

Jorge Camilo Valenzuela

Tropical rainforests are arguably the hardest habitats in which to photograph wildlife. *Wild Planet* spoke to rainforest specialist **Jorge Camilo Valenzuela** about coping with the heat, humidity, contrast and subjects that appear once in 12 years...

Interview by Keith Wilson



Jorge on location in the rainforest canopy. He spends at least four months of each year photographing in the world's tropical rainforests

A flight of macaws in the Peruvian Amazon
Nikon D3X, Nikkor 400mm f/2.8, ISO 320, f/2.8

When did you first become seriously interested in photography?

About 20 years ago, when I was on holiday in Costa Rica. I saw so much wildlife. I'm 40 now and I started as a professional photographer 12 years ago. First, I went to film school and worked in cinema and TV as a cameramen and then I came back to my first love, the still.

Which has been your most memorable trip to the rainforest?

I think one of the first trips to the Amazon was the most incredible because I was very thin, I had no muscle, but I bought a lot of cameras and I was hired by a magazine to make a reportage of the Amazon for four months. I tried to learn to climb the trees so I could learn about the canopy, but I broke my foot three days before I was to leave for the Amazon. My foot was blue, yellow, purple, very swollen, double the normal size. My doctor said, 'Don't go, you're crazy!' I thought: I have a six month permit from the Peruvian government to be in the rainforest, I already bought my ticket for my flight, everything was ready. I go! I go on the flight and I go with my foot broken. I was 26 years of age, with a lot of luggage, maybe 50 kilos of luggage.



Giant river otter, Amazon, Peru
*Nikon D3X, Nikkor 400mm f/2.8, ISO
320, 1/1000sec at f/2.8*



On a broken foot?

Yes! It was painful the whole time I was working in the jungle. But it was amazing. When I went into Peru into the jungle then – it was 2002 – there was no one inside, because they had some political problems with a paramilitary group. It was finished but still people did not want to go into the jungle, so I go deep inside

and it was amazing because there was no-one, just me, my guide, the boat and no-one else for a few months. It was like discovering a new place where nobody goes. Everything was new to me: the noises in the jungle at night, the birds, frogs, bats, all the time there was noise. When you come from the city and you go into the jungle it's a new world.

Which has been the most difficult animal to photograph?

The jaguar was very difficult. I had been into the jungle four times but I had never seen a jaguar. All the guys, scientists and photographers, say to me, 'Oh Jorge, we have been coming here for 10 years and we never see the jaguar.' Then one day, very early in the morning, we're in the river and my

boatman says, 'Jorge!' 'What?'

'A jaguar!' I was not ready. I'd just woken up and I had only the 300mm lens on my body, the D2X. The 500mm was in my bag but you cannot change because early in the morning there's a lot of humidity and if you open to change lenses the humidity goes inside. I see the jaguar there and I say to

myself, ‘Oh, my god, what do I do?’ My boatman says, ‘Jorge we must cut the motor, if not he will run away.’ So we go very slowly with the river. Then I say, ‘I need to go close to the riverbank.’ So I jump into the river. The boatman says ‘Jorge! Are you crazy?’ I say, ‘I don’t care, it’s my first time to see the jaguar so I need to.’

It was crazy because there’s caiman, there’s rays, snakes.’ I make my way over quietly and I wait for him to look up so I take my photo and then he walks away very slowly, like a king. That was the first time and last time in 12 years that I had seen the jaguar in the wild.

Yet jaguars are photographed regularly in the Pantanal?

People say to me in the Pantanal you can see jaguars many times and they’re not scared of boats because it is a tourist place, but my sighting was deep inside the jungle in the Manu National Park, where no-one else was around. For me this moment was magic. I think if I saw a jaguar in the Pantanal it wouldn’t be the same.

Do you use wideangle lenses in remote camera set-ups?

No, but I tried remote once when photographing a dangerous snake. I have a picture of me photographing a vine snake just 10 or 15cm away from me with a 105mm macro. I am not scared of snakes. You just have to take it slowly. If it’s moving you stop, then you wait and you can go. It can take two or three hours to take a shot like that. If he can feel that you are not a danger, it is ok.

What equipment do you regard as essential for jungle photography?

Two camera bodies, I use the Nikon D4S. You need one spare because you never know with a rain shower or the humidity if you’ll get problems. But also to use different lenses for the same shot, you need a long lens for the face and something shorter or a zoom to show the whole body and the surroundings. So I will have the 70-200mm on one body and the 400mm on the other.

