

Backyard Biodiversity

Life in Crisis: Schad Gallery of Biodiversity



Another Day at the Office

Searching for herpetological species in the jungles of Vietnam

BY BOB MURPHY

We climbed an 800-metre elevation up an old dirt track and then descended 800 metres down a steep jungle slip-and-slide in the midst of driving rain . . . we being a group of 20—biologists, students, and our porters. Along the way we cooked lunch: rice and pork. I never asked myself why I was doing this. After all, I was just getting to my “other” office, this time deep into the A Chau Valley region of central Vietnam. The night before setting out we had seen the infamous “Hamburger Hill” from the local outdoor market.

This other office of mine was located in a small strip of treeless turf surrounded by bamboo and tall grasses. After arriving in late afternoon, our cook prepared dinner: the same meal of rice and pork, one we would have almost every day over the course of a month for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Funnelled through bamboo pipes, water came untreated from the local stream. My ephemeral office was a former war zone and our camp had no trees because some 40 years earlier it had been stripped bare by that destructive defoliant, Agent Orange.

The night found us getting down to work. We headed out with flashlights to explore nearby rivers and forest trails. Clad in \$1.50 Vietnamese plastic shoes and leech socks to ward off the terrestrial species, we nearly stepped on an unexploded 105mm artillery shell. Hmmm. Give me a snake any day; I do *not* like unexploded ordnance.

The next evening I got exactly what I’d asked for, an ophidiophobe’s worst nightmare. Preparing to leave camp for the usual 6-hour evening stroll in the jungle, I felt something slithering across my feet. Aha! My flashlight revealed a gift from the gods. A nearly metre-long *Protobothrops mucrosquamatus* was hurriedly making its way to my sleeping area, only to get stuck in the mosquito net next to my bed. I kid you not. This large ground-living viper had fangs nearly 2 cm long, more than a bit of attitude, and enough powerful venom to put all of us happy campers into a world of hurt. “Hey, Sang, bring me a snake stick, please . . . and hurry.” That snake in a bag was better than three in the bush! That was just the start to a great evening of exploration.

Later we scaled a waterfall—5 metres straight up—and found ourselves in a fairly pristine area. It held a herpetological motherlode. There we found new species of frogs, including a tiny one no larger than a fingernail, and a legless skink.

Now all we had to do was find a way to get back down . . . o

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Left: Adult female of a new as yet unnamed species of frog.