

RDE Digest



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UPLB's
Outstanding
R&E Personnel**

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Expedition to the Saw-Toothed Mountain

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All our bags were packed and we were definitely ready to go!

This trip was not like our usual fieldwork. Led by some of the youngest in our pool of researchers, the team bravely travelled the deep seas between Batangas and Romblon to reach an island called Sibuyan.

Carrying all our bags, field equipment, and sacks of canned goods, we travelled for up to 13 long hours via ferry from Batangas Port to Romblon. Upon arrival at the Port of Romblon, we waited for a smaller ferry called 'Maria Querubin' that travels from Romblon to Magdiwang, Sibuyan.

Usually it takes two to three hours of travel to reach the Port of Ambulong in Sibuyan Island, but during the rainy season when the waves are strong, travel by boat is around four hours. Fortunately for us, the sea was very calm. In fact, the sky was clear and we saw the neighboring islands of Tablas and Romblon. Dolphins even came near our ferry.

From Ambulong Port, we were fetched by a top-load jeepney. It took us to the Protected Area Office where we stayed before starting our field activities.

Conquering the Heights

Christened as the “Galapagos of Asia,” the island of Sibuyan boasts of having one of the densest forests per hectare in the world.

The very steep and rocky terrain makes it one of the most difficult mountains to climb in the Philippines.

This vast forest supports a rich and unique biodiversity that continue to amaze biologists and enthusiasts alike. This diversity was what caught our interest to explore the hidden wealth of Sibuyan.

Towering above the heart of the island is Sibuyan’s highest peak - Mt. Guiting-Guiting, or fondly called G2, which got its name from its seemingly jagged peaks. Its very steep and rocky terrain makes it one of the most difficult mountains to climb in the Philippines.

Unlike most of the mountaineers that hike the G2, our team is different. During our ascent to our first campsite at Mayo’s Peak (ca. 1,500 meters above sea level), we were accompanied by 25 porters each carrying at least 25 kg of baggage. And while mountaineers usually carry butane gas in small cans, we brought along a 20 kg LPG tank!

It took us 30 minutes to reach Gaong River which was the end of the flat land. By lunch, we were almost halfway through our hike to Camp 2 (ca. 700masl).

It was our second time to hike up this mountain but it still felt like it was our first time. We stopped to rest more often—every sip of water was heavenly. We got to Camp 3 (ca. 1,300masl) at around 2:00 PM. It is common knowledge that a spring called Bulod Spring

was just a few meters before reaching the campsite, but to our surprise and disappointment, it was dry!

What was left was only a small pool of water with traces of algae--still better than nothing.

We continued the hike and we arrived at our first camp site by 3:30 PM. We were surprised that we walked faster this time than during our previous hike.

Mayo’s Peak: The Place Above the Clouds

Trees were short and thin. Thick moss covered the twisting branches of trees. Thick clouds covered the area most of the day. This is Mayo’s Peak, where we spent our first week.

The area for sampling was very small because we were on top of the

ridge. It was also very cold, the temperature was between 16 and 18°C and the relative humidity not lower than 95%. Mayo’s Peak was named after Mayo Monteza, a mountaineer from the Philippine

Mountaineering Society. She celebrated her birthday during the group’s first attempt to explore Mt. Guiting-Guiting.

Water was scarce at the peak. We had to set up tarpaulins so we could collect mist and dew to supplement the water supply that we got from the lower camp. Still, G2 was very kind to us as the rains were frequent even during the summer period. The water was just enough for us to survive the week.

The summit sometimes became visible on bright days. The view of the sunrise at the looking deck was breath taking. Even more beautiful was the sunset with the vestiges of the neighboring islands of Romblon and Tablas. The clear sky also revealed a peek of the Mayon Volcano all the way in Bicol.

At night, we enjoyed the company of civet cats that roamed around our camp to feed on leftover food.

Only a few species of animals live in the higher elevation of G2, but they are all unique. In fact, we were able to record only one species of the bat *Pipistrellus tenuis*. Several undescribed species were found including the pygmy *Platymantis* frogs.

