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NICARAGUA WITHOUT THE MUD

By Dr. Fred Sibley

Chapter three of the Nicaraguan chronicles. Episode one ["How far to Wiwili" Argia 13 (3):9-14] covered Nick Donnelly and his troop's August 2001 adventures on Cerro Kilambe in northern Nicaragua. That trip is now part of the Nicaraguan folk lore and will be told around campfires for generations to terrorize small children.

Episode two, August 2002, ["Nick-at-Night" Argia 14 (3):14-15] took Nick and his troops to Bartola in the rain forest of se Nicaragua.

Not having been able to go on either of these earlier trips I was hoping for a 2003 trip. That didn't happen so Peggy and I had to either stay home or wing it on our own. Thanks to the generous assistance in scheduling and reservations provided by Jean-Michel Maes, this decision proved to be very easy.

As we were starting the descent into Managua my wife read the earlier Argia articles for the first time. Their less than idyllic descriptions about mud, rain and humidity produced a few frowns, but then we looked out on the Nicaraguan landscape to see blue skies, numerous grass fires and brown fields. The country was suffering from an extended "short" dry season and continued to suffer for the two weeks of our stay. Sort of like the weather forecaster in Kansas saying "Another beautiful weekend coming up" while the farmer looks at his wilting corn crop. Sorry Nicaraguan farmers, but I appreciated the extra weeks without rain.

We had chickened out on going to Bartola because of the problems of chartering a boat for the river trip. The fall back position was Domitila [a private reserve located in dry tropical forest south of Managua]. We were thrilled to find a welcoming party - Maria Jose, the all purpose manager, owner, cheer leader and organizer for Domitila. After a short ride from the airport we turned onto the 10 kilometer dirt road to Domitila and Lake Nicaragua. It is more like 100 miles from the modern world. For a week we were cared for by Maria, her husband Silvio, 7 staff members plus 2 very friendly small dogs and a cat. One vehicle, other than the resident jeep, went by in the week. There are no electric lights and no hot water, Coleman and kerosene lanterns fill in for light and the tropical temperature makes anything but a late night shower perfect. The three meals a day are wonderfully prepared and varied enough to have you anticipating what will be served. Juice and cold water were always available in abundance so there was no excuse to get dehydrated. The temperatures were tropical but delightfully pleasant when you were sitting in the open thatch-roofed dining portion of the building looking out toward the lake. On our arrival we were greeted by a veritable swarm of dragonflies over the dry arid scrub land. All common widespread things, *Pantala flavescens*, *Orthemis ferruginea*, *Erythemis vesiculosa*, *Erythrodiplax funerea*, *Brachymesia herbida*, *Tramea calverti*, *T. onusta*, and *Erythemis plebeja*, but I still get a thrill out of seeing large masses of

odonates. I was a little disappointed that one had to travel 2 kilometers to get to the lake, but Silvio pointed out that in exceptionally rainy years it would only be a few hundred yards to the lake and at the height of dry season a 3 kilometer trek. We both found this place wonderfully relaxing. It was tempting to forget dragonflies and just rest but the first few days there was an impressive morning and evening flight of dragonflies that stretched the day from 5:30AM to after 6PM. We never did figure out everything that was in the flight but caught *Gymnacantha mexicana* and *nervosa*, *Triacanthagyna caribbea* and *septima*, the dusk flying libellulid *Tholymis citrina* plus a number of early and late flying *Pantala flavescens* and *Tamea calverti*. Some of our success was due to Eric van den Burghe, professor at American University in Managua, whose good eyes and quick reflexes increased our harvest of dusk flying creatures. He also was a wealth of information on Nicaragua and potential collecting sites.

The lake was visited one day in the jeep and another in the ox cart- take the latter; it has a better ride. The odonates included *Enallagma novaehispaniae*, *Telebasis digitcollis* and *griffinii*, *Phyllocycla breviphylla*, *Progomphus clendoni*, *Brachymesia herbida*, *Erythemis plebeja*, *Micrathyria aequalis*, *M. didyma*, *Tauriphila australis* as well as a number of *Anax* and *Aeshna* that we never did catch. If you would like to see an area where ox carts and kerosene lanterns are a way of life and not just tourist curios come to Domitila. Also see real weather beaten, hard used authentic cowboys.

The buildings are located on a slight rise with a 500 foot forested hill behind that proved good for a few hilltoppers [*Argia tezpi* and *Phyllocycla breviphylla* among others]. Two permanent, spring fed, forest streams, Rio Dorado and Rio Pital, are a short distance east and west respectively.

