

# Alex Goes Exploring in El Imposible

by David Dudenhoefer  
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**Hola. I'm Alex. My name is really Tito Alexander, but everyone calls me Alex. I live in San Miguelito, in the mountains of western El Salvador, next to El Imposible National Park. The park has been there all my life, but I wasn't very interested in it before last year. When I was little, I remember hearing my uncle complain that the rangers wouldn't let him hunt there since they turned it into a park.**

**I guess I never had an opinion about the park, even though most grown-ups seemed to. Biologists from the group that runs El Imposible, SalvaNatura, visit my school and tell us how important it is. They say it's the biggest national park in El Salvador, and has more different kinds of plants and animals than any other park. They say most of the forests in El Salvador were cut down long ago, which makes El Imposible very important. There are lots of trees around here though, even outside the park, so I guess San Miguelito is special.**





**We've got lots of birds and other animals. A few months ago, I saw a tayra near our farm. It was early in the morning, when I went to the spring to fill a jug with water. He was drinking when I came down the trail. When he heard me coming, he turned and stared at me for a few seconds, then he raced up the hill. I think animals are cool. My favorite part of school is when the biologists from SalvaNatura teach us about the animals that live in the park.**





photo © David Cook

I guess I became interested in the park about a year ago, when my older sister Maritza started a SalvaNatura course to become a nature guide. She went up there every weekend for months, and would tell us about the things she saw and learned. I asked to go with her, but she said it wasn't allowed. She promised to take me once she got her guide certificate. My whole family went to her graduation, but it was at the ranger station. I wanted to hike up one of the trails, but my dad wouldn't let me.

It was months after that before Maritza finally took me with her to the park, but it was worth the wait. I got to meet the rangers and hike up to a couple lookout points. We could see the ocean from one spot, and a big valley full of forest from another. I learned a lot from my big sister. She told me the names of some of the plants and birds, and explained things about the forest. There are more than 400 different kinds of trees in El Imposible, and some of them are gigantic. Though most of those trees are real tall, I found an *amate* tree that I could climb up into. It was the perfect tree to monkey around in.

