

Biology students hit the field to explore Amazonian ecology

A two-week **field course in Amazonian Peru** gave biology students the opportunity to study diverse organisms in their natural habitats, including numerous species of monkeys, leaf-cutter ants, mound-building cicadas, colourful neotropical birds, and a family of giant river otters.~

"I normally concentrate on birds, so it was excellent to be exposed to the wide variety of mammals, reptiles, butterflies, plants and fungi," says UWindsor master's student Jessica Cuthbert. "In addition, we had the dichotomy of experience in the lowlands with a visit to the highlands."

Cuthbert was one of five graduate students who joined 16 undergraduates—and biology professors Daniel Mennill and Stéphanie Doucet, the course leaders—for a visit to the Amazon jungle at the height of its rainy season.

"It certainly gave the students an excellent demonstration of the trials and tribulations of field biology," says Dr. Mennill. "When we arrived to dock at our jungle lodge, we found that the landing point had been swept away by the flooding of the river. It took some clever docking and a scramble up the steep banks to get us there."

The students developed detailed independent studies on a diverse array of topics:

- monitoring the behaviour of frogs and leaf-cutter ants at different times of day under different weather conditions,
- comparing plant growth patterns and butterfly behaviour in shady versus sunny microhabitats,
- making acoustic recordings to characterize the ambient sounds of the neotropical forest, and
- studying variation in the songs of one of the neotropic's loudest songbirds, the screaming piha.

Over the next month, students will write scientific manuscripts describing their findings and, in some cases, submit them for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

The trip also included exploration of the ancient Inca city of Machu Picchu. Students returned to Windsor Saturday.

"It was a great experience," says Cuthbert. "Besides the chance to study tropical ecology, we got to see the ruins and see the cultural diversity of Peru."

[Click here for more on this trip, including more photographs of the University of Windsor students' adventures.](#)



Skill-testing: Canadian canoeing skills were put to the test as students and instructors explored southern Peru's Lake Cococoha in search of giant river otters.



Master's student Jessica Cuthbert holds a silver-beaked tanager. The bird was the subject of her independent study during a course taught in Peru by UWindsor professors Daniel Mennill and Stéphanie Doucet under the Ontario Universities Program in Field Biology