

Coiba Island – Celebration of a wild beauty

by Christian Ziegler, Tim Laman, and Omar Lopez

Coiba Island, off Panamas' Pacific coast, is the biggest (appr. 500 square kilometers) island in Central America and the largest uninhabited island in all of Latin America. Together with the nearby mainland, the Baya Honda area, it forms one of the wildest and most spectacular landscapes in Central America, inhabited by charismatic wildlife, both terrestrial and marine. Having been a penal colony until 2005 prevented Coiba from getting logged, like most of the mainland and 80% of the island is forested with a pristine seasonal and ever moist forest made up of 1450 plant species of plants, including several endemics.

Coiba is home to a variety of endemic vertebrates including 19 species and subspecies of birds and two mammals (an agouti and a howler monkey) and further harbors stable populations of some spectacular species that have largely disappeared from the mainland such as the Crested Eagle (a sister species to the Harpy Eagle) and the Scarlet Macaw, of which there are several hundred on the island. The endangered Central American Crocodile grows to impressive sizes on Coiba Island and so do Boas and the infamous fer-de-lance snake.

Much of the island is rugged, unexplored, and has a spectacular rocky coastline, a forested rock in the Pacific covered with rich habitat covered by a forest that is long gone from the mainland.

The ocean surrounding Coiba, the Golf of Chiriqui, gets deep rapidly and has a seasonal productive upwelling. This combination attracts a large concentration of interesting marine wildlife including huge schools of Tuna and Barracudas, different species of whales (20 species of marine mammals have been recorded in Coibas' waters, including humpbacks which come here to give birth, and even orcas), a high diversity and abundance of sharks (33 recorded species include hammerhead, whale sharks and guitar sharks) as well as Eagle and Manta Rays in abundance. In deeper water off Coiba lies forests of fragile and rare Black Coral.

Coibas' land facing coastline is fringed by the second largest coral reef of the American Pacific coast, which is home to a whole other set of marine creatures. Scientists have only started to census the biodiversity there and found almost half of the invertebrate species to be new to science. Turtles and reef fish are abundant because of minimal fishing pressure, and the corals are structurally intact.

Coiba Island is the center of the Coiba National Park, a large marine park which includes a number of smaller islands and protects the marine life. It has been declared a World Heritage site in 2005 and is an integral part of the Eastern Pacific Marine Corridor, an important conservation area.

RECON PHOTOGRAPHS

all aerial photographs by Christian Ziegler, all under water images by Shari Sant Plummer







