

The Infinite Variety

From *Life on Earth*, by David Attenborough

It is not difficult to discover an unknown animal. Spend a day in the tropical forest of South America, turning over logs, looking beneath bark, sifting through the moist litter of leaves, followed by an evening shining a mercury lamp on a white screen, and one way or another you will collect hundreds of different kinds of small creatures. Moths, caterpillars, spiders, long-nosed bugs, luminous beetles, harmless butterflies disguised as wasps, wasps shaped like ants, sticks that walk, leaves that open wings and fly – the variety will be enormous and one of these creatures is quite likely to be undescribed by science. The difficulty will be to find specialists who know enough about the groups concerned to be able to single out the new one.

No one can say just how many species of animals there are in these greenhouse-humid dimly lit jungles. They contain the richest and most varied assemblage of animals and plant life to be found anywhere on earth. Not only are there many major categories of creatures – monkeys, rodents, spiders, hummingbirds, butterflies – but most of those types exist in many different forms. There are over forty species of parrot, over seventy different monkeys, three hundred hummingbirds and tens of thousands of butterflies. If you are not careful, you can even be bitten by a hundred different kinds of mosquito.

[...]

Building Bodies

The Great Barrier Reef swarms with life. The tides surging through the coral heads charge the water with oxygen and the tropical sun warms it and fills it with light. All the main kinds of sea animals seem to flourish here. Phosphorescent purple eyes peer out from beneath shells; black sea urchins swivel their spines as they slowly perambulate on needle tip; starfish of an intense blue spangle the sand; and patterned rosettes unfurl from holes in the smooth surface of coral. Dive down through the pellucid water and turn a boulder. A flat ribbon, striped yellow and scarlet, dances gracefully away and an emerald green brittle star careers over the sand to find a new hiding place.

Questions

What are the four activities you could do to potentially discover a new creature in the tropical forest of South America?

Why might a butterfly have evolved to be disguised like a wasp?

How many species of hummingbird are there?

How is the water of the Great Barrier Reef oxygenated?

What kind of movement do you think is described by the word ‘perambulate’?

What do you think ‘pellucid’ means? (you can look it up, but try to infer from the context first)

What kind of movement do you think is described by the verb ‘careers’?

Creative response (choose any of the following):

Imagine you have spent the day searching for new creatures in the tropical forest of South America, or scuba diving in the Great Barrier Reef. Describe your experience.

Create a drawing of one or both of the habitats described here.

Write a poem about the natural world entitled ‘The Infinite Variety’