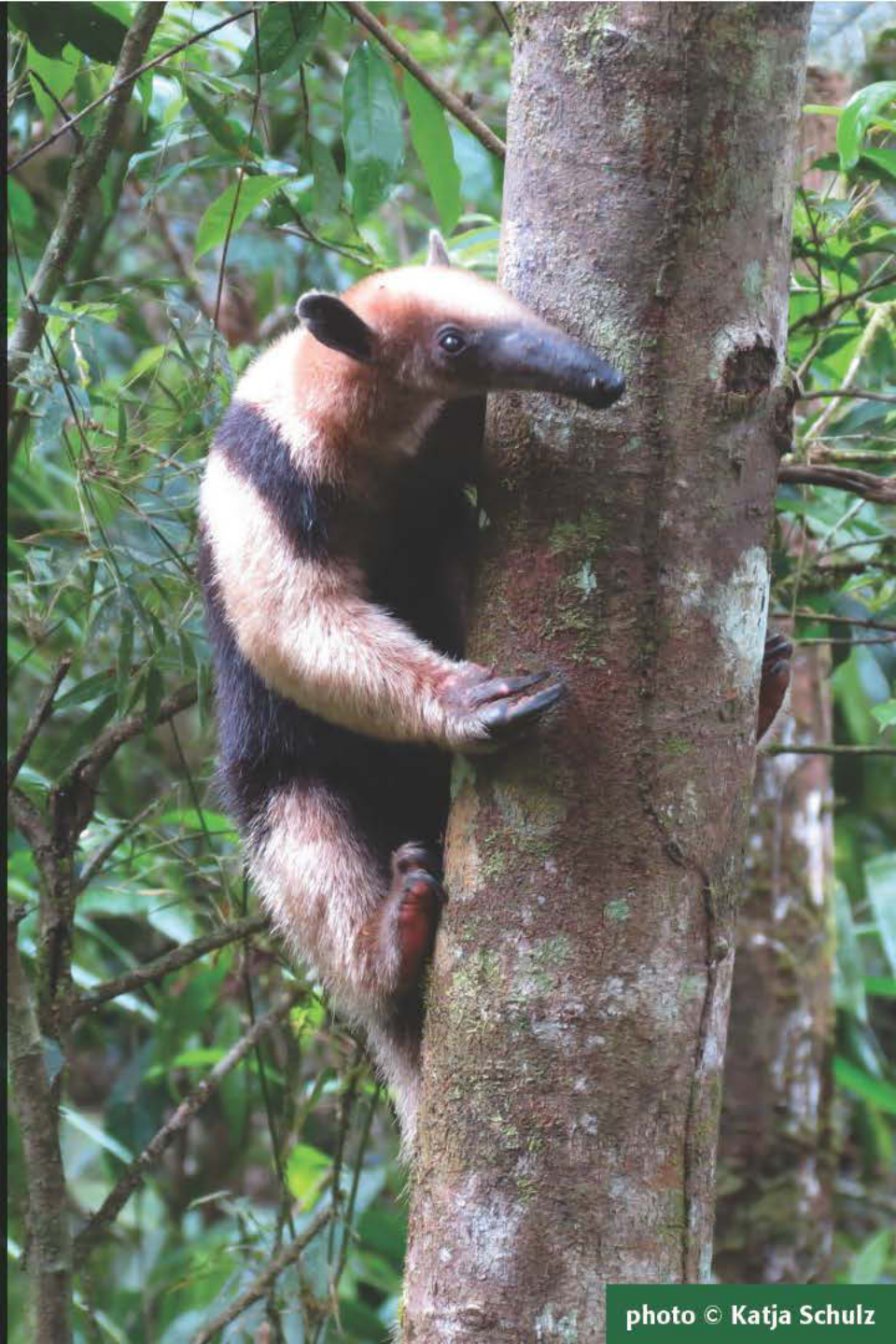






**We hiked for hours, deep into the park, where I saw animals I'd never seen before. I saw two agoutis—big brown rodents that live on the ground—and a tamandua. The tamandua crossed the trail ahead of us and climbed up a big tree, disappearing into the branches. Maritza said the tamandua spends most of its time in the trees because it eats termites, which live in big nests on the branches. The agouti can't climb trees, so it eats fruit and seeds that fall onto the ground. We also saw an armadillo, and lizards, but I've seen them on our farm.**





Maritza said the reason we saw so many animals is because we got there real early: at 5:30 in the morning. I felt a little sleepy, but when I saw the first agouti, I woke right up. The birds were also singing like crazy, but they were hard to see between so many leaves and branches. There are always lots of birds around our house in the morning, but I saw some birds that day I'd never seen before, like the *pajuil*, which is a kind of wild turkey. El Imposible is the only place in El Salvador that still has *pajuils*—called the great curassow.

We also saw the biggest bird that lives in the park: the *rey zope*. The *rey zope* is a giant, black-and-white vulture with wings that are longer than my arms. I'd seen them flying high overhead before, but never so close as from the park's lookout point.





photo © Jerry Oldenettel



photo © A.M. Lewis

At the end of our hike, Maritza showed me pictures of the birds we'd seen in a book they have at the ranger station. It was in English, but it had drawings of all the birds in Mexico and Central America, and maps showing where each one lives. It had every bird's name in English and Latin, which is what they call the scientific name. For example, the *pajuil* is called great curassow in English and *Crax rubra* in Latin. The *rey zope* is called king vulture in English and *Sarcoramphus papa* in Latin. I never realized a bird could have so many names.

I looked up some of the birds I've seen around our farm, like the *piscoy*, a reddish-brown bird with a long, striped tail—in English it's called the squirrel cuckoo. The *torogoz* is one of my favorite birds, because it has such bright colors. In English, it's called turquoise-browed motmot. What a long name! And I thought Tito Alexander was complicated.





photo © Dario Sanches

**That day, I decided that I would become a nature guide someday too. Maritza said I'll have to wait till I'm older, but I'm going to start learning now. I want to learn the names of all the birds in El Imposible. Maritza says there are 377 different kinds. I also want to see all the mammals in the park, even the rare ones, like the collared peccary, a kind of wild pig, and the ocelot, a spotted wildcat. I used to want to be a farmer, like my dad. But he's always complaining that it's hard to make a living. Not many tourists visit El Imposible, but when Maritza gets a big group, she can make more money in one day than our whole family earns for several days of picking coffee.**





photo © Ana Cotto

The director of El Imposible told me that every year, more people visit the park. Hopefully they'll need more guides when I get old enough to do it. He also said that lots of birds are easier to see around San Miguelito than in the park. Most of the migratory birds prefer the coffee farms to the forests. More than 100 of the birds around here spend half the year in North America, so they're only here from October to April. Some of them are really pretty, such as the *colorín azul*, which is called "indigo bunting" in English, and the *tangara aliblanca*, or "western tanager."





**I figured I could guide tourists around San Miguelito, and show them some of those birds. I know of farms that have lots of trees with plenty of birds in them. Then I remembered that my friends Tirso and Luis like to hunt birds with slingshots, just for fun. I even used to go with them sometimes. I'm not too good a shot, but once I got a dove. When I held that dead dove in my hand, though, it wasn't much fun, so I quit hunting.**

**I have to convince those guys to stop killing birds. I know people around here like to hunt, but if we keep hunting, there won't be any animals left. That's why I think the national park is a good idea. If they didn't stop people from hunting, there wouldn't be any more curassows or agoutis. And if there weren't any animals in the park, no tourists would come to San Miguelito.**







**I'm going to talk to Tirso and Luis, and tell them why we need to protect animals. I'll ask Maritza to take the three of us hiking in the park, so they can see how much wildlife there can be if people stop hunting. I'll tell them that someday the three of us could be nature guides. We could get paid to show tourists all the animals around here. That's much easier than picking coffee!**