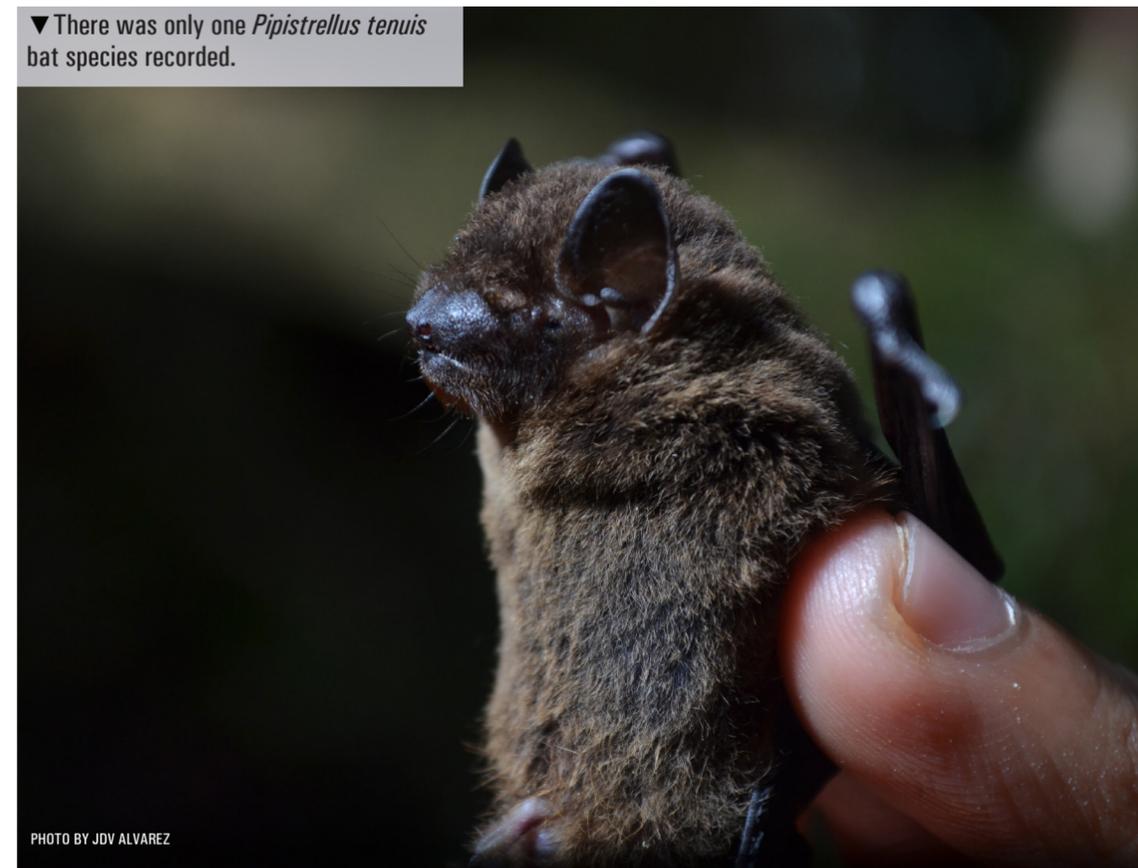
Camp 3: Getting Refreshed in the Spring

After five days, we went down to Camp 3 (ca. 1,300masl). There, we were reminded that it was indeed summer. It was very hot and humid and we

were profusely sweating. Good thing we were close to Bulod Spring, where ice-cold water flows abundantly when it rains. We gathered water in plastic containers and took our first bath

after 5 long days. Refreshing, indeed! Bulod Spring was named after the local guide who accompanied the first team to explore G2 in 1982. He was the one who found the stream a few meters from their campsite, presumably the now established Camp 3.

Water was scarce at the peak. We had to set up tarpaulins to collect mist and dew.



▼ There was only one *Pipistrellus tenuis* bat species recorded.

PHOTO BY JDV ALVAREZ



▼ There were several pygmy *Platymantis* frogs found in the higher elevation.

PHOTO BY JDV ALVAREZ

Our routine activities were done: setting up harp traps, light trapping insects, digging up holes for the pitfall traps and putting out the recorders.

Although it was very hot and humid during our stay, we also experienced heavy downpour just before we broke camp and transferred to another site. The rain was so heavy that our tarps were almost wrecked.

On the sixth day, 15 porters who helped us bring our things down to Camp 2 joined us. It was a very long walk along the steep slopes and very narrow trails on top of the ridge that was made more challenging by the heavy baggage we had with us. Along the way, we retrieved our harp traps and mist nets and went straight to Camp 2 to set up our next camp.

Camp 2: When We Wished for the Rain

Camp 2 was not really the best camp to stay for a long time. Water was the scarcest resource. Our guides even had to walk for one whole hour down to Camp 1 just to get water. So we made sure to save every drop of it as much as we could! Not one of us took a bath—we just used wet wipes to clean ourselves and at least feel refreshed after a day's work.

It was very humid! Temperature was also increasing at 23-24°C during daytime. The terrain was steep and the trail was either rocky or carpeted by intertwined roots of all sizes.

Water was becoming even scarcer. The heat made it more challenging and exhausting for our guides.