How much gear do you take on an expedition?

I take two flight Pelican cases. I always pack a macro 105mm – it’s my favourite lens for ordinary snakes, reptiles and insects. Fisheye lens, 10mm, a 12-24mm f/2.8 zoom, 70-200mm f/2.8, 300mm and 400mm f/2.8.

How much does all that weigh?

Oh my gosh! Before, when I was shooting only photo it was 45 or 50 kilos, now I have 85 or 90 kilos with the video as well. I always need an assistant when I’m using video. Carrying 45 or 50 kilos is very hard.

What is your preference, stills or video?

It’s two different kinds of shooting. Photo is old

school. For photo you look at the light, you look at the composition, you look at the expression, and it’s one photo when you must tell everything. Video is different. In video we give sound. I record in full HD and Dolby stereo because for me sound is 50 per cent of the video. If you look at a good video without sound, it’s not a good

movie; if you look at a good video with good sound that’s a good movie: to hear the sound of the animals, when it’s raining, the wind, everything has to be there. Also, with the editing, sometimes you put the sound first, before you see the animal to create impact, so editing is important too.

“I like the jungle, I like green, I like colours. The savannah of Africa is not my element”



A young mountain gorilla lying on the forest floor, Uganda
Nikon D3X, Nikkor 300mm f/4, ISO 640, f/4

"There was no-one, just me, my guide, the boat and no-one else for a few months. It was like discovering a new place where nobody goes!"

Jorge uses a boat to travel into the jungle while on assignment in the Amazon. His camera and video gear weighs up to 90kg, so this is the easiest means of transportation
Nikon D7000, Nikkor 10.5mm fisheye, ISO 400, f/2.8



Your Jungle Spirit project focuses on three locations: the Peruvian Amazon, Uganda and Malaysia. Why did you choose those places?

Because I needed to find one place on each continent to concentrate on. I wanted to do something more in-depth and to do that, to learn more and understand more, you must always go back to the same place. You have to be a specialist of one place. The rivers change every month, there's different seasons, different fruits and the animals are always moving. So when you go every few months you start to understand the habitat, it becomes your home.

How many trips have you made to each of those locations?

I don't know, the Amazon in Peru, maybe eight, nine or ten times? Sometimes up to four months at one time. Uganda, two or three times, Malaysia maybe twelve to 15 times.

Are you the sort of photographer who deletes a lot of images when you come back or do you keep everything?

When I started I shot a lot. I saved a lot. Now, I don't save so much. Now, I wait for the light, if there's no light, I don't photograph. Sometimes the light is too bright. When it's too

bright I take a rest. I work from 5am to 8.30, maybe 9am, then come back to camp to breakfast, shower and sleep. Then I'll go out again around 2 or 3pm till sunset. I take my time; I try to find a good spot, wait for the light. I want the best photo I can have so I wait for the right moment. I don't shoot in bursts. Of course, I delete as I go along.

Who are the other photographers that you admire and inspire you?

The first photographer, whose exhibition I saw a long time ago, was Frans Lanting. I don't find any other photographer I like as much as him. For me, it's different because I like the jungle, I like green, I like colours. The savannah of Africa is not my element. Ok, when I see a photo I can see it's nice but I don't feel the same as when I see a nice photo in the jungle. It's different. I appreciate the jungle. I have been once to the savannah in Africa and there were sometimes two cars, three cars of photographers taking photos of a couple of lions and for me it was not the idea of wildlife photography that I had in mind. I think a wildlife photographer should be exploring. Leaving the campsite with a driver to take the photos and then come back is not my style of wildlife photography. I will never do that again, even if you pay me!

Mist hangs over the rainforest canopy in Borneo. The high humidity of a tropical rainforest is a constant challenge to photography

Nikon D4, Nikkor 70-200mm f/2.8 at 200mm, ISO 500, f/2.8

An infant orangutan, Borneo
Nikon D4, Nikkor 400mm f/2.8,
ISO 500, f/3.2



Jorge Camilo Valenzuela is a specialist photographer of the world's tropical rainforests who spends up to four months of the year on location. His work has been exhibited in Santiago, Tokyo, Paris, Barcelona and Montier-en-Der.

Jungle Spirit is an ongoing project, now 12 years in the making, and the title of a digital photo book available from the App Store. He is the author of two hardback photo books, *Borneo*, published by Vilo, and *Amazonia*, published by National Geographic.

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