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Wildlife wonders: Behind the scenes of David Attenborough's 'Seven Worlds, One Planet'



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The new Attenborough series *Seven Worlds, One Planet*, starts on BBC One on Sunday CREDIT: ALEX BOARD



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By Sarah Marshall

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Crouching on a stool, wedged into a muddy hole, Bertie Gregory is confined by the four walls of his hide. He has been here several hours. But with every tick of the clock, the temperature rises. Mosquitoes hum a little louder, ants bite a bit harder and trickles of sweat become one continuous stream. Wriggling one arm free he picks up a walkie-talkie, a tool in case of emergency.

“I have a small problem,” crackles his voice through the receiver. “A bee has snuck through a rip in my trousers and stung me in a rather

Exhilarating and intrepid, the life of a BBC wildlife cameraman is rarely glamorous, and occasionally brushes with nature can be a little too close for comfort – and intimate in all the wrong ways.

I've joined Bertie in the Peruvian rainforest, seven hours upriver from Puerto Maldonado, where a Natural History Unit team is filming for new landmark Attenborough series Seven Worlds, One Planet, which starts on BBC One on Sunday. Each episode focuses on a different continent and tells the story of a land mass fragmented into a giant jigsaw puzzle where life fits together in an extraordinary way.

For the past three weeks, Bertie has been in a hide, trying to capture footage of scarlet macaws feeding on clay licks (steep walls of reddish, mineral-rich mud), a habit that has baffled scientists but is most likely a response to a sodium-poor diet; irrespective of the reason, it's a razzle-dazzle display.

“South America is rich and full of colour and life, and we wanted to represent that,” explains executive producer Jonny Keeling when discussing the choice of story back at Tambopata Research Center (TRC), where the team is temporarily based.

Established by Rainforest Expeditions in the Tambopata National Reserve 30 years ago, the centre is one of the most remote eco lodges on the continent, with 24 newly renovated wooden rooms – all open to the jungle – connected by walkways. It's also home to the Tambopata Macaw Project, a leader in its field.



The centre is one of the most remote eco lodges on the continent CREDIT: PAUL BERTNER 2017

The biggest challenge you've got is the lens on the camera – it looks like a big, predatory eyeball,” explains Bertie, when we set off at 4am under the cover of darkness to avoid raising any suspicions from the birds. Armed with four Tupperware boxes of food, a head net and a Little John (an affectionate name for a portable urinal), he disappears into his hide.

Hours later, he emerges, drenched with sweat, prompting one boatman to ask: “Iluvia?” – rain?

Over the course of five weeks, Bertie will spend 105 hours in his “hotbox” staring at crumbling orange riverbanks, even getting attacked by a bizarre species of bee that “crawls into your hair and pulls out chunks from the root” – perhaps marginally better than crawling into your pants – all for a sequence which lasts only minutes in the final cut.

Admittedly impatient, the eager 26-year-old claims passion motivates him to sit for hours, waiting for something incredible to happen, tuning into movements of the forest silent and invisible to most.

At TRC I'm able to do the same – albeit in far greater comfort. Every day, I wake to the whooshing roar of howler monkeys, like a fleet of helicopters preparing to land, and at night I'm cooled by giant moths snapping their wings above my head.

Some of the Tambopata Macaw Project's early inhabitants, a clutch of brazen redheads known as the “chicos”, still perch and squawk on railings, and elsewhere birds fly between nesting boxes, monitored by researchers and volunteer students scaling trees with ropes and harnesses. Several nature trails lead from the lodge, and we use one to gain elevation for shooting above the canopy, hoping to capture a macaw returning to its natural nest.



A macaw in the Peruvian rainforest CREDIT: GETTY

Advances in technology allowed drones to become a staple piece of kit in *Seven Worlds, One Planet*. “We’ve flown them at night, in -30C [-22F], over lakes and rivers,” explains Jonny, excitedly.

But as the drone clips a branch and tumbles into the river, we gasp and can only hope for the best.

One occasion on which Bertie willed the tech to hold up was during filming in Iceland for the programme’s opening sequence, where Sir David Attenborough is seen walking along a blustery black sand beach. “If you are ever going to crash a drone, best not to do it when flying around a national treasure,” Bertie quite rightly says.

These days, the 93-year-old narrator keeps location shoots to a minimum. But he’s been involved with the edit and voices a strong conservation message that runs throughout the show, one which connects even the most far-flung wilds of South America with British shores.

“We all live on the same planet, so all these seven worlds are actually one,” he says in London’s Cineworld Leicester Square, at a preview screening. “And we are dependent on it for every mouthful of food we eat and every breath of air we take.”



David Attenborough in Iceland CREDIT: ALEX BOARD