We opted to use plastic bags to cover our plates, just so we didn't have to wash them—saving more water in the process. On some days, we cleaned our plates using wet wipes.

We also ran out of LPG. Our guides had to go down to the town center but were still not able to refill the tank because of the lack of supply from the market. We had to resort to using dry wood to cook—with permission, of course.

On the third day, we ran out of rice. All that was left were a few cans of sardines and instant *pancit canton*.

But sometimes we also pampered ourselves. We requested our guides to buy some bananas, which we



▲ The best 'turon' we ever tasted was made during camp.



▲ Bulod Spring helped us refresh after 5 days.



▲ Monitor lizards dropped by the camp to feed on leftovers.

made into sweet *turon*. It was the best *turon* we ever had!

The rain that we were waiting for still had not come. It was not our lucky camp, probably.

But the night before we left the camp, it finally rained, although only for a short while. We finally had just enough water to wash the dishes. After our field activities in Camp 2, we headed down to the Protected Area Office to prepare a training for students and researchers of a local university.

Water was becoming even scarcer. We also ran out of LPG. On the third day, we ran out of rice.

Sharing Knowledge to the Locals

One of our long-term goals is to engage local researchers so that they can conduct biodiversity studies in their own island. In partnership with the Protected Area Office, we conducted a 3-day training for teachers and students of Romblon State University. The training was composed of lectures on the diversity of various groups of organisms and supplemented by hands-on field practicum. Participants were guided

in collecting, handling, identifying and properly preserving arthropods, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and bats. For the first time, the locals were able to see some species that are known only from their island, including the Philippine tube-nosed fruit bat.

During the training, we discussed potential areas of research that the participants can eventually pursue, identified the challenges that they might encounter, and came up with possible solutions to bridge the gaps and address the constraints.

Camp 1: When Everything was Abundant

After the 3-day training, we packed our gear again to continue with our field activities.

At Camp 1 (ca. 350masl), water was overflowing. Our camp and tents were perfectly set; no rocks or roots underneath. It was a perfect camp site compared to the previous ones. Again, we conducted our routine activities. The herpetology team also set up more traps for monitor lizards which are quite prevalent in the lower areas. We recorded several interesting species in



▼ The team was able to record several reptiles in the area.



▲ The Gaong River's ice-cold water was a swimming treat for the thirsty explorers.

the area. Snakes and lizards were abundant. Monitor lizards even visited our camp to feed on the leftovers and at times, we were awakened by the chorus of wild chickens or *labuyo*.

During our 5-day stay in the camp, we had everything in abundance. Since we were already close to the communities, we had fresh goods in addition to the canned goods that we had.

Gaong River: An Overnight Family Picnic

Gaong River is one of the many tributaries from Mt. Guiting-Guiting. Similar to other camp sites, water here is ice-cold-- a refreshing treat for everyone. Like what we have always done, we first set up our camp.

However, we already ran out of supplies for our lunch—we only had one can of sardines left to feed nine people. Some of us had to resort to putting spicy soy sauce on our rice. But still, everyone was full. It was as if we had a feast!

After lunch, everyone enjoyed swimming in the river's cold water. It was also an opportunity to clean the dirty and muddy gear we had. The night ended with interesting catches from our traps and opportunistic sampling. Everybody feasted on shrimps we caught from the river.

The following morning, we retrieved the traps and headed to our last site near the Protected Area Office.

Buffer Zone: "Bahay sa Kagubatan"

Our last camp was unusual. We stayed in a bunkhouse at the Protected Area Office—no more tents, no more sleeping bags, and no more tarps. Unfortunately, water supply was cut for a while when we arrived. Water sources dried up because of the extreme heat.

We did the same routine of activities, except that we visited more places around the buffer zone of the protected area, from disturbed agricultural areas to pristine waterfalls to mangroves.

We also discussed with the Protected Area Superintendent our prospects and plans for future research and collaboration.

It was indeed a successful and unforgettable expedition. We made new friends. We experienced troubles and problems but were able to overcome them.

Every hike was exhausting and tiring but living in Nature has refreshed and renewed our strength. It was rewarding to be in areas unreachable by most people and to witness the grandest beauty of the forest during the day and night.

The experiences we had in Sibuyan honed us and captivated our hearts as young researchers to learn

more and be trained to be good in our chosen fields. It was worth every peso that we spent and every tiring day that we were away from the comforts of home.

We are privileged to have a deeper encounter with nature while learning our crafts as field biologists. Sincerest gratitude to the support that we got from The Rufford Foundation and The Awesome Foundation- Ottawa. ■

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Tell us stories of your experience while doing fieldwork. We accept stories year round. Email us at ovcre.uplb@up.edu.ph. We look forward to it!