The lake was good for many species not found in the streams but the streams were where the action was. An unpredictable and fickle population of odonates, but when the sunlight and temperature were right there were always new surprises. On one day I found a collection of 40 plus pairs of the very striking *Neoneura Amelia* [red head and thorax with black abdomen] laying eggs in a tiny collection of floating debris. One group of 5-6 pairs were in a tight circle with the heads of the males almost touching. In the shade only the red of the male's head and thorax show up, and these little red dots seem to be floating in the air.

Argia pulla, *translata*, *Hetaerina caja* and *titia* were the dominant species but the striking red-eyed *Argia oenea* was common and the hard to find species included. *Hetaerina occisa*, *Palaemnema nathalia*, *Neoneura esthera*, *Protoneura amatoria*, *P. cara*, *Acanthagrion trilobatum*, *Aphylla obscura* and in the riparian woodland the big helicopter damselfly *Mecistogaster ornata*.

If you have a weakness for butterflies, you will store the dragonfly gear and spend your time on these creatures. There are an amazing variety and abundance of them. There is also probably the highest density of howler monkeys you'll find anywhere. There is no escaping the din when you are in the field, but they also show up next to the hotel every day.

Except for a brief trip to a nearby series of lagoons we stayed within 2 kilometers of the hotel and collected 43 species - 8 new to Nicaragua.

On the 2001 trip the group retreated to Selva Negra, a cloud forest reserve at over 4000 feet, to recuperate and savor civilization. We had planned the trip accordingly with Domitila as the rough part and Selva Negra for recuperation. Should have done the reverse. Selva Negra is beautiful with wonderful hot showers, flowers, forest and civilization. But it was cold, allowed fewer hours of dragonfly hunting, had poorer food and of course none of the personal attention we had at Domitila. There is a totally different group of odonates and no one would pass up the chance to collect here.

The three duck infested lakes produced amazingly easy to catch aeshnids *Aeshna cornigera*, *A. jalapensis*, *A. psilus*, *Remartinia luteipennis*. *Micrathyria laevigata* was new for Nicaragua. *Anisagrion allopterum* confused me a couple times because the reddish tenerals look like *Telebasis* and the greenish adults look like female *Enallagma*. *Enallagma civile*, so familiar in NY state, seemed strangely out of place next to the yellow nosed *Neocytheromma cultellatum*. *Cannaphila vibex*, *Erythrodiplax fusca*, *Libellula foliata*, and *Sympetrum illotum* padded the list. The lakes were amazingly inactive before 10 or after 2 despite clear skies on some days. With temperatures in the 60's there was still an evening flight of a few aeshnids - uncaught and unidentified. *Argia extranea* was everywhere - almost paving the walks to cottages.

The trails and mountain streams were even more fickle than the lakes and we spent a lot of time sitting next to streams or trickles waiting for the sun to reappear. *Epigomphus westfalli* and *Brechmorhoga rapax* were fairly common, one small stream had an abundance of the bright red *Heteragrion albifrons*, *Argia anceps*, *medullaris*, *oculata*, and *Hetaerina cruentata* were all present. There were two very pleasant little streams through the coffee plantations that also had a number of these species.

On the way to Selva Negra we stopped at Laguna Moyua, a large, shallow, heavily vegetated natural lake. We only spent an hour here with *Erythemis peruviana*, *Erythrodiplax umbrata*, and *Micrathyria ocellata* being the only species added. But it has far more potential than that. Right off the Pan-American highway close to kilometer 71, this is worth a stop. Is this the only place in the world where there is a snake crossing sign?.

On the way back to Managua we stopped on the Rio Matagalpa at Sebaco - kilometer 101 and the turn off of the Pan American highway for Selva Negra. A short hour produced a lot of damselflies - *Hetaerina americana*, *Neoneura amelia*, *Argia pulla*, *tezpi*, *translata* (very different looking from the ones at Domitila), and *Enallagma novaehispaniae* - but there are certainly better looking, and probably more productive, sections of the river.

We spent more days at each site than most of you might but each day produced new species and at both sites some of the best bugs turned up on the last day.

It was a delightful trip, 70 species, 10 new to the country. Brings the Nicaraguan list to the 150-160 species level. We had a nice farewell meal with Jean-Michel Maes in Managua and then back to the airport hotel to find a *Triacanthagyna septima* flying around in our room.

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