COMMUNITY CAPTURE

A Tale of Costa Rica

Story and photos by Moses Sparks

PREVIOUS PAGE: These tiny Honduran white bats (*Ectophylla alba*) like to roost under leaves. They look like little pigs with snow-white fur!

I have been traveling a lot since I stepped into the world of wildlife photography, and I would have to say that Costa Rica is my favorite place to shoot. There is something truly magical about the rivers and rainforests there that keeps drawing me back.

My last trip there was mostly spent in the Sarapiqui region. We hired a guide there who took us deep into the rainforest, and I do mean DEEP... We walked through mud up to our knees, crossed streams, and followed him through rope-like vines that had to be cut with a machete — not the easiest thing to do while carrying two cameras with big lenses and a backpack! It was worth the effort though, as he kept finding incredible subjects for us.

At one point, he stopped and peered under one of the huge heliconia leaves hanging over our path. He motioned for us to come and have a look, but to be very careful not to touch any of the plants. On the underside of that leaf, four tiny Honduran white bats (*Ectophylla alba*) were huddled together.

LEFT: These amazing collared aracari (*Pteroglossus torquatus*) visited the lodge where I stayed in the rainforest each morning to forage for fruit in the trees. I made many images of them but really wanted one in flight. The last morning of my trip, I finally got one frame where one cooperated.

I photographed this beautiful but very dangerous eyelash viper (*Bothriechis schlegelii*) with a Sony A1 and a 70-200mm lens. Meanwhile, my assistant held a monopod with a Flashpoint speedlight and a small softbox so the light could be positioned as needed. A professional herpetologist made sure we were at a safe distance, i.e., out of strike range!

These tiny creatures are the size of a mouse, and they use their teeth to cut the veins of the leaf, causing it to fold over and create a “tent” for shelter. Our guide explained that they were sensitive to vibration, hence the need to avoid touching anything near them that would cause them to fly away. The leaf was a meter or so off the ground, so to photograph the bats, I had to sit beneath it in a puddle of water and mud. My bush pants will never be the same.

I used a Sony A1 camera with a new 70-200mm f/2.8 lens. This lens focuses very close and is extremely sharp, so it has become my go-to “macro” lens. My guide held a small LED panel light under the leaf to kick some light into the dark underside. I stopped down to f/5.6 to get a bit more depth of field, zoomed to 200mm, and shot at 1/200th of a second at ISO 2500. I would have preferred to go lower on ISO, but shooting wide open would have meant getting only one bat in focus, and I loved the look of them all huddled together.

The image was edited in Lightroom. The photo was made from UNDER the leaf, so I flipped it over in post. I thought it made the image read better and create a more immediate connection for the viewer. The only other tweaks were basic white-balance adjustment, sharpening, and a bit of saturation boost.

Moses Sparks

After three decades as a commercial photographer in the United States, Moses Sparks found himself at a standstill in early 2020 at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. A friend loaned him a super telephoto lens, which he began using on daily hikes to photograph the wildlife he found. By the following year, he had made connections and gotten assignments from the United States National Park Service, various wildlife organizations, and conservation groups as far away as South America. Since then, he has lined up speaking engagements, two gallery shows, and a book deal, and he will soon begin leading multi-day workshops for a large photo retailer.

To learn more about Moses’s work, visit mosessparkswildlifephotography.com.

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