “rana boca de pala, *Tripion petasatus*.” His camouflage is almost perfect. The little owl of p. 62 and trio of snails are great shots (likewise p. 62). The caterpillar of p. 107 is excellent too.

What is noticeable about this book is how it reveals how many rivers, lakes, and swamps occupy the Peten area of Guatemala.

I learned a lot from this book, especially seeing the venomous lizard, the *Heloderma horridum*, which looks sort of like the Gila Monster that we know in the US.

The double-page spread of butterflies (pp 104-105), are examples of a kind of photo that are a challenge. Even at a butterfly farm it's tough to capture good shots.

This book was a present to me from the current rector of Universidad del Istmo.

