

# LAS CUEVAS

The Newsletter of the Las Cuevas Research Station, Belize  
July 2001 Issue No. 8

## Las Cuevas signs Memorandum of Understanding with La Sierra

**Chris Minty**

Las Cuevas Research Station

Building on an already close partnership for Las Cuevas, the Museum recently signed an agreement with Cleveland State University (CSU), who operate a similar research station called La Sierra in southern Belize. The agreement promises to develop exciting new collaborations in taxonomic research, conservation and Maya impacts on biodiversity. Chris Minty recently visited Cleveland to sign the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that will facilitate and formalise the collaboration and exchange of information between the two stations.

La Sierra is set in the southern Maya Mountains, over the Main Divide from Las Cuevas, in a spectacular, 1800-square-mile tropical moist forest, honeycombed with vast unexplored caves and interspersed with biologically

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## Diary of a tropical novice: The Life Science Keepers appraise Las Cuevas

**Richard Bateman**

The Natural History Museum

Having been Keeper of Botany (and thus ultimately responsible for Las Cuevas) for 15 months, I decided to take the radical step of abandoning the unrelenting bustle of South Kensington in order to see for myself the biodiversity treasure-chest of Belize. Fellow NHM Life Science Keepers Phil Rainbow (Zoology) and Dick Vane-Wright (Entomology) had never visited Belize either, so they kindly agreed to participate in our brief

but intensive fact-finding tour, along with Station Manager Chris Minty and Scientific Leader Malcolm Penn. Detailed comparison of everyone's diaries revealed an (astonishingly broad) week-long window in mid-February and the rest, as they say, is history:

### Day One: London to Houston

Gatwick to Houston flight was characterised by non-stop Keeperial chatter on a wide range of topics (even including Las Cuevas). We were impressed by the various high-tech devices now provided on trans-Atlantic flights, but used only the in-flight telephone (a Keeper's work is never done), having looked in vain for a means of transmitting e-mails (surely in this day and age ... ?!). Followed Lynn's excellent schedule implicitly, but made our first error



Chapal Bol, Phil Rainbow and Richard Bateman admire the view at the ancient Mayan archaeological site of Caracol; the modern border between Belize and Guatemala is in the middle distance

## Theraphosid spiders surveyed at Las Cuevas

**Steve Reichling**  
Curator of Reptiles  
Memphis Zoo

Recently, I visited the Las Cuevas Research Station as part of my long-term research on the theraphosid spider (tarantula) fauna of Belize. Although my study has been ongoing for the past six years, this was my first opportunity to explore the Chiquibul forest and examine its theraphosids. My trip was funded by a grant from the American Arachnological Society and by the Memphis Zoological Society.

I prospected for tarantulas in and adjacent to the Las Cuevas Research Station from 18-21 October 2000. Two species were found; one expected and the other a surprise. As predicted, *Citharacanthus meermani* occurs in the area. The type locality is near Cristo Rey and I have

previously examined material from Mayflower, Slate Creek Preserve, and Caracol. The Las Cuevas area is physiographically and floristically conterminous with the latter two sites, and thus it was no surprise to find *C. meermani*. The Las Cuevas specimens are significant in that they confirm the existence of this species deep within the Chiquibul and Vaca Plateau and thus support my contention that the two *Citharacanthus* species in Belize are allopatric, with *C. meermani* occurring to the lee of the central divide and *C. livingstoni* limited to the windward slopes of the Maya Mountains and adjacent foothills.

I also found *Brachypelma vagans* in abundance near Las Cuevas. Although *B. vagans* is the most wide-ranging theraphosid spider in Belize, I did not expect to find it in the Chiquibul. My previous collecting along the margins of the highlands had led me to believe that *Brachypelma* was replaced by *Citharacanthus* above 200 m elevation. I was surprised to find the species common at Las Cuevas. Throughout most of Belize, *B. vagans* is ubiquitous due to its preference for clearings and early

successional scrub. This is an abundant habitat in the lowlands due to the presence of villages and many milpas. Because the Las Cuevas site is heavily forested and has no permanent human settlements besides the Las Cuevas staff, I found *B. vagans* populations concentrated in the Station yard, but scarce in the adjacent forest. In contrast, *C. meermani*, a species preferring well-shaded habitat, was abundant in the forest but I found only one specimen living on Station grounds. The presence of *B. vagans* in the Chiquibul, the last area to be sampled for theraphosids, indicates that it is found country-wide — and in this way it is unique among Belizean tarantulas.

Finding *B. vagans* in the highlands seems to rule out the possibility of a second *Brachypelma* species occurring in Belize, specifically *B. sabulosum*. Prior to my trip to Las Cuevas, I had suspected that the range of *B. sabulosum* extended eastward from Guatemala into the Vaca Plateau in western Belize. This seemed likely because I had failed to find *B. vagans* above 200 m and museum records established *B. sabulosum* as occurring not far beyond the border in the Guatemalan Petén. The type locality of *B. sabulosum* is the Tikal Archaeological site. I have not personally examined Tikal theraphosids in situ, but given the close proximity of Las Cuevas and Tikal, the physiographic homogeneity of the intervening territory, and the fact that *B. vagans* — not *B. sabulosum* — is found in the Chiquibul Reserve, I now harbor some skepticism that the *B. sabulosum* type material actually originated from Tikal. My path now leads to Guatemala!



Mexicana 'Red Rump' Spider (*Brachypelma vagans*)